

Mary McKillop : Saint Mary of the Cross 17th October 2010 Any of you who have had the pleasure of visiting Rome will have noticed that the ancient Roman Pantheon has been transformed into a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary and all the Martyrs. This dedication was made by Pope Boniface IV in 609AD. The martyrs held a special place in the affection of the Christian community because they had clung to their faith even when it meant making the ultimate sacrifice. They followed Jesus in giving their life in love.

The martyrs were not the only ones who were seen as models for Christian life. Throughout history the church has recognised the outstanding holiness of men and women who have not suffered martyrdom, but who have given their lives, day in and day out, in service of others, and have done so by opening their minds and hearts to the presence and action of the Spirit of Jesus, and have, to an extraordinary degree, loved others with the love of the Heart of Jesus. Today the church has recognised Mary Mackillop, Mary of the Cross, as one of these – the first Australian to be recognised in a way that offers her to the whole church as an example of what it means to live the Christian life. Whatever we may think of the role of miracles in all this, it is undoubtedly true that the central miracle is the wonder of her life. It is this that makes her a model for us all.

Today's First Reading is taken from St Paul's Letter to the Colossians. It spells out for us all what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We all need to see people who show us what it means to be 'generous, humble, gentle and patient'. We need people close to us to witness to such a life. We also need to have people who stand out on the international stage as models to inspire us, in our turn, to take our baptismal grace seriously and let the risen Christ live and love in and through us.

The Responsorial Psalm gives us the key to living such a life. We can't do it on our own. We must do what Jesus himself did when from the cross he prayed, using the response we have just repeated: 'Into your hands, O Lord, I entrust my spirit'. Obviously, we are not all going to be canonised like Mary Mackillop. Think of the saints you have known – people who have significantly touched your lives and inspired you to follow their example and offer yourself as an instrument for Jesus, to be on earth the Heart of God. Obviously we are not all going to be canonised, but we are all called to be saints. The Second Vatican Council reminds us: 'All are called to holiness ... a holiness which is expressed in many ways by men and women who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love'(Lumen Gentium n.39).

Towards the end of the Creed which we will pray together shortly we proclaim our faith in 'the communion of saints'. Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. We belong to the family of Jesus and we belong to each other, to those who have died and have attained to the perfection of love in eternal communion with God (those canonised and those not canonised) and to all those still living here on earth and who are, as the Council says, 'tending to the perfection of love'. We know that we can pray for each other and when we are suffering or feeling alone, it is a great comfort to remember that people are praying for us. We are especially grateful for the prayer of those who have allowed God's love to so transform their lives that all the branches that do not bear the fruit of love in their lives they have allowed to be pruned away till their whole life is a harvest of love. To change the image. We are like a candle. Ignited by Jesus, we are being drawn ever closer to him till our flame is one with his and like Saint Paul we can say: 'I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me'(Galatians 2:20).

When the saints in heaven, and the saints on earth who are being transformed by Jesus' love, take us into their heart and hold us in their prayer we are being warmed by the love

that glows in their heart. All baptised Christians belong in this family. We are never alone. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says: 'Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God' (Hebrews 12:1-2). Saint Bernard reminds us of how much the saints help us: 'When I think of them, I feel myself inflamed by a tremendous yearning. Calling the saints to mind inspires us and arouses in us a longing to enjoy their company.'

We long to be united in happiness with all the saints. The saints want us to be with them; let us not be indifferent. They await us; let us not ignore them' (Sermon 2, see Office of Readings Nov 1st). The saints are enjoying the fullness of love for which we are all created. Saint Paul tells us: 'Now we see only a dim reflection. Then we will see face to face. Now we know only imperfectly; then we will know fully, even as we are fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12). Life is, in many ways, like a fire. If we accept life as it comes and keep our hearts focused on God who is present to us in every situation, we will find that God's love will indeed purify us. Our temptation is to avoid the truth and to live in distraction. The saints remind us to keep seeking love until our whole being is drawn into the fire of God's love. Then, like two candles jointed together, there is but one flame and our hearts burn with Jesus' love for God and for others. We are not like this yet, but neither were the saints. They allowed themselves to be purified by love and we too are called to 'tend toward the perfection of love'. Loving will purify us till we, too, are numbered among the saints, including St Mary Mackillop whose life we commemorate today.