

# Friends of Caroline Chisholm

## NEWSLETTER

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Our lead article reports on the well-advanced plans to celebrate the Caroline Chisholm Society's Golden Jubilee and fund-raising for its on-going work and the art quilt and history projects. The Society, a non-political and non-denominational charity, is the longest continuing organisation that is named after Caroline Chisholm. The name was chosen because of the inspiration she provides for their valuable work. It was not chosen on the prompting of Caroline Chisholm's descendants or any group she set up in her lifetime.

As this Newsletter has noted before, Mrs Chisholm has had many admirers since her death, as she had in life, though the hoped-for Cause has yet to commence. And why is this so?

Clara Geoghegan's article explains some of the likely reasons. Historically, Mrs Chisholm was a puzzle to Archbishop Polding during the Colonial period, being "a married laywoman exercising an active social ministry independently of episcopal authority". Her social ministry was "a prototype of the lay apostolate" propounded at Vatican II and as path-blazing as the social justice approaches of Ozanam and von Kettler, her illustrious contemporaries. The Council also taught about the universal call to holiness, encompassing all members of the Church. Caroline Chisholm, we believe, heroically lived that call.

How is it then that she still seems "beyond the understanding of our Catholic hierarchy"?

### Golden Jubilee in 2019

The Caroline Chisholm Society began its pregnancy and family support service in 1969. It went on to incorporate in the early 1970s, but 2019 is its Golden Jubilee year of foundation. A group of volunteers, including a doctor, met in response to a very real need in the community, and this led to the Society's foundation in Box Hill.

Its original and strong focus was delivering material aid to expectant mothers and providing pregnancy counselling services. Maintaining that focus, the Society also began, in 1979, effective in-home family support. Now, almost a half century later, the Society offers support from the moment a woman learns of her pregnancy to the time her youngest child goes to school.

As part of the Golden Jubilee celebrations in 2019, the Society is planning a special fund-raiser for support of pregnant and new mothers and their babies and toddlers. The Society will continue the innovation of its first 50 years into the next 50, when most (or all) of those reading this account will have passed on.



## Caroline Chisholm Society

#### *What the Society does*

We help women and their families to achieve a safe and nurturing environment for their children. We assist with new and preloved baby and maternity goods, welfare support and counselling, homelessness support, and in-home family support. The families we work with typically lack wider social and family supports, and they are very grateful for the Society's practical, emotional and financial support.

At three sites in Victoria, the Society has each year about 1,000 appointments and home visits for approximately 250 families. We know the top issues facing mothers, babies and toddlers - after pregnancy and parenting - are associated with poverty or financial crisis.

## Golden Jubilee in 2019 (cont.)

Financial issues are particularly prevalent for those clients presenting at the appointments program, many of whom face challenges associated with being a migrant or refugee. The critical issues facing clients we home visit are related to mental health, homelessness, family violence and isolation.

The Society's three locations are: Essendon, in the Moonee Valley, which for many years has been a diverse and challenging socio-economic area; and close by, Caroline Springs, Melbourne's far-western suburb with a city the size of Canberra; and Shepparton, where many of the challenges of a rural life are present and the Society has been a part of the community since the early 1970s.

### *The link to Mrs Chisholm*

The Society's members feel that they act in the spirit of its nineteenth century namesake, Caroline Chisholm. They are inspired by her concern with the immense disadvantages and pressures facing women and families at that time. She provided practical assistance with accommodation, work and protection - as well as politically agitating on behalf of women and their children. The Caroline Chisholm Society does that today.

If you would like to support the Society continue to do its work in her name, please donate online at [www.caroline.org.au](http://www.caroline.org.au). If you would like your contribution to go towards a history of the Society, please mention that as most donations are used to support clients.

### *A fine art quilt for perpetuity*

Also, as part of the Golden Jubilee, some members and supporters of the Society would like to celebrate Caroline Chisholm - the woman and her work, which was supported by her family. The volunteers have proposed the creation



Volunteering Returns to Moonee Ponds

of a fine art quilt honouring Caroline Chisholm, and discussions have begun with some quilters. The completed quilt would be displayed in a meeting room at the Essendon office and be a gift to, and an asset for, the Society. It is to be unveiled at the planned fundraiser in 2019.

Because the Society must use its funds for the needs of pregnant and new mothers, babies and toddlers, separate financial donations are requested.

If you would like to support the volunteers seeking to recognise Caroline, please phone Helen Cooney, the Society's CEO, on +61 (03) 9361 7000 or email [secretary@caroline.org.au](mailto:secretary@caroline.org.au)

Helen Cooney

The Caroline Chisholm Society has respect for life, is compassionate and caring, values social justice, believes in empowerment of women and families, recognises diversity, and operates accountably according to best practice.

We are inspired by Caroline Chisholm and acknowledge the traditional owners of the land in communities in which we work

### *Footnotes for Recognising Apostolic Sanctity*

<sup>1</sup> Michelet, Jules, *La Femme* (Paris, 1862), page 468.

<sup>2</sup> *Hierarchy and Democracy in Australia, 1788-1870: the Formation of Australian Catholicism* (Melbourne, 1965), page 11.

<sup>3</sup> *The Bulletin*, issue of May 21, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> *Female Immigration Considered* (Sydney, 1842), reproduced in *Unfeigned Love* (Sydney, 2008), page 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Westminster Review* (London 1852), page 399.

<sup>6</sup> *op.cit*, page 49.

## Recognising Apostolic Sanctity

Caroline Chisholm died in 1877, but even before her death she was acclaimed 'a saint' by French historian Jules Michelet. Writing in 1862, he claimed:

'Australia has a saint, an English woman without wealth and without assistance who has done more for the new world than all the emigration societies and the British Government together - a simple woman who succeeded in her aims by force of character and vigour of soul.'<sup>1</sup>

Timothy Suttor, in his 1960s book on the formation of Australian Catholicism, mentions that Australia had two saints: Archbishop Polding and Caroline Chisholm.<sup>2</sup>

James McAuley, the Australian poet, reviewed Suttor's book in *The Bulletin* in 1966 and kick-started the movement to recognise her sanctity. McAuley wrote:

'My heroine is Caroline Chisholm, the greatest Catholic Australian in our history motivated by Christian charity and seeing all things in the light of Christian theology, she was at the same time wholly above and beyond sectarianism and sectional advantage. Neither in the ghetto, nor obsessed with being outside the ghetto; with her eye fixed on the real issues, with real love in her heart... It is she who ought to be the first Australian saint - even before Mother Mary MacKillop.'<sup>3</sup>

Caroline Chisholm's work has often been regarded in the context of nineteenth century female philanthropy. It was not uncommon for middle-class women, many with an evangelical religious background, to devote their energies to welfare and social reform.

What is significant is Caroline's own self-understanding of her work as stemming from what she perceived to be a call from God and the extent to which she sacrificed her own resources to this end. From her early twenties she had a firm conviction that she was being called to give herself totally to work for the welfare of others - a fact she made abundantly clear to Lieutenant Archibald Chisholm when he proposed marriage. She feared that as a consequence she might not be a good wife and mother so, before consenting to the marriage

she refused to see him for one month so that he might consider the implications of her call. If Archibald wanted to marry her, he had to marry God's vocation for her as well. He accepted the test of a month's separation and they were married.

Lieutenant Chisholm's first posting was to Madras, where Caroline established a school for the daughters of poor soldiers whose education and moral formation was often neglected. In 1838 Archibald suffered ill-health and they chose Australia for his convalescence.

Soon after arriving in Sydney, Caroline was struck by the plight of young single women in the colony, particularly the moral dangers they faced, and began to assist individual cases. She felt she needed to awaken the conscience of the colony to their plight but received little support. The desperate situation of these women weighed heavily on Caroline's conscience and it soon became clear she had to go it alone. Caroline herself explained the agony she suffered and the way in which God was speaking to her in these circumstances:

'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 promised to know neither country nor creed, but to try and serve all justly and impartially. I asked only to be enabled to keep these poor girls from being tempted, by their need, to mortal sin; and resolved that to accomplish this, I would in every way sacrifice my feelings - surrender all comfort - nor in fact consider my own wishes or feelings, but wholly devote myself to the work in hand.'

## Recognising Apostolic Sanctity (cont.)

'I felt my offering was accepted and God's blessing was on my work.'<sup>4</sup>

These are Caroline's words, but their validity needs to be measured by the recognition of her sanctity by others - in her own time and since. Again, this is not a difficult task. In her own lifetime the *Westminster Review* declared that she had done more for the regeneration of the Australian colonies than all the Churches 'and the five Australian Bishops to boot'.<sup>5</sup>

Her work is recognised across the country. Hers was the face on the original five-dollar note. There are numerous Catholic schools which bear her name. She is celebrated by the Caroline Chisholm Society which works with pregnant women and mothers. Her name is given to the offices of the Diocese of Broken Bay, a women's refuge. A number of churches commemorate her in stained glass windows - St Ignatius' Richmond (Vic); St Mary's Hamilton (Vic); St Mary's Crookwell (NSW) and in Mosaics - St Peter's and Paul's Old Cathedral Goulburn (NSW). And the Caroline Chisholm Centre is Centrelink Headquarters in Tuggeranong, ACT.

If 'renown for sanctity' is a criterion for canonisation, and her renown is evident across the country, why is her cause not proceeding?

As Timothy Suttor wrote:

'Polding ... completely failed to grasp her importance; his country was ready for a lay and social apostolate conducted by women as Mrs Chisholm proved. But he had no language with which to take possession of such a concept... Hers was an apostolic sanctity beyond the range of vision, not of Polding alone, but of most of her contemporaries except a few distinguished Protestants like Shaftesbury, Dickens, Florence Nightingale and also Pius IX.'<sup>6</sup>

Here Suttor identified some of the aspects of the Caroline Chisholm story which universalise it in terms of contemporary relevance to the church. However, he recognises that Caroline's 'apostolic sanctity' was beyond the vision of her catholic contemporaries. 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.

Polding had no concept of a married laywoman exercising an active social ministry independently of episcopal authority. Caroline Chisholm's work was concurrent with the work of Frederick Ozanam in France and Wilhelm Emmanuel von Kettler in Germany, but where they both identified themselves within the catholic milieu and consciously sought to shape an emerging theory of social justice within the church, Caroline Chisholm did not attempt a broader social theory nor did she seek to situate her work within the institutional church. Hers was a 'practical genius' which responded to concrete situations of need as they presented themselves. Her concerns diversified as the needs of those around her changed. The absence of a social theory can be attributed to her lack of education when compared to Ozanam and Kettler, and her practical approach can possibly be attributed to her evangelical protestant background. She did not require the approval of bishops or clerics to endorse or justify her vocation.

Caroline Chisholm's life can be seen as a prototype of the lay apostolate which was not fully enunciated until Vatican II - largely due to the theology of French Dominican Yves Congar, developed in the 1950s. In many ways her 'apostolic sanctity' personifies the model of catholic laity articulated by the documents of Vatican II which speak of lay people as the experts in bringing Christianity to bear upon contemporary social political and economic structures. This approach continues to appeal to Catholic women but it can be argued that the hierarchical church is still struggling to comprehend its significance.

Caroline Chisholm, too, appears beyond the understanding of our Catholic hierarchy.

Clara Geoghegan