

St Mary of the Cross (Mary MacKillop)



Mary MacKillop, daughter of Alexander and Flora nee McDonald, was born in Melbourne, Victoria on 15 January, 1842. Her parents were born in Scotland and came to live in Australia. Her Father studied for the priesthood, however, just before his ordination he withdrew and decided against becoming a priest. Alexander migrated to Sydney, Australia, in 1838 and two years later moved to Melbourne where he met and married Flora. Following some unwise business deals, Alexander lost the family home and was never employed again. Consequently, his family struggled to make ends meet and were reliant upon support from friends and family.

Mary was the eldest of eight children; she had three sisters and four brothers. Although she and her siblings had little formal schooling, they were well educated by their parents. Mary's father firmly grounded them in faith whilst her mother instilled in them a strong trust in God's Providence and a love for music and singing. Mary received her First Holy Communion on 15 August 1850 at the age of eight.

Life was hard for the MacKillop family. Mary and her brother John assumed much responsibility for providing for their large family. At the age of 16, Mary began work as a clerk. At the age of 18, she moved to Penola in South Australia to become governess to her aunt's children. There she had a guaranteed income which she would send to her mother. In her spare time, Mary cared for others who had no one to look after them such as boys and girls who just roamed the streets, children in the country who had no school to go to, people who were old and sick and people who had nowhere to live. Mary wanted more than anything to help these people.

During her time in Penola, Mary met Father Julian Tenison Woods who also wanted to do something for the poor children who could not afford to pay the money needed to go to school. Together, in 1866, they began the first St Joseph's School in an old stable. Two of Mary's younger sisters also taught in the school and other young women came to help them. On 19 March 1866 (St Joseph's Day) Mary started to wear a simple black dress and began the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph. Now as a Sister, she dedicated her life to doing God's work. As more and more young women joined Mary as Sisters, they were able to start more schools. All children were welcome at the Josephite schools, which provided free Catholic education.

In Adelaide they opened a place for women who had nowhere to live, an orphanage for children who had no parents to look after them and a house where poor people could come and stay. The Sisters visited people who were in gaol and those who were poor and sick. Mary MacKillop was kind to all people, even if they did not agree with her.

The Sisters of St Joseph were required to live by the following 'Rules of Life'

1. Live poorly, owning nothing in your own right
2. Depend on Divine Providence for your subsistence
3. Go wherever you are needed
4. Do all the good you can, and never see an evil without trying to remedy it

Mary died on 8 August 1909 in Alma Cottage, North Sydney. Mary helped many people during her lifetime and after she died, the Sisters of St Joseph kept on doing the good work she had started. Mary MacKillop kept her faith in God and bravely challenged those who did not support her vision for a more caring world. Mary is an important Australian who spent her life helping people, especially children. She is Australia's first Saint.