

"I have learned to love the Cross"

In his 28 June general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on apostolic zeal, speaking about Saint Mary MacKillop.

06/28/2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we must have a bit of patience, with this heat – and thank you for coming, with this heat, with this sun: thank you very much for your visit.

In this series of catecheses on apostolic zeal – we are talking about this – we are encountering some exemplary figures of men and women from all times and places, who have given their lives for the Gospel. Today we are going to Oceania – far away, isn’t it? – a continent made up of many islands, large and small. The faith in Christ, which so many European emigrants brought to those lands, soon took root and bore abundant fruit (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania*, 6). Among them was an extraordinary religious sister, Mary MacKillop (1842-1909), foundress of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart, who dedicated her life to the intellectual and religious formation of the poor in rural Australia.

Mary MacKillop was born near Melbourne to parents who emigrated to Australia from Scotland. As a

young girl, she felt called by God to serve him and bear witness to him not only with words, but above all with a life transformed by God's presence (cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 259). Like Mary Magdalene, who first encountered the risen Jesus and was sent by him to bring the proclamation to the disciples, Mary was convinced that she too was sent to spread the Good News and attract others to an encounter with the living God.

Wisely reading the signs of the times, she understood that for her, the best way to do so was through the education of the young, in the knowledge that Catholic education is a form of evangelization. It is a great form of evangelization. In this way, if we can say that “Each saint is a mission, planned by the Father to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel” (Apostolic Exhortation

Gaudete et Exsultate, 19) then Mary McKillop was especially so through the founding of schools.

An essential characteristic of her zeal for the Gospel was caring for the poor and marginalized. And this is very important: on the path to holiness, which is the Christian path, the poor and marginalized are protagonists, and a person cannot advance in holiness if he or she is not dedicated to them too, in one way or another. But they are the presence of the Lord, those who are in need of the Lord's help. Once I read a phrase that struck me; it said: "The protagonist of history is the beggar. They are the ones who draw attention to this great injustice, which is the great poverty in the world." Money is spent on manufacturing weapons, not providing meals. And do not forget: there is no holiness if in one way or another there is no care for the poor,

the needy, those who are somewhat on the margins of society. This care for the poor and the marginalized drove Mary to go where others would not or could not go. On 19 March 1866, the feast of Saint Joseph, she opened the first school in a small suburb of South Australia. It was followed by many others that she and her sisters founded in rural communities throughout Australia and New Zealand. But they multiplied, apostolic zeal is like that: it multiplies works.

Mary MacKillop was convinced that the purpose of education is the integral development of the person both as an individual and as a member of the community; and that this requires wisdom, patience and charity on the part of every teacher.

Indeed, education does not consist of filling the head with ideas: no, not just this. What is education

constituted of? Accompanying and encouraging students on the path of human and spiritual growth, showing them how friendship with the Risen Jesus expands the heart and makes life more humane. Educating and helping to think well, to feel well (the language of the heart) and to do good (the language of the hands). This vision is fully relevant today, when we feel the need for an “educational pact” capable of uniting families, schools and society as a whole.

Mary MacKillop's zeal for spreading the Gospel among the poor also led her to undertake a number of other charitable works, starting with the “Providence House” opened in Adelaide to take in the elderly and abandoned children. Mary had great faith in God's Providence: she was always confident that in any situation God provides. But this did not spare her from the anxieties and

difficulties arising from her apostolate, and Mary had good reason for this: she had to pay bills, negotiate with local bishops and priests, manage the schools and look after the professional and spiritual formation of her Sisters; and, later, she suffered health problems. Yet, through it all, she remained calm, patiently carrying the cross that is an integral part of the mission.

On one occasion, on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, Mary said to one of her Sisters: “My daughter, for many years I have learned to love the Cross.” *For many years I have learned to love the Cross.* She did not give up in times of trial and darkness, when her joy was dampened by opposition or rejection. Look at this: all the saints faced opposition, even within the Church. This is curious. And she faced it too. She remained convinced that even when the Lord gave her “the bread of

adversity and the water of affliction" (*Is 30:20*), The Lord Himself would soon answer her cry and surround her with His grace. This is the secret of apostolic zea: the continual relationship with the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, may Saint Mary MacKillop's missionary discipleship, her creative response to the needs of the Church of her time, and her commitment to the integral formation of young people inspire all of us today, called to be a leaven of the Gospel in our rapidly changing societies. May her example and intercession support the daily work of parents, teachers, catechists and all educators, for the good of young people and for a more humane and hopeful future. Thank you very much.

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