

# Celebrating Our Founders

## Mary Aikenhead - Sisters of Charity

Mary Aikenhead/Mother Mary Frances Aikenhead (19 January 1787 – 22 July 1858) was born in Cork, Ireland. Mary's commitment to the poor, sick, and needy was pivotal in founding a religious women's Institute, the Sisters of Charity.

Mary sought permission from Rome to have a fourth vow – Service to the Poor. This would enable the sisters to visit poor people in their homes, ministering to those who were sick and hungry, cold and penniless, and with no one to whom to turn. Mary & her Sisters were the first women religious to visit prisoners in jail. In 1830, she established the first school for poor children in Dublin. In 1834, against all odds, she founded the first St Vincent's Hospital in Dublin, the first to be run by women religious, to care for people of all creeds, and where doctors and nurses could be trained. In 1838, Mary sent five sisters to Australia, the first religious women to set foot in this country. She is described as one of nursing's greatest leaders.

In 1831, overexertion and disease impacted Aikenhead's health, leaving her an invalid. Her activity was unceasing; however, she directed her sisters in their heroic work during the plague of 1832, placing them in charge of new institutions and sending them on missions to France and, in 1835, to Australia.



## Mary MacKillop - Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart

Mary MacKillop (15 Jan 1842 – 8 August 1909): Born in Melbourne to Scottish Parents, Mary was the eldest of eight children. She was an earnest child who always strived to help those in need. Mary and her brother John supported their mother and five siblings. Their father lacked good business sense, and his unpredictable behaviour led to conflicts in the family. Working as a governess for extended members of her family, at the age of 18, Mary was in Penola, SA, where she met Fr Julian Tenison Woods.

At the age of 24, she dedicated her life to God as a religious sister and took the name “Mary of the Cross.” In due course, she co-founded (with Fr Julian Tenison Woods) the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart. During her time as a religious sister and founder, she faced many trials and tribulations, many of which had to do with the clergy of the time.

Mary always responded to the needs of the time. The new religious order she co-founded was made up of ordinary women, many from poor backgrounds themselves. They now went out to the schools founded especially for poor children, visiting people in their homes, hospitals, jails, or Destitute Asylums. She died in North Sydney on 8 August 1909.

She was canonized on 17 October 2024 and was the first Australian to be recognised as a saint in the Australian Catholic Church. Her feast day is on August 8.



## Catherine McAuley - Sisters of Mercy

Catherine McAuley: (29 Sept 1778 – 11 Nov 1841) Founder of the Sisters of Mercy, in Ireland 1831. She desired to establish a House of Mercy. Catherine inherited a considerable fortune from her parents. She chose to use it to build a house where she and other compassionate women could take in homeless women and children to provide care and education for them.

On the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, 24 September 1827, the new institution for destitute women, orphans, and a school for the poor was opened, and Catherine McAuley, with two companions, undertook its management.

Catherine and her companions were true social reformers, challenging the system that kept people in chronic poverty. Catherine wished to remain a laywoman serving the community; however, at the Bishop's request, she became a religious sister to continue carrying out her mission.



## Mary Potter - Little Company of Mary

Mary Potter (22 Nov 1847 – 9 April 1913) was born in London and raised during a complex time of struggle and transition, the Industrial Revolution. Many family tensions existed: a strict, overbearing mother and a father with poor business sense. She was the youngest of five children and an only daughter. In 1850, her father left the family for Australia and never returned.

Mary Potter entered the Sisters of Mercy – however, having suffered from ill health from an early age, she was sent home as she nearly died. Mary realised how important it was to be with and pray for those sick and dying. She was called by God to found the order of the Little Company of Mary in 1877 - an order founded to pray and care for the sick and dying of the world, now an international Congregation.

Mary wanted a religious group of women to be active and contemplative, with the Spirit of Mary's Maternal Heart, being for others as Mary was for her Son, Jesus, on the Cross at Calvary.

As well as the Sisters of the Little Company of Mary, Mary Potter also spoke of the Greater Company of Mary, Affiliates, and Associates called to join the Sisters in daily prayer for the dying, those dying physically, psychologically, and spiritually throughout our world.





## Bridget Clancy - Sisters of St John of God

Bridget Clancy 1871 Co-founded the Sisters of St John of God with Bishop Furlong of Wexford, Ireland. The bishop wanted a congregation of sisters to teach, nurse, and visit the poor in their homes, and Bridget Clancy responded with great passion.

She was a Sister of Bon Secours of Paris, nursing in Wexford. From very small beginnings in those difficult post-famine decades of poverty and deprivation, the congregation of St John of God Sisters began to grow and flourish. New ministries in the care of the sick, education and social work, spiritual formation, and direction brought new challenges.

Bridget Clancy was considered to be “a woman of prayer and vision, of great courage, kindness, and dedication to the sick...” (P. Cornish, *The Sisters of St John of God 1871-1971*). Eight Sisters of St John of God arrived in Perth, WA, in 1895 from Wexford, Ireland, as a response from Bishop Gibney of WA.

Their mission was to minister to the sick and attend to the pastoral needs of the people of his Diocese. In 1907, some sisters went to the remote Kimberley region, where they provided education and healthcare. Over time, the sisters established healthcare services, education, and pastoral care in other areas of Australia, New Zealand, and Pakistan.



## St John of God - Brothers of St John of God

St John of God: He was born in Portugal in 1495 but lived mainly in Granada, Spain, from a young age. He lived in a middle-class family, was the only child, was lovingly nurtured, and was destined for a comfortable life. He took over the family business of marketing garden produce. Things, however, changed dramatically when he was eight years old.

John lived some of his life as a soldier. He changed his heart's direction through his lived experience of this time. He experienced a religious conversion that led him to undertake acts of penance that were seen by many as signs of mental illness – for which he was hospitalised.

This experience moved him compassionately to devote his life to reaching out to those who suffered any need, sickness, or deprivation. He established a hospital in Granada that accepted anyone and everyone regardless of their illness. People responded to St John's work by donating to his hospital.

The Brothers of St John of God is a Catholic religious order founded in 1572. Two lay coworkers founded the order after John of God's death to continue his work and teachings. The Brothers provide care in general hospitals and care for those with intellectual and physical disabilities and health for persons who are affected by poverty, illness, homelessness, disabilities, and unmet basic human needs. He died on 8 March 1550, aged 55. He was canonized on 16 October 1690—his feast day is on 8 March.

