

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 29, 2010 at 2:45pm

Buzz builds for new unofficial saint of abuse victims

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Mother Mary MacKillop won't be canonized until Oct. 17, but some Catholics already have an unofficial title for the 19th-century Australian nun: Patron Saint of Whistleblowers.

MacKillop, who lived from 1842-1909, is Australia's first native-born saint. She was a co-founder of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart, an order of nuns dedicated to the religious instruction of children and care for the poor.

The strong-willed MacKillop, who worked under harsh conditions in the Australian outback, was once briefly excommunicated by her bishop for reasons that have never been entirely clear.

According to a new Australian television documentary set to air a week before her canonization, at least one of the reasons MacKillop was punished was for denouncing clerical child abuse.

The story of the excommunication amounts to this: that some priests had been uncovered for being involved in the sexual abuse of children, Jesuit Fr. Paul Gardiner, the official advocate for MacKillop's canonization, told Australia's ABC television.

After her denunciation led to disciplining the priests, Gardiner said, "one of these priests was so angry with this that he swore vengeance."

The same bishop who excommunicated MacKillop rescinded the decision on his deathbed five months later.

A short statement from the Sisters of Saint Joseph last week referred to "several factors" leading to MacKillop's excommunication, and said only that the new documentary's account is "consistent with" previous studies of the event.

Yet the news that MacKillop may have been persecuted for speaking out has already prompted bloggers and others to nominate her as the "patron saint of whistleblowers," and even of abuse victims themselves.

"If the facts support that account, then she should be looked to for her intercession by all who seek justice in the sex abuse crisis," said Jesuit Fr. James Martin, author of *My Life with the Saints*.

"The timing of this revelation seems providential," Martin said, referring to abuse scandals that have shaken the church in Europe for most of 2010. "Maybe there is a reason that Mary MacKillop is walking back onto the international stage at this time."

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But according to Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office, casting MacKillop as protector of abuse victims would "reduce the extraordinary richness of her work to a very marginal episode in her life."

"The merits of Mother Mary MacKillop, her commitment to children, to the poor, to indigenous peoples, to the dignity of all human persons, were much more extensive than the fact that she denounced an abuser," Lombardi said.

Martin doubted the Vatican will make any official link between MacKillop and child abuse, but said her experience with the problem could become a focus of popular devotion -- much as how Hawaii's St. Damien de Veuster, who cared for lepers, has been adopted as the patron of AIDS patients.

According to one American advocate for sex abuse victims, MacKillop's story is "an example of what needs to be done."

"Sister Mary understood that the men who were sexually abusing children were just men and were not representing God," said Gary Bergeron of Survivor's Voice, a group that is organizing an international demonstration by abuse victims to be held in St. Peter's Square on Oct. 31.

"Anyone that can be used as an example to protect children is a positive thing," Bergeron said. "And frankly, we could use all the help we can get."

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