15 things to know about St Mary MacKillop

Celebrating ten years since St Mary MacKillop's canonisation, these are some details about the life of Australia's first saint.

1. She was born in Fitzroy
Far from being the hipster capital of Australia, in the early days of colonial Melbourne, Fitzroy was sparsely populated and working class. Mary was born on January 15, 1842, at 7 Brunswick Street Fitzroy (then 'Newtown'), when the city of Melbourne was less than seven years old. While many of Melbourne's early settlers lived in tents, Alexander and Flora MacKillop owned a small block of land on which stood a tiny weatherboard cottage, which they named 'Marino'.

2. Her parents were Scottish immigrants
Her parents, Flora and Alexander MacKillop, were Catholics from the Gaelic-speaking Braes of Lochaber in Inverness-shire, in the Scottish Highlands. Alexander was a former seminarian, who had studied in Rome to join the priesthood before abandoning this vocation and moving to Australia.

Within months of Mary's birth, Flora and Alexander lost their house, their possessions and savings owing to poor investments. By April 1842, Alexander moved the family to a farm in Darebin Creek. Money worries became a constant part of Mary's life and MacKillops suffered continual financial instability. They continued to rely on the good-will and support of relatives and friends.

3. She was the breadwinner
 Mary was 14 when she went out to work to support her younger brothers and sisters. Her first job was as a governess for the L'Estrange family in Richmond in a house called Erindale, which is no longer standing. In 1859, while living in Richmond, Mary started work as a clerk at Sands, Kenny & Co stationers in Collins St before moving to her uncle's farm in Penola, South Australia where she became a governess in 1860. She stayed two years before accepting a job teaching children in Portland, Victoria in 1862.

At the age of 22, to supplement her income so she could support her whole family, Mary opened her own boarding school in Portland. It was called Bay View House Seminary for Young Ladies, and Mary's sisters Maggie and Lexie worked as supervisors. The school still exists as Bayview College.

4. She wanted to educate poor children

Mary knew that the only pathway out of poverty was education. In Penola, while teaching her uncle and aunt's children, she included the other farm children on the estate as well. This led her to meet Penola parish priest, Fr Julian Tenison Woods, a charismatic priest who preached on the importance of educating poor children. Mary later wrote: 'I heard the Pastor... Speak of the neglected state of the children in the parish... And I had to go and offer myself to aid him'.

5. She was 25 when she started the Josephites

On 19 March, 1866, on the feast of St Joseph, Mary discarded her secular clothing and put on a simple black dress. She was the first of the Sisters of St Joseph, a new religious order devoted to teaching the poor and caring for vulnerable people. They vowed to live in poverty, own no property and were committed to equality. Supported by Fr Woods, Mary opened the first St Joseph's School in a disused stable in Penola, South Australia.

On 15 August, 1867 Mary made her first religious vows as Sister Mary of the Cross. Fr Woods wrote a 'Rule' to direct their lives, emphasizing poverty and simplicity and independence so that the Sisters would be free to move across dioceses. They adopted a plain brown religious habit. Due to the colour of their habits and their name, the Josephite sisters became colloquially known as the 'Brown Joeys'.

6. Her order grew quickly

Attracted to the vision of educating poor children, many young women came to join Mary and Fr Woods. By the end of 1869 there were 72 sisters teaching in 21 schools as well as an orphanage and a refuge for women in distress. By August 1871, their number had swelled to 120 women and 40 schools, convents and four charitable institutions had been founded. At the time of her death, 750 women had entered the Order. The Sisters of St Joseph had opened 117 schools with a total of over 12,400 pupils.

7. She was a skilled fundraiser

As well as schools, Mary MacKillop and the sisters founded hospitals and orphanages, as well as providing shelters for the homeless, former prostitutes and unmarried mothers. And they raised all of the money themselves. Mary sometimes referred to herself as the 'Beggar in Chief'.

8. She was fiercely independent

While other religious orders were governed by their local bishops, the Sisters of St Joseph insisted on governing themselves, something that became a point of friction between Mary MacKillop and some members of the Church hierarchy in numerous dioceses across Australia.

9. She was excommunicated

Ongoing tensions over the issue of central control led to MacKillop being excommunicated from the Catholic Church in 1871 by Adelaide Bishop Laurence Sheil. During the excommunication, the Josephites were not disbanded, but most of their schools were closed. Because Mary MacKillop was forbidden to have contact with anyone in the Church, she relied on the support of prominent Jewish merchant Emanuel Solomon who gave her a house in Flinders Street, Adelaide, rent-free.

Mary described the experience to Fr Woods: 'I do not know how to describe the feeling, but I was intensely happy and felt nearer to God than I ever felt before. The sensation of the calm beautiful presence of God I shall never forget.'

Five months later, Bishop Sheil was gravely ill and from his deathbed instructed that Mary be absolved and restored to her order.

10. She was a whistleblower
Mary MacKillop was instrumental in exposing sexual abuse of minors by an Irish priest at Kapunda, north of Adelaide, and documents reveal that her whistleblowing was in part what led to Bishop Sheil excommunicating Mary MacKillop for alleged insubordination.

11. She was (falsely) accused of alcoholism
Prior to her excommunication, a group sought to discredit the Josephites. As well as allegations of financial incompetence, rumours were also spread that Mary MacKillop had a drinking problem. MacKillop is said to have battled dysmenorrhea for many years and self-medicated by drinking brandy.

Her canonisation process began in 1926, but was delayed in 1931 because the Vatican could not produce a key document exonerating Mary from these accusations. In 1951, twenty years later, a cardinal was able to procure the missing document and the process could continue.

12. She answered to Rome
In 1873, Mary travelled to Rome for a personal audience with Pope Pius IX and obtained papal approval for the order's constitution. The pope's sign-off on their 'Rule of Life', ensured a level of independence and autonomy for the Sisters. The order would be self-governed, under papal authority.

13. She lived in community, not convents
The Josephites were unusual among Catholic orders, as the sisters lived in the community, alongside the people they were assisting, rather than in convents. They were also democratic. The congregation's constitution required administration by a superior general chosen from within the congregation of sisters rather than by the bishop, which was uncommon in its day.

14. She didn't accept government funding
The Josephites refused to accept government funding for their schools. They also refused to teach instrumental music (then considered an essential part of education) and were unwilling to educate girls from more affluent families. This structure resulted in the sisters being forced to leave Bathurst in 1876 and Queensland by 1880 due to the local bishops' refusal to accept this working structure.

15. She was known for her kindness
According to the official Vatican Decree for her canonisation: '... the most striking thing about her was her kindness. She was a great believer in encouragement, urging people to be kind and united. In everything she said or did, she showed respect and love for those around her, making no distinction between the rich, the high-born, and the influential on the one hand, and the lowly, the jailbirds, and the outcasts of society.'