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St. Mary MacKillop and the Communion of Saints

by Janice Sevre-Duszynska

Hurrah for Pope Benedict's canonization on Oct. 17 of an excommunicated 19th century nun, Mother Mary MacKillop, the first Australian saint. A woman of courage and integrity, she stood up for victims and her sisters exposed a pedophile priest to church officials urging them to act. For following her conscience and challenging the hierarchy, she and the order she co-founded to serve the poor and disadvantaged were excommunicated. On his deathbed, five months later, the bishop reversed his decision.

Saints are an important part of Catholic life. They serve as guides and protectors. In 1960 when my fifth grade teacher, Sr. Ignatia told us to pick a patron saint as a model for holiness, I relished the assignment. Like other Catholic schoolgirls, I knew the saints like the back of my hand, not only from our Catholic calendar, but from our Missals which we used for daily Mass. In our immigrant-American community, we borrowed books from our Catholic school library and the neighborhood one. The two books I owned were a copy of the *Lives of the Saints* and *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. I was the kid on the block with a shoe box collection of holy pictures.

I got greedy with the saints in heaven who had walked the earth. I compared them with the castles on a chess board and with the movement and power to shape me and keep me from outside harm and my own bad choices. When Sr. Ignatia called on me, I was ready. For this one time, it didn't matter that I had indulged myself.

I read their names and the virtues I expected them to teach me as if they were members of my own family: St. Mary Magdalene because she was close to Jesus. St. Joan of Arc for courage. St. Clare of Assisi to live simply, remember the poor and work for inner and outer peace, and" -- because our Polish household valued music, song and dance -- "St. Cecilia, who I pray to before practicing the piano at the convent after school."


?Four?? Sr. Ignatia asked in amazement.

?Yes,? I nodded. ?I want all the help I can get.?

With St. Mary MacKillop, Catholics now have a patron saint for the untold numbers of survivors of sexual abuse and their families. As a personal prayerful relationship unfolds, we believe she will intercede in their behalf. There will be the never-ending prayers for the trauma to end. Other prayers for healing and wholeness and the ability to forgive. Finally, and unmistakably, prayers for a more just and transparent Church -- so that instead of the lies, the evil, the darkness -- light and peace would flow.

The growing flock of Catholic whistleblowers who have been excommunicated, silenced, dismissed from their livelihoods or punished in other ways can also claim St. Mary MacKillop as their patron saint. She'll hear prayers from theologians who differ with the Vatican, sisters and priests who minister to the GLBT community and their families, the millions of Catholics who practice birth control, those who support a woman's right to choose, women called to priesthood and those who support them.

?We can affirm St. Mary MacKillop as a patron saint for all those whom the Catholic Church condemns for their prophetic stances for justice and equality for all people in our church, including Roman Catholic Womenpriests,? said RCWP Bishop Bridget Mary Meehan.

In the past those who bore the stigma of excommunication had moved into eternity centuries before the Vatican recognized their truth as an outpouring of the Spirit.  Joan of Arc, Thomas Aquinas, and the most recently canonized American saint, Guerin, the founder of the Sisters of Providence of St.-Mary-of-the-Woods. The Friends of NCR 2011 We women, devoted daughters of the Church who have said: Yes, to priesthood, reject our misguided Annual Appeal is underway. Please support us excommunication. So do the majority of Catholics and people of other faiths. Our faith and their teaches so that we may continue to provide the best independent Catholic news through informed reporting, analysis and commentary. us to obey our conscience and disobey an unjust law.

With St. Mary MacKillop now in the Litany of Saints the good news is that excommunication could be the new fast track to sainthood! Our brother priests at the Vatican would do well to make her their patron saint, too.

Advertisement

[Janice Sevre-Duszynska was ordained a Roman Catholic Womanpriest in 2008.]

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