



The Life and Work of St Mary of the Cross: A View from Sandhurst

Part 2 of 3: Mary and the Sisters begin in Penola

By Jackson Saunders

Sandhurst seminarian, Jackson Saunders, offers this second article in his three-part series on the life of Saint Mary of the Cross MacKillop. We consider the establishment of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart in Penola and their expansion into Adelaide and beyond. However, troubles arose, and Mary went to Rome before the Institute made Sydney their Mother House.

The Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart began in Penola in 1866 when Fr Julian Tenison Woods and Mary MacKillop united with a plan to provide education to poor rural children in Penola. They had no money or school building, no local traditions or religious sisters. However, Mary and her sister, Lexie, were ready to help.³⁵ Woods had shared the concern of Adelaide Bishop, Patrick Geoghegan, that children were missing out on a Catholic education as their parents could not afford to pay for separate schools and that the only way to resolve this issue was to “bring a community of religious sisters into his mission area.”³⁶

This dream, however, was soon to become a reality. March 19, 1866, is regarded as the birthday of the Institute as Mary “appeared in simple black dress.”³⁷ Her aim was to “to publicly declare her commitment to becoming a nun and living a life of sacrifice, entirely devoted to God.”³⁸ The mission of the Institute had begun with Mary writing a school curriculum based on her experiences as a governess and as a teacher in Portland.³⁹ Those also to benefit from the curriculum were children of parents, who were illiterate, so Mary focused on bringing the message of the Gospel by teaching reading, writing, arithmetic and religion.⁴⁰

THE INSTITUTE’S EXPANSION INTO ADELAIDE

Bishop Laurence Sheil, successor of Bishop Geoghegan, was aware of the Institute’s good work in Penola and wanted this to spread across South Australia. He appointed Woods as “his secretary, and Director General of Catholic Education, Chairman of the Board and Inspector of the Schools.”⁴¹ Mary arrived in Adelaide and began teaching mid-1867.⁴² Mary made her profession there on August 15. By the end of that year, there were ten names on the register of the Institute.⁴³ The Sisters initially lived at Grote Street but numbers grew and they “moved to three cottages at the corner of West Terrace and



Jackson at the South Australian border during the ‘Aussie Camino’ pilgrimage from Portland to Penola in 2017. PICTURE: SUPPLIED.

³⁵ Paul Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross, Mary MacKillop: 1842-1909*, vol. I (Carlton: Miegunyah Press, 2015), 113.

³⁶ Marie Therese Foale, “Mary MacKillop: A woman of her time,” *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* 15 (1993): 27.

³⁷ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 113.

³⁸ Lesley O’Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled* (North Blackburn: Collins Dove, 1994), 45.

³⁹ Foale, “Mary MacKillop,” 28.

⁴⁰ Foale, “Mary MacKillop,” 27.

⁴¹ O’Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 58.

⁴² Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 114.

⁴³ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 138.

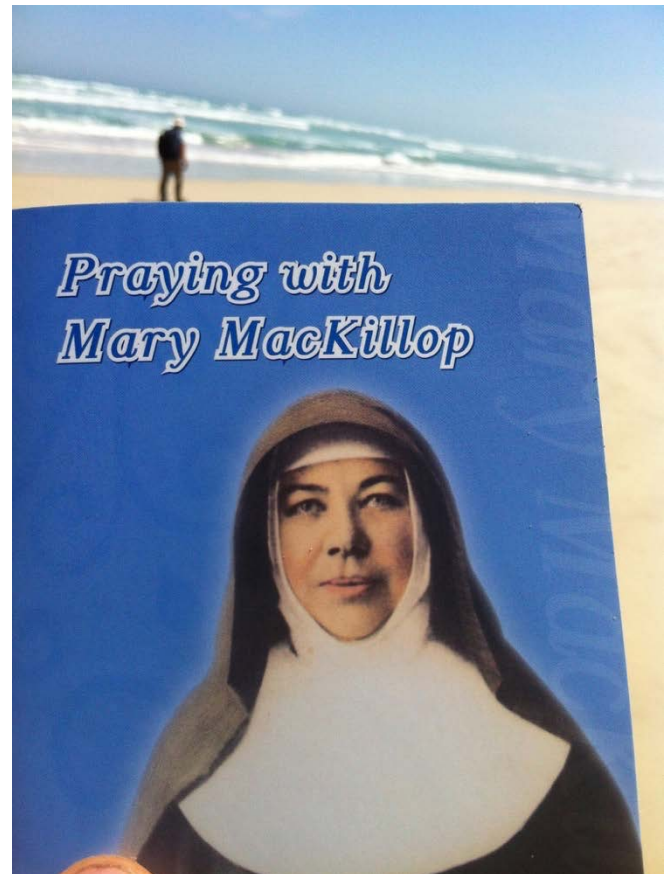


Franklin Street.”⁴⁴ In these early years based in Adelaide, the Sisters had opened their first country school in Yankalilla in October 1867 and had set up by mid-1868 an orphanage, refuge and providence caring for those less fortunate. The Sisters’ ministry in education expanded with 72 Sisters conducting twenty-one schools in South Australia when Mary left for Brisbane at the end of 1869.⁴⁵ The philosophy of the Institute was developed during this period and the Sisters were not confined in convents but moved among the people. Australian Church Historian, Christopher Dowd OP, explains that the Sisters shed a lot of monastic observances. This included strict enclosure, the full Divine Office and lay-choir distinction. This opened them to some criticism that they were not proper religious sisters.⁴⁶ While education was their focus, Mary led the way in showing that their charity extended to “visiting the sick and people in prison, offering help and consolation to anybody in trouble or sorrow, irrespective of religion.”⁴⁷ At this time, Bishop Sheil was supportive of their work and had given written approval to Mary and Woods of their Rule for the Institute on December 17, 1868.⁴⁸

EXPANSION INTO BATHURST AND BRISBANE FROM ADELAIDE

The work of the Institute expanded beyond South Australia when Bishop James Quinn requested Sisters for the Brisbane Diocese.⁴⁹ Mary left Adelaide for Brisbane at the end of 1869 and did not return until April 1871.⁵⁰ During this time, Mary dealt with the Vicar-General, Fr John Cani, as Bishop Quinn was in Rome.⁵¹ However, Cani showed little respect for the Institute’s Rule and sought to control everything.⁵² The main concern was that the Institute had been told to accept Government money for Catholic education, but this would have meant that they had to operate under the General Board of Education, like other schools in Queensland. This, however, was in opposition to the Institute’s Rule.

Mary wanted to trust in God’s providence and not rely on the Government in handing on the Catholic tradition.⁵³ This central issue of governance was also evident in Bathurst Diocese with Bishop Matthew Quinn, especially between 1872 and 1876.⁵⁴ Quinn believed that his Diocese was “being controlled from Adelaide.”⁵⁵ Quinn believed that the Sisters’ Rule was subject to and dependent on him.⁵⁶ However, Mary was adamant that the Sisters had made vows and believed the Rule to be a sacred trust.⁵⁷



The ‘Aussie Camino’ pilgrimage from Portland to Penola involved coastal walks. PICTURE: Jackson Saunders.

MARY RETURNS TO ADELAIDE

Mary’s return to South Australia in March 1871 highlighted concerns for the Institute and the Rule. Bishop Sheil had proposed changes to the Rule believing that the Sisters had become too

⁴⁴ Paul Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian: Mary MacKillop* (North Sydney: Trustees of the Sisters of St Joseph, 2011), 69.

⁴⁵ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 70.

⁴⁶ Christopher Dowd, *Lecturer’s comment added into the essay*, 9 August, 2021.

⁴⁷ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 70.

⁴⁸ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 490.

⁴⁹ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 73.

⁵⁰ Anne Marie Power, *We Are Her People: Mary MacKillop-Woman of Australia* (Sydney: Archdiocese of Sydney, 1982), 18.

⁵¹ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 80.

⁵² Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 81.

⁵³ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 82.

⁵⁴ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 193.

⁵⁵ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 199.

⁵⁶ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 202.

⁵⁷ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 201.



independent of him and his priests.⁵⁸ Woods was also increasingly in debt and disliked by the clergy.⁵⁹ Two key events in April 1870 had affected the credibility of the Institute. Firstly, the Sisters had informed Woods that one of the Franciscan priests, Father Patrick Keating, at Kapunda was guilty of indecent actions with children, and the Sisters informed the Vicar General, Father Smyth. This upset, Charles Horan, who was also a Franciscan and a friend of Keating.⁶⁰ The second event was the disappearance of the tabernacle from the Sisters' chapel in Adelaide. The pre-occupation of Woods and some of the Sisters on preternatural or spiritual phenomena did not help the situation.⁶¹ Horan spread rumours about Mary and the Sisters, and upon Bishop Sheil's return from Rome in February 1871 presented him with "a written complaint against the Josephites signed by about half of his priests."⁶² As Bishop Sheil's health deteriorated, the influence of Horan became stronger.⁶³ About this time, there were 127 Sisters and thirty-four schools in South Australia.⁶⁴

Crisis for the Institute was brewing in 1871 when Mary was advised to return from Kadina to meet Bishop Sheil, who complained about Sisters unfit for teaching. Sheil also sought to alter the Institute's Rule and indicated that those who did not obey would be dispensed from their vows.⁶⁵ He wanted to make the Institute more like European religious orders, split the Sisters into choir and lay groups, and place them under the jurisdiction of the local priest. In addition, schools would only accept students who could pay for their fees. Mary insisted that she wanted the Institute to be independent of any particular Diocese, so that it could provide Catholic education to poor children across Australia. In the Institute's early years, this had become a central charism.⁶⁶ Mary emphasised that while the Bishop could alter the Rule, he could not change a vow already made. Conversely, Sheil thought that "anything but complete cooperation was

disobedience."⁶⁷ Mary resisted changes and was excommunicated for disobedience on September 22, 1871.⁶⁸

Most of the Adelaide Sisters of the Institute were subsequently "expelled or dispensed from the Order."⁶⁹ About 20 of them moved into a home provided by a wealthy Jew, Emmanuel Solomon, as the Sisters worked in the community sewing, cleaning and embroidering to make some money.⁷⁰ During this time, Jesuit priest friends of Mary informed her that the excommunication was invalid.⁷¹

On his death-bed on February 23, 1872, Sheil realised that he had been ill-advised and so he directed Father Peter Hughes to find Mary and lift the excommunication.⁷² Sheil died on March 1, 1872, and had arranged for Father Christopher Reynolds to be appointed Administrator of the Diocese.

One of Reynold's first acts was to "accept back into the Order all the Sisters who had been expelled or dispensed."⁷³ This period highlighted the need for the Institute to be independent of any Diocesan Bishop and so the congregation sought the support of Rome. Dowd highlights that the 1860s and 1870s were periods of disunity and factionalism among the clergy in Adelaide. "A major issue was the ancient rivalry between regular and secular. The last two bishops, Geoghegan and Shiel, had been Franciscans, and influential priests like Horan, Keating and Henderson were Franciscans, Capuchins, or Augustinians. There was also a lot of jealousy and resentment against Woods, MacKillop and the Josephites because of their success."⁷⁴ This provides further context for Mary's trip to Rome.

⁵⁸ Pauline Wicks, *God Will Take Care of Us All: A Spirituality of Mary MacKillop* (Strathfield: St Paul's, 2009), 63.

⁵⁹ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 180.

⁶⁰ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 181.

⁶¹ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 182.

⁶² Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 99.

⁶³ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 99.

⁶⁴ William Modystack, *Mary MacKillop: A Woman Before Her Time* (Adelaide: Rigby Publishers, 1982), 55.

⁶⁵ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 100.

⁶⁶ O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 90.

⁶⁷ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 101.

⁶⁸ Felicity O'Brien, *Called to Love: Mary MacKillop* (Homebush: St Paul's, 1993), 44.

⁶⁹ O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 97.

⁷⁰ O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 98.

⁷¹ O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 99.

⁷² O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 104.

⁷³ O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 106.

⁷⁴ Dowd, *Lecturer's comment*, 9 August, 2021.



ROME

Mary left Adelaide on March 28, 1873 and arrived in Rome on May 11, 1873.⁷⁵ She made two visits; one for three months in 1873 and the second for a month in 1874.⁷⁶ The Rule she took to the Holy See for approval was written by Woods.⁷⁷ Upon Mary's arrival in Rome, she had the support of the Irish College Rector, Monsignor Tobias Kirby. Mary expressed her gratitude for his assistance in arranging for her to meet the Prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò.⁷⁸ Cardinal Barnabò was receptive to Mary's "formal petition for approval of the Rule." Her motivation was twofold:

as of little account."⁷⁹ Barnabò and Kirby introduced Mary to Pope Pius IX on June 1, while Father Raymund Bianchi, Procurator General of the Dominicans, was entrusted with overlooking the Rule.⁸⁰ On April 18, 1874, Mary was given two documents from Bianchi; one with "a number of comments on the original Rule, and the second the long-awaited revised Rule."⁸¹ There was one major change and this was that the Institute should be able to own its own property. The Rule also reinforced that the vow of obedience for the Sisters was to their religious superior and not to a Diocesan Bishop.⁸² The new Rule was to be presented to Bishop Christopher Reynolds in Adelaide and returned to Rome for final approval after some years.⁸³

SYDNEY

The issue of central governance for the Institute in Adelaide, however, was not universally accepted. Bathurst and Brisbane's Bishops struggled with not having control of the Sisters and the Institute subsequently withdrew from both Diocese's in February 1876 and November 1879 respectively.⁸⁴ Issues also arose in Adelaide when Bishop Reynolds started to question Mary and the Institute's ministry, with concerns about debts and financial mismanagement in 1880.⁸⁵ An apostolic commission followed led by Vicar General, Archdeacon Russell, into the Institute. Russell had been an opponent and influenced Reynolds.⁸⁶ Mary was subsequently "expelled from Adelaide by the Bishop late in 1883."⁸⁷ She went to Sydney and the question about whether the Holy See would continue to support central Government, which was independent of Diocesan Bishops, remained a concern.⁸⁸ Patrick Francis Moran became Archbishop of Sydney in 1884 and told Mary that he had been asked by the Holy See to investigate what had happened in



A painting of Mary at Domus Australia in Rome. PICTURE: Jackson Saunders.

"The good the Institute hoped to do, particularly for poor children; and the dangers that arose when people considered a Rule without Roman approval

⁷⁵ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 125.

⁷⁶ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 491.

⁷⁷ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 131.

⁷⁸ Mary MacKillop, "1873 July 15th," Letter to Monsignor Kirby: Rome, in *Mary MacKillop 1873: One Year of an Extraordinary Life*, ed. Sheila McCreanor (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2016), 149.

⁷⁹ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 127.

⁸⁰ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 129.

⁸¹ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 155.

⁸² Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 156.

⁸³ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 157.

⁸⁴ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 491.

⁸⁵ O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 177.

⁸⁶ O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 178.

⁸⁷ Paul Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross, Mary MacKillop: 1842-1909*, vol. II (Carlton: Miegunyah Press, 2015), 875.

⁸⁸ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 876.



Adelaide.⁸⁹ The Sisters were encouraged to share with Moran what they experienced and he wrote a report for Propaganda, dated March 7, 1885.⁹⁰ The Plenary Council of Australia and New Zealand in November 1885 also discussed the Institute's status.⁹¹ The decrees of the Synod were then discussed by the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in March 1887, with Cardinal Luigi Serafini confirming that the Institute was "a non-diocesan institute, that is, with a superior who has authority over the houses in various Dioceses."⁹² After a visit to Rome, Moran confirmed the Holy See's decision for the Institute to have central government and indicated that the Mother House would now be in Sydney. Known as the Roman Decree of 1888, this was shared with the Sisters in Sydney on December 1.⁹³ This meant that Mary's vision that the work of her Institute would not be "restricted to one colony or one Diocese" had been realised and that they could respond to any need across Australia.⁹⁴

- Pilgrims pray at the tomb of Mary in Sydney during the Australian Catholic Youth Festival in 2017. PICTURE: Jackson Saunders.



⁸⁹ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 877.

⁹⁰ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 878.

⁹¹ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 342.

⁹² Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 345.

⁹³ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 346.

⁹⁴ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 28.