AN UNSWERVING VISION

St Mary of the Cross

THE life and work of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop is an inspiration for Catholics and Australians of all backgrounds.

The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council has released a paper in the Catholic Social Justice Series to analyse and reflect upon her extraordinary achievements.

Charity and Justice: St Mary MacKillop and Australian Society, draws on presentations at a conference on the life, work and legacy of Mary MacKillop organised last year by Catholic Social Services Victoria, MacKillop Family Services, the Sisters of St Joseph, the Australian Catholic University and the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry.

Author John Warhurst quotes keynote speakers Frank Brennan SJ, Katrina Brill RSJ and Joan Healy RSJ as well as the 2011 McCosker Oration for Catholic Social Services Australia, delivered by Anne Derwin RSJ, plus contributions from workshop presenters at the conference.

Frank Brennan drew a broad picture and offered lessons for social justice advocates in the modern world; Katrina Brill emphasised Mary’s personal holiness and perseverance and her life of personal poverty; and Joan Healy discussed early Melbourne developments and the collaboration which eventually led to the creation of MacKillop Family Services, a partnership between the Josephites, the Mercy Sisters and the Christian Brothers.

The paper’s principal theme is St Mary’s unwavering vision: that a commitment to justice must go hand in hand with a commitment to hard practical work on behalf of people on the margins of society.

In the 42 years between Mary’s establishment of the Sisters of St Joseph in 1867 and her death, 109 religious houses were founded; the Order had established 117 schools; and towns and cities all over Australia knew of and gave thanks for the work of her Sisters.

“Her Sisters shared the lives of the people they served and were not deterred by poverty and misery,” writes ACSJC chairman Bishop Christopher Saunders in his foreword to the paper.

“They were prepared to live in sheds without heating or even a stove. Young women committed themselves to a life of insecurity: they knew that they would live on what they begged for and were prepared to share everything with the people they served.”

This commitment to justice was founded on the deepest faith in God, as described by Fr Julian Tension Woods [co-founder of the Josephites] who wrote in the first Rule for the Sisters ‘Do all the good you can and never see an evil [a need] without trying to remedy it.’

“There are nuances of difference between needs and evils, despite the fact that they may be used interchangeably. But as Joan Healy put it, ‘This was a justice statement, not simply advice to act kindly.’

“Mary MacKillop saw and responded to evils and needs in a variety of situations. She also lived a personal life of poverty and inspired the lives of poverty of her Sisters.

“Anne Derwin recounts how in Melbourne, the city of her birth, Mary became ‘the beggar in chief’. She ‘relived on the providence of God, a providence Mary totally trusted.’

Several of the Order’s establishments were known as ‘Providences’. ‘As Joan Healy says, ‘Providence’ was ‘a name the Josephites coined when they had no idea where the money would come from. God would have to provide.’”

The author quotes former ACSJC chairman Bishop Kevin Manning on Mary MacKillop: “She was an extraordinary Australian woman who endured suffering and confrontation in order to achieve justice for the poor and alienated. When Mary founded the Institute of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart in 1867 – the first order of nuns established by an Australian in Australia – the scattered population of Australia was badly in need of schooling.

“Mary MacKillop recognised this need, especially for poor families whose children lacked the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Her inspiration was not confined to education, but touched other areas of deprivation in providing care for ex-convicts, prostitutes, unmarried mothers and orphans.”

The paper illustrates how Mary MacKillop’s life and work is Catholic Social Teaching in action. “Her actions stem from an independently arrived at version of the see, judge, act methodology and illuminate key components of Catholic Social Teaching such as human dignity, the common good, subsidiarity and the preferential option for the poor.”

Catholic Social Teaching was formalised only towards the end of Mary’s life – in the 1891 papal social encyclical Rerum Novarum – but her approach prefigured this specific Church teaching.

Fr Max Vodola reinforces this point: “The central theological perspective is that Mary MacKillop brought the Gospel to life – she went out in search of the lost, she bandaged up the wounded, she brought healing to those who were sick, and brought the light of Christ to places of human misery, darkness and despair.

“She is a woman of the city and the outback, for those who are young and those in the sunset of their lives, for those born here and the newly arrived who call Australia home. She is a friend to the poor and needy, the broken and the afflicted, those struggling with life and those seeking home, the vulnerable and the marginalised.”

Catholic Social Justice Series No 72, Charity and Justice: St Mary MacKillop and Australian Society, by John Warhurst, is available for $6.60 from the ACSJC, PO Box 7246, Alexandria NSW 2015; tel: (02) 8306 3499; fax: (02) 8306 3496; email: admin@acsjc.org.au; website: www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au