

Friends of Caroline Chisholm

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The Vocation of the Laity is Essential to the Mission of the Church

Clara Geoghegan

Pope John Paul II developed the role of the laity in the post-synodal exhortation *Christifidelis Laici*.¹ He identified the following areas as means of living the lay vocation (they are not exhaustive).

Promoting the dignity of the human person (37)

Fostering respect for Life (38)

Supporting religious liberty (39)

Assisting marriage and family life (40)

Carrying out works of charity (41)

Serving in public life (42)

Promoting social and economic justice (43)

Engaging in the evangelisation of culture (44)

Reflection Points

How do these areas of lay activity appeal to you?

How can you respond from the concrete reality of your life?

You might consider these questions in the light of the following ways in which Caroline Chisholm's life embodied each of these callings. There are many others.

1. Promoting the dignity of the human person

Caroline was concerned with the treatment of immigrant women upon their arrival in the colony. She campaigned to establish the Home for Immigrant Women. She also campaigned against the practice of on board recruitment of servants that often resulted in vulnerable unaccompanied girls and young women being recruited for brothels or for the sexual dalliance of wealthy men.²

Caroline Chisholm was concerned with the treatment of women on board ship. She successfully sued the captain and surgeon of the *Carthaginian* for the maltreatment of passenger Margaret Bolton.³ She reduced overcrowding on ships chartered by the Family Colonisation Loan Society thereby permitting more privacy for spouses and their families and protection of morals.⁴ This also reduced death and disease on board ship.

Caroline arranged for an expectant single mother's privacy and care during pregnancy.⁵

2. Fostering respect for life

Caroline tells the poignant story of her encounters with Flora. The final episode in this mercy mission, sees Flora single, abandoned and pregnant. Caroline recognised her potential for suicide and thus ending two lives. She organised a safe, private place for her to continue the pregnancy.⁶

3. Supporting religious liberty

From the outset Caroline vowed that she would “know neither country nor creed, but to try and serve all justly and impartially”.⁷ This vow on Caroline’s part caused much mistrust amongst clergy who suspected this as a ruse for proselytism. Bishop Brougham also suspected her motives. Presbyterian Rev John Dunmore Lang accused her of being a ‘female Jesuit’. Caroline defended herself against these charges.⁸

Caroline recognised the right to freedom of religion and ensured that the religious needs of all her charges were met. The school at the Female Immigrants’ Home in Bent Street had a Scottish teacher who taught religious education to Presbyterians and Church of Scotland children and organised Fr Murphy for the Catholics and Rev Allwood for the Anglicans. After returning to England and establishing the Family Colonization Loan Society (FCLS) she ensured ministers for the three main Christian denominations on board FCLS emigrant ships and also ensured that special dietary and religious arrangements be made for Jewish girls.⁹

Vatican II articulated the freedom of religion in the document *Dignitatis Humanae*, in 1965, over a century after Caroline lived out those very principles.

4. Assisting marriage and family life

Caroline believed that intact families were the best safeguard against the exploitation on young women. She placed all her charges with families. She lobbied against the separation of families and against the practice of ‘bachelor’ stations where landowners employed single men in favour of married men because they attracted lesser rations. She lobbied for the reunification of families of emancipists and bounty passengers. Bounty passengers were only assisted to migrate with two children which meant other children were left behind in England or Ireland. Caroline Chisholm lobbied for these families to be reunited.¹⁰

Returning to England, Caroline founded the Family Colonization Loan Society aimed at keeping families together. The underlying objective was to allow families, including extended families, to emigrate together, to remain united, and to reunite families separated by past practices such as transportation, Bounty and Government systems of supported emigration. The FCLS met in the Chisholm home. Sir Sidney Hubert often attended these meetings as did Lord Shaftesbury who was on the committee.¹¹

5. Carrying out works of charity

It may be fair to say that Caroline Chisholm spent her entire life carrying out works of charity. If she was interested in the ‘big plan’ it was because she was interested in little people.

Before opening the Home, Caroline opened her own house to many young women in need of accommodation both while Archibald was with her and after he left for China. There are a number of stories about her that stand out as her walking the extra mile to assist those in need. On one occasion she was asked to assist in rescuing a young girl from a would-be seducer. At the end of a long working day welcoming new arrivals, she set out in the dark by boat on the harbour to rescue her. This could have taken three hours or more.¹²

She spent many hours reconciling a judgemental brother with his sister and ensuring his support for her to travel and thus to marry the father of her child. It would have required many hours for discussions with the brother in the Home and in the young mother's house, necessitating the walking to and from the other end of town in the rain and darkness, again at the end of a long working day especially as Caroline rose before the sun.¹³

The Chisholm family did not spare themselves in their personal and financial commitment to assisting others, and were often reduced to dire financial straights on account of their charitable works.

6. Serving in public life

In many ways, Caroline Chisholm lived her life in the public domain. In an essay, *The Development of Modern Catholic Political Theology*, Timothy Suttor in comparing her to Irish patriot Daniel O'Connell claims that 'Caroline Chisholm . . . appears perhaps the profounder thinker, with her careful integration of natural and supernatural in her motives and goals, and her trenchant insistence that Christian Democracy means the active participation of women in public life and debate.'¹⁴ Certainly she never held back her involvement when she believed a course of action ought be taken.

As a young woman in India she established the School of Industry in Madras.¹⁵ Upon arrival in Australia she lobbied the Governor's wife and the Governor, as well as Colonial leaders and officials in New South Wales both in personal meetings but also through the media by writing letters and contributing to news reports in newspapers.¹⁶ In England she lobbied British officials, and was one of the first women to appear before a Parliamentary committee and engaging in public debate including a public letter to Earl Grey.¹⁷ She also lectured in the United Kingdom and Ireland on the benefits and forms of emigration for those of limited financial means or with poor opportunities.¹⁸ She operated an information centre for intending emigrants out of her home in London and answered large volumes of mail on the immigration and family reunion requests from those in Australia or in the home countries.

Returning to Sydney she gave a number of lectures on social issues such as access to affordable farm and for families, shop hours, and even opposed the moves to restrict Chinese immigration.¹⁹ She certainly alluded to support of female suffrage.²⁰

7. Promoting social and economic justice

Caroline Chisholm had a comprehensive political and economic perspective. She supported fair wages, fair employment, and ownership of family farms. As Suttor noted, "she had immense organisational ability ... a talent for accurate statistical generalisation, an eye for the moral bearing of economic factors " and she was eminently practical.

Caroline Chisholm supported access to land ownership for all, not just the wealthy and well connected. She agitated for this in 1840s.²¹ She revisited the issue in the 1860s.²² She advocated for the unemployed in depressed economy, using statistical data and demonstrating considerable research skills.²³ She advocated fair living wages for employees and their dependant families and suitable accommodation and related support for them. In her own work of finding employment for immigrants she insisted on contracts - in triplicate - to ensure the workers who were placed by her would receive good treatment. The contracts also stipulated a just wage.²⁴ She established depots for migrants in country areas to ensure that adequate regional arrangements were made until new arrivals found work.²⁵ She was prepared to implement innovative projects such as a co-operative farming project at Shellharbour, ensuring the successful settlement of families who might otherwise not have been able to make it on their own.²⁶ Through the FCLS she was able to provide loans for family emigration thus avoiding usurious rates.

8. Engaging in the evangelisation of culture

An important aspect of 'evangelising the culture' is to ensure that the social and political structures of that society enable genuine human flourishing. This was the very essence of Caroline's work. She was moved to compassion by the plight of individuals, but believed that the lives of many could be improved through promoting social justice and putting in place laws and practices to protect individual endeavour.

The other means of evangelisation is as St Francis puts it: to preach always, if necessary use words. Although she never proselytized, Caroline's living, vibrant faith was unmistakable and her moral convictions were never shielded nor were they used as a debating weapon. Her virtue was transparent, and she explained, in simple, brief but profound words, her Christian motivation and the model of active Christianity which she summed up as the (Good) Samaritan principle. She was a strong believer in God's providence and also in her own role as His instrument which are clearly evident in her tract *Female Immigration Considered*.²⁷ It should be noted that this document was intended for public consumption - she certainly did not hide her faith under a bushel. Similarly she outlines the essential principles and practices of her faith in her response to John Dunmore Lang in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.²⁸

Her respect for the Catholic Church and its clergy and for other Christian denominations and their ministers was never put aside, even when she was personally attacked. There were a number of occasions when clergy she had presumed supportive caused her pain and disappointment, yet she continued on her course.

Footnotes

1. John Paul II, *Christifidelis Laici*, paragraphs 37-42.

2. Caroline Chisholm; *Female Immigration Considered*, as reproduced in Rodney Stinson; *Unfeigned Love*, Sydney: Yorkcross, 2009. 28-31, 34, 59-60. Samuel Sidney put it more plainly: "notorious brothel-keepers regularly visited the emigrant ships". Samuel Sidney; *The Three Colonies of Australia*, as reproduced in Stinson, 108; and Mackenzie reported they were recruited for dalliance (taken from Mrs Chisholm's *Female Immigration Considered*): "They are not required as servants — they are not wanted to work." Eneas MacKenzie, *The Emigrant's Guide to Australia with a Memoir of Mrs. Chisholm*, reproduced in Stinson, 30.

3. Kiddle, 35-8.
4. Mackenzie as reproduced in Stinson, 128.
5. Chisholm, *Female Immigration Considered*, in Stinson 61.
6. *ibid.* 23-25.
7. *ibid.* 22.
8. 'John Dunmore Lang's Sectarian Attack on Mrs Chisholm and Her Response, 1846', in Stinson. 84-96 Stinson reproduces correspondence between Lang and Chisholm from the *Sydney Morning Herald*. *Lang to SMH* 14 March 1846; *Chisholm to SMH*, 20 March 1846; *Lang to SMH*, 23 March 1846.
9. M L Cohen, 'Caroline Chisholm and Jewish Immigration,' *Australian Jewish History Society*, vol.2, 1944.
10. Walker. 78, also 'Caroline Chisholm Returns to Goulburn', *Friends of Caroline Chisholm Newsletter*, Issue 1, tells of Canberra resident Myles Hannan's great-grandmother who travelled to Australia to be reunited with her family in 1848 on the *Sir Edward Parry* by a special emigration scheme known as the Regulation of 6 May 1846, for which Mrs Chisholm had lobbied.
11. Walker, 85ff and Kiddle, 146
12. Chisholm, *Female Immigration Considered*, in Stinson, 48-9.
13. *ibid.* 26-8.
14. Timothy L Suttor, Development of Modern Catholic Political Theology, CCHA Study Sessions, 39(1972), 44-52. http://umanitoba.ca/colleges/st_pauls/ccha/Back%20Issues/CCHA1972/Suttor.html Retrieved 30 August 2011.
15. Mackenzie, in Stinson, 100-5.
16. Chisholm, *Female Immigration Considered*, in Stinson, 76-77.
17. Mackenzie, in Stinson, 138, also Walker, 75ff.
18. Walker, 85ff.
19. Walker, 142-52.
20. Walker, 147 "she warned her audience that if she were given the opportunity to vote in the House of Representatives she would not use her vote against the Chinese."
21. Samuel Sidney; *The Three Colonies of Australia*, reproduced in Stinson, 117-119.
22. Walker, 146.
23. Sidney, in Stinson, 119.
24. Chisholm, *Female Immigration Considered*, in Stinson, 50-2, 72 also Sidney, in Stinson, 112, 117; also Kiddle, 29.
25. Chisholm, *Female Immigration Considered*, in Stinson, 55, 59-61.
26. Kiddle, 49-52.
27. For belief in God's providence see Chisholm, *Female Immigration Considered*, in Stinson, 23, 25, 26, 35, 36, 38, 47, 48, and 49.
28. *Chisholm to SMH*, 20 March 1846, in Stinson, 84-96.

This article is an extract from a new writing project by Clara Geoghegan.

Some Definite Service

John Henry Newman

God has created me to do some definite service. To me has been committed some work which has not been committed to another. I have my mission - I may never know it in this life but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. God has not created me for naught.

I shall do good; I shall do God's work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place while not intending it if I but keep God's commandments.

Therefore I will trust God. Whatever I am, I can never get thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve God; in perplexity, my perplexity may likewise serve. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve.

God does nothing in vain and knows for each of us our joint and several purposes. God may take away my friends, may throw me among strangers, or make me feel desolate and bring my spirits low, hiding the future from me - still God knows all and what will lead us to a heavenly home.

