

Catholic Mission
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Saint Mary MacKillop: Her Call to the Poor Is Our Mission Too

Had she lived today Saint Mary MacKillop would recognise Catholic Mission's work of faith and action in the world as the same cause that drove her own mission more than 140 years ago. We also know that a lot of our classrooms would remind her of the one where she first taught as a Sister of St Joseph.

That classroom in Penola, South Australia, was the best that could be found: a converted stable. Mary was 25 years old and in that room she taught 50 children whose parents wanted only the best for their kids, including instruction in the Catholic faith.

Today, in places like Timor-Leste, Uganda, Bolivia and Zambia, Catholic Mission makes possible this same miracle of enlightenment. Contemporary mission brings literacy, numeracy and religious education to disadvantaged children whose circumstances mean they wouldn't otherwise be able to attend a school.

Spread across 160 countries, our classrooms so often are spare of resources, with walls of timber and floors made of hardened earth, but it is the missionary teacher, acting in faith like Mary MacKillop who makes a world of difference in so many young lives.

Yes, Mary MacKillop's mission to the poor is very much alive in our world.

When Mary MacKillop co-founded with Father Tenison Woods the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart in 1867, she ignited a missionary zeal to go to the poor and the marginalised of Australia.



There was no large supporting congregation, no wealthy endowments to fund this work. Mary's declaration of her new institute was of "a truly missionary spirit of poverty."

The Josephite Sisters, she wrote “would hold themselves at the shortest notice and without a murmur where obedience and the cause of the dear little ones of the Church require it.”

There was to be no delay in this cause, certainly not any consideration of personal comfort: “The necessity of securing beforehand a house to live in and such things are the greatest possible drawbacks to a true missionary spirit.” she wrote.

Yes, so great was her mission that Mary MacKillop could see only the urgency to help children at the edges.

And how many there were!

The discovery of gold a dozen years before had seen the population of the Australian colonies more than double, to over a million people. Many lived beyond the services of either church or state, surviving under canvas in far-flung mining towns.

The Sisters of St Joseph quickly became known as “Sisters of the Outback” for they shared the lot of the people they served, travelling for days on end to remote mining towns where their convent was a white-washed tent, the same as those of the diggers, or railroad workers, or farmers in distant places.

In Queensland they were known as “The Women of the West”, sharing the fortunes of the wives of stockmen, miners, sheep shearers in the hot and rough conditions. Yet to make their first foundation in isolated Queensland in January 1870, Mary and her companion had had to beg their fare from Adelaide, as the Bishop could provide no funds.

“They took risks and stepped outside the general norms of nineteenth century sisters’ behaviour. In particular, they went out into the city streets in pairs and asked the more affluent for donations of money or goods to be used for the benefit of the people (and) people of all faiths, or of none, responded generously to their appeals for help,” writes the historian Sr Marie Foale RSJ.

How much has changed today and how little!

Catholic Mission is funded solely by the generosity of our caring donors. You make possible missionary work that clothes, feeds and educates poor children; builds up fragile and isolated communities; and inspires and educates the next generation of Church leaders, including in Outback Australia and the Torres Strait Islands.

Like Saint Mary MacKillop, today’s missionaries are directed by the Holy Spirit to spread the Good News of Christ. Our ideals are faith in action in the world. Our missionary friends include lay missionaries, religious brothers, sisters and priests.

Like Saint Mary, they are called to go beyond the safe and the familiar, and to live and work with the people at the edges. Their work is guided by providence and is only possible through the contributions of Catholic Mission donors around the world.

PLEASE GIVE GENEROUSLY ON WORLD MISSION DAY, SUNDAY 24 OCTOBER

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