

‘Staunchly Your Friend’: Mary MacKillop and Friendship

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ABSTRACT: Sr. Cresp, a longtime member of the Order founded by Sr. Mary MacKillop, has elected to dwell on one aspect of the life of this recently canonized founder of her Order. This core of her life is linked to Aelred of Rievaulx’s *De spiritali amicitia* (‘Spiritual Friendship’), of c.1160. Here the spiritual quality is explored as it was practised by the new Saint.

Some time ago I made a cursory search of Mary MacKillop’s writings to identify different themes and was amazed at the result. In almost every letter she wrote, the word ‘friend’ appears.¹ I was reminded of the point made by philosopher Beatrice Bruteau that the ‘kingdom’,² inaugurated in the life and death of Jesus Christ, took its shape most precisely at the Last Supper. Here Jesus established the ‘Communion Paradigm’, as opposed to society’s paradigm of domination. Social hierarchy was inverted at that moment, when the ‘master’ became ‘servant’ and the relationship between members of this kingdom was described as being that of ‘friends’.³ It is obvious that Mary MacKillop was always open to the possibility of friendship. Her letters and the memories of her written by her contemporaries testify to one who had many close friends, her confidants in times of joy and sorrow.⁴ Was this because, in her time, she lived according to the ‘communion paradigm’? There is much in her life, I find, to corroborate this theory. Indeed, given the fact that her union with God, that is, her holiness, has been recognised by the Catholic Church,⁵ one would expect that her growth in Christ would have produced attitudes that reflected his own. Friendship, as a ‘kingdom’ quality, became a mark of her character.

¹ I did this search while writing another article and was amazed at the results.

² The ‘kingdom’ proclaimed by Jesus was the new order where, through him, life is lived in union with God and one another and the whole of creation. Cf. Rom. 8:19-22.

³ Beatrice Bruteau, *The Holy Thursday Revolution* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 66. Cf. John Chs 13-15.

⁴ In this short paper I confine myself, of necessity, to two examples of close friends.

Friendship

Friendship may be described as a bond between people with an attraction for each other, or who share a common interest or activity. This kind of friendship can have many layers, beginning 'in some mysterious fashion as two people get to know each other, and (growing), through ups and downs, conflict and reconciliation, communication and challenge to whatever depth it is destined to attain.'⁶ It can run the gamut, Schneiders says, 'from willed benevolence, even that which is contrary to our natural inclinations, to the most intimate and fulfilling relationship of which humans are capable.'⁷

The topic of friendship has long occupied classical and scriptural writers, pre-dating Christianity.⁸ The book of Sirach declares that 'Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter: whoever finds one has found a treasure.'⁹ The book of Wisdom and the Psalms indicate that friendship with God is found by those who attain wisdom and grow in knowledge of God's covenant.¹⁰ However, a consequence of the Christian belief in the incarnation, that is, that God is revealed in the human being Jesus, takes friendship with God a step further. It is *through* friendship with others that we can grow in friendship with God.

Medieval writer, Aelred of Rievaulx, took up this theme, asserting that 'friendship is a step toward the love and knowledge of God.'¹¹ He argues this in the context of the apostle John's first letter: 'if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us'.¹² In our day, Wicks, a psychologist, expresses the same thought in contemporary language: 'friends are not only important for support,

⁵ Mary MacKillop was canonised on October 17, 2010—that is, her name was added to the 'canon' or list of those in whom the grace of God is recognised.

⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Selling All* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), p. 295.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁸ Classical Greek and Latin writers/philosophers include Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. Aelred of Rievaulx draws on these in his treatment of friendship. The Old Testament passages from the Wisdom Books such as Sirach, Proverbs and the Book of Solomon also provided him with material.

⁹ Sirach 6:14.

¹⁰ For example, Wis 7:14—'for (wisdom) is an unfailing treasure for mortals; those who get it obtain friendship with God, commended for the gifts that come from instruction'; and Psalm 25:14—'The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them.'

¹¹ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. L.C. Braceland, ed. by M.L. Dutton (Kentucky: Liturgical Press, 2010). 74: 18.

¹² 1John 4:12. Cf. 1 John 4:7 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God'.

but are also necessary for psychological and spiritual growth—if you will, for holiness.¹³

'Kingdom' friendship

So how is 'kingdom friendship' or 'spiritual friendship' different from the friendships enjoyed in the everyday? The writers quoted above would assert that they are one and the same, 'kingdom friendship' taking this relationship to its ultimate. Beatrice Bruteau paraphrases Jesus' statement about laying down one's life for one's friends:¹⁴

No one can have greater love than this, to be willing to give your whole life to your friends. Do you see how it is? That a friend's life lives inside you? and you live in your friend? It's that kind of love. That's the kind of love we have with the Father. The Father is in me and I am in the Father, I am in you and you are in me; the Father is in you and you are in the Father; you are in each other.¹⁵

Through baptism, the Christian is called to be an icon of the God we know through Jesus. When we love to the ultimate, we reflect the One who is love outpoured. God, to whose love all of creation owes its existence, has made creatures in his own image.¹⁶ The Christian understanding of God is communal—God is Unity in Trinity—and so inbuilt in creation is the urge to unity. This movement, says Aelred, exists in human beings as friendship.¹⁷

Sharing Life

'Kingdom' friendship, then, develops in the same way as all human friendships do. Friends share life. They build one another up, looking unselfishly for the good of the other. The early letters of Mary MacKillop and her spiritual adviser, Father Julian Tenison Woods, record such a relationship. Their friendship began as a mutual search for an answer to the needs of neglected children in isolated country settlements in Australia. Almost immediately, they felt at home with

¹³ Robert J. Wicks, *Touching the Holy: Ordinarity, Self-Esteem, and Friendship* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2007), pp. 114-115.

¹⁴ John 15:13.

¹⁵ Bruteau, *The Holy Thursday Revolution*, (2005), p. 60.

¹⁶ Genesis, 1:17.

¹⁷ Marsha L. Dutton, 'Introduction' to Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 41. See also Aelred's text,

Thus from him who is supremely and uniquely one, all should be allotted some trace of this unity. For this reason, he left no class of creatures isolated, but from the many he linked each one in a kind of society. 65:53.

one another. As they developed in their appreciation of one another they shared dreams and showed care for each other. Family news is exchanged; teasing comments are made; misunderstandings are clarified.

Equally, with other friends, Mary was affectionate, interested in those dear to the other and unafraid to express her deepest wishes for them. Joanna Barr Smith, a protestant but close friend, described the regard in which she held Mary:

You have always had a wonderful attraction for me ... I have had so many things to worry me lately, that I have often found myself thinking of you as of something serene and peaceful, far, far removed from me. ... I wear your locket and shall wear it forever for your sake—so that I can always feel I have loved a good woman—who has tried to do me some good.¹⁸

Mutuality

Socially, Mary and Joanna were on far different planes, Joanna a loving wife and mother from the wealthy upper class, and Mary a religious who had come from a family in constant financial stress. Mary wrote to her mother about this anomaly:

(Joanna) is a woman of very superior mind, and why she should so singularly attach herself to me I cannot understand.¹⁹

However, it is in the fact that both women could maintain mutuality that we see true friendship at work. 'This is a property of friendship', declares Aelred, 'there exists neither superior nor inferior.'²⁰ Bruteau says it was a necessary act on Jesus' part to make his disciples not servants but equals, his friends. 'Jesus treats everyone the same: respect people as persons, showing no deference to power and no condescension to the poor.'²¹

This was a 'kingdom' value that Mary put into practice all her life. Not long before her death she addressed the Sisters on this point:

¹⁸ Letter of Joanna Barr Smith to Mary MacKillop, undated, 1871. Archives, Sisters of St Joseph, Sydney.

¹⁹ Quoted by Margaret Paton, *Mary MacKillop: The Ground of her Loving* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), p. 113.

²⁰ Aelred of Rievaulx, (trans./adapted), *Spiritual Friendship*, 66: 57.

²¹ Bruteau, B., *The Holy Thursday Revolution*, p. 57.

You heard of the early days in Adelaide when Mrs John George Daly desired to send her little son to the Hall School thinking the governor's grandson would give a tone to the school. ... She requested that her son might be permitted to have a seat beside my desk, but I declined to make any distinctions.²²

Egalitarianism fits easily with intimacy, where no artificial barriers prevent the person from being oneself for the other.

Vulnerability

Mary also knew that friendship requires self-revelation. 'Friendships are not sustained by blood or genes but only by love freely shared', says Schneiders. 'This makes them both more vulnerable and, ultimately, stronger than any other kind of relationship.'²³ We run a risk in being open. When Father Woods left Penola for Adelaide in 1867, Mary was obviously upset and dissolved into tears. She wrote to Woods soon afterwards, 'I fear you thought me very selfish and foolish to give way so much when I saw your own grief at parting with your poor people, but I felt for them, for you, and I felt too that I was a great loser myself.'²⁴

There is risk, too, when friends find they have differences of opinion. While away in Brisbane, Mary heard that Father Woods in Adelaide was encouraging Sisters, so-called 'visionaries', in their delusions. Mary did not trust this approach to spirituality and felt she needed to warn Julian about it. He accused her of wanting in trust: as Spiritual Director he felt he could not err in these matters. Mary was aware that 'the anxiety, the overwork, the many duties which he imposed on himself, as well as those which belonged to his position',²⁵ were interfering with his judgement, and she urged him to take advice from the Jesuits rather than deal with everything himself. She did this not without trepidation, as she was ten years younger than Woods and, compared with him, somewhat of a 'beginner' in expressing spiritual principles. However, Julian's eventual breakdown and banishment from Adelaide confirmed the validity of her observations. Her friendship for him demanded that she run the risk of telling him the truth he did not want to hear. 'It is characteristic of personal friendship to warn and be warned, to warn freely but not harshly and to be warned patiently and without resentment,' says Aelred.²⁶

²² Address to the Sisters, 1901. Archives, Sisters of St Joseph, Sydney.

²³ Schneiders, S.M., *Selling All*, p. 296.

²⁴ Mary to Fr Woods, 21 February 1867. Archives, Sisters of St Joseph, Sydney.

²⁵ MacKillop, Mary, *Julian Tenison Woods: A Life*, ed. by Margaret Press (Sydney: Sisters of St Joseph, 1997), p. 142.

²⁶ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, 117: 108.

Conflict

Friendship, like every emotional expression, develops and matures through facing conflict as much as sharing the joy of one another's company, a fact that Mary came to know through bitter experience. When she did not hear from Joanna for a long time, she eventually complained about it to her friend. With some shame, Joanna admitted that she had listened to gossip about the Sisters and had been swayed by that fact to distance herself. At the time her own ill-health was a complicating factor, and so she had nursed a hurt that Mary had not contacted her before this.²⁷ That the two women were able to reconcile and grow even closer gives testimony to the power of a love that overcomes fear of the censure that accompanies disagreement.

Sometimes the risk of dealing with disagreement leads to rupture and distress. 'Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken,' said C.S. Lewis.²⁸ Certainly, in her friendship with Julian Woods, Mary was to know this pain. The two had worked through conflict on many occasions, but when Mary upheld the Bishops' decision to preclude Father Woods from directing the Sisters, they found themselves against a stone wall. He took her willingness to act on the advice of Bishop Reynolds or Father Tappeiner as a rejection of himself. When she returned from Rome, having been given revised Constitutions that changed Father Woods' stipulations about poverty, Mary sought to clarify matters with him. Julian grudgingly agreed and they met in Penola, SA, where their dream had first taken shape. However, nothing was resolved and relations between the two became more and more strained. Mary wrote of her disappointment to her friend, Sister Josephine:

It was no use to appeal to his reason, or to hope that I could make anything of him. I simply felt that it was labour in vain, that I, at least, could not alter his opinion. ... Well, then we parted in friendship and affection, but in deep sorrow and disappointment on my part. I cannot describe the anguish I feel when thinking of him and his views. It is better not to dwell upon this subject, for it does me no good and I cannot see that it will do anyone good. He is too sensitive and tender-hearted to be a faithful guide of souls. Poor dear Father!²⁹

Fidelity

But despite hurt and disagreements, Mary always held in her heart the 'friendship and affection' for Julian that never gave up even

²⁷ Cf. Paton, M., *Mary MacKillop: The Ground of her Loving*, pp. 115-116.

²⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*. Cited by Robert J. Wicks, *Touching the Holy*, p. 25.

²⁹ Letter to Sister Josephine, January 1877. St Joseph's Archives, North Sydney.

though she continued to find herself strongly disagreeing with his actions.³⁰ Both were good people who saw things differently. After the Penola rift, they were never as close as before, but Mary always honoured the part he had played in the foundation of the Sisters of St Joseph and refused to engage in vindictive gossip. ‘Love never ends’, says St Paul.³¹ Surely Mary’s constraint in managing their differences and yet holding to her admiration of the man provides for us an example of how we can separate persons from their actions—that is, how we can ‘love our enemies’. In the months before Julian died, he was an invalid, and Mary used to take him strawberries and other treats which she knew he would like. She undertook writing her biography of this gentle but brilliant man as a ‘labour of love.’³² Julian seems to have harboured bitterness about what had happened, but he could still write in tender terms to Bishop O’Reilly: ‘Sister Mary has been to see me and many more of my old friends have thought the occasion sufficiently grave to pay me a visit as well.’³³

Joanna, too, ‘loved to the end.’ Besides continuing to be a generous donor to the many projects for which Mary was responsible, she was able to render to her a kindness that endures to this day, donating the marble slab that covers Mary’s tomb. Theirs was a friendship that had spanned more than forty years. During all that time, Joanne could declare herself to Mary as ‘Staunchly your friend’,³⁴ for here, true to the ‘kingdom’ concept of friendship, there was ‘sharing of life with one who (had) become one’s ‘other self’.’³⁵

Friendship with God

Because she had been brought into the ‘communion paradigm’ of Jesus, Mary had learnt that it is through friendship with others that we can grow in friendship with God. At the same time, it was *because* of her friendship with God that she could be so at ease in forming friendships with others. From the time she was a small child, Mary

³⁰ The passage from Aelred’s *Spiritual Friendship* is particularly apt in the case of Mary and Julian:

Friendship is indeed everlasting. Hence *a friend loves always*. If the person you love harms you, love him still. If he be such that your friendship should be withdrawn, still never let your love be withdrawn. As much as you can, consider his welfare, respect his reputation, and, even if he has betrayed the secrets of your friendship, never betray his. 98: 44.

³¹ 1 Corinthians, 13:8.

³² MacKillop, M., *Julian Tenison Woods: A Life*, p. 1.

³³ Letter to Bishop O’Reilly, 8 March, 1889, Archives, Sisters of St Joseph of Lochinvar.

³⁴ Letter to Mary, 15 August, 1869. Archives, Sisters of St Joseph, Sydney.

³⁵ Schneiders, S.M., *Selling All*, p. 296.

had felt God's protective presence with her.³⁶ God was her loving companion who understood her inability to 'say prayers' when she was feeling unwell.³⁷ When human friendships failed, she took refuge in the God who is always faithful.³⁸

In Jesus, the One who makes known to us all that He knows from the Father,³⁹ Mary found the human expression of God: 'His presence is before me almost in everything, and I love to come to Him in prayer as to my dearest and only Friend.'⁴⁰ Jesus' human heart held comfort for her:

When storms rage, when persecutions or danger threaten, I quietly creep into (the Sacred Heart's) deep abyss, and securely sheltered there, my soul is in peace, though my body is tossed upon the stormy waves of a cold and selfish world.⁴¹

Mary's entering into friendship had a sacramental aspect about it, 'carrying within it God's own unity and leading to friendship with Christ in this life and in eternity.'⁴² Her life taught her that Jesus' 'communion paradigm' was both a way and a witness to friendship with God. We are fortunate in our time to have the example of Mary MacKillop to demonstrate this relationship. For her, Jesus' words, 'I have called you friends,' was invitation, mission and privilege.

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³⁶ Mary wrote to Monsignor Kirby, March 1873: 'From my earliest childhood, as far back as I can remember, God gave me a sense of His watchful presence.' Archives, Sisters of St Joseph, Sydney.

³⁷ '...and yet all the while I do not pray--only feel near God and my mind working or my body resting to please him.' Letter to Father Woods, 28 March, 1870.

³⁸ Having written of her sadness at Father Woods' rejection of her explanations, she ended her letter to Sister Josephine (*op. cit.*), 'But in better moments I feel all this drawing my heart more to God. May it really do so with all of us!'

³⁹ See John 15:15.

⁴⁰ Retreat Notes to Monsignor Kirby, March 1873. Archives, Sisters of St Joseph, Sydney.

⁴¹ Letter to Sisters, 21 May, 1907. Archives, Sisters of St Joseph, Sydney.

⁴² Marsha L. Dutton, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

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