

# CAROLINE CHISHOLM – PROPHET OF THE LAITY

Framework for Cause for Canonisation – a paper by Clara Geoghegan

---

## Introduction

The following is a synopsis of the key areas which can be used to evaluate the life and work of Caroline Chisholm within a framework of contemporary Catholicism. Caroline achieved tremendous good in her own time with her concern for the welfare of families and individuals. A study of her work and motivation reveals enduring Christian principles which are as relevant to present times as they were to her own. In addition, it can be seen that her own perceptions of a vocational call and the manner in which she responded to it are reflected in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and clearly articulated in the apostolic exhortation of John Paul II, *Christifidelis Laici*.

## Summary of her work

The work of Caroline Chisholm unfolded in Australia and England in the middle decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main focus of her work was to alleviate poverty and the associated moral dangers. Caroline's most pressing and immediate concern was the well being of young unaccompanied women immigrants many of whom found themselves alone on the streets of Sydney. Caroline provided them with accommodation and assistance in obtaining work. Ultimately, however, she saw the encouragement of family life as the solution to the social problems of her time. She dedicated much of her energies to reuniting the families of emancipists and free settlers by obtaining government assistance in the emigration of spouses and children left behind in England. She rallied against the squattocracy for locking up the lands and making the settlement of families on small farms difficult. She opposed 'bachelor stations' – a policy of employing only single men because they attracted lower wages and rations. Caroline Chisholm saw immigration and settlement of families from the desperate poverty of England to the new land of opportunity in Australia as a solution to the economic problems of both overcrowded England and the shortages of labour in the Australian colonies. She returned to England for a few years and established the Family Colonisation Loan Society to facilitate the emigration of intact families.

## A Prophet

Caroline Chisholm was a prophetic voice in colonial Australia. Her concerns in the 1840s-1860s are issues that still concern church and society today, not only in Australia but universally. The principles she identified are as valid today as they were in her own time. These principles are echoed in the social justice teachings of *Rerum Novarum* (1891). Hers was a prophetic voice in her ability to understand and articulate an enduring Christian vision in a colonial society that was facing new and radical challenges. Much of her life and work embodied a view of the lay vocation which the Church did not articulate until a century after her death.

## **Discerning God's Will**

From a young age Caroline Chisholm was aware of a call to serve others. When Archibald Chisholm proposed marriage she initially refused him for fear that her call would make her an unsuitable wife for an officer and an inadequate mother. She was ever ready to respond to the needs of those around her, from visiting the elderly in her village in the north of England, to establishing a school for the daughters of poor soldiers in Madras. When faced with the situation of desperate young women in Sydney, she prayed and fasted in order to discern God's will for her:

I was impressed with the idea that God had, in a peculiar manner, fitted me for this work; and yet I hesitated . . . my delay pressed on my mind as a sin; and when I heard of a poor girl suffering distress and losing her reputation in consequence, I felt that I was not clear of her sin, for I did not do all I could to prevent it.

During the season of Lent that year, I suffered much; but on Easter Sunday I was enabled, at the altar of our Lord to make an offering of my talents to the God who gave them . . . .

. . . I felt my offering was accepted and God's blessing was on my work.<sup>1</sup>

The Caroline Chisholm story is relatively well known in Australia, but it is a secularised interpretation. Her religious motivation which she publicly acknowledged is omitted or caricatured and ridiculed as in Anne Summer's description of women in colonial Australia as being considered either 'damned whores' or 'God's police' the latter term specifically applied to Caroline Chisholm.<sup>2</sup> Caroline never used derogatory language to describe the women she assisted nor was she condescending towards them but always treated them with respect and understanding. She clearly understood the human condition and the doctrine of Redemption.

## **The Good Samaritan**

Caroline recounts the story of Flora, a young woman whom she had previously warned about a relationship with a man whom Caroline knew to be married. One evening, some months later Caroline again encounters Flora:

. . . the ruddy rose of the highlands was changed for the tinge of rum; she had been drinking but well knew what she was about. 'Tell me where you are going?' 'To hell!' was her answer. I continued to walk by her side; she became insolent; but I was determined not to leave her. She made for Lavender's Ferry; and said, 'My mistress lives over there'. I said I will go to the other side with you, as I want to say a few words with you. She was unwilling; but I persisted; we crossed over; I felt certain from her manner that she meditated suicide . . . .<sup>3</sup>

Caroline's suspicions were confirmed. Flora was pregnant and intended to drown herself. She remained with the Flora until she regained her composure and promised

not to attempt self-destruction. Caroline Chisholm, reassured of Flora's psychological state, made immediate arrangements to find her suitable accommodation.

The story recalls the parable of the Good Samaritan, recounted in the Gospel of Luke. The Good Samaritan also tends to the needs of the man beaten by robbers and pays for his care at an inn. Jesus concludes his parable by asking, 'which of these proved himself a neighbour?' (Lk. 10: 37) This parable in Luke follows and reinforces Jesus' Great Commandment to 'love your neighbour as yourself. It is precisely this love of neighbour that recurs as a theme in Caroline Chisholm's life. Herminie Chavanne, a young Swiss woman records her meeting with Caroline Chisholm and sums her up with:

Kindness shone from her face, with never a hint of weariness and it was obvious that God had granted her all the courage and energy she needed for this living work for her 'neighbour' (this simple and profound word says so much that I need say nothing more.)<sup>4</sup>

Caroline's own understanding of neighbour extended beyond those of her own faith and culture to all humanity.

### ***Rerum Novarum***

Caroline Chisholm respected the human dignity of all she served and she understood well that human dignity was most easily respected in a society built on principles of justice. She did not limit her concern to the individuals and families she assisted but lobbied government and society to create structures which respected the dignity of the human person. Her concerns with social justice issues such as a family wage; private ownership of family farms; freedom to migrate; were yet to be articulated by the Catholic Church. Her main work unfolded in the 1840s and 1850s. The encyclical *Rerum Novarum* which marks the beginning of the Church's social justice teaching for the Modern Age, and deals with such issues, was written by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, fourteen years after Caroline's death.

### **The Mission of the Laity**

Similarly, Caroline Chisholm's work echoes in the teachings of the Church on the laity as described by the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II recognised the laity's 'special and indispensable role in the mission of the Church' and, noting the new challenges facing the Church, called forward an 'infinitely broader and more intense' apostolate.<sup>5</sup> The document on the laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* listed areas of lay activity including: the renewal of the temporal order, charitable works and social aid, the family – all areas which had concerned Caroline Chisholm more than an century earlier.

In 1987 Synod of Bishops met to discuss the 'Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World, Twenty Years after the Second Vatican Council'. The Holy

Father's post-synod Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, expands on the concerns of the *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. *Christifideles Laici* sets out areas in particular need of the attention of the laity:

1. Promoting the dignity of the human person (37)
2. Fostering respect for Life (38)
3. Supporting religious liberty (39)
4. Assisting marriage and family life (40)
5. Carrying out works of charity (41)
6. Serving in public life (42)
7. Promoting social and economic justice (43)
8. Engaging in the evangelisation of culture (44)

It is unlikely that the Holy Father expects an individual to engage in all these areas, yet Caroline Chisholm's work did engage them all. If engagement in these areas constitutes a legitimate living out of the lay vocation and therefore a path to holiness, Caroline Chisholm's life fulfils this call in abundance.

### **Marriage as a Path to Holiness – Saints Caroline and Archibald?**

Caroline Chisholm did not travel her path to holiness alone. While she was aware of a call to serve others before her marriage to Archibald and had reservations about how this call might affect marriage and family life, Archibald reassured Caroline that in marrying her he would also support her work in whatever manner he was able.

It was through marriage to Archibald Chisholm that Caroline Jones, an evangelical Protestant, converted to Catholicism.

Caroline undertook her early work with the single women of Sydney while Archibald was in China on active duty with the East India Company. Caroline was also responsible for the care of three young children. On Captain Chisholm's return to Sydney he accompanied her on a tour of NSW collecting testimonies from happily settled immigrants with the purpose of taking these to England to encourage further immigration to Australia. A fourth child was born on board ship as they returned to England. It was a difficult birth and almost caused the death of mother and child. Another two children were born in England. In England they established the Family Colonisation Loan Society, which brought together prospective immigrants, arranged loans, and acquainted them with information regarding their endeavours. Meetings of migrant families took place in the Chisholm family home with the assistance of Caroline's mother and their eldest son. The Society chartered ships which were fitted out to Caroline's specification. Unable to afford to pay an Australian agent, Archibald undertook to return to Australia to meet the ships of the Society. The family were reunited three years later and settled in Kyneton in Victoria. By this time the gold rush

was underway and Caroline undertook the construction of shelter sheds along the road from Melbourne to the Mount Alexander goldfields. These were rudimentary buildings which provided shelter and cooking facilities for women and children travelling to join their husbands on the goldfields.

In addition to any government grants, the Chisholms used their own personal means to assist their work. Caroline's work could only have been successful with a supportive husband.

## **Conclusion**

This document is merely the beginning of a possible exploration of Caroline Chisholm's life of 'heroic virtue'. Further study of her life and works would enable these to be developed further and perhaps a clearer vision of her sanctity will emerge.

---

<sup>1</sup> Caroline Chisholm, *Female Immigration Considered in a Brief Account of the Sydney Immigrants Home* (London, 1842), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Chisholm, *Female Immigration Considered in a Brief Account of the Sydney Immigrants Home* (London, 1842), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Herminie Chavanne, *Une Jeune Suisse en Australie*, (Geneva, 1852), 164.

<sup>5</sup> *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 1.