

NO.22



ACSJ OCCASIONAL PAPER

PRINT POST APPROVED P# 241613/00059 DECEMBER 1994 LIBRARY CATALOGUE NO. ISSN 1032-2205

BUILDING THE KINGDOM:  
MARY MACKILLOP AND  
SOCIAL JUSTICE

by GEOFFREY HULL



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### BUILDING THE KINGDOM: MARY MACKILLOP AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

BY  
GEOFFREY HULL

**W**hatever troubles may be before you, accept them cheerfully,  
remembering Whom you are trying to follow. Do not be afraid. Love  
one another, bear with one another, and let charity guide you in all your life.

Mother Mary's last letter to  
her Sisters, 12 January 1909.

 **Dove**  
An imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers*

**A Dove Publication**

An imprint of  
HarperCollins *Publishers* (Australia) Pty Ltd  
(ACN 008 431 730)  
22–24 Joseph Street  
North Blackburn, Victoria 3130, Australia

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First published 1995  
Designed by William Hung  
Cover design by William Hung  
Cover images: Australian outback scenery by Graeme Horner  
and Mary MacKillop from the Mary MacKillop Archive

Typeset in Australia by J&M Typesetting Services  
Printed in Australia by Printgraphics Pty Ltd.

The National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:

Hull, Geoffrey Stephen.

Building the kingdom: Mary MacKillop and social justice.

Bibliography.

ISBN 1 86371 550 9.

1. MacKillop, Mary, 1842–1909. 2. Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart. 3. Social justice—Australia.
4. Church work with the poor—Australia. I. Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. II. Title. (Series: ACSJC occasional paper; no. 22).

303.372

The opinions expressed in ACSJC Occasional Papers do not necessarily reflect the policies of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. These papers are published to provide information and to stimulate public discussion.

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## FOREWORD

The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJC) is delighted to present *Building the Kingdom: Mary MacKillop and Social Justice* written by Dr Geoffrey Hull, as No. 22 in its series of Occasional Papers.

Mary MacKillop is set to become “The Australian People’s Saint” because of the way in which she touched the average Australian citizen. She was an extraordinary Australian woman who endured suffering and confrontation in order to achieve justice for the poor and alienated.

When Mary founded the Institute of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart in 1867—the first order of nuns established by an Australian in Australia—the scattered population of Australia was badly in need of schooling. Mary MacKillop recognized this need, especially for poor families whose children lacked the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Her inspiration was not confined to education, but touched other areas of deprivation in providing care for ex-convicts, prostitutes, unmarried mothers and orphans.

The ACSJC hopes that *Building the Kingdom* will be a contribution towards the “unveiling” of this great Australian woman, and that Mary MacKillop will be seen as a model for the effective integration of social justice into everyday life.

+ K. M. Manning

Most Rev. Kevin Manning  
Chairman, ACSJC  
Bishop of Armidale  
31 October 1994

## ABBREVIATIONS

- DL 1983 Daniel Lyne CP, *Mary MacKillop: Spirituality and Charisms*, St Josephs Generalate, Sydney, 1983
- DL 1994 Daniel Lyne CP, *Mary MacKillop: "Made in Australia,"* Mary MacKillop Secretariat, Sydney, 1994
- GON George O'Neill SJ, *Life of Mother Mary of the Cross (MacKillop) 1842–1909: Foundress of the (Australian) Sisters of St Joseph*, Pellegrini, Sydney, 1931
- OT Osmund Thorpe CP, *Mary MacKillop*, 1957, 3rd edn, Generalate of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, Sydney, 1994
- PSV Paul Gardiner SJ, *Positio super virtutibus (Matris Mariae a Cruce MacKillop)*, vol. II, Rome, 1989
- RMA 1980 *Resource Material from the Archives of the Sisters of St Joseph*, Issue No. 3, January 1980
- RMA 1982 *Resource Material from the Archives of the Sisters of St Joseph*, Issue No. 8, April 1982
- RMA 1984 *Resource Material from the Archives of the Sisters of St Joseph*, Issue No. 3, August 1984
- WM William Modystack, *Mary MacKillop: A Woman Before Her Time*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1982

## OPTING FOR THE POOR

My dear Mother Mary,

We have been out here for two months now. Nobody in the district can remember a drought as bad as this one. When will the good Lord hear our unceasing prayers for rain? It breaks my heart to find the men on the stations looking thinner every time we visit them, and the light of hope a little dimmer in the eyes of their wives. But the children, God bless them, play as gaily and noisily as ever on the banks of the bone-dry creeks, amused by the mosaic of cracked earth under their feet, fascinated by the woolly clumps of death studding the paddocks, and not noticing that the crows have swooped down to pick the eyes out of the dying ewes and lambs stranded in the mud.

Blind sheep. How I want to weep to see them, yet I can't forget that the poor crows are hungry, too. Strange how the sad sight of them reminds me of you, Mother, of the things you used to say to us back in Adelaide. About God's children in this country, and how equally dangerous for souls is the poverty of so many and the good fortune of a few. It all made sense for me this morning as my eyes fell upon this prayer from the Old Testament in our book of meditations:

"Two things I ask of Thee;  
deny them not to me before I die:  
Remove far from me falsehood and lying;  
give me neither poverty nor riches;  
feed me with the food that is needful for me,  
lest I be full, and deny Thee,  
and say, 'Who is the Lord?'  
or lest I be poor, and steal,  
and profane the name of my God."

A Sister of St Joseph in the South Australian outback, c.1870.

These verses from the Book of Proverbs (30, 7–9) sum up a Catholic woman's prayer for the people of a place and an age characterized by extremes of wealth and poverty and a pursuit of material prosperity that left little room for the things of the spirit. A woman of heart and faith, Mother Mary of the Cross was haunted by the knowledge that excessive need leads to human degradation while excessive ease leads to the denial of God.

In 1867 Mary Ellen MacKillop had founded, with Father Julian Tenison Woods, the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart. Their religious institute, born in the country town of Penola, South Australia, spread to Adelaide and from there to Queensland, New South Wales and eventually the whole of Australia and New Zealand.

When Mother Mary of the Cross died in 1909, there were 650 members of her uniquely Australian order of nuns.

Mary MacKillop took her religious vows in response to what she perceived as a clear call from God to carry out a mission of love to the poor of this land. The young women attracted to her example and her ideals were motivated by the same sense of commitment to the underprivileged and the deprived. Yet it was not merely the poverty of the less fortunate Australians of her day that moved Mary MacKillop to found her sisterhood. Schools catering for the children of the poor already existed and would undoubtedly have multiplied had she never been born. More than anything else it was what she perceived as the spiritual destitution of the Australian poor that inspired Mary's great adventure. Her natural love for the land of her birth was not unqualified. "Australia is in every sense a dangerous place for Catholics," she once wrote, and, loving her Catholic religion as passionately as she did, it was impossible for her to look on idle while "the poor and their children were torn away from the true faith" (OT, 6).

The Josephite dream began in the Colony of South Australia against the backdrop of the mid-nineteenth century educational ferment. In 1833 Governor Bourke, an Irish Anglican liberal, had ended the Church of England's monopoly of public education in Australia. Thereafter the pauper Catholic community was able to run its own schools, with the aid of small government grants. Nevertheless, the paltriness of the grants and the virtual absence of teacher training ensured low standards in the few Church schools opened throughout the country. To the promoters of universal education there were many plausible reasons why the maintenance of a dual system of schooling was a wasteful luxury. In 1844 the Select Committee on Education recommended the introduction of the Irish national system of education, in which sectarian religious instruction was added to an official syllabus including Bible reading and common Christian prayers. The energetic opposition of both the Anglican and Catholic Churches prevented the implementation of the committee's recommendations, but the battle was far from over.

In 1851 the South Australian government passed an act severely restricting state aid to denominational schools. Within a decade Bishop Patrick Geoghegan of Adelaide was sufficiently alarmed by the drift of Catholic pupils towards state schools he perceived as "godless" to lay the foundations of a new network of self-supporting Catholic schools entirely independent of the government. Bishop Lawrence Sheil, who succeeded him in 1866, carried this plan further. Like her mentor



Father Woods. Mary MacKillop shared the common Catholic fear that the intention behind “the Government’s aim at strict secular schools and institutions for the poor, especially for the children of the poor” was to sever Catholic Australians from their ancestral faith (OT, 6).

For Bishop Sheil the foundation of the Sisters of St Joseph, who opened their first Adelaide school in July 1867, was manna from heaven. Since Catholics then found themselves at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, church schools were indeed synonymous with poor schools. In the challenging task at hand the Josephites were to play a major role. The nineteen Catholic schools functioning in 1866 had risen in number to sixty-eight by 1872.

The state government’s pragmatic discouragement of Church schools was widely misunderstood by Catholics, not least because it was an affront to their pride. Furthermore, the problem was aggravated by the anti-Catholicism of a minority of Protestant loyalists and ardent secularists who found it convenient to exploit the well-intentioned state policies for their own ends. But these were not the only obstacles faced by the pioneers of Catholic education at this time. Ironically, among its greatest opponents were the very people it had been devised to serve: the Catholic poor. Ignorant and illiterate, and daunted by the burden of school fees, most Catholic parents were apathetic when not hostile to the exhortations of priests and bishops that they educate their children. Female teachers, too, were a startling innovation: in the popular memory teaching had always been the work of gentlemen. As for nuns, their place was in the cloister.

Mother Mary and her Sisters quickly rose to the challenge of such attitudes. From the first the Josephites refused to be dispensers of a patronizing charity; their way was not to offer help from a height of comfort and privilege. They won Catholic parents over to their scheme by meeting them on their own ground, that of material deprivation. Mary MacKillop never forgot those first efforts that were to set the tone of her whole apostolate. She recalled how, soon after her arrival in Adelaide, the priest of a parish outside the city asked Father Woods to send some nuns to take charge of his school,

telling him honestly that there was but scant welcome for them on the part of the people. Nothing daunted, three Sisters arrived on the scene on a Sunday just before the 11 o’clock Mass. Not one word of welcome, but scowling looks instead. The poor old Priest asked the Sisters if they had the courage to remain. By this time, they had ascertained that the three-roomed hut secured for them by Father Woods had not a stick of furniture in it.

At their request, the Priest stated that the Sisters had come to stay, that they could open the school the next morning, and that they invited the parents to attend and hear them examine and classify the children. Mass over, one Sister remained in the church where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved, the other went to the empty hut and waited to see if anyone would come to them, but no.

A child soon passed, and as her parents owned the hut and were Catholics and living near, she was told to go to her mother and say that the Sisters expected she would send some dinner. This came in time, the Sisters making a table of the window-sill and seats of some stones. A farmer passing later saw the Sisters in the empty house and returned in the evening with a few necessities—a tarpaulin which he spread on the earthen floor, on which again he laid three nice clean straw beds. His good wife came and made these up. Between them, the Sisters were supplied for the time being with what they required.

Next day the school work began. No attempt was made at furnishing the house until the following Thursday, when two Sisters went out amongst the people with amazing results. In a few weeks, the people had learned to love the Sisters, a splendid school was working, the most bitter against the women teachers became the Sisters' friends, and on Sundays the little church where, in the absence of the Priest the Sisters used to say the Rosary with the people, was crowded. (*RMA* 1984, 6–7.)

## RADICAL POVERTY

Above all things, the Sisters must bear in mind that they are called to imitate their Divine Spouse and to resemble Him in His poverty. They are called to labour and to spend their lives for the poor; they must be really poor themselves in desire as well as in reality.

The love of poverty must show itself everywhere in a true Sister of St Joseph. She must be contented with the poorest houses, fare and habit; she is ready to beg from door to door if holy obedience or necessity demands it ...

The Sisters must not wish for good materials in their habits or furniture, even on the plea that such things last longer, but only what poor people can afford. Let them have no confidence at all in money, but remember that poverty is the ornament of their Institute, and should be worn by them as the brightest gem which they can wear in the world, as the badge of their Divine Spouse.

Rules for the General Guidance of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, 1867, 3; and Rules for the Institute of St Joseph, 1867, 9  
(*RMA* 1982, 16–17; *RMA* 1980, 18–19).

Mary MacKillop never knew wealth or material comfort in her life, either as the eldest daughter of a Scottish immigrant family fallen on hard times, or as a professed religious. And her prayer that the people she loved be spared the misery of destitution was one she never made for herself. Instead she chose what she strove to spare others, a life of radical poverty.

When it came to the religious life, Mary, whose name and way were those of the Cross, admitted that she “looked for a poverty more like unto that practised in the early religious orders of the Church, a poverty which in its practice would make a kind of reparation to God for the little confidence now placed in His Divine Providence by so many of His creatures” (DL 1983, 175). For her the practice of evangelical poverty was inseparable from a childlike trust in Divine Providence. It was this same trust that enabled her to keep her serenity amid the physical trials and moral sufferings that punctuated her life: why worry in adversity when God’s “beautiful will” would always triumph and ultimately set things right, in the next world if not in this one?

In the eyes of the world Mary MacKillop’s chief virtue is her work of restoring dignity to the lives of the poor and underprivileged. But this admired humanitarianism was not the fruit of any earthly philosophy. Rather it was a natural expression of her spirituality, and inseparable from the general effort of the Christian faithful to build up the Kingdom of God. It is this that distinguishes Mary MacKillop the woman of faith from most other social workers.

The complement of the Josephites’ profound trust in God’s providence was the humility that made the poverty they chose truly radical. It fuelled their conviction that one could not help the poor without cheerfully sharing their poverty, even their spiritual poverty: the Sisters did not hesitate to go to places where there were no priests and where they would be deprived of Holy Mass and the sacraments for long periods. And it was their charism of humility that emboldened them to go about the streets of Adelaide on hot summer days, carpet-bag in hand and perspiring under their heavy habits, risking public ridicule as they passed from door to door begging for themselves and for the poor. Such a manner of earning their livelihood was a source of scandal to many respectable citizens, like the Catholic gentleman who sneered: “If my daughter were to do that sort of thing, I’d have her run in under the Vagrancy Act” (OT, 67).

Indeed the part of the Josephite rule dearest to the hearts of both its Founder and its Co-Foundress was the invitation to a poverty in the

spirit of the Gospel. In its original form the rule forbade the Sisters to own any property whatsoever: not even the clothes they wore were to belong to them personally. One of the causes of the clerical hostility that built up against them and culminated in the excommunication of Mother Mary in 1871 was the mendicant character of the Institute. This same feature proved to be the one area of difficulty in 1873 when, the invalid excommunication lifted, Mary journeyed to Rome to have the Rules of the Institute approved by Pope Pius IX. The Vatican authorities insisted that the new rule make provision for the ownership of property as a means of guaranteeing not only the Sisters' material survival but their independence and freedom from direct episcopal control.

While for Mother Mary the attenuation of the ideal of poverty was the greatest sacrifice involved in this reform, for Father Julian Tenison Woods it was a betrayal of fundamental Josephite principles. Sadly, he went to his grave blaming the Co-Foundress for her "capitulation." The estrangement of Father Woods, in spite of unceasing efforts on her part to honour and heed him as Director of the Institute, was one of the many crosses of Mary MacKillop's life, an ever-deepening sorrow resulting from the clash of vision and commonsense, of irresponsible idealism and prudent realism, of the European and the Australian approaches to life. It was in this painful parting of the ways, imposed by practical necessity, that Mary reflected the wisdom of the vast, patient land that had given her birth.

## THE AUSTRALIAN WAY

On another occasion a Sister was dying at Port Augusta. She was putting out a crude kerosene lamp in the church after evening devotions when the lamp burst and the poor Sister was in flames. She lingered for some days in great agony and each day kept asking for Mother Mary. The boat from Adelaide went only once a week, and at that time the nearest railway station to Port Augusta was Mount Remarkable. Mother Mary's kind heart yearned to be with her dying child and in her distress she said: "I shall go by train to Mount Remarkable, and surely some kind people will drive me on the rest of the journey."

On arrival at the terminus she made fruitless efforts to be driven on. Several farmers were in with their wheat but all shook their heads at the prospect of the long distance to Port Augusta. The farmers then adjourned to the hotel for refreshments, and Mother Mary walked in and said: "Gentlemen, one of my Sisters at Port Augusta is dying, and is constantly

asking for me. If one of you will lend me a horse I will ride there." Chivalry was not quite dead in those Celtic hearts. Two or three jumped up, got a pair of horses and a buggy, and drove her on that afternoon, and she arrived in time to console the last moments of the dying Sister.

(*PSV*, Cap. 36C, 56.)

Mary MacKillop was a determined woman, driven by her lights to do things her own way. The way of Mother Mary of the Cross had two dimensions. First, it was Catholic. Second, it was Australian. Throughout her life she strove to achieve her objectives in harmony with the teachings, traditions and laws of her Church. But it was precisely her sense of the universality of Catholicism that made her appreciate the diversity naturally underlying that catholicity. Since the Catholic ideal was unity rather than uniformity, she could hardly look with approval upon the dogged efforts of certain missionaries to re-create in Australia a carbon copy of the 'Hibernian' Church.

This caricature of Irish Catholicism, authoritarian and utilitarian and largely the creation of Cardinal Paul Cullen (1803–1878), must be carefully distinguished from the traditional Irish Christianity it sought to reform and replace. By no means did all the Irish clergy working in Australia follow the Cullenite line. However, its supporters were numerous and powerful enough to provide a stiff challenge to those Irish and others whose view of Catholicism was broader and more flexible. It was Mary MacKillop's fate to be caught up in these tensions of the new-born Church of Australia. No doubt it never occurred to her that the Hibernicist priests and bishops, in trying to build up a new, purified Irish Catholic society in the Antipodes, were pursuing the nationalistic dream of compensating the Irish race for its past humiliations in its ancestral land. What did concern her, and concern her deeply, was the fact that the contemporary Cullenite approach to evangelization in Australia was hopelessly unsuited to the local conditions.

"[T]he Institute of the Sisterhood of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart was established to meet the many wants of the Australian Colonies," she wrote in 1873,

and... these wants can hardly be realized by those who have not had some experience of them... [for] what would seem much out of place in Europe, is still the very reverse in most parts of Australia. It is an Australian who writes this, one brought up in the midst of many of the evils she tries to describe, and who has over and over again heard

pious priests and zealous Bishops sadly deplore a state of things which they could not remedy; and later still, known many of the same to declare that in the peculiar spirit of the Sisterhood they saw at last the answer to their frequent sighs and prayers. (*RMA* 1984, 74.)

In her characteristic charity, Mary perhaps exaggerates the extent of episcopal support for her work. In practice all bishops took advantage of it because the Josephites were the immediate answer to a pressing need. They welcomed the Sisters' contribution to the task of evangelization, but at the same time the Hibernicists among them wished to make the Josephites conform to contemporary Irish patterns of behaviour and, especially, to bring them under tight diocesan control like the Irish congregations of nuns already working in the country.

Mary MacKillop's Australian way, which drew such bitter hierarchical opposition, included the concept of central government for her Institute. This principle reflected Mary's prophetic vision of the British colonies of the continent welded into one nation, which in reality they already were. In order for their apostolate to be effective throughout this vast land, the Josephites needed to be free of direct episcopal control at the local level. Mother Mary fought long and hard to defend this principle which a few bishops continued to oppose long after it had been vindicated and approved by the Holy See.

While it was her intimate knowledge of the Australian reality that inspired the Josephite idea, it was Mother Mary's Australian qualities that guaranteed its success. Mary knew all there was to know about that daunting constant of Antipodean life, the "tyranny of distance." Neither she nor her Sisters were strangers to long journeys, to "roughing it" outdoors or dossing in miserable shanties. Mary had first-hand experience of both urban and country life in Australia. She was an excellent horsewoman, and her telling the farmers in the Mount Remarkable pub that she would ride to her destination was no mere exercise in feminine manipulation.

The whole early history of the Sisters of St Joseph is a lesson in the Australian pioneering spirit, an illustration of the Australian talent for improvisation. Their particular apostolate demanded that they abandon their fellow Europeans' pursuit of material comfort in an unkind environment. As Mother Mary noted, "solicitude about one's temporary wants, necessity of securing beforehand a house to live in and such things, are the greatest possible drawbacks to the missionary spirit" (*DL* 1994, 60).

## BROWN JOEYS

A familiar sight to all in the streets of Adelaide, in the tram cars, and more particularly in what back slums this beautiful city possesses—and there are vile dens and haunts as bad as any in Australia—is that of two female figures, clad in coarse brown and black alpaca garments. Their bandaged features and the rosary hung from the waist show that they are nuns. It is an ugly dress this, cunningly designed to hide all beauties of feature, youth or form... These are Sisters of St Joseph, who are ever to be seen busy in the cause of their Master, but of whose inner life and works even Catholics know so little.

Stanley James, 1882, in WM, 189.

There was certainly nothing unobtrusive about the Sisters of St Joseph in their early days: they dressed to draw attention, not to themselves as individuals, but to what they represented. Theirs was the courage to “stick it out” and to “stick out” in places where the sight of a nun was an unusual, and at times a seemingly absurd one. Yet amid the hard external conditions of their life Mary MacKillop and her Sisters never lost their feminine dignity, the European ideal of the lady symbolized by the Josephite habit. (A religious dress which, ungainly as it looked to the warm-hearted freethinker Stanley James, the Mother Foundress loved so dearly that being forced back into lay clothes after her excommunication had been one of her greatest sorrows.) To us it may seem in retrospect that the Sisters’ heavy monastic garb with its ankle-length alpaca dress and its coiffe, band and veil was hopelessly inappropriate for a pioneering society plagued by savage heat in the summer months. How strangely “European” a mode of dress for an order of women who had opted for the down-to-earth, “no-frills” Australian way, we might think.

Yet the image of Sisters of St Joseph going about in their ample habits amid the roughness, squalor and hardship of nineteenth century Australia symbolizes their whole mission: that of taking the Church to the people, wherever the people were. In Mary MacKillop’s childhood most Catholics did not go to church for the simple reason that they had no churches to go to. In many places they would be lucky to see a priest once a year to christen their children, solemnize their common-law marriages and read prayers over the graves of loved ones buried without the last rites of the Church.

Mary MacKillop saw the Catholic Church as the ark of salvation, but she was no less aware of its traditional role as the educator,

civilizer and humanizer of its faithful. The task of the Church as she saw it was not simply to save people's souls, but to foster in an integral way their human dignity. Her mission was to introduce the gentle Catholic alternative wherever misery and neglect had created a subculture of uncouthness, cynicism and irreligion. The familiar brown habit, so loved by ordinary people, Catholic and Protestant alike, was the visible sign of this mission of love, as well as the symbol of the Church's ennobling work in places where there were no shrines, sanctuaries or scholars.

Now the fact that it was an association of religious *women* who, in spite of such strong opposition, did so much to take the Church to the Australian people is a significant one. In old civilizations like that of Europe it might be possible to keep women—"ladies" at least—safe, secure and under control in the family home, while nuns could remain mysterious, segregated beings. But in a rough frontier society such a role for women was a luxury as well as an impracticality. In any case women had, from the earliest days of European settlement, shared all the hardships endured by men, both at sea on the convict ships and ashore in the new colony.

Indeed the achievement of the Josephites was not simply to cooperate with men, clerical and lay, in building up the Kingdom of God under the Southern Cross. As Australian religious women they made their mark on this land by doing things their way, and by succeeding in areas where men had failed. In the slums and the outback, where priests were often unwelcome and even rejected, the Josephite charism was able to warm hearts and change minds. The message of the Gospel, wrapped up in Josephite humility and kindness, penetrated further and had a stronger impact than the matter-of-fact ministrations and muscular Christianity of the male clergy.

Whereas well-meaning Catholic priests tended to bring out the worst in bigoted Protestants, the Josephites were remarkably successful in "getting through" to non-Catholics trained since childhood to fear and distrust the Church of Rome. In his December 1882 article for the *Victorian Review*, Stanley James noted with surprise that "Not only have the Sisters of St Joseph been unchecked by Protestant criticism, but they have been warmly supported by Protestants... Indeed the only troubles they had were with officials of their own faith" (WM, 195).

The "officials" referred to here were the Cullenite bishops. James Quinn of Brisbane was particularly strong in his dislike of religious who had minds of their own. Priests disinclined to bend to his iron



rule were bad enough, but no-one, it seems, aroused his ire as much as the Australian woman who dared to insist, however respectfully, on her right—conceded by the Vatican—to do things her own way. In March 1875 Dr Quinn refused to allow the Queensland Sisters to attend a General Chapter in Adelaide called to revise the Rule of the Institute, and wrote to the Mother General that “The formation of such a rule is hardly woman’s work, and I cannot venture to hope that your meeting of Sisters will accomplish it.” For Quinn and fellow bishops of like mind Mary of the Cross was variously “obstinate” and “proud,” “some extraordinary and bold woman” and “that very troublesome woman” (GON, 212). Accent on *woman*.

Mother Mary’s “constructive dissent” (as we would call it today) disobeyed the abusive directives of bishops overstepping the limits of their authority, to obey instead the imperatives of time and place. As the Order grew, she constantly reminded the Sisters in charge of recruitment that the fulfilment of their mission called for a particularly down-to-earth and intrepid kind of woman. Fr O’Neill remarked of Mother Mary’s selection criteria that “In general she did not favour the reception of postulants that had been delicately reared and finely educated. She liked subjects that could, as she expressed it, ‘stand wear and tear’, that could face the loneliness of the bush, rough poverty and trying human beings, without losing nerve and spirit” (GON, 394).

The “Brown Joeys” never shied away from “roughing it,” from coming down to earth, but never at the expense of their Catholic faith and culture. In her deeds and attitudes Mary of the Cross could hardly be further removed from the stereotype of Australians as a people happily isolated from the rest of the world, staunch individualists ever ready to give other “battlers” a hand in the daily grind of living but stubbornly closed to ideas and patterns of behaviour outside their own thought and experience. Nor was she like those Aussies of the future with a strong sense of the “fair go” but who, unable to see any difference between religion and morality, would feel little attraction to a God who demands to be publicly worshipped on the day of the week dedicated to the one thing really sacred to them: sport.

Perhaps the challenge of Mary MacKillop to her fellow Australian Catholics of today is that she was able, effortlessly and gracefully, to combine being genuinely Australian and deeply religious. A religiosity without fanaticism or narrowness. The “splendid isolation” mentality was quite alien to her nature, both as an Australian and as a Christian. To be Catholic, after all, is to be part of a wider reality. It is the way of receptivity and inclusion, within the bounds of a definite tradition

whose origin and heart are Jesus Christ the *Philanthropos*, the Lover of Mankind.

## THE CATHOLIC ALTERNATIVE

Many reasons are alleged for having our schools placed under the [State Education] Board. Great toleration is in some cases promised. Every argument is brought forward to show that aid from Government is necessary... that we are self-willed and obstinately bent upon adhering to our own way rather than yield to the wishes of the learned and enlightened Superiors. We have but one answer to all:—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...

The world, its cold, false maxims, its pride and self-sufficiency, its trust to human judgments and human means, is such a heartless opponent of the meek and humble Heart of Jesus, that we, as victims consecrated to Its Sacred interests, must only love that which It loves, and despise that which (in its acts and consequences at least) despises It. We must lean on It and not on the world—Its enemy. We never, never can be connected with any secular Board of Education. Even granted that a free use of our religious principles might be allowed, we must be left free to appoint our own teachers and adhere strictly to our own system; otherwise endless evils would ensue and the work of the Sacred Heart would not go on. Were we to depart in the least from this, the whole would fail—it would cease to be God's work.

Brisbane Statement of 1870 by Mother Mary of the Cross  
(*RMA* 1984, 59–60).

Mary MacKillop's commitment to building up the Kingdom of God implied a deep love of humanity, but also a radical rejection of the so-called spirit of the world. In nineteenth-century Australia, fertile ground for freethinking and the religion of progress, she had the courage—and to many, the folly—to stand out in educational matters as a Catholic separatist. When she characterized Australia as a dangerous place for Catholics, the target of her condemnation was the humanist philosophy that she associated with state education and saw as a threat to the Faith. It must be remembered that for Mary MacKillop and her contemporaries Catholicism was not simply a religion, but also a culture and a "perfect society." In any case, Mother Mary was wholly consistent in wanting nothing to do with a way of life founded on what to her was an alien world-view. If she never

sought its approval, she desired its money least of all, even in her greatest need.

Whatever admiration Australians of the 1990s may have for Mary MacKillop, whether it be for her holiness or her philanthropy or both, one thing is certain. On the question of secularism a gulf divides most Australian Catholics of today from the woman by whose beatification they are so honoured. The truth, however uncomfortably it may sit with us a century later, is that Mother Mary positively dreaded the prospect of Catholics being assimilated into the mainstream of Australian civilization. If for her the “enemy” was that of an officially Christian Establishment in the process of secularizing itself, it was because she earnestly believed that the material paradise promised by a culture that minimized faith and piety was destructive of the true happiness that begins here in the life of grace and reaches its fulfilment in eternal salvation. In the light of this one wonders what Mary MacKillop would think of those products of Catholic homes and schools prominent in Australian society and politics today whose thought and action are guided not by the teachings of their Church, but by the ideals and standards of contemporary “political correctness.”

In Mary MacKillop’s day the vast majority of Catholics were still outside the established culture, not only because of their religion, but because of their socio-economic condition: in nineteenth-century Australia to be Catholic was, with few exceptions, to be poor and marginalized. For Mary MacKillop the correlation between Catholicism and poverty was fundamental, and guided all her policies. Indeed, she did nothing directly to promote the social and economic emancipation of the Catholic poor. The Josephites were not interested in educating their children so that they could join the ranks of the middle class:

The children of the poor cannot learn much, nor for long. It is easy to teach them what they require to fit them for their place in the world. But we must teach them also to love God and aspire to Heaven; to be content with their lot; to be meek, that they may possess the land; to be poor in spirit, that they may do their Father’s will as it is done in Heaven. Thus, we shall teach the children to avoid those vices and that discontent which are the fruitful source of the miseries of nations, their crimes and rebellions. If we attempt to do more than this, they suffer. We must do a little and do it well, doing it for the Sacred Heart and in union with our own sweet Mother. (Fr Woods, “The Object and the Spirit of the Institute,” 14.8.1870, in *RMA*, 1984.)

Social reactionaries as well as fanatics, deliberately contriving to keep the poor in their lowly place for the sake of saving their souls? Hardly. It was simply that Josephite schools, designed to meet immediate needs, to offer dignity and hope, were not institutions teaching the art of getting on in the world. But they served nonetheless as the cornerstones of continuing education. Provided that the end result was not loss of faith, Mary MacKillop always rejoiced in the self-improvement of poorer Catholics.

Needless to say, Mother Mary's "religious reservation," though in perfect harmony with the theocentric principles of Catholicism, was disconcerting to those of her contemporaries who were staunch proponents of social mobilism. The aims of Catholic education should not be merely confessional, people argued. Its role was also to free Catholics from the cultural inferiority that made them the second-class citizens of Australia. Since the manifest destiny of Australian Catholics was to be the co-rulers of the land of their birth, Catholic schools should be preparing children for their rise out of the lower class into the bourgeoisie. Their charter was to foster the Catholic faith while immersing their pupils in the prevailing culture of their upper-class non-Catholic compatriots.

These counsels, central to the Irish emancipist tradition from Daniel O'Connell to Cardinal Moran, always left Mary MacKillop cold. Her vision of the Catholic alternative was integral, not selective. Since God was all, His way was narrow only in appearance. And the emancipists refused to see what she did: that religious indifference and infidelity would be the inevitable consequence of full cultural assimilation. History has proved her right, however we may choose to judge the outcome.

## THE BRAES OF LOCHABER

After a good night's rest, a short visit to our dear Lord, and an early breakfast, we started for Greenock, where we took a steamer for the Highlands... We had about three hours' delightful sail—the day calm and beautiful—not too cold, though we could see snow on the surrounding hills. Then, as we approached Tobermorey we saw a boat coming towards us, and the steamer stopped. The captain came to tell us that Miss Gordon had come out in the boat for us, as the steamer never puts in at Drinnen. She had four Highlanders rowing it, and I was so pleased to hear them speak the Gaelic.

After a truly Highland welcome from Lady Gordon, I was brought by her to a nice room, where she told me how glad she was to have a Religious in her house—the first, she believed, in that part since the time of the Protestant persecution. She then sent for the priest, and showed me their pretty oratory. I was very happy there, and found in the priest an old college companion of my father's....

I had to leave there for Fort William where I remained quietly for another fortnight, after which I went to the 'Braes of Lochaber' to beg... With one or two exceptions the people were all poor—however, all gave something and with hearty goodwill. The Braes of Lochaber is quite a Catholic place—no Protestants being there; but I am sorry to say that I saw a number of fine old homesteads, which had once been the happy and hospitable residence of good old Catholic families, quite deserted, and their former occupants either dead, or obliged to leave, in poverty, for other countries—the poverty in many cases brought upon them by their warm attachment to their religion. So, thank God, in Scotland, as in many other places, the true Faith has been preferred to all the wealth of the world.

Letter home 16.2.1874, in GON, 175.

What makes Mary MacKillop's option for the poor admirable is the fact that she was not herself an heir to poverty. Born into a genteel Scottish family, the privations she tasted in her childhood and adolescence were the result of reduced circumstances. It was not simply that her father, Alasdair MacFhilib (Alexander MacKillop) had suffered financial reverses since immigrating to Australia in 1838. Mary came from a line of Highlanders who had paid the price of their support of the Stuarts in the Jacobite rebellions between 1689 and 1745 and, above all, of their steadfast adherence to the proscribed Catholic faith of their fathers. And yet despite their misfortunes, the MacKillops and MacDonalds of Lochaber remained rich culturally and spiritually.

Indeed what Mary MacKillop sought to restore to the Catholic poor of Australia was something her family had never lost: their pride. Pride in their Gaelic traditions and in their Catholic faith. For such people pride in the midst of material poverty was the guarantee of dignity and hope. What distinguished the Gaels of Lochaber and the Southern Hebrides from the other Highlanders who converted to Presbyterianism on the one hand, and from the Irish Gaels who remained Catholic on the other, was their ethnic integrity, their refusal to divorce their traditional faith from their ancestral culture. In embracing Protestantism the other Highlanders took on certain values of the Lowlanders and embarked on the road to anglicization. The Irish kept their faith, but after the Flight of the Earls in 1691, the Penal

Age degraded them to such an extent that they lost confidence in their Gaelic speech and traditions, and many saw the conforming to Englishness in all but religion as the only means of improving their lot.

In Penal Ireland the Gaelic pride of old was replaced by a new Hibernian arrogance, the arrogance of the underdog. Hibernicism spoke English, not Irish, and it coupled a seething hatred of the Protestant English with an all-consuming ambition to become their equals. By contrast the Scottish Catholic Gaels, protected by their mountain fastnesses and their islands, managed to keep intact the immemorial clan system as well as their language and culture. The clearances of the eighteenth century may have reduced them to grinding poverty and led to the migration of thousands to America and Australia, but their sense of human worth had not been seriously impaired. Hence the ethnic heritage that shaped Mary MacKillop's own Australianness was a positive one, free of the historical bitterness and driving materialism that had become the negative themes of post-penal Irish life. Highland Catholics, like English Catholics, had learned the art of surviving as a minority among their Protestant neighbours. It was a survival that had depended not only on humility, but on a generous open-mindedness and spirit of co-operation. All efforts were towards the preservation of a separate way of life, while the temptation to assimilation was to be avoided at all costs.

Another aspect of the Highland heritage in Mary MacKillop's outlook was her conviction that earthly power must be derived from group consensus, and not imposed arbitrarily from above. Hence her difficulties with the compulsive clericalism and social climbing of so many of her Catholic contemporaries. If Mary's "Gaelic" style was seen as a threat to the assimilationists determined to monopolize the existing structures of Catholic education, her spirit of independence and tenacious fidelity to the constitutions of her Congregation was an affront to the imported European bishops determined to act on their "right" to bring the colonial nuns under their direct rule. It is a sad fact that Mary MacKillop's unintentional bruising of fragile clerical egos was the immediate cause of her excommunication in 1871.

Mary's "grass-roots" approach to social relations may have been directly linked with the Gaelic traditions of independence and federalism, but it was equally in harmony with Catholic teaching. According to the principle of subsidiarity, as defined by Pope Pius XI, "It is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance to right order to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies" (*Quadragesimo*

*Anno*, n. 79). Thinking the Catholic way, Mary MacKillop had no inclination to confuse communion with conformity in non-essentials. And the Roman decision of 1888 proved that she was well within her rights to insist that her Sisters be able to pursue their distinctive Josephite way of life unhindered by those who did not share their vision.

The same respect Mother Mary demanded for her Order she never hesitated to give to other, different, groups of labourers in the Lord's vineyard. Her Josephites were satisfied with their own humble place in the Church, and since service to the children of the poor was the charter of her Institute, they were content to leave to other groups work for which they did not feel suited, such as the organization of higher education. "We are for the back-blocks," the Mother Foundress used to say, "It is our business to gather in poor children abandoned in out-of-the-way places; when that is over we ought to make way for others" (GON, 394).

## THAT MOST PRECIOUS THING

When I was a young professed Sister another young Sister and I were sent to the country. The train left about 7 p.m. and we would not reach our destination until about 11 p.m. We left Mount Street without tea; somehow Mother found out, and a few minutes before the train left she arrived at the train almost breathless, with some lunch in a paper bag, also some fruit. When she saw our distress on account of her coming she smiled gaily and said she could not have her children without anything to eat until after 11 p.m. I said, "But Mother, there are people in the compartment with us." [In those days nuns were obliged to eat in private.] She answered, "No matter, dear, and both of you are to eat all I have given you; it is a necessity." I often saw and received many such instances of her charity and kindness.

(PSV, Cap. 36C, 56.)

Mary MacKillop's "Catholic alternative" was founded not only on the faith of her Church and its rich cultural tradition, but on its social teaching as well. In Catholic doctrine the social order exists for the good of the human person, not the other way round. "The human individual," wrote Pope Pius XII, "far from being an object and, as it were, a merely passive element in the social order, must be and must continue to be, its subject, its foundation and its end" (quoted by John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris*, n. 26).

Since men and woman are made “in the image of God,” there can be nothing more precious than the human person. It goes without saying, then, that in any conception of society, the human person, its qualities, needs and rights, must be paramount. Perhaps Mary’s intuiting of this noble ideal was first awakened in her by her beloved maternal grandfather, Alasdair MacDonald, who used to call her in their ancestral Gaelic *gnothach miadhail*, “precious thing.” Pondering this term of endearment, the intelligent little girl must have understood that she was not just the object of her grandfather’s affection, but something precious in herself. Certainly, treating others as precious things would characterize her whole life’s work, first as Mary, the hard-working big sister of an impoverished family, then as Miss MacKillop the schoolmistress and governess, later as Mother Mary of the Cross, and finally as Blessed Mary MacKillop who continues to guide the lives and answer the prayers of the individuals devoted to her today.

One of the last Josephite Sisters to have known Mother Mary of the Cross personally was Sister Pius Carney, who died in 1984. Being a direct link with the Co-Foundress of the order, she was often asked by younger Sisters to share her memories of Mary MacKillop. One Josephite once asked Sister Pius what was the thing that struck her most about Mother Mary as a person. The answer: “She was always approachable.” Sister Pius knew “Mother” in her last years, when she was confined to bed and chair, suffering frequent acute pain from the effects of advanced paralysis. Ailing and worn out by her life’s labours, she might well have been excused for being impatient, short-tempered or eccentrically set in her ways. Instead, Mary of the Cross remained available to everyone who sought her out. She considered it not an obligation but a joy to converse with her spiritual daughters, to share their hearts’ burdens. And she deemed it no less an honour to be visited by any other person, clerical or lay, male or female, adult or child, important or lowly. The reason? Because for Mary MacKillop everyone was important, worth listening to and spending time with. Her particular imitation of Christ was to share herself with all of God’s “precious things,” the men and women created in His image and redeemed in the Blood of His Son.

Mary’s approachableness was a manifestation of her charism of simplicity. The simple soul, engaged in a continual, lucid dialogue with God, is one necessarily repelled by stiffness and sanctimony, qualities so often masking an egotistical love of power. Against Mary’s dealings with others we must measure her ability to see Christ in them and to



treat them as He would. Although she was a great respecter of rules and discipline, hers was the way of love, not authoritarianism.

It is remembered of the Mother Foundress that there was always laughter when she was present. She may have insisted on unquestioning obedience to the rules of the Institute, but we read of her that the sharp reprimands she sometimes needed to deliver were invariably followed by an affectionate hug. Even though she commanded enormous respect, it was Mother Mary's custom to address her fellow Josephites affectionately as "Sister dear" or simply "dear." Once, in answering a letter from a prospective postulant, she wrote: "Please do not address me as Rev. Mother but simply as Sister Mary." And as strict as convent life may have been, the Josephites were distinguished by a sensible, unpretentious and cordial approach that bridged the gulf separating most other orders of nuns from the outside world. That was how they struck Melbourne journalist Stanley James, who was highly amused to watch the Sisters contentedly pacing about an orphanage playground while a mischievous little boy sang: "I won't be a nun, but away from the Convent I'll run" (WM, 194).

Mother Mary's profound respect for every human individual was often sorely tested. She had to suffer the disobedience and dishonesty of certain members of her Institute, the increasingly erratic behaviour of the Father Founder, the baffling hostility of respectable Catholics to her work, the persecution of prelates and, above all, the sudden and inexplicable enmity of Dr Christopher Reynolds, the Adelaide bishop who had once been her friend and supporter. In the face of all such trials of apparently human origin Mary managed to see the hand of God, and she emerged from them without the slightest bitterness towards those who had wronged her. On 4th November 1884, Mother Mary wrote to her Sisters in Adelaide exhorting them to think and speak charitably of the Archbishop who was persecuting her and them:

Whilst speaking the truth to the Archbishop and doing what we can for our loved Institute and its rights, let no Sister worthy of the name yield to bitterness or want of charity in anything she may have to say about the Bishop or those concerned with the Visitation. 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 ... 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. If we cannot excuse everything we can at least excuse the intention. (WM, 217.)

The last people from whom Mary of the Cross might have expected enmity were her fellow religious. And yet when Mary MacKillop referred to the bishops and priests who treated her or her Sisters abominably as “poor dear Dr X” or “our wonderful Fr X,” she was not being hypocritical. Rather, she was displaying her rare gift of being able to see the essential good—present, past and future—in a person whose faults or folly were causing her pain—the gift of a saint who had attained simplicity by conquering self, the root of all sin.

Tolerance was the foundation of Mary’s charity, a tolerance born of wisdom. Mary MacKillop had no illusions about human nature, its weaknesses and its limitations. Following the example of her Crucified Lord she was always ready to forgive lovingly those who had transgressed through ignorance or “limited vision,” as Fr Daniel Lyne has put it. That is why she was able to write to Cardinal Franchi of Dr Matthew Quinn, the bishop determined to drive her Sisters from his diocese of Bathurst: “I humbly submit to Your Eminence that this good, holy Bishop does not understand us” (WM, 156).

## THE WAY OF SOLIDARITY

There was in Adelaide a man named Fagan condemned to death for murder. Dr Reynolds (the bishop) and priests went to see him but he was like a lion and had to be chained down. He was just like a wild animal. Mother Mary and Sister Felicitas went to see him. The warders told them not to go in. But they went in and prayed and Mother was so affected that the tears poured down her face. This so moved him that he knelt down and prayed with them. At the beginning he was abrupt with Mother but he calmed down and became as gentle as a lamb. Mother prepared him for Confession and Father Williams heard his Confession and in the morning Mother went again with Sister Felicitas and he was without the chains, and received Holy Communion between the two of them. Mother Mary wished to ascend the scaffold with him but this was not allowed. Father Williams, however, did. He was said to be one of the worst of the criminals they had there. I know many hardened sinners that others could not get but Mother Mary always prevailed on them.

(PSV, Cap. 19A, 39.)

Mary MacKillop’s reverence for every human creature meant that she was incapable of “giving up” on anyone, even on a social outcast like Fagan who had turned his back not only on his fellow man but on his Creator. When Mary of the Cross thought about her Institute, about the Church, about Australia, about humanity itself, she thought in

terms of family. Hence for her the spirit of co-operation must always triumph over the spirit of division and dissent. The family was the basic unit of any human society, or, as her Scottish forebears would have put it, what is society but a great clan?

Part and parcel of this philosophy of solidarity was an aristocratic disdain of the vulgar snobbery that judges people by externals. Nor was Mary's ideal of human solidarity restricted to her co-religionists, for hers was the vision of a vast human family from which no-one was excluded by culture, race or religion. Here again Mary MacKillop derived the best from her Highland heritage, with its practice of hospitality to strangers as a sacred obligation. Since she took a "multiculturalist" approach a century ahead of its time, xenophobia and prejudice of any kind were meaningless to her. As for ethnic and cultural equality within the Church itself, if the Hibernicist tradition in the country was (and to some extent still is) responsible for the marginalization of indigenous and immigrant members of the faithful, Mary MacKillop, like Fr Tenison Woods, preferred the universalism of Irish prelates like Geoghegan and Goold and of the English Benedictines Ullathorne, Polding and Vaughan, all men who pioneered in this land a Catholicism that was Australian and inclusive, not Hibernian and exclusive.

No surprise, then, that non-British names are well represented among those associated with the life of Mary MacKillop. Surely one of her most curious "foreign" friends was Dr Barnabé Rodrigues, the pious, eccentric Portuguese surgeon living in Portland, who had given up his profession to help the poor and eke out a living pressing perfume from flowers. Mother Mary was especially kind to the newcomers from Germany who had difficulty settling into the new country, and her openness to other cultures is especially evident from her accounts of her travels in Italy and France, where she was only too happy to share the customs of the new peoples she encountered. Wherever she went, Mary "clicked" with people, in spite of the barriers of language and custom.

The misery of the South Sea Islanders drafted to labour in the cane-fields of North Queensland especially aroused her pity, and she exhorted Sister Josephine, the state provincial, to "Be kind to the poor foreigners. Remember that I was a foreigner once and, as such, was never laughed at or unkindly criticized" (OT, 150). In New Zealand Mary and her Sisters shared the life of the Maoris in the same way that they shared the life of the Australian poor. At their missions the Sisters took pains to learn Maori so they could teach the children in their own

language. During one of her stays in the North Island it was Mother Mary's delight to be distracted from her letter-writing by a little Maori boy who insisted on dancing for her.

Mary MacKillop's concern for the welfare and dignity of the Australian Aborigines was no less great. In Penola she used to tend an ailing part-Aboriginal girl whose filthiness had repelled other, less charitable Europeans. Many years later, she longed to join her Jesuit brother Donald in his missionary work among the native tribes of the Daly River district, especially after hearing how their way of life and welfare was being threatened by white hunters. Circumstances prevented her going to the Northern Territory, but it was her privilege to offer hospitality to the Aboriginal boys her brother sent to Sydney for further education. In the following century the Josephites would realize in a variety of ways Mary's desire to serve the indigenous people of this continent.

Significantly, too, Mother Mary always held a deep affection for her fellow Gaels the Irish, admiring their generosity, their resilience and, above all, their loyalty to the Church. Her natural empathy and open-mindedness enabled her to distinguish the virtues of ordinary Irish faithful from the excesses of the well-intentioned but misguided clerics who had hampered her work. This sense of human and Christian solidarity which knew no barriers and bore no grudges had much to do with Mary MacKillop's view of human beings as the ordinary instruments of Divine Providence. It was the simple human sympathy she radiated that drew forth the same quality from others, like the Italian pauper who confirmed her in hope on her difficult first day in Rome, as Fr George O'Neill would relate sixty years later:

She made her way to the college indicated, but the Father she asked for was not at home. Disappointed in this hope, she turned into a church hard by, where, finding at the door a number of poor people asking for alms, though her means were extremely scanty, she gave a trifle to each supplicant, feeling amply repaid by the gratitude expressed and the prayers poured forth for her. Kneeling down then in the church, she felt her loneliness very keenly; her tears burst forth; it seemed for a few moments as if for utter desolation her heart would break. Alone—no, not alone! Before her in the tabernacle was the Blessed Sacrament, and to it she next turned with fervent prayer for help.

A hand was gently laid on her shoulder. She turned to look, and met the sympathetic eyes of one of the poor men upon whom she had bestowed alms at the door. He spoke to her words she did not understand, but she knew he spoke kindly; then he held up to her view a tiny picture of Our Blessed Lady, and his gestures said plainly: "Have

confidence in our dear Mother. She will help you in your trials.” Then she felt comforted and consoled, and thanked as best she could the unknown one who had come to her aid. She kept this little picture as a treasure, and the sight of it in later years often brought tears to her eyes.” (GON, 148.)

While it would be certainly inaccurate to betray Mary MacKillop as a forerunner of the ecumenical movement (a woman of her times, she naturally could hardly conceive the possibility of Catholics and Protestants praying publicly together and collaborating in apostolic works), it is nevertheless true that she stood out among her contemporaries as a Catholic who refused to draw in practice the same rigid lines between religious truth and religious error which she drew in theory.

Error may have no rights, but people did, and Mother Mary was never guilty of reserving a greater share of her love for members of her own Church. Her friendship and kindness towards Protestants, Jews and unbelievers was reciprocated by non-Catholics who supported and encouraged her at times when members of her own Church persecuted or rejected her. We are reminded of Mr Emanuel Solomon, the Jewish citizen of Adelaide who offered Mary a home after her excommunication; of Mrs Joanna Barr-Smith, an Anglican and a life-long benefactress and friend of the Sisters of St Joseph. The degrees of membership might differ, but every human being had a place in Mary’s family, a unit of the vast family of God. The doors of her houses, like the Gate of Heaven, were always open to whoever, poor in spirit and humble of heart, wished to knock.

## THIRSTING FOR JUSTICE

The St Joseph’s schools do not admit of any distinctions such as High or Select. All children attending them are treated alike. The children of the rich man, if sent to them, must not be more favoured than those of the poor.

In the early days in Adelaide, this spirit was put to a severe test. The then Governor was a Catholic, Sir Dominic Daly. His son, John George Daly, was a leading member of the Catholic Board of Education and a great friend of the cause. His wife, an admirable Catholic, wished the Sisters to take her little boy as a day pupil, but naturally did not care that he should be placed on a par with everyone’s child. She thought that, being the Governor’s grandchild, an exception should be made in his favour, and that he should be allowed a separate desk near the head teacher and apart from the other children.

This request of hers had to be respectfully but firmly refused on the plea that the school was for the poorer class, not for the upper ranks. It

was advanced in favour that the Governor's grandchild being a pupil, many more would come. Against this the Sisters held that the children who would so come were not of the class they wanted, that these should and could easily find teachers, but that the poorer class could not, and that the latter were the Sisters' charge. The Dalys were annoyed at first, but in the end admitted that the Sisters were right. The principle then struggled for has always been maintained, but often in the face of much opposition from well-meaning but mistaken friends.

From Mother Mary's account of the History of the Congregation  
(1866–1900) (*RMA* 1984, 5–6).

One further manifestation of Mary MacKillop's Highland heritage was her egalitarianism. This philosophy was elevated, in Mary the woman of faith, to reverence for every child of God. Hence her impatience with any social convention that undermined the unity of the human family, something she held to be a sacred principle. It is in this light that we must view her refusal to make distinctions between rich and poor, between gentlefolk and workers, distinctions then the pillar of capitalist society. Part of Mary's clash with the contemporary clergy and society stemmed from her refusal to give preferential treatment to the pupils of the wealthy and the well-born, to teach upper-class accomplishments like music and languages to the children of the poor, or, in the spartan regime of the Josephite convents, to make any room for the middle-class comforts not enjoyed by the underprivileged among whom she and her Sisters toiled.

Another source of scandal for conservative-minded churchmen and laity was her exclusion from the Institute of the inferior class of lay sister, a standard feature of Catholic women's orders. The Josephite Rule forbade a nun to consider herself above any one of her sisters, whether by reason of her superior gifts or her higher social background. "Those who may have received a more polite education than ordinary, or who may have moved in higher worldly positions, must always remember that they have left these things outside the doors of St Joseph's Convent, where, all being Sisters, Spouses of Jesus, and unworthy followers of Him who chose rough fishermen for His dearest friends, they must imitate His example, and become as the least among their Sisters" (*RMA* 1982, 28).

Social justice, for Mother Mary of the Cross, was inimical to the spirit of her grasping age which filled the poor with envy of their social betters and fired them with the ambition to clamber up the ladder of social success in a manner that implied a deep contempt for themselves. Mary MacKillop dissented from such attitudes. She

did not believe that the poor were chronically inadequate human beings, unacceptable until they attained material prosperity and “respectability.” In her Christian optimism Mary understood the phenomenon of poverty within the context of Divine Providence. The struggling Australian family was for her an icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Individual poverty she certainly saw as an evil to be remedied, but the enduring reality of poverty in the world she recognized as divinely ordained. That is why she laboured for the happiness of the poor without the slightest disgust for their misery, and without making odious social comparisons.

Mary’s antidote to the quest for respectability was the inculcation of self-respect. The Josephites, she wrote, had been unwilling to teach instrumental music in their schools because

They have seen too many sad instances in larger towns of the evils which have attended the children of those foolish parents who hesitated not laying out money they could ill afford upon lessons in music, thus giving their poor children ideas so totally opposed to their positions in life, and at the same time inwardly neglecting the essential things, that as a natural consequence the children grow up dissatisfied with their state, ashamed of their parents, and where they did not go step by step to open ruin, they fell little short of it, and were anything but what Catholic young women should be. (*RMA* 1980, 58–9.)

In the closing years of the nineteenth century Mother Mary was saddened by the growth of Catholic education of an elitist type: “I have been much grieved over the Select Schools opened this year in Adelaide,” she wrote in 1899. “Those who favour High Schools or Select Schools are not true to the spirit of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, nor to the interests of the Rule for which we have suffered so much. Had I given in to having Select Schools I would not have been excommunicated, nor would any of us have suffered so much” (*WM*, 155).

In her quest to give the poor a sense of self-acceptance and self-worth she always took people as she found them. Condescension was not her way: Mary knew since childhood what it was to depend on the charity of others. She knew that all the virtues and gifts supposedly natural to the upper classes belonged equally to the “lower orders.” It was a matter of restoring the fullness of human dignity to the economically oppressed. The social improvement of individuals and families might well result from this, but that was the work of the God of Providence in whom the Josephites so fervently trusted.

We have in the records of Mother Mary's life abundant examples of the little things she and her Sisters did to promote the dignity of the poor. For instance, when the time of First Holy Communion came round each year, they would busy themselves collecting clothes and sewing so that the children of the poor would be as beautifully dressed on the great day as the more privileged ones. Rome's obliging the Josephites to own property had in fact increased their ability to relieve the sting of poverty. Officially the Sisters now owned houses, yet their homes were not private property, but constantly open to those in need. One of the most touching episodes from the life of Blessed Mary MacKillop must be the following testimony from a nun recalling the circumstances of her entering the Institute:

I could not relate all the goodness and kindness I received from her. I first met Mother Mary when I was a girl at school. She asked me my name and then about my parents. As they had both died just before, I burst out crying. Then, calling me by my name, she told me never to want a home while she had a convent.

When I was leaving Sydney with Mother to enter in Adelaide my people came to the train to see us off. When the train left I burst out crying and Mother commenced the Rosary, not stopping till she had finished the fifteen mysteries. By that time I had calmed down, and dear Mother had a good laugh at me. (*PSV*, Cap. 36C, 58.)

Mary's sense of justice did not distinguish between the individual and the group. Fr William Modystack relates a good example of this from 1882, when a certain priest took a dislike to one particular Sister of St Joseph working in his parish and "informed Mary that he would no longer take any of his meals at the convent. Her reply to him, though written with the utmost respect for the priesthood, had something of her acute Scots sense of wit and justice about it. She informed him that not only would she accede to his request to remove the Sister he did not want, but she would change the whole community" (WM, 180).

Mary's long and hard-fought battle to defend the rights of her Institute against episcopal encroachments and interference is yet another manifestation of her concern for justice. The objective of the struggle was not egotistically to prove a point, much less to force a just outcome in order to "teach a lesson" to those who had sinned against her. Mother Mary's fight for central government in her Order must be seen in the context of her sense of responsibility for her Sisters and her obligations to those whom the Josephites were founded to serve. Young women had joined her convents with the intention of living out



the Josephite rule. Priests and lay people who welcomed the nuns to their parishes and towns naturally expected them to do things the Josephite way. To give in to prelates who were openly defying the ruling of Rome in her favour was to Mary's mind far more than personal cowardice: it would be a sin against common justice.

On one of the rare occasions when Mother Mary of the Cross counselled her Sisters on political matters—before one of the first Australian federal elections—her advice reflected her concern to see the application in society of Christian principles of justice: “Find out who are the members proposed for election and vote for those who are considered mostly friendly to the Church and Religion. Every so-called Catholic is not the best man” (WM, 259).

## THE PRIVILEGE OF SHARING

When she arrived our midday meal was over, and as we had in this place a very small school, only thirty day pupils, no boarders etc., so you may guess we had very little to spare. When Mother came I was the only Sister in the convent as the other two Sisters were at school, one being the Superior. “Oh, dear child, are the Sisters at school? I am on my way to see my poor Sister at the next convent. I had to leave very early this morning, and had only time to take a cup of tea. I am very tired and hungry. So prepare something for me whilst I run over to see the Sisters in the schools. I will not be long as the train leaves at 3 p.m.”

I got ready what I could—only a little steak that was left, as quickly as possible. Mother was back in a few minutes, and after a little delay the meal was set before her. Just as she was about to sit to the table a knock came at the door. I went to see who was there, and a poor, half-starved, badly clothed old man stood before me. “Would you give me a bit to eat, Miss?,” he said. “I can get no work in this town, nor anything to eat. I am very weak.”

Mother followed me to the door, and when she saw the man, “Sister dear,” she said, “give to that poor creature what you have prepared for me. The very look of him would draw tears from a stone,” she said, “a cup of tea and a slice of bread and butter will be sufficient for me. It will do me more good to give him a dinner. Poor old man, perhaps some father that the world has been hard on.” And, “My dear child, we must do all for the honour and glory of God,” she said.

(PSV, Cap. 36C, 59.)

If Mary McKillop had a weakness, it was that she was generous to a fault, a generosity so great that she had to put other Sisters in charge of

the Institute's finances. Her inability to ignore any genuine case of need caused her to run up debts that made her many an enemy within the Catholic community. Once again we find Mary's ancestry at work, for, as Fr Osmund Thorpe remarked, both she and her father "had the Gaelic trait of being lavish in hospitality even when they possessed little, and of being willing to share with others—relations, friends and even strangers—whatever they happened to have a goodly share of at the moment" (OT, 149). Of the three cardinal virtues, Mary deemed charity "the darling one of all."

The generosity of Mother Mary of the Cross is as perfect an illustration as we could hope to find of the Catholic doctrine of the universal purpose of goods, the teaching that the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use, to the fact that goods are meant for everyone (John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, n. 14). Josephite begging and charity were direct applications of this teaching: collecting from the "haves" goods to be distributed to the "have nots." In most cases the donors were the better-endowed members of society, kind souls who gave of their surplus. But the generosity of the "collectors" was of a radical kind, for they were accustomed to giving even when there was nothing to spare and it meant their going without.

Food, clothing and other basic necessities were not the only commodities that the daughters of St Joseph, the Provider of the Holy Family, collected and distributed for free. Education was also to be shared, and the Josephites offered it as willingly to the children of parents who could pay school fees as to those who could not afford them. There were many cases of Josephites conquering popular resistance to the opening of a new school because of the fear that fees would be demanded. With so little income the difficulties the Sisters experienced in furnishing and running their schools need hardly be imagined, yet Mother Mary is on record as having advised people willing to support her schools but not the diocesan fund to pay their dues to the Church, even if it meant depriving her of income. When a group of Irish Dominican nuns arrived in Adelaide in the early days, Mary did not hesitate to give up her only convent to them. To love was to share.

"The Sisters must do all the good they can and never see an evil without trying how they may remedy it" (DL 1994, 53). This gem of the Josephite rule, expressed either in words or by example, inspired and attracted many other generous souls to the wonderful work of the Institute. Among these "outsiders" was one of Mary's dearest Protestant friends, Adelaide physician Dr John Benson. Of him she

wrote to her mother in 1873: “There are two doctors attending the Convent; one of them, a Protestant, is wonderful in his kindness and liberality. He not only attends daily when necessary, but also prescribes and makes up our medicines for us, for none of which he will take a penny of payment save what we can give him in praying for him” (WM, 101).

Only four years later, Mother Mary had the opportunity to repay her debt to Dr Benson, and her actions, a touching testimony to human goodness, are also a lesson in Christian sharing:

All last week we were in a sad way about our good and generous friend, Dr Benson. He died on Friday, but not a Catholic. I was with him for part of his agony... I feel this death more than words can express. Poor, dear Doctor, he is universally loved and respected and his funeral... was one of the largest ever seen in Adelaide. Besides about two hundred carriages and other traps, it is thought there must have been three thousand people at the cemetery. He has left very little provision for his wife and children; his too-generous heart never having allowed him to save. We have offered to educate, for the present, Lottie and the younger boys. Poor Mrs Benson is most grateful. When I made the offer she cried and, embracing me, said, “He told me you would be kind.”

It is proposed to put up a monument to his memory and we were asked to give one of our corners for a site—just a small piece large enough for the erection of a monument. Of course we would only be too glad, but the thing is not yet decided. It was the Mayor who proposed it. There is to be a fund for the widow and children as well as for the monument. I feel that wherever our Sisters have the power and opportunity, they should get the generous Irish to give them something to send me for this Fund. Something that we could hand to the Mayor as having been given by those who did not know the Doctor themselves, but who honoured his memory for his generous kindness to us... (WM, 164.)

## UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS

It's been a hot, trying day. But now, in the pitch-black stillness of a tropical night I stare out of the open window of this little hut, our first Josephite mission in this land. It was Mary of the Cross herself who led us here. She wanted us to bring her big heart to this people who have drunk the cup of suffering to the bitter dregs. Please, Lord, a little cool, just a little! I'm too tired to pore any longer over the old text-book open on my wooden bench, dimly lit by a kerosene lamp. Who could have imagined it, an Australian

Sister of St Joseph struggling with the complexities of Portuguese in the mountains of Timor!

And yet—as I was telling Father Afonso the parish priest here—but for a quirk of history all Australia could be speaking the language of Camões today. Poor old Captain Cook, poor Dirk Hartog: today the scholars tell us that the first European to reach the shores of Terra Australis were Portuguese, and in 1522 to boot! And where should one of Captain Mendonça's three caravels end up beached but at Warrnambool, just up the coast from Portland, where our own Mary MacKillop began her life of teaching.

Was it the ghosts of those unlucky adventurers that drew another Portuguese to the district three centuries later? Yes, Barnabé Rodrigues, the same "Doc Rodrigues" who told Mary, well before her great adventure began in Penola, how he had seen her in a dream at the head of a band of virgins all dressed in brown. And me, one of them, up here in this sorrowing land where friars from Portugal planted the cross not long after Captain Mendonça's chaplain—so my imagination tells me—planted it in Australian earth.

She's done her dash in the land of her birth, Mother Mary has. Australians don't seem to have too much time for her God these days. So now she's sending us around the world. An army of obstinate and troublesome women just like her. Timor, Cambodia, the Philippines, even Peru. She likes the difficult places. I think of our own dear Sister Irene sealing her faith with her blood high in the Andes. But here, too, we work and suffer and pray under the shadow of the Cross.

In this place there's probably not one family that hasn't suffered tragedy over the past twenty-five years, the loss of a loved-one through war or famine. These people must be close to the heart of Mary of the Cross: she knew what it was like to lose those she loved. First her brother John, then brother Peter, her father, her sister Lexie and finally, the cruellest loss of all, her mother's death by drowning in a shipwreck off the New South Wales coast. And to think poor Flora MacKillop was coming to Sydney to help her daughter, who had been ill! The shadow of the Cross followed Mary all her life. And here we are today, in this land of crosses. Suddenly it's all falling into place.

A land of crosses. There's a big white one standing on the top of the mountain facing our little hut. The men of the village erected it twenty years ago after the massacre that took place in the valley. The darkness now is thick and impenetrable. It invades everything and seems eternal. But in just a few hours' time—on the first day of a new century—I'll see it again, beacon-bright in the miraculous light of morning.

A Sister of St Joseph, in a village in the mountains of East Timor,  
31 December 1999.

## END OF CENTURY PRAYER

Grant us, O most clement God,  
through the intercession  
of the Blessed and Immaculate Virgin  
that we may expiate  
with tears of penance  
the sins of the declining century.  
May we thus prepare  
for the beginning of the new century,  
that it may be wholly dedicated  
to the honour of Thy Name  
and the Kingdom of Jesus Christ Thy Son.  
May all nations serve Him  
in unity of faith  
and perfection of charity. AMEN

Found among Mary MacKillop's papers.

## A MESSAGE FROM SCOTLAND

### Màiri Nic Fhilib, Bean-Uasal nan Gàidheal

Ged is ann an Astràilia a rugadh agus a thogadh i, agus gur ann do dhaoine an dùthaich sin a thug i a beatha, bha fuil a' Ghàidheil làidir ann am Màiri Nic Fhilib. Chan e gu robh Gàidhlig aice, ged a bha, ach gu robh nàdur a' Ghàidheil innte, a dh'fhuilingeadh cruadalas agus duilicheadasan, ach nach crùbadh idir air 's bith dè cho dorch 's a bhiodh cùisean a' coimhead.

'S ann bho Ghaidhealtachd na h-Alba a bha pàrantan Mhàiri, agus bha an creideamh gu math làidir. Bha a h-athair, Alasdair, air a bhith a' deasachadh airson a bhi 'na shagart, ach cha b'urrain dhà fhoghlum a chrìochachadh air sgàth a dhroch shlàinte. 'S beag a bha fhios aige nuair a phòs e Flòraidh Dhòmhnallach gun robh e an dàn gun crìochnaicheadh a cheud leanabh, Màiri, ann an dòigh, an obair air an do thòisich esan.

Tha e ann eachdraidh nan Gàidheal a bhi eòlach air bochdainn, agus a bhi a' fulang ainneart agus cruaidh-chàs air sgàths an chreideamh agus an dilseachd, gun an earbs a chall gun tionndaidheadh an roth agus gur ann aca a bhiodh am buaidh mu dheireadh. Dh'fhuiling Màiri bochdainn, ach cha do chail i a creideamh. Dh'fhuiling i nàimhdeas

bho luchd na h-eaglaise nuair a bhiodh dùil aice ri cuideachadh, ach cha do chaill i a creideamh. Agus dh'fhuiling i coinneal-bhàthadh, ach do chaill i a creideamh. Chan ann an rìgh talmhaidh a chuir Màiri a h-earbs', mar a rinn a sinnsearan ann an Alba, ach ann an Rìgh nan Dùl, agus thionndaidh an roth dhithise mu dheireadh. Chaidh an coinneal-bhàthadh a thogail; fhuair i cead bho 'n Phàp airson a sgoiltean an ruith mar a bha i ag iarraidh, agus far an robh feadhainn air feuchainn ri stad a chuir air a h-obair, 's e leudachadh a thachair.

Troimh gach duilicheadas ris an do choinnich i 'na beatha, cha do rinn Màiri càineadh air an fheadhainn a dh'fheuch ri bacadh a chuir oirre. Ged a bha cùidean gu math doirbh dhi aig amannan, cha robh eagal oirre, oir bha i cinnteach gu robh Dia a' coimhead oirre, agus gur a toil Dhé a bh'air cùlaibh a h-uile nì.

Thoughts on Mary MacKillop by Anne Frater, specialist on Highland women and their writings. (A translation follows.)

### Mary MacKillop, Woman of the Gael

Although she was born and raised in Australia, and it was the people of that country to whom she devoted her life, the blood of the Gael was strong in Mary MacKillop. It's not only that she had Gaelic, but that she had the nature of the Gael: able to withstand hardship and difficulties without breaking, no matter how dark things seemed.

Mary's parents were from the Highlands of Scotland, and their faith was strong. Her father, Alexander, had prepared for the priesthood, but was unable to complete his studies because of ill health. Little did he know when he married Flora MacDonald that his first child was destined, in a way, to complete the work which he had started.

It is in the history of the Gaels to be acquainted with poverty and to have suffered cruelty and persecution because of their religion and their loyalties, without losing their conviction that the wheel would turn and that victory would one day be theirs. Mary suffered poverty, but she did not lose her faith. She suffered the enmity of the Church when she would have expected aid, but she did not lose her faith. She encountered difficulties on all sides because of what she was trying to do, but she did not lose her faith. It was not in an earthly king that Mary placed her faith, as her ancestors had done in Scotland, but in the King of Kings, and for her the wheel eventually turned. The excommunication was lifted; she received the Pope's permission to run her

schools as she wanted to, and her work flourished where some had tried to stop it.

Through all the problematic times in her life, Mary made no criticism of those who had tried to hinder her. Although things were sometimes difficult, she was not afraid, because she was certain that God was watching over her, and that His will was behind everything.

### JOSEPHITE REFLECTIONS: 1994

What has always impressed me most about Mary MacKillop was her inability to see a problem without doing something to remedy it.

Sister Rita Mary Duffy

Mary was a woman of courage who was not daunted by the limits placed on her by the society of her time. Her wisdom was grounded in her deep listening to the needs of the poor and the marginalized.

Sisters Catherine Dean, Kathleen Price and Eileen McHugh

Mary MacKillop had a great sense of compassion. To see children deprived of education because of poverty moved her to co-operate with Fr Julian Tenison Woods and begin the first school at Penola, South Australia. No school fees were asked for: the parents gave what they could. That was fine with Mary, because she trusted entirely in God's providence.

Sister Moira Miller

Mother Mary was a very prayerful and Christlike person who walked in the presence of God and saw God in the people He created. "Let us forgive in our hearts those who have hurt us" was a recommendation of hers that has always impressed me deeply.

Anonymous Sister

I often think of the two inscriptions on Mother Mary's tomb in the Mount Street convent. On one side of the tomb are the words "Remember we are but travellers here—God is love." The other says: "I leave you in St Joseph's care."

Anonymous Sister

I feel that Mary has a lot to say to the Church of today. She was a woman who challenged injustice and was prepared to be excommunicated for her ideals by a hierarchy that did not want to understand her.

Sister Marie McAlister

For me the qualities of Mary MacKillop I admire most are her tenacity and perseverance in the times of hardship and opposition. These are qualities needed so much in today's society where fidelity to following a way of life dedicated to fostering the dignity of others is as important as it was in her time.

Sister Anne Cooper

The situation in country areas today has similarities to Mary MacKillop's time, when she took the Church to the people and gave them a sense of dignity and worth while sharing their poverty—and not only material poverty—and isolation. Rural Australia today has fewer priests, services and support systems, and its people are suffering from loneliness, the high cost of education and extreme poverty with no cash flow. Because of the reluctance of priests, religious and professionals to accept the isolation of small country towns, country people can feel forgotten and alienated. They need dedicated people, prepared to live the same hardships, bringing hope through a God who loves. It seems to me that Mary MacKillop's charism is still needed in the outback areas of Australia.

Sister Mary Fermio

Mother Mary's complete submission to the Divine Will and the love and forgiveness which she extended to all have always inspired and challenged me. And I pray that she will inspire a renewal of devotion to St Joseph as the model and protector of families today.

Sister Paula Reilly

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*Building the Kingdom* is a creative exploration of the significance and spirituality of Australia's first saint. Beginning with an imaginary letter from an early Josephite sister in the South Australian outback and concluding with a vision of the Josephites at work in East Timor at the end of this century, Geoffrey Hull explores the spiritual roots of Mary MacKillop's life-long commitment to the underprivileged. What emerges is a sensitive appreciation of Josephite humility and poverty, faith and piety, tolerance and charity, a spirituality that draws strength from a deep sense of involvement in the providential building of the Kingdom of God.

Dr Hull evokes Mary MacKillop's inclusive understanding of social justice, ranging from her insistence on the dignity of the poor, to her concern for the suffering of our indigenous peoples, to her principled kindness to Protestants, Jews and unbelievers. In her vision of Christian community Mary MacKillop resisted the prejudices that divide class from class and faith from faith. For her, human beings were instruments of Divine Providence, and all deserved the respect entailed by their being creatures of a loving God.

Dr Geoffrey Hull is a lecturer in linguistics at the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur. He is at present also Director of the Mary MacKillop Institute of East Timorese Studies sponsored by the Sisters of St Joseph. The Institute was set up in August 1994 to provide educational materials in the Tetum language for the Catholic schools of the Diocese of Dili, East Timor.

*Building the Kingdom* is one of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council Occasional Paper series.

 Dove  
An imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

ISBN 1-86371-550-9



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