

From Scotland to Rome – Memories of a Pilgrimage

Alastair Cherry

The recent canonisation of Mary MacKillop brought pilgrims to Rome not only from Australia, but from Scotland too. One of them was Scottish historian, Alastair Cherry, who recounts the story of his pilgrimage and what it tells us about the woman with Highland roots who is now Australia's first saint.

Friday 15 October 2010

Standing with my daughter in Edinburgh Airport on a bright October morning on the first stage of our pilgrimage to Rome, I find myself contrasting in my mind the comparatively mild discomforts of modern travel (particularly by air) with the experiences of Mother Mary MacKillop, one hundred and thirty seven years earlier.

On boarding the plane I try to imagine how this young nun, a daughter of Australia but of Scots parentage, sailing to Europe in 1873, managed to cope with the primitive travel conditions of her day. Our pilgrimage by air is a matter of hours but hers took many weeks in far less comfortable conditions. We travel in a spirit of joyful anticipation, whereas she journeyed to Rome in order to clear her name from false accusations and calumny. A single woman disguised in lay dress to conceal her religious calling, she was constantly in poor health and was at times reduced to begging. By any standards she cuts a heroic figure, something of a spiritual Amazon: fearless, determined and with an unshakeable faith in the providence of God.

Our arrival in Rome is also very different to hers. The discomforts of the day's journey are soon forgotten as we take up residence in a comfortable hotel near the Vatican. There an unexpected bonus awaits me: my



guardian angel has given me 'a room with a view' – the floodlit dome of St Peter's soaring majestically against the night sky!

Saturday 16 October

The next morning outside St Peter's we meet long queues of eager pilgrims waiting for tickets to the following day's canonisation. The friendly sounds of Australian and Scots accents mingle with the tongues of many other nations, a reminder of the universality of the Church. Above our heads, on the façade of the Basilica, a massive portrait of Australia's first saint hangs beside those of another five candidates from Spain, Italy and Canada. Not only here but elsewhere in the crowded streets, shops and churches of the ancient city we frequently come across portraits of Mother Mary. The Romans seem to have taken her to their hearts with special warmth, mindful perhaps that on her travels to Europe in the 1870s she came here and was warmly received on three occasions by Pope Pius IX.

No pilgrimage to Rome would, however, be complete without a visit to the tomb of St Peter or a chance to marvel before Michelangelo's *Pietà* and the Sistine Chapel, but as patriotic Scots we also take the opportunity to pay our respects to the tomb of the royal Stuarts in the crypt of the Basilica and later make our way to the Old Scots College in the Via

Quattro Fontane where, in penal times, generations of priests studied and were ordained before returning to the perilous mission fields of their native land. Mary's own father, Alexander MacKillop, studied here for a time in his youth but, having decided against the priesthood, returned to Scotland and in 1838 emigrated to Australia.

Other reminders of Scotland's links with the Eternal City can be found as we walk through narrow, cobbled streets, dodging the notorious Roman traffic and stopping frequently for the cappuccino and panini which are themselves a mandatory feature of any Roman pilgrimage! Turning one corner, we come upon the gloomy Palazzo Muti where the Old Pretender and his Polish queen, Clementina Sobieska, lived in lonely exile and reared their two sons, one destined to become the legendary Bonnie Prince Charlie and the other Prince Henry Benedict, better known as Cardinal York, the last of the Stuarts. The walls of this old palace are full of sad memories, of links with distant Scotland, of hopes dashed and dreams destroyed, of battles won and lost. But as we go on our way I remind myself that we are in Rome not to mourn the past but to celebrate the present and the future. A large part of that future lies with the emerging nations of the southern hemisphere, among whom Australia can now boast a saint of its very own, who was never one to indulge in nostalgia.

Sunday 17 October

The great day of the canonisation arrives and outside St Peter's vast crowds gather within the embrace of Bernini's noble colonnades which spread out like the arms of the Mother of the Church enfolding her children. The fountains play, the sun shines and above the great circular piazza soars that great affirmation of Christian faith, the sublime dome of Michelangelo.

The Mass and the ceremony of canonisation are to take place in the open piazza. The papal throne, draped in crimson and placed before the great doors of the Basilica, awaits the arrival of the Holy Father. In front stands the altar while above, swaying in a gentle breeze, are portraits of those who are to be elevated to sainthood on this day. At a lower level and seated on the steps facing the altar are the serried ranks of Cardinals in their red robes (including our

own Keith Patrick O'Brien), flanked by Swiss Guards in their splendid, sixteenth-century uniforms, plumed helmets and gleaming pikes sparkling in the sunlight. Lower still the great piazza is filled to capacity with an international gathering – nuns in their habits, saltires and Australian flags waving above our heads.

The excitement mounts as the procession bearing the Holy Father moves through the great bronze doors to the right of the Basilica and into the square. Cameras flash, there is loud cheering and clapping reminiscent of scenes back home in Scotland only a few weeks before when Pope Benedict began his memorable state visit to the United Kingdom. This day he is with us again, a slight figure with arms outstretched, blessing the multitude of pilgrims who have come from the ends of the earth to join him in a joyous act of worship. Even those of us who cannot find seats are caught up in the splendour of the liturgy and the fervour of the singing. Standing for hours somehow seems a small penance compared to the privilege of being present at such an historic occasion.

Preceding the Rite of Canonisation, each of the six saints is commemorated in homilies given in Polish, French, English, Spanish and Italian, spoken by religious and laity chosen from among the congregation. The Holy Father celebrates the Mass in Latin and pronounces solemnly the Formula of Canonisation, naming each saint individually. Relics of the new saints are brought to the altar and the assembled congregation respond with loud alleluias. The Mass proceeds with great solemnity, culminating in the consecration. At communion, priests and ministers of the Eucharist move among the people distributing the host. Then a great silence descends upon the huge gathering and the Mass concludes with the Angelus and papal blessing.

After the departure of the Holy Father we struggle with some difficulty through the milling crowds and out into the streets and piazzas surrounding the Vatican City. All are intent upon only one thing – the nearest bar or restaurant! Spurred on by hunger and thirst, we descend upon the neighbouring Borgo where lunch-time business is flourishing. A noisier or more chaotic meal I have never experienced, but nature is soon satisfied in an atmosphere of joy and celebration. Restored we return to our hotel and rest and think upon the events of the morning. Scotland

and Australia have indeed been honoured this day in celebration of the remarkable life of a woman whose heroic character in the face of great adversity has forged a strong bond between two nations placed at opposite ends of the planet.

Who was this woman, Mary MacKillop, and why should we be honouring her memory today? Born in Melbourne in 1842, she was the eldest of eight children of Scottish immigrants, Alexander MacKillop and Flora MacDonald, whose ancestral roots were deep in the Highlands of Lochaber and Glen Roy. Like many Scots highlanders at that time they had sought employment and prosperity in the far-flung outposts of the British Empire but conditions in Australia were primitive. Poverty, not confined to the rapidly growing Catholic population, was rife. Religious discrimination was widespread and schools, medical care and basic social services were lacking. Into this harsh climate Mary was born. Of her early years she writes, 'My life as a child was one of sorrow; my home, when I had it, was a most unhappy one.' Much of this was due to dwindling family fortunes, her father frequently without work because of unsuccessful business deals. Only her family's strong Catholic faith sustained them when all else seemed to fail.

At sixteen, Mary became the family's main provider. 'When I was little more than sixteen years of age, the principal care of a very large family fell upon me, and from that time until I was twenty-five, I felt its burden yearly more and more.' During those years, while working as a governess in Penola in South Australia, she met the man who was to change her life, the local parish priest, Father Julian Tenison Woods. He became her spiritual director and encouraged her growing desire for a religious vocation and for a life devoted to the education of the children of the Catholic poor. Together they planned a new religious order which would spread across the outback, teaching and helping the poor and the sick. Soon Mary was joined by other dedicated young women and in 1866 the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart was formed, the first Order founded by an Australian. Their first school opened in a converted stable in Penola, a fitting beginning for one who had dedicated herself to the service of Jesus Christ.

In 1867, Mary took the religious name of Sister Mary of the Cross and she made her final vows two years later. By this time there were sixty sisters working in schools, orphanages and refuges for women. However, severe trials lay ahead. The supreme crisis of her life occurred in September 1871, just five years after the foundation of the Order. A clash with the Bishop of Adelaide, once her friend and benefactor, led to her excommunication for supposed disobedience and the expulsion of all the Sisters from their schools and convents. Her reaction was extraordinary and reveals the true measure of this young woman. She quietly accepted the excommunication, never criticised the Bishop or allowed the other Sisters to do so. A few months later the Bishop, realising his error, revoked the sentence on his death bed.

With the Order restored, Mary realised that official Church approval of the Sisters of St Joseph was vital so she turned her thoughts to the Vatican. In 1873 she begged her passage to Rome, travelling in the guise of a widow under the name of 'Mrs Macdonald'! Nothing seems to have daunted this woman, neither poverty, nor ill-health, nor malicious tongues. In Rome she received the blessing of Pope Pius IX, although final approval for the constitutions of the Order did not come until 1888. Further travels in search of vocations and funds for her Josephite Sisters took her to England and then to her ancestral Scotland. She travelled to Edinburgh which she found both unwelcoming and cold (it was midwinter)! A warmer reception awaited her from relatives in the Highlands where she is recorded as feeling truly at home. From there she sailed to Ireland where she met with conspicuous success, returning in 1874 to Australia accompanied by several young Irish women.

However, still more trials lay ahead. Although elected Superior in 1875 she was regularly subjected to gossip and false accusations, culminating in 1885 in her dismissal. She was not reinstated as Mother General until 1899, a position she then held till her death. Despite all these setbacks the Order spread throughout Australia and New Zealand. It was while on a visit to New Zealand in 1902 that she suffered a stroke and was confined to a wheelchair, but undaunted as ever she continued to make visitations to distant convents.

Mary MacKillop died in Sydney in 1909. Three Popes – Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI – have prayed at her tomb in the motherhouse in North Sydney, as do thousands of pilgrims annually from all over the world. Her example remains a source of inspiration for all Australians. Supremely practical and unsentimental, her life can be summed up in her own words: ‘Never see a need without doing something about it.’ She was beatified in 1995 and now in this year of 2010 has joined the company of the saints.

Her Josephite Sisters – or ‘Joeys’ as they are affectionately called in Aussie style – continue to flourish to this day.

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