

## **St Mary McKillop: A Reflection**

As we celebrated Mary McKillop's feast day yesterday, August 8, we can recall her connection with our parish. The first foundation of the Sisters of St Joseph in Melbourne was in Surrey Hills, on the corner of Highfield Rd and Kent Rd. There is a small park at the T junction of those streets named after her and the buildings erected over the ninety years the Josephite Sisters remained there caring for children immediately catch the eye. For many years now the site has been the Melbourne campus of Ywam, a Christian missionary training organization.

In 1888 the Society of St Vincent de Paul established a Home in South Melbourne for orphans and abandoned children. It began with three children under the care of a matron. The immediate need was for a larger residence. In 1890 a suitable property was found in Surrey Hills and that same year 58 children, described in the Council of the St Vincent de Paul's records as "the most helpless of the helpless" and "the waifs and strays of the great Metropolis of Melbourne" were in residence there. Local benefactors and the St Vincent de Paul Society in Paris financed the work.

The committee running the Home could not manage and Archbishop Carr, who was then the archbishop of Melbourne, approached the Josephite Sisters for help. They responded positively, and Mary McKillop shouldered the burden of managing the enterprise.

The problems presented by the Home were different from the ordinary classroom challenges that the sisters were familiar with. It was said that a sister who worked there needed "strong motivation, a sound constitution and a strong stomach." One of the annual reports on the Home describes the situation: "Their clothes – if rags which covered them could receive such a dignified title – were merely hanging together; their language was in keeping with their apparel, and although but mites, one may say that every sixth word was prefaced by either an adjective or an oath." Mary coped with transforming the building, raising funds, making the Home a real home for the children who had suffered profound neglect, while encouraging her sisters to persevere in the demanding work.

Mary had written in one of her letters that "I feel joy when things go well, for I see His will in this, and an equal joy when they seem to go wrong or against our natural desire, for there again I see his will." Her remarkable trust in the Lord and in his providence touches our hearts today, and perhaps recalling our proximity to the site of her first Melbourne foundation, helps us savour the greatness of our ancient land's first canonised saint.

***Fr David Willis OP***