



Bishop
Sheil



Father Charles Horan

**REASONS BEHIND
THE EXCOMMUNICATION
OF MARY MACKILLOP**



CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:

Bishop Sheil excommunicated Mary MacKillop on Friday, 22 September 1871. There is clear evidence that this was not an unpremeditated action on the part of a highly stressed bishop. Rather, was the outcome of a long and complicated process orchestrated by some of the Adelaide clergy.

On the surface, it appears to have come about because the priests concerned were convinced that these Josephites were not proper nuns and that their way of operating needed radical reform if they were to be a force for good in the diocese.

The clergy who opposed the Institute were Irish. Therefore, their experience of religious communities was of Sisters whose way of life was very different from that of the Australian Josephites.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE IRISH NUNS AND THE JOSEPHITES:

IRISH COMMUNITIES

In Ireland, as a rule, the religious Sisters known to the Irish clergy:

- were well-educated members of the middle or upper classes of society;
- lived in large houses owned by their Order;
- carried on their ministries within these houses;
- rarely, if ever, appeared in public;
- belonged to large, stable communities where each house was autonomous, self-governing, self-supporting and self-perpetuating;
- had their communities divided along class lines into choir nuns (ladies) and lay Sisters (servant women from the lower classes of society who wished to dedicate their lives to God as religious Sisters)
- regarded their bishop as their higher superior, while the local parish priest was superior of all houses in his parish.

AUSTRALIAN SISTERS OF ST JOSEPH

Sisters of St Joseph did not fit this mould because they:

- were ordinary women from poor families, some with little formal education
- a number, including Mary MacKillop, were colonial-born at a time when the immigrant tended to look down on the colonial;
- were all of equal status;
- lived in small, mobile communities with two or three members, often in rented or Church-owned properties in poor neighbourhoods;
- went out to their schools and visited people at home, in hospital, in gaol or in Destitute Asylums.
- had no fixed income but relied on the local people for their support;
- begged local businesses and markets for food and/or money to support their charitable institutions
- had centralized structures under the control of a General Superior who was drawn from their membership.

Given these differences it can be understood easily that these men might have wished that the Australian Sisters be more like those they had left behind.

From the evidence, however, it is clear that these differences were not the major cause of the crisis. In fact, its seeds had been sown some eighteen months earlier, while Mary herself was away in Queensland, establishing a foundation there.

EARLY SIGNS OF TROUBLE:

It all began at Kapunda, a small mining town about 100 kilometres north of Adelaide. As Father Tappeiner put it in his evidence to the Bishop's Commission of Inquiry into the Diocese of Adelaide in June 1872:

While the Bishop was in Rome at the time of the [First Vatican] Ecumenical Council, scandal occurred in the Kapunda district. Fr. Keating OSF was accused of sexual offence in the Confessional, committed frequently and with many. Having examined the matter, Fr. J. Smyth VG judged Keating guilty of the offence and ordered him to return to Europe.

The matter had been discovered by the Sisters of St. Joseph and brought to Fr. Woods and, through him, to the Vicar General. Fr. Horan was then the companion and Superior of Fr. Keating and they were of the same Order of St. Francis; he himself was judged by the Vicar General to have been not altogether free from fault, even if only by turning a blind eye. The Reverend VG declared that he would send them both home [i.e. back to Europe], unless he ascertained a contrary intention on the part of the Bishop.

This was the beginning of the hatred of Fr. Horan for Fr. Woods and the Sisters. It was gradually communicated to other priests, and it was fanned by Fr. Woods's imprudent and too imperious management of school affairs when he was Director General of the Schools and of the Sisters.

Source: Evidence of Fr. Joseph Tappeiner SJ, 11 June 1872 in <http://legacy.library.unisa.edu.au/condon/CatholicLetters/index.htm>

In fact, Father Horan, who was absolutely furious at this turn of events, declared openly that he would destroy Father Woods through the Sisters of St Joseph. He watched them closely, noted every move they made and persuaded his friends to join him in spying on them. At the same time, it appears that Father Woods, who had already upset some of these clergy over his management of the schools and the Sisters, became even more stressed and less able to operate successfully. It is highly possible too, that Horan did not leave him alone, but took every opportunity to remind him of the trouble he had caused by having Father Keating sent home to Ireland.

Next, Horan addressed to Bishop Sheil a letter where he listed the Sisters' alleged weaknesses, shortcomings and faults and had a number of priests sign it before handing it to the bishop on the day of his arrival home from overseas in February 1871. [Mary MacKillop was still in Queensland at this time.] (See attachment one below for a copy of this letter).

Initially, Sheil was upset and refused to take any action against Woods or the Sisters. Horan did not give up, however, and eventually he succeeded in persuading the bishop to send Woods to New South Wales to arrange for a Josephite foundation in the Bathurst diocese and then to have Archbishop Polding of Sydney detain him there for an unlimited time.

IMPENDING CRISIS:

In the meantime, when Mary arrived home in late April 1871 Woods, whose mental and physical health were far from good, did not allow her to go to Franklin Street. Instead, he had her remain at Port Adelaide for the two or two or three weeks that elapsed before she accompanied two Sisters to a new foundation in distant Port Augusta where she stayed for two weeks. Then, after she had a brief stay in the Mother House, in mid-June he sent her to visit the Sisters in the widely scattered country convents. She was away from Adelaide until the end of August. In the meantime, it was early August when Sheil sent Woods to New South Wales, leaving the Adelaide Sisters bereft of his or Mary's leadership.

He was scarcely gone before she began receiving disturbing letters from Adelaide, begging her to return as soon as possible.

Why?

Because Horan now saw his opportunity to commence the process of destroying the Josephites. As a first step he pressured Sheil to enforce changes to the Sisters' Rule of Life.

He visited metropolitan convents and schools, examined the Sisters' ability as teachers and talked to them about future change, saying there would be choir and lay Sisters, with no central superior. Each small community would be under the local priest's control and be totally independent of any other community. The bishop would be their only point of reference.

He claimed that these matters were of little importance, that change was inevitable, and that the Sisters should expect it. What he did not say was that the changes he was proposing were, in fact, a blueprint for the total destruction of the Institute.

He believed that, in Woods' absence, the Sisters would bend to his will easily. However, he had not counted on the strength and determination of Mary or the majority of these young, seemingly inexperienced Sisters!! He did not realise how well they understood the meaning of their vows and knew that they were not bound to accept changes to the rule under which they had made those vows.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN:

When Mary arrived back in Adelaide in early September, she asked to see the bishop, hoping he would clarify his position regarding the Institute. He refused to listen to her, however, and was annoyed that Sister Ursula Ross had not accompanied her to the city. Mary was unaware that such was his wish. She agreed to go back and fetch Ursula, taking an overnight journey by the coastal steamer "Kangaroo." When she arrived there, she found that Ursula had already left for Adelaide. Very likely they had passed in the night! There was nothing for Mary to do but to return home alone.

As she travelled, it seems that the reality of what was happening became clear to her. Therefore, she decided to inform the bishop of her position regarding the Institute by writing a statement concerning her call to the Religious Life, her love for the Institute and her determination to remain faithful to the Rule of Life according to which she had made her vows.

She wrote:

From that time [the time when I professed my vows] I looked upon it as sacred, and can you blame me, my Lord, if I do so still?

I know that you can withdraw your approbation from it, and if our good God so wills it I am resigned. But, Oh! pardon me, my Lord, if I say that I cannot in conscience see the Rule altered and still remain a Sister. I am your child, my Lord, your humble, helpless child. I want to please you, but above all to please God, and do His holy Will.

If then, in any way it may please Him that you should alter the Rule then, my Lord, I feel that I must take the alternative that you offered, and leave the Institute, until it may please God to give me in some other place what my soul desires.

These were brave words. Bishop Sheil and Horan were furious and read it as insubordination! At once Horan put extra pressure on the bishop to get her out of the way—to send her to Bago's Gap, in his parish of Kapunda, where she could have no contact with the other Sisters and then to let him get to work enforcing his changes.

As a first step, on the morning of 22 September 1871, Sheil excommunicated Mary from the church and evicted the Sisters from their Franklin Street convent. Over the next several weeks he released fifty more Sisters from their vows because they refused to accept the proposed changes to their rule.

One wonders whether Horan felt satisfied with his attempts to destroy the Institute because they did not go to plan. The Institute did not die. Within eight months Mary MacKillop had been reinstated as its leader, most of the Sisters had resumed the wearing of their habits and had renewed their vows according to their Original Rule. Before long new members had joined them as they undertook their ministries once more. It was he, not they, who was banished from the diocese and his friend Keating was not vindicated.

ATTACHMENT ONE:

Priests' letter of complaint, February 1871.

<http://legacy.library.unisa.edu.au/condon/CatholicLetters/index.htm>

May it please Your Lordship, we the undersigned beg leave to lay before you the following allegations:

That having, since your Lordship's departure for Europe looked on with pain and without power of remedy at the detriment caused directly to Education and indirectly to Religion by the Sisters of St Joseph in this diocese we have considered it our bounden duty (as being responsible for the souls committed to our charge) to bring the matter officially under your Lordship's notice.

That having had an opportunity in our respective districts of judging of the efficiency of the aforesaid Sisters in the matter of imparting a satisfactory education to our children we conscientiously declare that they are utterly inadequate to such an object and that consequently a gross injustice is being done to the children of the Catholic community by withholding from them a class of education that should place them on a par with their fellow colonists of other denominations.

That in many of the outlying districts no provision whatsoever is made for the education of the male sex and that in consequence thereof Catholic boys have to attend schools belonging to other religious persuasions.

That consequent on such an imperfect system of education the Catholic children throughout the greater portion (if not all) of your Lordship's diocese are in comparative ignorance when contrasted with the youth of other denominations around them.

That this state of things if suffered to continue cannot but redound to the discredit and disgrace of the Catholics of this diocese.

We also wish to state that exclusive of their "Father Director" the priests of the diocese are by the aforesaid Sisters virtually and practically looked upon as nonentities and as a proof of the truth of this statement we offer as an instance - a single instance - that on the late lamentable occasion when the blessed Sacrament had been abstracted from the tabernacle - and that nine priests (virtually on their oaths) without a single dissenting voice gave a verdict against an individual sister as the unfortunate and infatuated being who had been guilty of the sacrilege - that same condemned

sister was in defiance and in the teeth of such verdict retained in the responsible position of Mistress of Novices.

We furthermore wish to state that the opinion of the local pastors is never sought or respected in the matter of education - also that without their permission (and sometimes even against their expressed orders) collections are made by the Sisters of St Joseph in their districts. - That the said Sisters have been known to establish of their own accord and without the local Pastor's knowledge have religious Confraternities - from which they have been in receipt of monies that have been forwarded to Adelaide for Masses to be said "in globo" (?) for the members of the said contributing confraternities.

That girls - ignorant girls - are constantly admitted into the community of the Sisters of St Joseph who have had neither character nor recommendation nor spiritual counsel on the matter of their religious vocation from their local Pastor. - That it is our firm belief - founded on circumstantial evidence - that the Sisters (or those by whom they are guided) instruct to the foregoing effect the individuals who present themselves as postulants.

That at least three fourths of the present members of the society are utterly useless for educational purposes and finally - that if the number of candidates to be hereafter admitted continue at the present formidable rate - the diocese shall in a short time become inundated with a host of uneducated and ignorant Sisters (in religion) who while they shall be an unbearable onus on both priests and people shall be of no use whatsoever towards the enlightenment of the growing Catholic youth of the colony.

Signatures:

Ven. Archdeacon Russell

Rev. T. Murphy

Very Rev. P. Hughes

Rev. James Maher

Rev. C. Horan

Very Rev. F. Byrne

Rev. B. Nevin

Rev. J.J. Roche

Very Rev. C. Reynolds

Rev. R. Cleary

Rev Michael Kennedy

P.S. We wish to state that it is our opinion that much injury is done to religion by the publication of visions, revelations and prophecies said to be received by the Sisters and [the Very Rev. J.E.T. Woods.]

ATTACHMENT TWO:

ASSORTED REFERENCES FOR FURTHER READING REGARDING THIS MATTER:

1. Mary MacKillop to Bishop Sheil. 10 September 1871

[Source: Archives of Propaganda Fide, Rome: SOCG 1873 vol. 1000, 1385v-1386v]

[Latin version sent to Rome replaced by original English version, to be found in Life and Letters of Mother Mary of the Cross [MacKillop], by A Sister of St. Joseph. Westmead, Sydney, 1916, pp. 49-51] <http://legacy.library.unisa.edu.au/condon/CatholicLetters/index.htm>

2. Mary MacKillop's account of what happened after her return to Adelaide on 31 August 1871.

Mary MacKillop to the Episcopal Commissioners, Bishops Murphy and Quinn. June 1872.

[Source: Archives of Propaganda Fide, Rome: SOCG 1873 vol. 1000, 1308-1311. Original English text. <http://legacy.library.unisa.edu.au/condon/CatholicLetters/index.htm>

3. Evidence submitted in writing by Sister Monica Phillips. 14 June 1872

Source: Archives of Propaganda Fide, Rome: SOCG 1873 vol. 1000, 1416-1419v.

<http://legacy.library.unisa.edu.au/condon/CatholicLetters/index.htm>