



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of December 17, 2010,
Novena of Preparation for Christmas

Dear Friends,

IF we cannot excuse everything we can at least excuse the intention." These words reveal a benevolence rooted in the Gospel's teachings, facilitating human relations and building peace in society. They were written by Mother Mary MacKillop at a time when she was suffering greatly because of certain prelates of the Church. John Paul II beatified her on January 19, 1995, and Pope Benedict XVI canonized her this past October 17.

Mary MacKillop was born on January 15, 1842 in Fitzroy, close to Melbourne, Australia. Her parents were Scottish immigrants. For several decades, the island continent of Australia had been an adopted country for a growing number of immigrants, many of whom had come from Great Britain and Ireland. At the time Mary MacKillop was born, a Benedictine monk from Downside in England, Bishop Bede Polding, had just been named the first administrator for the new apostolic vicariate that included all of Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand. At that time, this vast vicariate had 28 priests to serve 40,000 Catholics, in an area nearly as big as Europe!

A look that you could not forget

Mary grew up in a difficult context, in which her father's lack of common sense, her mother's sometimes excessive demands, and the birth of many brothers and sisters forced her to carry heavy loads. While still young, she rode the wildest horses with ease, and was only too pleased to lead a herd of cows—yet this did not keep her from being a girl like the others and loving to dance. Sent in 1860 to live with her uncle, she became a governess for her young cousins, who would later testify to her beneficial influence: "You could not face cousin Mary with ill-done work; she would give you a look you couldn't forget."

At this time, she made the acquaintance of Father Julian Tenison Woods, who was trying to create a congregation of teaching nuns in Australia to provide an appropriate education for young Catholics, especially the poorest. Mary felt that God was calling her to devote her life to Him, and this encounter with Father Woods was decisive. In 1866, she opened, with two



Saint Mary MacKillop

of her sisters, a school in Penola, South Australia, under the direction of Father Julian. The following year, Father Julian was called to Adelaide to assist the new bishop. This was a providential transfer that allowed the new institute to be located in the capital of South Australia. On August 15, Mary—who took as her religious name Sister Mary of the Cross—and her companions made their vows. Thus was born the first Australian religious congregation for women: the Institute of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, who would be known as "Josephites". Benefiting from the patronage of Saint JOSEPH, the Sisters combined a great zeal to educate youth with a particular insistence on poverty and a great abandonment to divine Providence. In a letter to her mother, Sister Mary allowed her joy at belonging completely to God to overflow: "What a happiness it will be to you to think that some of your children are endeavouring to serve God in holy Religion—their one great wish being to lead souls to Him... How many are lost through indifference and coldness of those who might and should think more of their eternal welfare and far less of this miserable world?... Think, dear Mamma, of the work that is to be done, and how few there are to do it, and thank God for permitting a child of yours to be one—the least worthy—of the workers."

It was a bold undertaking. Father Julian wrote in his journal: "God would have His work succeed by His aid alone, and not from the human elements of success... I had at my disposal what the Government with all its

resources could never buy, and that was zeal and disinterestedness for the glory of God, which were eminently conspicuous amongst those who gave themselves to the institute of St. Joseph." In fact, God sent numerous vocations. Soon, Fr. Julian was receiving requests from all over for these new religious to be sent to run schools. In 1869, the institute numbered 70 members, most of whom were teachers in twenty-some schools in Adelaide and other towns in this vast diocese. In addition, the Sisters devoted themselves to other activities—caring for the elderly, the sick, orphans, vagabonds, and endangered young women.

A fundamental right

Father Julian and Sister Mary of the Cross were convinced that the unique qualities of Catholic education should in no way be compromised by unwarranted intervention from the State. They preferred to be poor and remain faithful to the principles of the faith, rather than have all the financial means and lose their freedom to educate, which is essential to providing truly Christian formation. They were also aware that, if parents receive from God the responsibility of providing for their children's education, they must have the freedom and the opportunity to be helped by competent individuals of their choosing.

"As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. As far as possible parents have the duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators. Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, CCC*, no. 2229). Indeed, schools play a decisive role in forming the individual, particularly in forming the moral conscience: "The education of the conscience is a lifelong task. From the earliest years, it awakens the child to the knowledge and practice of the interior law recognized by conscience. Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults. The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart. In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path, we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord's Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church" (*ibid.*, nos. 1784-1785).

For Sister Mary and her companions, the educator must perform her task in a great spirit of abandonment to God, following the example of the foster Father of the Holy Family: "St. Joseph's schools are humble, but strictly and purely Catholic—intended only for the humble

poor, and having nothing to do with the great and learned. The sisters of these schools are also humble and poor in worldly knowledge. They only undertake to teach because it is on God, through their glorious Patron, St. JOSEPH, that they rely for the necessary means to enable them to do so. Conscious of our weakness, we dare not undertake that which we do, but that our sole trust is in Him, and that we know He delights in manifesting His glory through the very weakness and misery of His instruments."

During Mary MacKillop's beatification ceremony in Sydney on January 19, 1995, Pope John Paul II pointed out the importance of Saint JOSEPH's patronage for the new congregation: "Saint JOSEPH ... committed His whole being and life to God's loving Providence. JOSEPH of Nazareth was a man of boundless trust. Only in this way was He able to live out the unique calling He had received from God, to become the spouse of the Virgin MARY and the guardian of God's own Son."

"He invites us to rest in Him"

In May 1867, Father Julian drafted the constitutions of the institute, which would be approved by the bishop of Adelaide the following year. In December 1869, the Sisters founded a house in Brisbane, Queensland. But soon difficulties appeared. Mother Mary wrote to Father Julian: "We feel ourselves alone and little thought of—and have no kind, familiar heart to come in and help us on—but, oh, my Father, I am wrong! We have One. You know we have the Sacred Heart—that Heart above all hearts, and instead of leaving us lonely when we are tempted to be so, it comes, and so lovingly invites us to rest our weary minds awhile with It... Ah! if it were not for the love of the Sacred Heart—and the ever-watchful and tender care of our Immaculate Mother, we would be weak and lonely indeed; but near them we are strong and without fear—no matter what storms threaten..."

Even worse storms were brewing. During Mother Mary's absence, the difficulties in Adelaide increased: a group of priests from the diocese, fiercely opposed to the new institute, wished for it to be dissolved. It was in this atmosphere of animosity that Bishop Sheil of Adelaide found himself, tired after a long trip to Europe where he had taken part in the First Vatican Council. At first he was impervious to the accusations being made against the Sisters—he was the one, after all, who had erected their institute. Yet, little by little he was won over to the cause of the malcontents, whose main grievances were the Sisters' refusal to accept the governmental stipend, and the supposed inability of several of them to teach. Bishop Sheil allowed himself to be persuaded that he had to change the constitutions, and, going beyond his authority, eventually wanted to impose his will. But the Sisters could not agree to this. In fact, according to the law of the Church, once the constitutions of a religious congregation have been recognized by the appropriate authority, they cannot be modified without the approval

of the general chapter of the institute. Faced with Mother Mary's refusal, Bishop Sheil took an extreme step—on September 22, 1871 in the presence of the community, he pronounced the foundress' excommunication. The Sisters almost unanimously preferred to be released of their vows than to accept the constitutions he wished to impose on them, but that they had not made a vow to observe. In a matter of days, they were scattered, stripped of their religious habit, and forced to rely on the charity of the faithful—the Congregation no longer existed.

Closer to God than ever

Mother Mary described in these words her feelings when the bishop, surrounded by several priests, pronounced the sentence on her: "I felt, oh, such a love for their office, a love, a sort of reverence for the very sentence which I then knew was being in full force passed upon me. I do not know how to describe the feeling, but I was intensely happy and felt nearer to God than I had ever felt before. The sensation of the calm beautiful presence of God I shall never forget." Charitably received by friendly families and morally supported by a community of Jesuit priests, Mother Mary saw herself forced to avoid contact with the Sisters so as to avoid scandal, and to don secular dress, which cost her greatly. She wrote from the solitary place to which she had withdrawn: "I have never enjoyed so sure and certain peace of mind as of late. The majesty of God's ways seems so beautiful... Something seemed to whisper: 'A few years and this trying scandal will be completely obliterated from the minds of men and the case of the Church more firmly established than ever—not in Adelaide alone, but in all the colonies.'"

The following February, Bishop Sheil fell gravely ill. Shortly before his death, he realized that he had been ill-counseled, repented of the injustice he had committed against the Sisters, and lifted the censure he had pronounced on Mother Mary. For the feast of Saint JOSEPH, March 19, 1872, the Sisters had the joy of taking up their religious habit again. However, there was no shortage of difficulties, particularly financial ones. Some days, the Sisters did not have enough to eat. One of them wrote, "But what dit it matter? we had Mother Mary and our habits again and were as happy as the day is long." For Mother Mary, the resolution of the situation was a victory. However, far from shouting in triumph, she made no illusions about the future. She wrote to her mother, "My path, dearest Mamma, will yet be that of the Cross. I seek nothing else, and oh, I love and bless the sweet Will which gives this chosen portion to me. It is utterly impossible for me to have any other portion."

"Christ...calls His disciples to *take up [their] cross and follow [Him]* (Mt. 16:24), for *Christ also suffered for [us], leaving [us] an example so that [we] should follow in His steps* (1 Pet. 2:21). In fact JESUS desires to associate with His redeeming sacrifice those who were to be its first beneficiaries ... Apart from the cross there is no other

ladder by which we may get to heaven (Saint Rose of Lima)" (CCC, no. 618).

On March 28, 1873, Mother Mary embarked for Rome to request the Holy See's approbation for her Congregation. She relates her meeting with Pope Pius IX in these words: "Sunday, the feast of Pentecost, I had the happiness of seeing the Holy Father, and of obtaining a warm blessing from him for myself and my dear Sisters... What he said and how he said it when he knew that I was 'the excommunicated one', ... let me see that the Pope had a father's heart, and when he laid his loved hand upon my head I felt more than I will attempt to say." She left Europe only after she had visited several other countries and had obtained information on the best methods of instruction. When she returned to Australia at the end of 1874, she was greeted by her Sisters with the greatest joy. She convened a general chapter of the Congregation for the following March 19, to share decisions from Rome—the Congregation was recognized by the Holy See, contingent upon several modifications in the nuns' way of life.

An admirable charity

As she had anticipated, there was no lack of difficulties, in spite of support from Rome. The new bishop of Adelaide, Bishop Reynolds, once such a great supporter of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, allowed himself to be persuaded that Mother Mary was not worthy of her position. Along with other Australian bishops, he had never agreed that the Institute of the Sisters of Saint Joseph should be recognized as a congregation of pontifical right, with a central government that was not under the jurisdiction of diocesan bishops. Eventually, Bishop Reynolds expelled the foundress from the diocese of Adelaide and assumed the rights of canonical superior. Having gone to Sydney, Mother Mary was pleasantly greeted by the new archbishop, Cardinal Moran, who became a great friend and protector of the Institute. The Cardinal was soon appointed by the Holy See to study the charges brought against the foundress by Bishop Reynolds. In a letter to her Sisters, Mother Mary showed an admirable respect and charity toward the bishop who had treated her unfairly: "Let us all believe that everything was done with a good intention, and let us never forget what the good bishop was to us in a very painful past, and oh, surely I need not ask any true child of mine—anyone who really loves me as she professes—I need not ask her never by word or act in this trying time to say or do aught that would reflect upon the Bishop, either his priests or his people. Now more than ever we should be humble, patient, and charitable and forgiving... for out of this sorrow much good has come and more will follow."

Here Mother Mary saw the painful events of her life through the eyes of faith, and in doing so, reminds us of the teaching of Saint Paul: *in everything God works for good with those who love Him* (Rom 8:28). "The constant

witness of the saints confirms this truth : St. Catherine of Siena said to those who are scandalized and rebel against what happens to them : 'Everything comes from love, all is ordained for the salvation of man, God does nothing without this goal in mind' " (CCC, no. 313).

In fact, Providence would reward the Sisters' patience. On July 25, 1888, the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda confirmed the central government of the Sisters of the Institute of Saint Joseph and transferred its mother house to Sydney.

"Would Saint JOSEPH recognize us as His children?"

The month of March 1891 marked the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Institute. Mother Mary wrote to her Sisters : "O my Sisters, let us with great confidence turn to our glorious Patron on his Feast Day—let us ask him to obtain for us all we need to make us humble and faithful. Unless we have the spirit of humility we shall only be Sisters of St. Joseph in name. Saint JOSEPH, our Father, was humble and hidden. Unless he sees in us the desire to imitate him in this, how can he recognize us as his children, how plead for us as such with his foster Son ?... Make an offering of every wrong, real or imaginary, to our glorious Patron to be presented by him to our Divine Spouse, his Foster Son, and pray that you may never remember such things again. How can we have peace or charity whilst constantly recalling past injuries ?"

In the years that followed, Mother Mary visited the various houses of the Congregation in Australia and

New Zealand. In January 1899, after having given up her position for several years, she was once again elected Superior General. However, her health was deteriorating. In 1902, she suffered a stroke that left her unable to walk and paralyzed on her right side. Slowly she regained the use of her limbs, and was able to walk again with the help of a walker. However, her strength was declining. She rendered her soul to God on August 8, 1909. Today, there are about a thousand Sisters of Saint Joseph, scattered across Australia, New Zealand, East Timor, Europe, and South America.

"In the vastness of the Australian continent," Pope John Paul II emphasized, "Blessed Mary MacKillop was not daunted by the great desert, the immense expanses of the outback, nor by the spiritual 'wilderness' which affected so many of her fellow citizens. Rather she boldly prepared the way of the Lord in the most trying situations. ... Just as in Mother MacKillop's time, so too today the Christian community is faced with many modern 'deserts': the wastelands of indifference and intolerance, the desolation of racism and contempt for other human beings, the barrenness of selfishness and faithlessness : sin in all its forms and expressions, and the scandal of sin magnified by the means of social communications. If the Church continually recalls God's law, inscribed in the human heart and revealed in the Old and New Testaments, it is not because of some arbitrary attachment to past tradition and outmoded views. It is that man detached from his Creator and Redeemer cannot fulfill his destiny and will not have peace."

Let us ask Saint Mary of the Cross MacKillop to lead us, through humility, forgiveness, and a profound charity towards everyone, in the way of true Peace, Who is JESUS CHRIST!

*Dom Antoine Marie
O.S.B.*

*Life of Mother Mary of the Cross, by George O'Neill, Pellegrini, 1931.
Mary MacKillop, A Woman Before Her Time, by William Modystack,
Rigby Publishers, 1982.*

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