



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**Main Committee**

**ST MARY OF THE CROSS**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 19 October 2010**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

---

## SPEECH

<p><b>Date</b> Tuesday, 19 October 2010  <b>Page</b> 123  <b>Questioner</b>  <b>Speaker</b> Sidebottom, Sid, MP</p>	<p><b>Source</b> House  <b>Proof</b> Yes  <b>Responder</b>  <b>Question No.</b></p>
---	---

---

**Mr SIDEBOTTOM** (Braddon) (8.33 pm)—I rise in this place to reflect for a moment upon the extraordinary contribution made to this nation by an extraordinary Australian woman, St Mary of the Cross MacKillop. Mary sought to serve and the last thing she would have ever imagined and probably the last thing she would have ever wanted is to be declared a saint. But, a saint she is. Mary is a saint, formally and theologically, in the Catholic Church. She was and is a secular ‘saint’ for the many thousands of people touched by her work and presence in days gone by and those many people inspired by her life and works today—and one of those is me as I got to know this tremendous woman’s story, which is truly inspirational. To paraphrase the philosopher and non-believer, Hannah Arendt, perhaps the true greatness of Mary MacKillop for us is and will be that we sense behind her marvellous work someone who remains greater and more mysterious, because her works point to a person whose essence can neither be exhausted nor fully revealed by what it is that she has done.

‘Heroic’, ‘holy’ and ‘infused with moral courage’ are descriptors which in part reveal facets of Mary MacKillop but fail to provide a satisfactory explanation of who Mary was. The events of Mary’s life are indeed extraordinary. Born on 15 January 1842 in Fitzroy in Melbourne, a city then less than eight years old, Mary was the eldest of eight children of Scottish immigrants, Alexander and Flora MacKillop. Alexander was an intelligent man but not a good provider and Mary’s family, we understand, struggled, with relatives often providing shelter and a home and other much-needed resources. Consequently, Mary commenced working at an early age, first in a stationery store, then as a teacher and later as a governess to cousins in the south-east of South Australia.

Apparently she was a fine horsewoman, loved nature and had a great affection for her family. In all this, Mary dreamed of becoming a nun but put her dream aside to help support her family. As a governess, Mary observed that there was little or no education for rural children and especially for Catholic children. In a watershed relationship, Mary met the parish priest, Father Julian Tenison Woods, who shared her dream to educate the poor, and when she was 24 years old she believed that she was free at last to follow that dream. Mary was well known for her maxim: ‘Never see a need without doing something about it.’ In 1866, Mary and her sister opened a school in a disused stable in Penola, thereby establishing the congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph. Mary was advised to move to Adelaide, where the new congregation expanded and soon spread to other colonies and to New Zealand.

In what was and probably still is a radical and unfashionable mission, the sisters begged for their support—much in the way of Buddhist monks—and only sought what parents of children could afford. Many could not pay anything. Later, and again in a mission against the norm, Mary established homes for unmarried pregnant girls, for women coming out of jail and for destitute elderly.

We should reflect and do well to remember that Mary’s and her order’s initial achievements were accomplished at a time when transport was mainly horse powered and funding was principally from donations. Mary inherited from her mother a strong belief in the providence of God. Her faith, hope and charity sustained her daily life. From all reports, Mary’s courage, gentleness and compassion enabled her to support isolated rural battlers, urban slum-dwellers and the ordinary working class people and it was with these that she lived and worked.

Mary was loyal to her church, cared for priests and would never allow a sister to say a word against a priest or bishop. Unfortunately and almost fatally for the future of the order, it was a value that was not reciprocated by some priests and bishops. Much has been made of her invalid excommunication by the ailing Bishop Shiel of Adelaide. However and fortunately, the Jesuits maintained their support for Mary and quietly continued to give her Holy Communion at the Norwood Church.

Mary remained loyal to her church but steadfast in remaining true to her understanding of God’s will. Thankfully, Bishop Shiel, five months after her excommunication, realised his error and, from his deathbed, revoked the excommunication. Mary struggled on to achieve her vision of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart serving those in need regardless of state or diocesan borders. Inevitably, Mary encountered powerful authorities intent upon exercising complete control of activities within their jurisdictions.

Mary wanted sisters to be governed by a sister superior-general, free to send them wherever there was a need. Usually, religious orders were subject to the authority of the local bishop. Furthermore, Mary wanted her sisters to live as the poor did in small communities of two or three sisters and in houses that were poor, like those of the people. At that time, religious people usually lived in congregational communities, not among the people.

Mary's vision and mission was for and of the whole of Australia at a time when it was a collection of colonies. Mary treated the first peoples of the land, the Aborigines, with respect and as a governess extended her friendship to the local Aboriginal children and taught some to read and write. Mary is remembered for her work and for her person. The late Pope John Paul II said in Sydney at the time of her beatification in 1995:

Because the love of God inflamed her heart, she tenaciously defended the weak, the poor, the suffering and all those on the margins of society. She worked to assist women and families in distress and to eradicate ignorance among the young. ... In her, the unwanted, the unloved and those alienated from society found comfort and strength.

Mary's life was stamped by the gospel injunction to love one's neighbour as oneself. She sought dignity for the poor and especially women in harsh and remote places. Of the impact of her work and person upon Australia and Australians, Paul Keating, then Prime Minister of Australia, addressing parliament on 30 January 1995 said:

The qualities she embodied—openness and tolerance, courage, persistence, faith and care for others—are qualities for individuals, communities and nations to live by.

And in 2008, during his visit to Sydney for World Youth Day, Pope Benedict XVI, in speaking of Mary MacKillop, said:

I know that her perseverance in the face of adversity, her plea for justice on behalf of those unfairly treated and her practical example of holiness have become a source of inspiration for all Australians.

Clearly and importantly, St Mary of the Cross was inspired and sustained by her understanding of God's will and the part she had to play in his plan. It was the essence of her work and person and the source of her moral courage. Those who joined her shared her vision and the source of her inspiration and courage and achieved great things in a very short period of time in an environment that was very challenging and, at times, openly hostile.

Nevertheless, I have only sketched the outline of how the mind and heart of Mary MacKillop may have ticked and can but wonder at what she was able to achieve and more especially admire how her relationship with her God energised her. Catholics throughout the land, none more so than those in my local community—particularly Kim and Sue Chen—have every reason to celebrate the formal declaration of the sainthood of Mary MacKillop. Every Australian who admires the selfless actions of one of their own need go no further for inspiration than this extraordinary Australian woman.