Mary MacKillop has been on the Uniting Church’s list of saints since 2005; or, to be more accurate, she appeared that year in ‘a calendar of other commemorations’ in the authorised liturgical book, *Uniting in Worship*. This ‘other’ calendar is additional to the ‘Liturgical Year’, that is, to the universally recognised western cycle of Sundays and other Principal Days, the seasons around Easter and Christmas, and ‘ordinary time’, on which the *Revised Common Lectionary* is based. In the book’s introduction to the ‘other commemorations’, reference is early made to the fact that ‘in some denominations, this list is called a *Calendar of Saints’ Days* or a *Sanctoral Cycle*’, but no explanation is given as to why a similar title was not adopted by the Uniting Church. Certainly the new list is based on a unique taxonomy of names, divided into categories such as Christian thinker, Christian pioneer, renewer of society, reformer of the Church, faithful servant, and person of prayer, as well as the more traditional ‘martyr’ and ‘apostle’ (a category ‘witness to Jesus’ includes biblical saints); so to that extent, it is a new kind of list. Other traditions have had their lists, simple or complex; all have had to distinguish between names with a stronger or a lesser claim on the congregations’ attention, and in this, the Roman calendar is the most precisely developed. The simple way in which ancient communities recognized the sanctity of men and women they knew, and remembered them on their death day (their ‘heavenly birthday’) was slowly systematised and developed into universal observance. The Uniting Church categorization also appeared in its first liturgical book in 1988, and the list is expanded in 2005. I have suggested elsewhere that this innovative approach has proved to have some problems and may need some rethinking.

Nevertheless, one might read between the lines a certain nervousness about producing a formal list of saints for the Uniting Church. The section’s introduction distinguishes its calendar from others in this way: ‘This *Calendar of Other Commemorations* is a single table; it calls to mind a representative group of people from the communion of saints, that great company whom no one can number, who have been the servants of Christ in their day and generation. It makes no attempt to be all-inclusive, and has limited resemblance to similar calendars prepared by other denominations’. It thus distances itself from the customary schemes of other churches: the Uniting Church worshipper is deprived of the joy which many an Anglican child of an earlier generation had, during boring moments of the liturgy, in digging through the ‘Tables and Rules for the Moveable and Immoveable Feasts;
together with the Days of Fasting and Abstinence through the Whole Year’ which appeared in successive editions of the Book of Common Prayer of 1662. Anglicans of a ritual turn of mind and Roman Catholics had the further excitement of distinguishing Red Letter and Black Letter Saints’ Days, or between memorials, feasts and solemnities, not forgetting to rank them e.g. St Joseph the Worker, a Double of the First Class, on May 1st, or Labour Day (thanks to Pope Pius XII in 1955); or you might even discover one had been transferred to a more convenient and spacious day because of a clash. There is a certain kind of mind that solves problems this way (one thinks of railway timetable composers, when more than one train is using the same line), and the Second Vatican Council did a great deal to rearrange them and even suppress some, perhaps temporarily. Protestant churches have their own canon law, but have always shied away from too much codification on sacred matters. Reacting against mediaeval casuistry and Tridentine rubricism, they have retained a particular suspicion about ritual tidiness. This has been exacerbated by other modern cultural incursions, such as the cults of informality and convenience. Sadly, the word ‘holy’ has largely disappeared from the Uniting Church’s vocabulary. It not the sort of thing you claim for yourself or, it would seem, for others.

The theological objections to mediaeval practice are too well known and over-rehearsed to need much room here. The hierarchy and the cult of saints was a problem in the face of the sola Scriptura of the Reformers. The word for ‘saint’ in biblical Greek is ἅγιος, meaning simply, ‘holy’. It is clear in the New Testament that ‘saints’ (derived from the Latin equivalent), usually in the plural, are those sanctified by the Holy Spirit of God, and who live their lives in Christ. They include men with proven flaws such as Peter and Paul, and women noted for their charity and for their leadership qualities like Phoebe and Chloe. Uniting in Worship-2 alludes to the Communion of Saints, and does so with a veiled reference to Revelation (7:9), a warning against an attempt to number the saints. The Apostles’ Creed might have been cited for the universal doctrine. All the baptised are members of this ‘in the world but not of it’ new community. The children of the Reformation, both ‘classical’ and Puritan, held firmly to this principle of equality in Christ, as their use of the title ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ suggests. So the very notion of particular ‘saints’ has been questioned for a long time; hence the modest claims for the Uniting Church calendar.

John Calvin placed his teaching on the ‘communion of saints’ firmly within his doctrine of the Church, one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which he discusses under
the heading ‘means of grace’. The Church is holy, because Christ sanctified it and cleanses it so that it daily progresses towards an eschatological perfection, that is, one not yet attained (cf Ephesians 5: 25-27). To this goal, all its members ‘aspire with all their souls’. As human beings press towards perfection, the Church aids them through preaching and the sacraments, and encourages them through the ‘power of the keys’, the office of absolution which belongs to its ministry. The Reformation for Calvin (and Luther) was just that: a process of calling the Church to its own holiness. However, the ‘communion of saints’ in terms of their intercession is dealt with elsewhere, in a section on the intercession of Christ, which Calvin regards as supreme and unique. There is simply no other way of access to God. The saints in heaven themselves pray to God through Jesus Christ: ‘meanwhile, notwithstanding, the saints still retain their intercessions, whereby they commend one another’s salvation to God. The apostle mentions these (1 Tim. 2:1), but all depend solely upon Christ’s intercession, so far are they from detracting from it in any way.’ So then, he concludes in the same section, ‘let it remain an established principle that we should direct all intercessions of the whole church to that sole intercession.’

In reaction to what he sees as the abuse of intercession in the mediaeval church, Calvin rules out requests to the saints. He is aware that such intercession has arisen in part because Christ himself has been seen as too severe or remote to approach. He calls on the witness of St Ambrose of Milan: ‘He [Christ] is our mouth, through which we speak to the Father; he is our eye, through which we see the Father; he is our right hand, through which we offer ourselves to the Father. Unless he intercedes, there is no intercourse with God either for us or for all saints’. He finds the adoption of a favourite saint both illogical (because the saint also prays through Christ) and abhorrent. His arguments proceed inexorably, and no close follower of Calvin will find a way to pray to, for or through the dead, be they ever so saintly. This principle is deeply written on the Protestant heart.

‘Holiness’ is a significant part in another of the traditions of the Uniting Church. In answer to a question about the origins of Methodism, John Wesley wrote,

In 1729, two young men, reading the Bible, saw they could not be saved without holiness, followed after it, and incited others so to do. In 1737 they saw holiness comes by faith; they say likewise that men are justified before they are sanctified; but still holiness was their point. God then thrust them out, utterly against their will, to raise a holy people.
He chose a somewhat difficult doctrine to mark this movement. He took with immense seriousness the text, ‘You shall be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect’ (Matthew 5: 48), and made ‘Christian perfection’ a central emphasis in his teaching. The inner organization of the Methodist societies, into ‘classes’ of about twelve and ‘bands’ for two or three was precisely to follow through the pursuit of holiness in life for those attracted to his preaching. In these groups, people were encouraged to confess their sins to one another (‘in band’ meant ‘in confidence’, the equivalent of the secrecy of the confessional), to name the conflicts they had as Christians in a wicked world, to encourage each other to persevere, and to celebrate the triumphs of grace. Holiness could be grown, and there are deep links with the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*. Wesley understood his calling to be ‘to spread Scriptural holiness through the land’. And what would be the sign of such holiness? It would be perfect love; that the love of Christ so indwelt a person that other, lesser loves were simply driven out. This was precisely not an individual attainment, not a virtue to be claimed. The aim of such holiness (he used the expression ‘social holiness’) was to redeem the whole nation, all humankind. This vision drove Methodism, long before the ‘Social Gospel’ was invented.

The dangers of such a doctrine are clear: arrogance, the ancient Corinthian sin of thinking one has ‘arrived’, even an underestimate of the power of sin itself. Wesley did not always explain himself clearly or well: but to tear the pursuit of holiness from Wesley’s practical Christianity would be to destroy it. He himself never claimed to have reached such a state – or to be given it; he claimed to have known two or three people over his long ministry who had. Perhaps in this claim he was already battling some of the problems the idea of perfection brings. ‘Social holiness’ was developed in the 20th century in relation to liberation theology, but that lost the radical hope which Wesley placed in what God could do with a person. Personal holiness, which he also called ‘entire sanctification’, was the trajectory which developed through the ‘holiness movement’ to become modern Pentecostalism. Nevertheless, there are attempts amongst contemporary Wesleyan theologians to recover a doctrine of Christian perfection which keeps the integrity and simplicity of Wesley’s vision of the spiritual life, but faces the theological and epistemological issues thrown up since his death.12

Wesley stands with the Reformers (and with his own Anglican tradition) in their critique of popular religion and the veneration and intercession of the saints. Indeed, when he edited the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* for the use of the Methodists in America in 1784, he reduced even the biblical ‘feasts’ usually there observed: Lent is
not mentioned, nor Epiphany; the sanctoral cycle familiar to 18th century Anglicans, even his beloved feast of All Saints’, disappear. One can only presume that in the American case, he was trying to meet Puritan sensitivities. Nevertheless, by what he did retain, he probably advanced American Methodist liturgical custom several degrees, and the pace quickened towards the early years of the 20th century.

John Wesley was the subject of peculiar personal veneration late in his own life and after his death: many a Methodist Church has a porcelain statue, or an engraving of Wesley or a close associate (not least his mother), and many relics, such as teapots and dinner plates (a sign of the success of Methodism in the Potteries) can still be found: the heritage collection at Queen’s College in the University of Melbourne has a pair of his spectacles, and Wesley Church, Portland (Vic.) has a preacher’s chair in the pulpit in which the great man regularly sat in London, to name but two Australian examples. His personal journals, already carefully prepared by himself for publication to edify the faithful, were further bowdlerised by his 19th century editors, and only in recent decades have the clay feet of the old ‘apostle of England’ been revealed to sight, and certain myths can be laid to rest. This should not diminish his standing as an extraordinary Christian. We need to keep reminding ourselves that the miracle of holiness is that God in his mercy works with fallible human beings: it is God’s light that shines through them; theirs is an afterglow.

The cult of the saints, which indeed has a long history in the Church, was exploited within the political and economic context of the 16th century in what Protestants have been taught was a particularly vulgar way. It is an almost physical shock for many to discover that indulgences still exist in the Roman Church. How well negative judgements are passed down through history! The Council of Trent, at what was really one of the low points of the controversy between Rome and the Reformers, while commending the benefit of invoking the support and assistance of the saints for one’s needs, also insisted that such favours were ‘from God through his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alone our redeemer and saviour’.

The self-styled ‘Progressive Christians’ around the contemporary scene also ask whether saints exist in any reality by which they might, as it were, hear our prayers. Certainly there is massive confusion about where and what human beings are after death. The New Testament gives no consistent picture, and once again, the train timetable people in the western church have filled in the gaps and ironed out the problems. Nineteenth century and more recent fascination with psychical research has muddied the waters further; the New Age groups, and the makers of films have provided the reductio ad absurdum. Do some go into a suspended state of sleep until
the Last Day, and others are admitted early into the presence of God? What did Luke’s Jesus mean when he said to the thief, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise’ (with or without a capital P)? We don’t know. We know we live and die ‘in Christ’. We know the Son belongs to that divine communion which we worship as the Holy Trinity, but from that point, our language is inadequate. Is there a ‘conversation’ between the Triune Persons? What form does the ‘intercession’ of the Risen Jesus take at the ‘right hand’ of God? We cannot tell, but if we are ‘in Christ’ we are part of that communication. If God in Christ can communicate with us in the Holy Spirit, it must be possible for us to reply. One of the possible words to be said when giving the sacrament into people’s hand is ‘The body of Christ keep you in eternal life’. At these points, at least, I would begin my pleas.

This is not the place for an extended consideration of saints other than she of the present celebration, but a few words may provide some illumination. The helpful place to start for Protestants is the New Testament ‘saints’, whose claim to be especially remembered is more easily established. We might begin with the mother of Jesus and of us all, Mary. She has been reduced to anonymity in Protestant worship precisely because the Reformers saw her role to have been distorted in the history of salvation. Where the early church struggled to define that role, for instance in the use of the title Theotokos, the God-bearer, Protestants have shared the suspicion of the opponents of the Chalcedonian Definition of 451 A.D. - mother of Jesus, yes, but Mother of God, no; but they may now also share the reconciliation which we may now celebrate between the two Orthodox families over this, which has opened the way to deeper unity.19

To the Reformed mind, Mary was the most abused of all, turned (they believed) into a co-mediatrix with her glorified Son. Little, however, was produced in that tradition to rescue and reform her standing, to give it the weight offered by the New Testament. At Christmas, she inevitably appears, but always as a fore-runner, a necessary fore-bear of the Promised One. The Methodist Hymn Book of 1933 actually had a version of the Stabat Mater (‘At the Cross, her station keeping/ Stood the mournful mother weeping’) evoking the same maternal emotion in the singer, but it was seldom sung.20 Leaving sentiment for the maternal aside, Protestants have had difficulty moving from what we might call the psychological plane to the theological, as some of other traditions have done. The psychology is powerful, and we are more open to it today: thus many lives are enhanced by pilgrimages and visits to holy places, and even to saints’ graves.
I myself have been much encouraged in my spiritual journey by the *anamnesis* which such places provide.\textsuperscript{21} I have sat beside the grave of Mary MacKillop in North Sydney\textsuperscript{22} and been moved by the sight of people in fervent prayer around me. At the very least, prayer is concentrated by being offered in the presence of such a person, and some Protestants at least have felt this.\textsuperscript{23} I have lived long enough with my Jesuit colleagues to have learned to enter into biblical narratives and engage the participants in conversation. I have sought to imagine what such an extraordinary person might have been like, what a significant person she is in all Christian history, in the house at Nazareth, by the Cross, and in the upper room at Pentecost. In short, I am allowing myself to get to know her. It is a conversation I am enjoying and I am not aware of having strayed from the way of Christ. My experience at Taizé, Grandchamp and Bose and other such ecumenical monastic communities has reminded me that Christians have prayed the angel Gabriel’s salute to Mary for centuries. One such community prays a litany which runs ‘Holy Mary, *stand with us sinners now…*’ and asks the same of many other notable Christians who have passed into life eternal.

If we take all we have gained through the ecumenical movement seriously, we must be careful of dismissing the spiritual experience of fellow-Christians, even as we question the ancient justification *vox populi, vox Dei*. The days when the so-called ‘mainstream churches’ dismiss evangelical and Pentecostal movements in their (and because of) manifold theological and ecclesial expressions are over: they already outnumber the entire membership of the World Council of Churches. Something is happening worthy of serious exploration.\textsuperscript{24} Their scholars work as critically as ‘we’ do on the issue of discerning the Holy Spirit (and this is a very ancient question!). Their pastors know that not all popular voices are evidence of the good. The contemporary witnesses are also measured by the Tradition, and on this too, all the churches have been challenged to define what that word means, with helpful results.\textsuperscript{25} We are all committed to the normative role in doctrine of the Holy Scriptures; their very modesty about Mary is a significant datum. We await the fruits of those dialogues which have ventured to explore her place and role in the church.\textsuperscript{26}

So our Roman Catholic colleagues have canonised Mother Mary MacKillop. There is one more stumbling block for otherwise welcoming Protestants. It takes us back to the train timetables: it is the mode of making a saint. One writer to a Uniting Church journal put it this way: ‘I have no quarrel with the Catholic Church’s [sic] recognition of her [sc. Mary MacKillop] as a saint. What I find questionable is that
the record of this good and godly woman must be adorned with miracle stories. Even Jesus’ alleged miracles are not what qualify him for exalted status.’ The writer expands on this: ‘I am uneasy with a divinity who/that can be manipulated by Mary MacKillop or any other singularly good person. What if a thousand good persons interceded? I do not believe in a “poll-driven” divinity either’. This puts the case starkly, but it points to a serious theological issue about the nature of intercession, and a process which seems to set up some sort of calculus of sanctity. I leave the questions there, and trust that such upfront honesty is understood to be part of good ecumenical relations.

But made her a saint, the Church of Rome has, and the Uniting Church was first to place her on its roll. All Australians are ready to claim her as a woman of courage, and insight, prayer and faith. She will have the respect of those beyond the Christian community. That she lived out of the love of Christ is clear to all. It will also be recognised that her way in holiness is very much a Roman Catholic way; within that tradition she responded to the call of God, and dealt with the exigencies of her time and religious context. Others may find some of her story strange for that reason, but the quality of the person cannot be doubted.

Other churches, too, have begun to name their Australian candidates for special sanctity for some time. The Anglican Church of Australia produced a calendar of saints of its own with An Australian Prayer Book in 1978. It ventures to include a number of Anglicans of the modern era, mostly connected with English church history (John Keble, William Wilberforce, Bishops Selwyn and Paterson, Elizabeth Fry, Charles Simeon, and Josephine Butler), as well as several of their counterparts from other churches. The first Anglican service of worship on Australian soil is commemorated. Its successor, A Prayer Book for Australia, takes bolder steps, and adds the names of bishops, religious, and social reformers from across the states, in the Pacific and in Asia and beyond, from different Christian traditions, and a much more representative list of gender, culture and century is secured.

As I have said, the Uniting Church introduced, in 1988, for the first time in any of its constituent traditions, a modest calendar of saints. Having formed itself into a national church with tenuous connections with its relevant world communions, the Uniting Church looks to Australian roots, and the new calendar reflects this. The British missionaries in Australasia and the South Pacific now hold a firm place, though more care needs to be taken to include their wives, and single women teachers and missionaries who frequently died in post. A growing group are those who served among Indigenous peoples: James Love, a Presbyterian minister, and
Alan Mungulu, an elder, at Mowanjum, near Derby in the Western Kimberley both appear in 2005, as do Diane Buchanan and Christian Kilham, Bible translators on Ngayawili (Elcho island), and a martyr, Leonard Kentish, a Methodist Chairman of District whom the Japanese beheaded in the Aru islands (now part of Indonesia). John Flynn and his successor Fred MacKay gained fame for their work with the Australian Inland Mission (Flynn founding the, now Royal, Flying Doctor Service), and Alan Walker, a Methodist, is remembered for his Mission to the Nation in the 1950s, and his founding of the telephone crisis counselling service, Lifeline, from his base in Sydney. Charles Harris, chair of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, and a long-time campaigner for aboriginal rights, Lazarus Lamilami, the first Aborigine to be ordained a Methodist minister, and a ‘petite…quietly spoken and unassuming’ nurse, [but with] a fierce determination, ordained in 1991, named Liyapidiny [family name, Marika] represent the Indigenous ministry of Uniting Churches. As these are named, possible further names and categories begin to be revealed, and one hopes the Uniting Church will continue to find them and tell their stories.30

Of course, Roman Catholic saints are not only made by the formal processes of the Vatican. The vox populi has its place, and many a Christian became a saint through people who knew them in places beyond which their fame barely passed. This is how the commemoration of saints began, at graves in the local cemetery, in the catacombs on the edge of town. When a name from the provinces reached Rome, Rome ratified the local election. Such a pressure still operates today, as in the cases of Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Pope John Paul II. Uniting Church synods and presbyteries are ‘encouraged to add to this calendar the names of significant Christians and of important events’ for their commemoration, though it must be said that the main purpose to be discerned in Uniting in Worship seems to be education – though the Church has published almost nothing to educate their members about the names listed in the ‘other commemorations’.31 Such holy people deserve more than a Sunday School history lesson.

So alongside Mary MacKillop may be placed the names of many other Australian Christians who in their own way have served Christ, and in whose lives the light of the Risen Jesus is seen to shine. At the canonization of Mary as Australia’s first Roman Catholic saint, I hope there will be rejoicing among all of Australia’s Christians. As Eduard Schweizer somewhere once wrote, ‘in the Church, there is no superiority or inferiority, but only joy in one another’s gifts’. Such common joy is also a way to unity in Christ.
Sydney: The Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2005). (Hereinafter referred to as UiW-2.)

A good summary may be found at ‘Saints, Cult of the’, the article by Andrew Cameron-Mowat in Paul Bradshaw, The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship, (London: SCM Press, 2002), 418. The concluding bibliography directs the reader to more substantial studies.


See my essay ‘Saints under the Southern Cross’ in Stephen Burns and Anita Munro, Christian Worship in Australia, Inculturating the Liturgical Tradition, (Strathfield NSW: St Paul’s, 2009), 91-105.

In this essay I will continue to use a word I seriously dislike: ‘Protestant’. It is mired in the 16th century and is a word which carries prejudice on both sides. If there is still a protest (and I think there is), it is different from the one that Luther, Calvin and their colleagues made. Nor can I use the word ‘Catholic’ without the descriptor ‘Roman’ when referring to what my friends there call the Catholic Church; nor can one rightly use the term ‘non-Catholic’: as someone once remarked, ‘the opposite of Catholic is not Protestant, but heretic’. Anglicans have long followed this usage; other churches of the Reform have not understood that they, too, must claim to be catholic or else abandon credal Christianity. It is difficult to find another nomenclature in this context, but I wish there were.


Ibid., III, xx, 19

Ibid., III, xx, 21

Ibid., III, xx, 21, quoting Ambrose, On Isaac or the Soul [viii, 75], 879, fn 34.

John Wesley, Works, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: reprint of 1872 edition), VIII, 300

A fine analysis of the roots of Wesley’s doctrine, its failure to be sustained, and possibilities for present Methodist theology may be read in William Abraham’s chapter (34), ‘Christian Perfection’ in William Abraham and James Kirby, The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 587f. The connections with Pentecostalism, through the ‘Holiness’ branch of Methodism may be found in the same volume at chapter 10, Donald Dayton, ‘Methodism and Pentecostalism’, 170f.


The successive Headmasters of The Leys (Methodist) School in Cambridge claims to be the guardian of a set of rosary beads belong to the old saint. However unlikely, it is not impossible…

I mean the removal of admiring and sentimental readings of Wesley’s life based on the 19th century editions of his letters and works. One of the most informed attempts is Richard Heitzenrater, The Elusive Mr Wesley, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985). Professor Heitzenrater, for instance, deciphered Wesley’s personal journals, which had been written in Wesley’s own form of shorthand.


On the whole, the Eastern Churches do not define their theology so precisely. They live more happily with mystery.

‘Angels’, I am told, are on the rise in America.

After some decades of dialogue, the Eastern and the Oriental Orthodox families agreed to a Christological Statement which resolved their differences. See an extract of the 1970 statement in Michael Kinnamon and Brian Cope (eds), The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices, (Geneva: WCC Publications/ Eerdmans, 1997) 147.
The equivalent Presbyterian book even had a further verse: ‘Who, on Christ’s dear mother gazing,/ Pierced by anguish so amazing,/ Born of woman, would not weep?’, but I suspect it was also deeply neglected in the kirk. *The Scottish Psalter 1929 with The Church Hymnary, Revised Edition*, (London: Oxford University Press), 99.


I am told that the more elaborate stone which now marks the grave was donated by a friend of Mary’s who was a Presbyterian; she must have been a good example of the ecumenical spirit.

The visitor to Wesley’s Chapel and house in City Road, London, will be struck by the number of Methodist ministers who managed to be buried near John Wesley’s grave in the garden.


*Crosslight*, the journal of the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, (Melbourne: March 2010) No. 197, p. 15. The writer was the Rev. Dr John Bodycomb.


For more detail on these, see my article in footnote 1.

An exception is *With Love to the World*, a widely used commentary on daily bible readings, produced by a committee of people from the Uniting Churches in the Strathfield area and from United Theological College in Sydney, which has published a number of brief accounts of names in the calendar.

**Bio**

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