

Pope creates Australia's first "saint"

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On October 17, in an elaborate ceremony in the Vatican, the Catholic nun and teacher Mary MacKillop was canonised by Pope Benedict XVI as the first Australian-born saint, more than a century after her death in 1909. The event was the end-product of an effort to utilise the canonisation campaign as a means of rehabilitating the badly battered standing of the Catholic Church in Australia.

MacKillop's canonisation was heavily promoted in the preceding weeks by the Church and the entire political and media establishment. A television mini-series capped endless reviews of selective details of her life, accompanied by paeans to her miracle-making and healing capacities. In the hours before her elevation to sainthood, a light show beamed her image onto 13 pylons of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The full Vatican service was televised live on state-owned and commercial cable television, complete with images of Australia's foreign minister and former prime minister, Kevin Rudd, and his opposition counterpart, Julie Bishop, joining other "pilgrims" in St Peter's Square, and obsequious commentary on the various feudalistic rituals associated with the event.

Politicians and editorialists lauded MacKillop as a "fair dinkum Aussie saint". Labor Party Prime Minister Julia Gillard, a declared atheist, enthused: "This is a saint who rides horse-back for days under the searing Australian sun... who has grit under her fingernails and sweat on her brow." Opposition leader Tony Abbott declared MacKillop "more than just a great Catholic, she was also a great Australian". Some of the 8,000 Australians at the Vatican, unable to contain their enthusiasm, defied convention and broke into the nationalist sporting chant, "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi! Oi! Oi!", when the Pope mentioned her name.

The reality of MacKillop's life is a somewhat tragic story of a thoughtful and compassionate woman whose hopes were thwarted by that bastion of political and social reaction, the Catholic Church. Born to Scottish Catholic migrants in the working class suburbs of Melbourne in 1842, she grew up in difficult circumstances. She appears to have drawn

from her own experiences, and those around her, a genuine desire to combat inequality and ignorance. Before there was any system of universal public education, she set out to convince the Church that it should set up schools that would accept students regardless of whether their parents could pay.

To achieve these ends, MacKillop helped found in 1867 an order of teaching nuns, the Sisters of Saint Joseph, or Josephites, who were required to take vows of poverty, no personal possessions and a willingness to travel anywhere to provide education services to the poor.

This was not, however, what the Church had in mind. The Josephites quickly came under attack for being insufficiently devout and for begging for food and money. After a series of conflicts with the Church, MacKillop was temporarily excommunicated in 1871, and the order's vow of poverty repudiated, on Rome's orders, in 1873.

MacKillop was ultimately removed in 1883 as head of the order over false accusations that she had become an alcoholic. By the time she regained the leadership 16 years later, in 1899, the Josephites had been transformed into a mainstay of the Australian Catholic establishment. When she died in 1909, the order was part of the sectarian, fee-charging Catholic school system, operating in opposition to the secular and free public school system that had by then been established as a result of the struggles of the working class.

After being largely dismissed as a saint candidate for decades, calls within the Church for MacKillop's canonisation gained momentum in the 1970s. She was ultimately beatified in 1995 by Pope John Paul II after a Church investigation decided that a woman's recovery from leukaemia in 1961 was the miraculous outcome of her prayers to the long-dead nun. Soon after, the recovery, in 1993, of a woman diagnosed with lung and brain cancer, was also attributed to MacKillop, giving her the necessary two "miracles" to qualify for sainthood.

It was not simply the Catholic Church that latched on to MacKillop but a long line of media hacks, politicians and celebrities all queued up to exploit her canonisation as a convenient diversion from the increasingly harsh realities of everyday life and a means of promoting nationalism, backwardness and religious superstition.

The saturation media coverage of the event and MacKillop's "miracles" drove issues such as the criminal war in Afghanistan, the catastrophic floods in Pakistan, the deepening global economic crisis and signs of escalating social tensions off the front pages and out of news broadcasts.

The same politicians hypocritically lauding MacKillop's "compassion for the poor" were precisely those responsible for implementing the savage pro-market measures that have created today's unprecedented gulf between rich and poor. A recent Salvation Army report found that more than two million Australians now live below the poverty line, struggling to survive from one day to the next. And the same media that praised MacKillop for fighting to provide the poor with equal access to education were those demanding that governments encourage private fee paying schools at the expense of public schools in working class areas.

Particularly pernicious has been the promotion of false hopes in miracles. In the area of health, medical science has made astonishing advances during the past decades, achieving cures that truly would have been miraculous 50, let alone 100 years ago. Yet today, there is a two-class health system, where the wealthy have access to the most up-to-date technology, while the majority face a rapidly deteriorating public health system starved of funds and increasingly incapable of providing timely, high quality treatment.

So prominent and dangerous have been the "medical miracle" claims that a number of medical specialists have felt obligated to publicly challenge them. Sydney oncologist David Bell, for example, who has written about the rare but established phenomenon of spontaneous cancer remission, told the *Australian*: "I'm very concerned that a lot of people will mistakenly think, 'I just have to go down to Mary MacKillop's grave and pray, and I'll be cured', and come away disappointed."

For its part, the Church hierarchy is desperate to stem the decline in its following. Only 15 percent of the reputed five million nominal Catholics in Australia attend Sunday mass on an average weekend. Reactionary church teachings on

homosexuality, contraception, sex-outside-marriage, abortion and in-vitro fertilisation are openly ignored and viewed with hostility or outright contempt.

After decades of stagnant recruitment into the priesthood, the average age of an Australian priest is now 60. Once figures of respect, priests are now overwhelmingly viewed with suspicion. An avalanche of child sex abuse scandals has rocked the Church over the past two decades, leaving few parents comfortable leaving their children alone with a member of the Catholic clergy.

Internationally the Church has latched on to saints and miracles as one means of clawing back support. From 1978 until his death in 2005, John Paul II created a staggering 482 saints, more than those created by his 17 predecessors put together. Not only that. He also beatified and prepared the way for the canonisation of hundreds more, including MacKillop.

Now formally anointed "Saint Mary of the Cross MacKillop" the Australian nun has been proposed, in a staggering act of cynicism, as a patron saint for sexually abused children by *America*, a Catholic publication in the US. "Like all saints she is a model for all Catholics", an editorial declared, "but at this time abuse victims and their families need all the help they can get from heaven as on earth."

In a time of immense and growing social distress, MacKillop's alleged miraculous powers will undoubtedly be invoked as a reason to stay within the Catholic fold. One suspects that the impact will be minimal however. Facing vast economic and social shocks, masses of workers and youth in Australia and internationally will not be relying on divine intervention, but seeking a political means to defend their living standards and rights.



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