

Mackillop Musings

A Pilgrimage to the Heart

We are always a part of history. It is simply that there are occasions when we are conscious of being in a moment much larger than ourselves. Last Sunday in Rome was one such experience. It was the high-point of our journey, the culmination of months of anticipation, and a grand celebration of the Church and six lives of faith and commitment.

We were there on a pilgrimage. This was a loose term. Pilgrims are not necessarily meant to spend their nights in comfortable, modern hotels and travel around in smooth, air-conditioned buses. We kept our mobile phones handy and computers at our finger-tips. Nevertheless, our intentions were sacred. We were there to visit holy places and remember holy people and to discover their meaning for our lives. We were there as members of the Church to add our voice of praise. We were there as members of Blessed Mary MacKillop Parish, Birkdale to be tangible witnesses to her legacy and to be a bridge to a concrete community across the other side of the globe. This fact reminded us that the canonisation was not simply another "event" but the telling of a real life, flesh and blood, human story which had been knitted together with ours.

We were privileged to spend those days together in Rome. There was no time for jet-lag. Anyway, pilgrims aren't meant to catch planes. As soon as we landed, we became immediately aware of the intense media interest back home. A Channel Ten cameraman and reporter were there to greet us as we disembarked the bus at the hotel. Pilgrims arriving with large suitcases apparently provide interesting news footage. On arrival, the bus driver struggled to find a place for us to alight, and so in the best tradition of Roman traffic etiquette, stopped in front of the hotel in the middle of the main thoroughfare. It didn't take long for the cars and bikes to back-up behind. The curt horn blast from a frustrated scooter driver, and then giving my suitcase a whack with his front wheel as he rode passed, reminded me why I am happy to live where I live.

That night there was one little miracle – perhaps one among many. A delightful Italian parish priest arrived at the reception, wondering why the group who had booked the Church for a Mass at 7pm hadn't turned-up. I don't know if that group was meant to be us, but it did allow us the opportunity to organise Mass the next morning. At 9am on our first full day in Rome, we gathered in the lovely little Roman Church of Santa Maria Regina Apostolorum for Mass. It was one of the little unexpected treasures which were to mark our trip. Monsignor Andrea, a very gentle, generous and welcoming Roman priest, was Mary MacKillop's little gift to us. We were also lucky enough to celebrate Mass there the following morning as well. However, I suspect that it was the first time that an iPhone had been used as a Missal in that little Roman Church. Monsignor Andrea was kind enough to ignore my little liturgical quirks.

After the tour of the crowded Vatican Museum, we embarked upon what was undoubtedly everyone's highlight of the pilgrimage – Father Anthony's (World Famous) Walking Tour of Rome. Our destination was one of the great communal areas of Rome, the ancient village of Trastevere. My hope was to give my fellow travellers a little taste of the city that I had come to know. It was a hasty taste but I hope that it wasn't fast food. The best way to discover Rome is to wander off the tourist trail and discover some of its hidden treasures. We didn't get a chance to do much of that, but did have a chance to wander the streets of the theatre that is Rome.

On the Saturday we shuffled off to the Scarvi, which is the site of the ancient excavations under St. Peter's. St. Peter's is built on a classical Roman necropolis (cemetery). The journey through the 1st century streets and the foundations of Constantine's original basilica leads to what is considered to be the tomb of St. Peter. We don't know for sure, of course, but the evidence points to the fact that this is a site which has been venerated as St. Peter's tomb since the early centuries. It certainly feels sacred if that counts for anything.

That night we joined many Australians for the vigil concert to celebrate Mary MacKillop. The four teachers who journeyed with us (Vickie, Vanessa, Terry and Nicole) joined a singer in the foyer and led the mingling crowd in an impromptu "Abba-esque" performance

of some Mary MacKillop songs. I walked passed pretending that they belong to another tour group. John Howard might have released a book this week called "Lazarus Rising", but he wasn't there to see and hear the reception that Kevin Rudd received as he was introduced on stage. I suspect Kevin thought that he had by-passed Lazarus and was being given an ever higher status by popular acclaim. He was given a shirt that had "Rudd" on the back and "Vote 1 Mary MacKillop" on the front. It was clear that we were among Australians.

The next morning, the big day had arrived. We were up early and standing at the gates of the square of St. Peter's by about 7:30am. It was slightly gloomy and some troublesome clouds threatened, but the gathered throng was in good spirits. When the gates opened we made our way with haste, ably lead by our tour leader Alessandra, to good seats in the front section. Not too long after that, I was speaking via phone to the community gathered in a church named in Mary MacKillop's honour. The marvels of modern technology brought both Birkdale communities closer. I'm sure that Mary smiled.

The canonisation was grand in number and simple in ritual. As someone said to me afterwards, you had the feeling that the crowd wanted to celebrate and cheer and shout, but were constrained by the reverential atmosphere. I know that I had to remind a group of rowdy pilgrims that St. Peter's was not the Gabba as a Mary MacKillop balloon was punched around like a beach ball at the cricket! As usual, they didn't take much notice of me. My sister and brother-in-law managed to do something that I have never been able to do and that is penetrate Vatican security. Somehow they managed to barge their way through a number of Swiss Guard check-points and find us among the thousands. Another little miracle (and an impressive performance from my sister!). The De Felice family joined us as well, with their three young children. These children unofficially represented the 652 children who belong to our school and who will be the first generation to grow-up with a strong Australian model of faith. The presence of these children helped me realise that canonisations aren't about the past or an other-worldly reality. Canonisations are about connections with young and old, here and now.

The colonnades of Bernini which surround St. Peter's Square are meant to resemble arms which reach out to embrace the faithful. There we were, people from all around the world, Catholics who wished to celebrate that lives of love and vocation, lives lived with an acute sense of the presence of God, are to be valued, honoured and revered and who are now officially recognised as our friends in the presence in God. The central refrain of any canonisation, indeed of any holy life, is simply, "See the wonders that God has done!" Saint Mary MacKillop points us to the goodness and graciousness of God. That is why she is a saint.

The following day we travelled out to St. Paul Outside the Walls for a thanksgiving mass. It is the great basilica built over what is believed to be the tomb of St. Paul. With thousands of Australians present, it was a rousing celebration. The singing and the responses filled the massive space, and there is something about gathering in such large numbers in a foreign land which helps you claim your own national identity. It was as Australian as Melbourne Cup day. A traditional Italian dinner in a typical little Roman restaurant topped off the celebrations that night. Assisi was the final and, for many, the favourite destination. Assisi is a quiet, peaceful place which certainly touches the heart. And that brought our time together to end.

Pilgrimages are what you make them. They don't need to end with the return home. We have plenty of stories to share and memories to explore. There are still moments of grace to be realised. Most importantly, the canonisation of Saint Mary MacKillop begins a new moment of grace for this community. Individually and collectively, we have a friend close to the heart of God. We have an example of what prayer, commitment, courage and grace can do in a person's life. We have a light whose glow is not her own, but whose radiance emanates from the very heart of God. *Saint Mary MacKillop, pray for us.*