Mary MacKillop Institute for Health Research

Vic Chancellor Professor Greg Crave, Professor Simon Stewart distinguished guests and all here present. It is a delight to be here with you today for the launch of the Mary MacKillop Institute for Health Research. Thank you for honouring Mary MacKillop in the naming of this Institute for Health Research.

A health research institute is not something most people would normally associate with Mary MacKillop – however her pioneering spirit would give full support to this new venture that is being undertaken by the Australian Catholic University. One such definition of a pioneer is someone who opens up new areas of thought, research or development and that is exactly what this Mary MacKillop Institute for Health Research is about: taking a new approach to addressing some of the most pressing health issues being faced by Australians through programmes centred on people, communities and services. Mary MacKillop was a very people oriented person. She encouraged her Sisters to love God in all whether pleasing or displeasing. Her work and mission was at heart about the people in the communities that she and her sisters served – people without opportunity, places where she saw humanity being diminished. I trust and hope that this new Mary MacKillop Institute for Health Research never loses its focus – ‘to protect the future health of those most vulnerable to poor health outcomes’.

I believe that this Institute for Health Research would be very dear to Mary MacKillop’s heart as she was a woman who suffered herself from on-going health issues – the availability of health research may have made a significant difference to her own journey of life. Mary herself depended on the best advice of her time – taking brandy to relieve her dysmenorrhea and bad heads, and taking the advice of a doctor to visit the medicinal baths in Rotorua in order to relieve her severe rheumatism of which she once wrote: I cannot say that the rheumatism is cured, but the symptoms are much better’. Shortly afterwards she suffered a stroke and took up the challenge of learning to write with her left hand. She wrote to Sr Annette in 1903:-My promised letter is late, but the rheumatism in my left hand is the cause, that and the weather, which with its many changes affects me so strangely. An Institute for Health Research such as is being launched here today at ACU may have assisted her in her last years when she described her illness in this ways: It is now seven years since the hand of God was laid so heavily upon me. I am suffering intensely with my nerves – they seem to be getting worse each year. Have you ever had a toothache? The pain throughout my body is similar to a severe toothache.

She was ever aware of the needs of the sick and the elderly encouraging her Sisters to visit the sick children. Hospital visitation was one of her earliest extra-curricular activities. There was a special place in her heart for the elderly sick cared for in the houses of Providence. There are some lovely letters from Sr Elizabeth to Mary MacKillop describing such experiences: Mrs Garen has not been able to leave the bed
this last 14 days. Mrs Cane is just as unchangeable as ever, sometimes pleased and other times in violent tempers with her food and the sisters. We have one woman at the Providence with cancer on the breast’. These few reflections show us how attentive the Sisters were to the people whom they served. May Mary MacKillop Health Institute always be attentive to the needs of the people it serves.

It is my hope that those who undertake research in this Institute draw their inspiration from Mary MacKillop who herself was a researcher. As she travelled through Europe she did not lose the opportunity to investigate other methods of teaching – visiting schools taught by other Religious Congregations and gleaning from them ideas to enhance the Catholic education system she had set up in Australia. Today as you launch the new Institute of Health Research here in her birthplace of Melbourne may you continue to glean the most up to date research. Mary MacKillop may never have written a thesis on a particular subject or obtained a PhD however she did write a rather lengthy and detailed letter to Monsignor Kirby outlining ‘The Necessity of the Institute – the Sisters of St Joseph in Australia’. She like many researchers had observed the growing needs of the Australian continent – she saw children without education, parishes without priests, poverty and isolation among the early settlers. She put forward a very persuasive case as to why it was necessary to form this kind of Religious Life in Australia. She had proved through experiment that this was the style of Religious Life needed for this particular time and place. It was a new model for these times and she reminded those with authority in Rome that the style of Religious Sisterhood required in Australia was different from what was required in Europe. Mary MacKillop convinced them to say yes. May the research that happens in this Institute be as productive as Mary MacKillop’s efforts.

Mary MacKillop had a big vision and a practical arm. May the vision you have for this Institute of Health Research bring about change for those who are most vulnerable, for these people are often those with the most health needs. Like Mary MacKillop may your vision have practical outcomes for the future health needs our nation.

Mary MacKillop

Standing with the vulnerable

Doing the extraordinary

Encouraging the tired and disappointed

Be the source of inspiration for all that happens in this
Mary MacKillop Institute for Health Research.