

LOOKING AT MARY AT EASTER

In 1905, the Sisters of St Joseph re-elected a partially paralysed Mother Mary Mackillop their Superior General. Though clear in thought and speech, Mary had been confined to a wheel chair for four years after a stroke that left her right side paralysed.

This event reminds us of a most important fact: Mary was re-elected because of who she was as a person – not because of what she could or could not do. Mary is a saint because the Easter power of Christ, the power of his Resurrection, made her a holy person as she prayed, worshipped and lived as Jesus taught.

Focus on Mary as a person

We live in a materialistic society that people valued more for what they can do, than for who they are. The media emphasis on Mary as we approach her canonisation tends to be on what she accomplished – not on who she was.

We need to keep before ourselves and others why God has revealed Mary to be a saint. Because she was a holy person – not because of her work – though this was one way she expressed her holiness.

Why are there saints?

God reveals saints to encourage and to provide Christians today with examples of the holiness Jesus called for. A saint demonstrates how the power of Christ can change those who, like Mother Mary, pray daily, worship and live as he taught, freeing them from human weaknesses.

Second, a saint is someone who is with God, and so we can ask them to pray to God for our needs. We can identify with saints we know had similar life needs and concerns to our own.

If we look a little more deeply at Mother Mary, we see her as someone who understands Australian life at many levels. She is someone one can ask to pray to God on our behalf.

The child of an unstable family

Mary, born in 1842, was the eldest of seven children. Her father was unsuccessful in business and the family suffered instability.

As the eldest, Mary had to accept considerable responsibility to keep her family together. She knew the strains of financial pressures on her parents' marriage and the effects on her brothers and sisters as well as on herself.

She understands those today who are experiencing strain in their marriages, young people whose parents have split up and teenagers who are embarrassed with their peers for family and financial reasons. She certainly understands teenagers who have to take on added burdens because one or more parents is absent. All of these people can pray to her.

Who experienced financial strain

Melbourne was a boom city due to the gold discoveries, particularly at Ballarat. However, economic reversals were the cause of her father losing money.

Mary understands the anxiety and pressures on many in our society today, caused by financial difficulties. She understands how hard it can be to provide for families, and to keep them together. She knows what it is like to have to go to work 'to make ends meet'.

Special love for those in need

From her teenage years, Mary had a special love for those in need. Working as a governess, she taught children to supplement the family income. However, after hours, she went to rural workers' huts and to Aborigines to teach their children basic literacy and numeracy.

In time, she founded, with Fr Tenison Woods, the Sisters of St Joseph to provide for those of 'humble circumstances'. The ways they did so ranged from schools to orphanages, founding homes and a reformatory.

Mary understands poverty. But she also understands young people lacking parent support, and those who are troubled. She would understand why many today would seek relief through drugs and excessive alcohol.

Love in tense relationships

Mary was a strong person. Disappointments with bishops, priests and laity meant there were tensions at times. There are those who suggest that Mary was something of a rebel, standing against authority, but this really is unworthy of her.

In her letters, she reveals a person who loved and urged her sisters to love others in times of disagreements. Even when people were dishonest towards her, she urged consideration and the avoidance of any sign of hostility.

She understands those struggling to prevent family and other relationships breaking down in times of tension. She understands what it is like where people are struggling with others who have different views, and even perhaps finding it hard to forgive hurts or lies against them.

Those in rural isolation

Mary knew Australian rural isolation. She experienced the physical burden of constant travel over large distances. She experienced endless miles of boring landscape.

Those were the days of horses, carts, trains - and no air conditioning. She understands what it is like for priests in isolated parishes, and the challenges of regular travel between small population centres. She knows the reality for parents collecting their children and those driving regularly for home supplies, medical care and other needs.

To see Jesus in the young

Perhaps the key to understanding Mary is in her naming her sisters after St Joseph. She saw the young Christ in children. Joseph cared for Jesus like a son, and knew

poverty, rural life, hard work and travel. Her sisters, then, were to care for children in the spirit of St Joseph caring for the young Jesus.

Seeing Christ in others was a foundation for the holiness that has led to her canonisation. Let us reflect on her as a fellow Australian who understands so many of our needs and challenges today.

The challenges of teachers and leaders

Mother Mary was a teacher who became an educational leader. She knew classrooms, out of classroom settings and inadequate resources.

She taught Indigenous children, the children of migrants and children of European background. She formed young teachers and understood their problems. She also trained new teachers.

School leaders today know that Mary too was a school leader. She had to maintain standards and support teachers with their problems.

Anyone involved in Catholic education and government schools knows Mary taught as they do. All can look to her for inspiration, and pray to a past colleague.

The paralysed, the seriously ill and carers

Mary knew the frustration and pain experienced by those who, like her, are confined to wheel chairs and beds; those who depend on others to provide for even their most basic bodily needs.

Before her stroke, Mary had seen to the care for the aged poor. She also saw to the care of the incurably ill. Both miracles through which God revealed her sanctity were for the incurably ill.

Mary understood those receiving and those providing aged care. Mary understands the experience of carers today in every situation.

The suffering criticism

Mary in her time was often criticised. While some of her greatest supporters were not Catholics, many others saw her as something of an insidious 'papist' influence. Many, too, thought education should be for the children of those who could afford a tutor – not for the working classes.

Mary was criticised also by Catholics. Many believed nuns should live cloistered or semi-cloistered lives. They disapproved nuns moving convents, to follow farmers, miners and railway workers moving to where employment could be found, to teach their children.

Mary knew what it is like to be less acceptable because of one's Catholic faith, and to be criticised for unappreciated efforts to help others in country towns.

The victim of misunderstanding

Mary suffered because some bishops and priests also misunderstood her. There were jurisdictional misunderstandings because of her new vision of religious life in Australia. Eventually this was resolved by Popes Pius IX and Leo XIII.

The ailing Bishop Shiel of Adelaide even excommunicated her on the basis of misinformation that Mary was insubordinate. Before his death, he lifted this sentence, acknowledging that he had been badly advised.

Some people gossiped too that Mary had a drink problem because she took medically prescribed brandy for the pains of dysmenorrhea. Mary suffered from these pains for decades.

But perhaps the most painful personal misunderstanding was when Fr Woods fell out with her over the Rule for the Sisters. The original Rule, developed by Fr Woods and Mother Mary, stressed poverty and dependence on God. Rome, however, modified this Rule, seeing it as too severe. Woods fell out with Mary, feeling that she had not done all she could to defend the original Rule.

Mary understands those today who suffer rejection because of misunderstanding. Many today experience similar hurts to Mary. Many too suffer the loss of friends for similar reasons.

Those feeling let down

Mary was followed after her first period as Superior General by Mother Bernard, whose personality and ideas were different from those of Mary in key respects. Mother Bernard was not as insistent, for example, that the sisters were for those of 'humble circumstances'.

She was also not as administratively capable. Mary, who was now Mother Bernard's deputy, suffered to see the effects on the lives of the sisters. Often she had to see to their needs in ways that did not undermine Mother Bernard. The situation of following Mary as General was not always easy for Mother Bernard either.

Mary understands anyone today who feels undermined, including in families. She knows how hard it is to remain loyal, particularly to those who are less capable. She knows too what it is like to have to step in to clear up a mess, while being taken for granted or even resented for doing so.

The power of the Risen Lord

Mother Mary Mackillop is an outstanding example of someone who opened herself to the Risen Lord and his power. Her story is of someone in whom Christ's power shone through human weakness. This physically tiny lady became a spiritual giant.

As we reflect on Mary, let us remember that Christ loves each one of us no less than he loved her. He offers his power to each of us no less than he offered it to her.

May we all have a happy Easter – and be encouraged by Mary's example to seek Christ's power to become the people we are capable of being. Let us pray to her as someone in heaven knows what it is like to live as an Australian.

Bishop Gerard Holohan