

**Homily – Mass of Thanksgiving for the Canonisation of  
Saint Mary MacKillop  
Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, Palmerston North**

**4 December 2010**

**+ P J Cullinane**

Mary MacKillop wasn't even born until 2 years after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, and so we are really talking about our own times. She was only 24 when she opened her first school, and within 2 years of that, no less than 80 other inspired young women seeing her felt the desire to go with her and share her work. Since then, her Sisters have served the Gospel throughout Australia and New Zealand, also in parts of Brazil and Peru, Papua New Guinea and East Timor.

It all took off the way it did because of the shared vision and collaboration of Mary and the young English priest Julian Tennyson-Woods. But before they had even met, each of them had a remarkable love for God and strong desire to serve God generously. It all came out of that. The work that they would eventually initiate together would be but the external manifestation of what was already going on in the life of each of them in their relationship with God. When that kind of love is faced with the needs of the poor and with equality of opportunity, it translates into deep compassion and a passion for justice. That is precisely what happened to Mary.

Out of that came her single-minded commitment to the needs of the most needy, out of that came her wisdom in recognising that the most far-reaching way of helping them was through education, and out of that came her personal identification with them, her desire to be never other one than one with them. Out of that also came the courage she needed to translate the vision into reality, against huge odds, and the courage she needed to withstand senseless opposition, and her loyalty to the Church even in the midst of that.

Such then is the one who inspired the calling of those whom today we know as the Josephites; those through whom Mary's own charism became flesh among us.

This diocese has been blessed by its association with both branches of the Congregation – the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart (whom we fondly called the Brown Joeys) and who represent the Congregation in its original form as it was approved originally by the Holy See. And the Sisters of St Joseph of Nazareth (whom we fondly call the Black Joeys) who represent the Congregation in the modified form of having a special relationship with each of the dioceses in which it originally served. Both branches derived from the founding vision and charism of Mary MacKillop; both branches derived from the founding vision and collaboration of Julian Tennyson-Woods.

In 1880 the diocesan form of the Josephites came across the Tasman to Whanganui where they established their Mother House, and where it has been ever since. They were associated with Suzanne Aubert in re-establishing the mission at Jerusalem in 1883 following its earlier difficulties. Down the years the Black Joeys have pioneered and staffed the earliest Catholic schools in rural towns throughout this diocese, and carried out other ministries, including during the 1970s working for the Catholic Education office operating out of Wellington; and more recently in various ministries of advocacy.

In 1883 the Brown Josephites came across the Tasman to Temuka. Then within 9 years of that they were right here in Palmerston North, in Broad Street as it was called then, half a kilometre from where we are assembled at this moment – just up towards the Square.

The following year Mary MacKillop herself came to Palmerston North. She actually came to see what went wrong between the Sisters and the Parish Priest of the time. The lay people of the day expressed their view by withholding their Christmas and Easter Dues, but unfortunately also by withdrawing their children from the school. And so when the parish priest heard Mary MacKillop herself was coming he was expecting all hell to play. But the opposite happened. A saint had come among us. She restored the peace including the re-enrolment of the children at the school, and the restoration of the Easter and Christmas dues! More recently the Brown Josephites have served in this diocese at the Pastoral Centre, in the Tertiary Chaplaincy, in Religious Education, in Social Services and in Catholic schools in Wairoa and New Plymouth.

Historically, most Religious Orders came into existence to meet unmet human needs. They were, after all, the original founders of schools and universities, hospitals, orphanages, leprosaria and refuges. Eventually, as we know, governments and wider society took over many of those works. At that point the Religious went looking for other unmet human needs.

That sequence is, if you like, the mega-narrative. Within that mega-narrative, there are the personal journeys, the personal stories, and personal sacrifices of each Religious woman. Each of those Sisters was first of all a young woman, whose girlhood would have been as any other's. Recently, a priest at St Francis' Church in Melbourne must have been looking up the parish records; he told the congregation that on a given date a young couple stood before the altar to be married; the bride was wearing a borrowed dress. They were duly married, and became the parents of Ned Kelly. The record also shows that the woman who prepared the church for that wedding was Flora MacKillop, and it's not too much to imagine that little Mary may have been running around inside the church as her mother prepared the flowers.

The point I make is that each Sister is first of all a young woman. Each of them would have known that sharing Mary's vision and Mary's compassion was going to involve sharing the same sacrifices and the same sufferings. In fact, as you read the early history, many of their stories would have matched much of what St Paul told about his own sufferings, when he speaks about going hungry and without sleep, having to contend with misunderstandings and opposition, persecution and shipwreck. If you think it's exaggerating to make that comparison, let's just think of what's actually involved in the work of establishing schools with few resources beyond what you get from going without yourself; what's involved with struggling to meet the ongoing week-by-week, month-by-month requirements and eventually of expansion; what was eventually involved in meeting the increasing requirements of professionalism, for which they worked on top of each long day's hard work. And then what's involved in having to let go of it all – let go what they had given so much for – for others to take over.

There's was much pain in a lot of that, about which the Sisters themselves have said very little. But we the Catholic community need to know about it because at times we expected much and gave little; and sometimes showed little understanding when the

time came for those Sisters to find outlets for their generosity, while they were still grieving over having to let go of some of the wonderful works they had initiated. Mary herself was not the only saint among them.

Pope John Paul II reminded us that the saints are the true face of the Church. We all know that in recent times the faith of the Church has been soiled and scarred, and so it's wonderful that we are able to point to those who represent the Church as it is truly meant to be. They include the Mary MacKillops and the Suzanne Auberts, the Frederick Ozanams and the Oscar Romeros.

More widely, they include the Aung San Sun Kyi's, the Tohu's and Te Whiti's, and the Fred Hollows. They also include people who are still in our kitchens and our classrooms and on our streets. Unsuspecting saints, not all of them in the Church. Even wider society notices them, and though it doesn't have our Catholic language for talking about saints, it does identify them, even features them on TV and calls them people who "muck in" or people who are "good sorts". The Spirit blows where the Spirit will. I make the point because the saints were not extraordinary people. They were ordinary people of extraordinary faithfulness.

I'm sure that Mary MacKillop would be delighted if we used this occasion to recall our own vocation to holiness of life through faithfulness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, because that is where it started with Mary MacKillop.

So celebrate her we will, and her Sisters too. I gladly associate the diocese with their celebrations.

It's the goodness of God that is mirrored in the goodness of the saints. And so in celebrating them, we are celebrating God.