



Caroline Chisholm a local saint

Caroline Chisholm was born in the early 19th century in Northampton. She is mainly known for her progressive involvement in the welfare of female immigrants in Australia. When the PYD group travelled to Sydney for World Youth Day 2008 they had the opportunity to follow part of her trail. In Australia people asked for her to be nominated as a saint, but the petition has to come from her home diocese (Northampton!). In this resource we'd like to give you an overview of this remarkable woman's life. If you want to use this with a group, you might want to use our discussion starters, or think of some yourself that fit in with the session you are planning.

Before she married, Caroline Chisholm's name was Caroline Jones. She was born in 1808 in Northampton as the youngest child of relatively wealthy farmers. Her father died when Caroline was 6, so she grew up with her mother and 11 siblings. As a young girl Caroline visited sick neighbours and helped her mother giving food to poor people. Caroline was told stories from far away places and she developed a huge passion for migration; she converted a wash basin in her parent's house into the sea and her dolls were emigrants on the way to Australia. At the age of 22 she met Archibald Chisholm and he asked to marry her. Caroline accepted only on the condition that she could continue her charitable work. At that time it was unusual for women to work and most men probably would not have agreed to this. Like Caroline, Archibald was a person who wanted to help others and for the rest of his life he worked alongside Caroline. She was born a protestant but converted to Catholicism at her wedding, which was unusual and a difficult step at a time when anti-Catholicism was common. Caroline was inspired by her faith and felt a strong calling from God to help others.

Her husband was a captain in the army and was sent to India shortly after they got married. Caroline followed him and as an officer's wife she enjoyed a lifestyle of luxury, but was shocked by the poverty that surrounded her. When she realized that some of the children begging for food and sleeping in doorways were children of British soldiers, she set up a school for children of European soldiers. A few years later the family (now with 2 children) sailed from India to Australia. The journey took 7 months and gave Caroline a first lesson in how appalling the situation on immigrant ships was at the time. When they got to Sydney they settled at a place outside Sydney, where Archibald was recovering from health problems.

A few years before, the English government had established a migration programme to Australia. Most emigrants were male convicts; but the government also emptied slums, orphanages and asylums to send people to Australia. Ship owners spotted an opportunity to make huge profits and packed as many immigrants as possible on their ships. Sydney was a relatively small town at the time, and when immigrants disembarked there was simply a lack of services and places to go. In some years as many as 20.000 people arrived in Sydney.

Caroline often went for walks by the harbour and was devastated by what she saw. She was mainly concerned about young immigrant girls. Most had come to Australia seeking a better life but had found themselves with no job, no food, living in shocking conditions and a number of them turned to prostitution. Caroline thought it was God's plan for her to start a house to look after the girls. When asking Sydney's Governor for a place he declined her request but eventually gave in and let her use some old barracks. Caroline worked hard to clean the barracks and when they were finished she went to the harbour and met immigrants as they disembarked the ships. In the first

year alone 1,400 women stayed in the home and it soon became too small for all the arriving immigrants. When the girls were off the streets the next part of Caroline's mission arrived. She saw potential in the bush farms of Australia, so she organized drays to get the girls to farms to become paid farm maids. With the help of a committee Caroline set up 16 other homes in the area within the next few months. Sydney's governor was still not in favour of Caroline's work; he believed women had no place in public life. Caroline became the first woman to publish a book in Australia and also was the first person to set up work contracts between employers and workers.

After the homes for female immigrants were established Caroline concentrated on settling whole families of immigrants on land of their own. She regarded the permanent settlement of families in the Australian bush as an ideal solution for economic problems and the overpopulation in Great Britain. She negotiated with landowners so that families were given small plots of land which they could pay off over a number of years.

When all that was set up Caroline felt it was necessary to return to England to be able to prepare immigrants for their new lives and to appeal more directly to British charities and politicians. Archibald stayed in Sydney to organize her work from there. With the help of supporters Caroline set up a 'Family Colonization Loan Society'. In 1849 200 families had signed up, enough to charter a vessel that would take the immigrants to Australia. Caroline personally took care of the embarkation and hired doctors to provide care and monitor food supplies during the journey. Two more ships followed. Around the same time Caroline was invited to Rome by Pope Pius IX, he gave her a Papal Medal and bust of herself as recognition of her good deeds. Caroline sold both presents to have more money for her work.

In 1854 Caroline returned to Australia. This time she went to Melbourne. Gold had been found in the area, and tens of thousands of people rushed to the goldfields. The journey from other parts of Australia to the gold fields was long and dangerous, it took many months. Caroline was shocked by the bad conditions on the roads and helped to set up shelters along the way.

During the following years Caroline was too ill to continue her work, the family had very little money and she tried to keep going by giving public lectures and working in a school. In 1865 Archibald and Caroline Chisholm returned to England, where they lived from a small government pension. At the age of 69 Caroline died in London; after she had spent the last years of her life bedridden and poor. The inscription on her grave stone in Northampton reads: 'The Emigrant's Friend'

Discussion Starters

- What impressed you most when reading about Caroline?
- Where do you think she got her motivation from?
- The immigrants coming to Australia often faced bad conditions, how do you think that compares to immigrants coming to the UK today?
- Do you think immigrants still need help by individuals?