

**CSSA McCosker Oration
Canberra 11th October 2011**

**Orator: Anne Derwin rsj
Congregational Leader**

**Women as Leaders:
Visionaries and Agents for Change
in the Development and Delivery of Social Services in
Australia**

I acknowledge that tonight we gather on the land of Ngunnawal people.

I'm not sure if any of you saw Four Corners last Monday when the program aired a British documentary in which we met Sam and Paige. We heard Sam and Paige speak very articulately about living in poverty. Sam was only 11 and Paige only 10. They lived, not in Somalia or East Timor but in the United Kingdom. They live now in the 21st century.

I am honoured to deliver the McCosker oration tonight. This man of our times, this priest of the Archdiocese of Sydney knew all too well the Sams and Paiges of 20th century Australia and spared himself nothing in bringing the Church to provide for them. So too did the woman who lived a century before him and for whom the Gospel was the impetus for responding to the young Sams and Paiges and the destitute women and men of the colonies of the great south land.

Mary's passion for God and her passion for humanity were recognised and celebrated as we well know by the Universal Church just one year ago on the 17th October.

Mary MacKillop is as significant to the story of Catholic Social Services as she is to the story of Catholic Education in Australia. I hope you hear that tonight as we glimpse ever so briefly some of the services she established for the vulnerable people of her time in Adelaide, northern Queensland, Sydney and Melbourne.

We see rarely see or hear about our society through the eyes and voices of children as we did in that Four Corners program which was so simply called "Poor Kids."

As we listened to 11 year old Sam living with his father and sister in Leicester and 10 year old Paige living with her mother and 2 other siblings in Glasgow, the reality of poverty was placed before us. Poverty in 21st century UK is hardly different from the poverty Mary MacKillop knew in the colonies of the 19th century.

Sam and Paige, as two of the 3.5 million children who live in poverty in the UK, were very articulate about their situations. 11 year old Sam told us it was 'all the time juggling for Dad- debt, food, debt, food'. 10 year old Paige told the viewers that 'it just isn't right that some people have to worry about being cold and getting sick because of the mould that covers the walls like carpet'.

These children were the very little ones who grabbed the heart of Mary MacKillop and the women who joined her as Sisters of St. Joseph.

Marie Foale, Josephite historian, in her Honours Thesis about the Sisters of St Joseph and Social Welfare in South Australia 1867-1909¹ speaks of the fact the planners of South Australia believed it would be a 'model province, rid of every fault of the mother country and of previous colonial systems'.²

Even such systematic colonisers could not prevent poverty and its consequences being a reality even among the free settlers. Periodic recessions, high unemployment, continuing immigration, especially of female orphans from workhouses in England and Ireland, the exodus of the able bodied men to the goldfields, droughts, all these realities caused the government of South Australia to pass a Destitute Persons' relief Act the very year Mary MacKillop was born in Melbourne.

By 1867, just ten months after opening the first St Joseph's school for poor children in Penola, Mary and her fledgling congregation had already entered the welfare system although education was the primary purpose for the establishment of the Sisters of St Joseph.

Mary and three other Sisters of St Joseph arrived in Adelaide in June 1867 to open a school and immediately began visiting the Adelaide Gaol, the Adelaide Hospital and the Destitute Asylum.

¹ M.T., Foale Think of the Ravens, thesis presented in Honours Degree, Department of History, University of Adelaide

² D. Pike, Paradise of Dissent, Melbourne 1967, p.147

After all, the Rule of the new Australian Congregation said that *religious must do any good that they can and make their charity all-embracing.*³

In our time we aim to go beyond welfare in the delivery of social services but in Mary MacKillop's time services were generally welfare services. However for Mary MacKillop education and welfare always seemed to go hand in hand. While she and the Sisters were educating they were delivering welfare services and while they were delivering these services they were educating.

The move by Mary and three companions in 1867 from Penola to the city of Adelaide meant that the Church could expand its welfare work there with confidence. Bishop Reynolds soon asked Mary to take over the management of the orphanage the Adelaide Church had opened the previous year, an orphanage the Josephites were to run for 22 years until they were asked to hand it over to the Sisters of Mercy.

Later in the same city they were then given the care of a second orphanage at Larg's Bay, an orphanage that did remain in Josephite care until last century when government policy brought an end to such ways of caring for children.

The other two major works begun by Mary and the Sisters in Adelaide were the Refuge and the House of Providence. The Refuge, initially for female prisoners wishing to find a new start in life, began to take in young girls requiring temporary shelter and prostitutes, and was to become the largest of the institutions in the care of the Sisters of St Joseph in Adelaide. The House of Providence took in children who were destitute but not orphans, homeless or unemployed young people and the destitute aged.

Other services were begun outside these major institutions. Within four years of moving to Adelaide many young women had joined Mary in her work and the Sisters had opened 11 schools in the metropolitan area and were teaching in 24 country districts of South Australia. In the early days in Adelaide, Mary MacKillop realised that children were not coming to school because they did not have suitable clothes to wear. She immediately launched an appeal for materials and cast-off clothing and organised that these be made up for the needy children.

Every convent of the Sisters of St Joseph large enough received boarders, orphans or destitute children in keeping

³ The Rule of Life written by Father Julian Tenison Woods, 1867

with the original Rule which stated that *The Sisters may take charge of poor and destitute orphans in the district where they have a school....and support them by begging the means to feed and clothe them.*⁴

This was so in Queensland when the Josephites went there in late 1869 and immediately took in the children of Aboriginal labourers in Maryborough as boarders.

The care of orphans continued in 1876 when the Sisters opened an orphanage attached to the Aboriginal mission at MacKay. Although it consisted of slab huts and uneven clay floors Sister Colette was overjoyed and wrote to Mary MacKillop: *I am so glad, dear Mother, to get a place for our children that I could cry with gratitude. We have not a penny to begin with, nor food for one week.*⁵

The commitment of Mary MacKillop and her companions in delivering whatever services they could to those who were poor drew support from others in society, Catholics and people of other Christian traditions and faiths. That support was not always there from Bishops however.

James Quinn of Brisbane was one and after only ten years in Queensland Mary was forced to withdraw her Sisters. They did return twenty years later when invited by the next Bishop Cani who succeeded Bishop Quinn.

This withdrawal from Brisbane opened the way for Mary and the Sisters to begin work in Sydney. Mary declined Archbishop Vaughan's request for the services of the Sisters in city schools as these schools were already under the care of the Sisters of Charity at Darlinghurst, the Sisters of Mercy at Church Hill and the Sisters of the Good Samaritan in Pitt Street.

Instead Mary again saw destitute and homeless children and opened a House of Providence in 1881 in Cumberland Street, the Rocks. Here, as in Adelaide, homeless and vulnerable children and women found care and protection for twenty years later until the redevelopment of the Harbour and the Bubonic Plague caused the Sisters to relocate the children to Kincumber and Gore Hill where they continued to care for them until the 1970s. The elderly women they gave into the care of the Little Sisters of the Poor in Randwick.

⁴ J.T. Woods, Original Rule Sisters of St Joseph Australia

⁵ Collette Carolan to Mary MacKillop 14.7.1876

Melbourne, Mary's home town, was not far from her sights. When Archbishop Carr asked the Josephites to take charge of the St Vincent de Paul home in Surrey Hills, another place for children suffering from homelessness, poverty and destitution, Mary responded with usual generosity.

Once there she looked even further and her heart went out to the destitute women in the slums on the eastern edge of the city also. This was in a particularly depressed area with nothing to lift the human spirit, dilapidated houses and tin sheds, alleys unfit for human habitation.

When the Archbishop worried about Mary's willingness to live in this part of town she wrote *Of course we have no objection to the locality, it is there that the real work lies.*⁶ Like Adelaide and Sydney this became another of Mary's houses of Providence.

The places the Sisters opened and the services Mary and the Sisters delivered relied on the providence of God, a providence Mary totally trusted. There was no funding to apply for, no government grants available. The Sisters could not have continued their work without the fundraising efforts of the people, Bishops and priests. And they took it upon themselves to go out daily begging for food and money. Mary herself became 'the beggar-in -chief' in the city of her birth.

In Melbourne the work soon diversified when Archbishop Carr asked the Sisters to take on a foundling home where unmarried mothers could leave their babies. A suitable house on a 30 acre dairy property was chosen in rural Broadmeadows and the Archbishop purchased it.⁷

Apart from having no water on the property and having to go a long way to the city to beg, the Sisters faced their most serious difficulty yet, that of tending young infants who were not breastfed.⁸ The Sisters had entered yet another area of social services, one that would continue for many years both in Melbourne and later in Sydney in the care of mothers and babies and in the training of mothercraft nurses.

In the midst of all these services for women and children the men were not forgotten. Wherever the Sisters lived they

⁶ Mary MacKillop 24.8.1891

⁷ J.Barnard, K.Twigg, Holding On To Hope; A History of the Founding Agencies of MacKillop Family Services 1854-1997, Australian Scholarly Publishing Melbourne

⁸ J.Barnard, From Humble Beginnings: The Story of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart in Victoria , 1890-2009, Utber and Patullo Publishing, _p.41

responded to the needs of destitute and homeless men. In Carlton where they opened St Joseph's Receiving Home close to the Women's Hospital they distributed sandwiches and soup every day. In every little town homeless and destitute men were always given food to eat when they knocked on the convent door.

As a young Sister doing Teacher Training in North Sydney many years ago I remember well our first task after Mass and breakfast being the making hundreds of sandwiches for the many homeless and destitute men of Sydney who visited the Convent daily.

Ten days after Mary died in 1909 the Freeman's Journal paid tribute in these words: *'What she wrought for the people and for the glory of God and life's labour, stands as the noblest record of an Australian woman'*.

Sydney's Daily Telegraph in August 1909 recorded that in her death 'Australia (had) lost one of its most unselfish workers'

Her attitude constantly encouraged her Sisters and can be summed up in her words:

Anything we are able to give to the poor is a sharing in our own struggle to live, and, if through begging or alms, we have food clothing or shelter to offer others, remember we are only administrators of a bounty which is God's⁹

Mary MacKillop's influence and impact on the delivery of social services in Australia is significant.

She was a visionary and she was also a visionary leader. Not only did she dream what life should be like for the children, women and men who were poor, but she acted for them and she was able to harness the commitment and participation of others in the work. She brought her vision for the poor into being and transformed the society around her, seemingly in small ways but actually in a big way.

Mary MacKillop's influence and impact was due to her ability to see things freshly. She could have joined an established Religious Order but instead she founded a new one suitable for this land, a Congregation where her sisters would be flexible, mobile, and able to live frugally among the poor whether that be in tents on the gold fields or moving with the people as the railway lines extended.

Mary MacKillop's fresh ways were often unconventional like renting places in an era when nuns did not rent. Renting gave her the flexibility to keep going where the needs were so why wouldn't she rent?

⁹Mary MacKillop, Book of Instructions, 1905

Mary MacKillop and her Sisters were acutely conscious of limitations, particularly financial insecurity, but this did not prevent them from taking initiatives and finding creative ways to respond to those in need.

Last week we saw poverty through the eyes of 11 year old Sam of Leicester and 10 year old Paige of Glasgow. This week we heard of an Australian delegation of child advocates and young people who are currently presenting their concerns about our country's vulnerable children to the committee which represents the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

These vulnerable children of our country and our time, as you well know, are the ever growing group of children who live in out of home care, those 400 children in immigration detention centres and our Aboriginal children.

May the influence of such wonderful visionary leaders and unselfish workers as St Mary MacKillop and Monsignor John McCosker inspire all today in Catholic Social Services Australia to be true to their mission of envisaging *a fairer, more inclusive Australian society that reflects and supports the dignity, equality and participation of all people.*

Reading CSSA's latest media releases

- People with disability deserve a 'fair go'
- The poor? we don't give a friar tuck
- Fairness for low income households vital for carbon pricing future
- Houses without walls

and knowing the services the hundreds of member organisations of CSSA offer, including those still in the care of the Sisters of St Joseph, I know St. Mary MacKillop and Monsignor McCosker would say to you all 'well done and thank you.'

Anne Derwin rsj
Congregational Leader