

The Australian Saint and Her Mother

Mary MacKillop wrote hundreds of letters all of which give great insight into the life of this extraordinary Australian woman. Among these letters, now kept at the archives of the Sisters of St Joseph in North Sydney, are many written between mother and daughter. Born in Melbourne on 15 January 1842, Mary was the first-born child of Flora MacDonald and Alexander MacKillop, both recent arrivals from Scotland.

On many occasions Mary pointed out to her mother the formative influence she had been in her life. Mary had learnt from her grandparents and parents that “God will take care of us all”. This deep trust in God’s loving care was foundational in the faith life of the whole family.

Mary wrote to her mother in 1867:

Dearest mamma, you ever taught me to look up to and depend on Divine Providence in every trouble and when you saw me dull or unhappy you always had the same sweet reminder for me. Ah do not now forget what you were the first to teach me.

Mary wrote again to Flora in January 1868, “Oh Mamma let us belong to Him completely and He will take care of us all.”

In September 1869 Mary wrote to her mother, “You used to tell me to love the Will of God – to submit to it in all things. Your words still often ring in my ears and I bless God that they were my mother’s words to me.”

On 6 June 1870 Mary wrote to Flora,

Your submission to the Will of God, your resignation under affliction, and your always confiding simple trust in Divine Providence proved a wonderful comfort and example to me when it pleased God to exercise our community in those virtues.

This submission to God’s will involved the acceptance of all that came into their lives. Mary wrote to her mother on 7 January 1868:

God in His infinite mercy has been extremely good to one and all of us. His greatest blessing has been what to the worldly eye appears a severe and heavy trial, or a continuation of trials..

Another lesson learnt from her family was that God was a “good God”. Mary wrote to Father Woods on 19 July 1870, “Whatever faults I committed as a child, I never felt that my Uncle (Donald) loved me a bit less for them, and this is like the way I feel

with our good God.” Strongly convinced that God was a “good God”, Mary knew that “God knows best and His holy Will is welcome”, even though it called her to live continually as ‘Mary of the Cross’.

Mary was always grateful for Flora’s letters. Both kept one another informed of family matters and wrote with great affection for one another. Flora wrote to Mary on 20 March 1875, “I trust your health is improved. The hot weather has been severe, but my dear child, I fear you are overburdened and that your young life will be sacrificed before its time.” Flora concluded her letter of 23 March 1876, “With our united love, I remain, hoping this will find you as well as it leaves us. My ever dear child. Believe me, your fond Mother”

Flora remained in close connection with the Sisters and the life of the Institute Mary had co-founded. Mary sent Flora a copy of her diary to keep her informed of happenings. Flora wrote on 9 December 1884, “My dear child, I am just in receipt of your welcome diary etc., if you continue to be punctual it will – to me – be very comforting.” But Mary’s busy life often left Flora waiting for letters.” Flora’s letter of 18 March 1885 began, “My dearest Child, I have only one construction to put on your silence – that you are in trouble – but do write to me and if I can help you gladly will I lend it.”

Flora was tragically drowned in the wreck of the *Lyeemoon* off the NSW coast near Eden on 30 May 1886. She was on her way to Sydney to help Mary and the Sisters in preparation for a Bazaar. All were “planning to make her visit a bright and happy one.” The *Freeman’s Journal* reported Flora’s death on 5 June:

Those who knew her (Flora) well speak of her as a sweet, amiable, good-natured creature, charitable in thought, word and deed, intensely devoted to her religion and withal a truly lovable women who ruled her life by the strictest principles of virtue, self-sacrifice, and integrity.

A fitting tribute to a remarkable mother of an Australian “Saint”.

Pauline Wicks rsj