



History of the Catholic Women's League

The Catholic Women's League was founded in Brighton in 1906 under the then title League of Catholic Women Workers. It was founded by Margaret Fletcher who was born in Oxford in 1862. She came from an Anglican background, her father being a vicar in Oxford. As an artist, Margaret eventually went on to study art in Paris, so had had a much broader education for a woman living at that time.

Her time in Paris was cut short by the death of her mother. She came back to Oxford to look after her younger siblings and father. Poverty and lack of freedom for many women struck the imagination and sympathy of Margaret and in 1896, aged 34, she came across the writings of St John of the Cross, given to her by a high Anglican. This set her on the path to the Catholic Church. She was received into the Church at Farm Street on 9 September 1897 and received her first Holy Communion the next morning at Southwark Cathedral. Her church in Oxford was St Aloysius and she "felt she had come home".

Her family and friends accepted her decision and she did not suffer petty persecution as so many converts did. She started a magazine called *The Crucible* aimed at arousing the interest of teachers and schools in getting better social education for women and after eight years of publication, this magazine was instrumental to the formation of a League for women by providing a route for Margaret's ideas. As a result, she was invited in 1905 to lecture to a small group of women who met at the Holy Childhood Convent in London. Her talk '*Present day social work for Catholic Women*' only appealed to 14 women, but Margaret's enthusiasm caught the group and they wished the talk to be published and also made practical offers of help for this to happen. It was published in *The Crucible* and a copy was also sent to Cardinal Bourne who, whilst he approved of the idea, thought it should be offered to the Ladies of Charity as they had an organisation already in existence and might be prepared to carry out the work. However, they were committed to other plans.

In the autumn of 1906 a National Catholic Conference was held in Brighton. Margaret obtained permission for a copy of the talk to be put on each chair on the platform - only four Bishops took their copy with them. At a reception that night, Margaret was bombarded with questions: already in Germany the Frauenbund had been founded with the approval of the German hierarchy, so from the Brighton Conference a group of about 70 Catholic women went ahead and the League of Catholic Women Workers was founded.

In *The Crucible* they published their objectives. In the original Minute Book, at the first meeting, it was proposed that the word "worker" be omitted from the title - hence the League of Catholic Women or Catholic Women's League as we have today. So in February 1907 the object of the newly formed League was - *to unite Catholic Women in a bond of common fellowship for the promotion of religious, intellectual and social work.*

Getting known was the League's biggest challenge. It was decided to appoint a Spiritual Adviser and the first priest to be asked was Fr Bernard Vaughan, and he accepted straight away. The first Branch opened in Manchester and others followed and immense activity and work devolved on the leaders. Officers from Headquarters travelled the country and delegates from Branches sent representatives to the Council Meetings. From the first, great emphasis was laid upon the importance of personal contact, a characteristic which remains in the League today.

In 1910 in Brussels the first Meeting of Catholic International Organisations of Women took place - Germany, England, France, Spain, Italy and Switzerland. England opened the discussion. In 1911 the next Conference for Women took place in Madrid and again England opened the discussion on *Conditions in Industry and Higher Education for Women*. It was considered an excellent thing to do; the next one took place in Vienna. Pope Pius X was becoming very interested in this new movement of Catholic Women and he expressed the wish that at the next International Conference, the delegates should revise the statutes that had been drawn up.

The next Conference or Congress was held in London in 1913. The Pope had received reports from people who had attended the previous one, and there were certain clauses that he desired to see incorporated. At the conclusion of the London Conference the President and Organising Secretary of the Catholic Women's League took the amended statutes to the Pope. His Holiness formally approved the International Federation, allotted a Cardinal Protector and appointed a (Polish) President. This is where today's World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations (WUCWO) started - the name change occurred in the 1970s.

In 1910 the League cut adrift from *The Crucible* and decided to have its own magazine. Today it is the *CWL News* which is issued three times a year. In the early years the League had scholarships, a course of lectures, a debating society, a school for mothers, a girls' club, a rescue scheme. It opened clothing depots to help the poor, conducted free night shelters, visited hospitals and workhouse infirmaries.

By now Margaret had already organised Catholic nurses, their work was obviously specialised and so from these came the Catholic Nurses Guild. 1914 saw the outbreak of the First World War and soon the League was heavily involved – the nurses first. Fifteen days after the outbreak of war, 22 fully trained Catholic nurses went to Belgium and were officially recognised as a CWL Volunteer Corps, 17 more went to Paris and four to Antwerp. The French and Flemish speaking members were helping with Refugee work. So Relief and Refugee work began in earnest with the arrival of Belgian refugees in autumn 1914. By November 1914, the League had placed 6,100 refugees and by April 1915 CWL had donated £10,408.17.6d to various war needs.

The Hut at Boulogne had 80 Catholic soldiers attending its first Mass on Palm Sunday 1915. CWL Huts were spread across England and Europe (one of which was on the site of St Paul's *Bookshop* next to Westminster Cathedral) to provide meals etc and it

soon became a spiritual oasis for the soldiers. It is from them that we have the Services Committee today.

The Union of Catholic Mothers came into being in Birmingham in 1914 and remained part of the League till the late 1930s and now continues as a sister organisation (UCM). By 1919 membership was 13,000. Members of the Dutch CWL visited England in the summer of 1919 to attend a conference at Swanwick on social service, and to make themselves better known. Canada was busy uniting Catholic Women's Organisations into one national association and letters were received from Toronto requesting copies of the Constitution of CWL England. Communications were made again with France, Spain and the Polish President of the International Catholic Women's Organisations - all saying it would be good to have another Conference. It met again in Brussels in 1921.

Margaret Fletcher was invited to Prague by the Czechoslovakia Women's League in order to study her methods especially dealing with non-Catholics. 1920 saw the League fighting easy divorce. In fact the then CWL President, Lady Sykes, led a deputation and was received by the Lord Chancellor. They presented an anti-divorce petition signed by 140,208 Catholic women.

In 1922 the League started a scholarship for women to the recently opened Catholic Workers College (later to become Plater College). In 1923 the first two women recipients, both factory workers and trade unionists, went to the College and stayed with Margaret Fletcher. That same year CWL Malta came into being and following an appeal from the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, CWL founded a Catholic settlement in Bethlehem. The school was a great success, but nine years later troubles broke out between the Arabs and Jews, as a result the League handed it over to the government.

In 1923 at the AGM, Cardinal Bourne spoke about religious education for children. The Reverend Mother of the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Hammersmith Road, London, offered to provide classes for those members desirous of being prepared for this apostolic work and so Our Lady's Catechists (OLC) came into being. The qualified members taught children who could not get to Catholic schools. They developed postal courses for those in isolated areas. OLC still works with children today, but has become a training source for men and women to become qualified catechists and tutors with a national qualification recognised by the hierarchy - foundation and diploma courses with a personal tutor through either email or post.

1939 saw the outbreak of World War II and once again members worked in the CWL Huts and Canteens with refugees and continued with their social work. The President at that time gave up her Presidency to become an honorary naval surgeon. At a meeting in 1943, the CWL decided to adopt Blessed Margaret Clitherow (now St Margaret Clitherow) as their special patroness.

On 21 December 1943, Margaret Fletcher died. She is buried in the cemetery at Begbroke Priory. Her grave has been restored over the years, the last restoration in 2006 for the centenary of the League's founding.

As at 2009, the League continues its work through:

- Our Lady's Catechists - educating, training and deepening the faith.
- Relief and Refugees - members work locally helping refugees and asylum seekers and also fundraising so HQ can continue making grants in certain circumstances.
- Social Welfare - helping our older CWL members stay in their own homes, through fundraising.
- Education - still making grants available for those who meet our approved criteria.
- Services - looking after the welfare of older service and allied people to help keep them in their own homes.
- WUCWO - to pray and work for the appeals which always follow their four-yearly world meetings.

Though never political, we do as individuals write to MPs etc about matters which go against the teaching of the Catholic Church. We try to raise awareness of legislation that's pending. We see a need and try to help how and where we can. Our motto is *Charity Work Loyalty*. Council meetings are now known as the National AGM Weekend, and Branch Officers and the Executive meet in February.

Through the National Board of Catholic Women, the League and the Union of Catholic Mothers, worked together on a project that proved to be the first steps towards the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development (CAFOD) which formally came into being in 1960.

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