

CORNELIA CONNELLY'S PHILOSOPHY / THEOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Caritas McCarthy SHCJ
March 1, 1985.

We are gathered here today because we share a conviction that Cornelia Connelly had a clear, effective philosophy of education, firm yet open-ended and dynamic, still able, in the late 20th century, to undergird an education which hopefully exhibits very substantial growth and development since her time. I welcome this chance to dialog with you and to affirm that my own extensive research and writing on Cornelia as well as my forty years in the ministry of Holy Child education substantiates the conviction we share. It has been clear to me for a long time that it is a theology as well as philosophy of education Cornelia handed on to us, a theology and philosophy so deeply integrated in her and by her that we distort and even lose her vision if we separate the two.

You are asking what Cornelia was about, who it is that emerges from her educational process? Cornelia strove that each person, and in her time, especially women, become the person God meant each to be, with all that means for the full development of physical, psychological and spiritual gifts. "Be yourself, but make that self what God meant it to be," was a goal Cornelia had appropriated fully for herself, and a goal she was willing to help others to achieve with all the dedicated force of her considerable natural and supernatural gifts as an educator.

For fourteen years as a mother and lay teacher, before she received a formal mission from the Church for an educational ministry, Cornelia displayed considerable interest in and intuitive understanding of the principles of Christian education. All of this experience was utilized and built upon through the first decades of the Society from 1846 on. By 1863 she was ready to publish her manual for schools of the Holy Child -- her Book of Studies, her "guide to the traveller"¹ as she called it, which remains our most concentrated source for her theology/philosophy of education as well as method and practice. (Note that the teachers and students are "travelling," they are "going somewhere" together.) This guide was a compilation based upon a real team effort with her young sisters, during which they crowned each full week of teaching with Sunday meetings for reflection, discussion and writing on the Holy Child education they were evolving and then synthesizing in the Book of Studies. From this manual I shall draw most heavily as I quote as much as possible from the sources, so that Cornelia and the first SHCJ may themselves speak their philosophy/theology of education to us.

Four main points seem to emerge consistently from the sources where we see Cornelia and her sisters educating -- leading each young person to become more and more the person God meant her/him to be:

First, Cornelia was profoundly aware and appreciative of the dynamics of development within each person; she shaped their principles and practice toward the unfolding of the person.

Second, Cornelia understood the challenge and responsibility of forming teachers for such an educational system, demanding a high level of maturity, personal autonomy and professional skill.

Third, Cornelia drew her theology/philosophy of education from her own and her sisters' experience, and verified, tested and refined it by study of the best authors she could find.

And fourth, she drew her theology/philosophy from her own Christian humanism which was both rich and redemptive.

Our first point: For Cornelia the principle that underlay and was the test of all educational theory and practice was the understanding, appreciation of, and respect for the God-given nature of the growing child, the adolescent, the young adult, with all of the magnificent dynamism of development inherent in each stage. Even though she wrote in the 19th century idiom, her Book of Studies rings with phrases like: "suited to the age and stage of moral development of those we are guiding."² With skill she mapped out a coherent system designed to promote the teacher's awareness of the stage at which she finds each student, and methods which would facilitate development from within the student -- a map for the e-ducere," the "education" process -- "leading out of," "leading forth." "Let us not want 'to fly' by ourselves, lest we leave our pupils behind,"³ she wrote.

Teachers of the youngest children were exhorted to "keep up attention by the love of activity so natural to children;" to start geography by calling attention to the length, breadth and shape of the playground, etc.⁴ Teachers of the older children were warned "not to be too severe in the criticism and correction of compositions, . . . not to expect a perfect one from a child; for "It is easy to correct redundancy, but a barren genius has no remedy." And although there is to be constant (and, compared to today, enviable!) training in grammar and logic, and teachers are frequently to "recall the rules of composition," they are not to⁵ "cramp the style of writing" by too strict attention to the rules. A sister who had grown up in Cornelia's school and was later trained by her as a teacher, recalled her saying "we must encourage our children to bring out their original ideas and put a check on seeking to copy."⁶ So, while there was thorough training in skills so that students could express themselves, there was concomitant fostering of creativity.

For the young women in the highest grades and for those in the Teacher Training College there was a clear emphasis on "the cultivation of the understanding and judgment rather than just the memory."⁷ "The object of reading is to enable the pupils to enter into the spirit of the writer, to seize his ideas... to test the force of his arguments, the justness of his feelings," and also "to form one's own taste and judgment."⁸ Young adults were expected to exhibit mastery of skills in speaking and writing well. Speaking included foreign languages to the extent not only of conversing, but also of reading Dante in the Italian, and the New Testament in Greek.

With great insight, especially in view of the limitations of 19th century thought, Cornelia appreciated and followed the human developmental processes in religious/moral education. Religious instruction, she said "should be suited to the age and capacity of "young" and "opening minds" (-- a beautiful expression "opening minds"!)." "First lessons should be ... simple tales - to excite their curiosity and arouse their imaginations - placing God before them [as] ... a tender

loving Father - a kind and good Creator," "not," Cornelia says, "God in the exercise of his power as a judge or a punisher of sin." Gradually, the stories of the major events of salvation history of the Old and New Testaments and the lives of the saints are to be brought before the students so that they "may grasp the goodness of God and his claims on our love and gratitude," so that they may be helped "to understand better the evil of sin and the hatred of God for it." With sureness and sensitivity Cornelia was developing people who were religiously healthy. Out of her own experience she could center on the goal of religious instruction -- for the youngest as well as for the oldest: "They must be led to feel strongly their relation to God." (The essence of the Judaeo-Christian religion is, of course, personal relationship with God.) Cornelia says the young people "are led to feel their relationship"; throughout her writings she showed her understanding of the key role of affectivity in moral/religious development. And she also understood the role of responsibility as students mature, responsibility for studying the history, doctrines, laws, and liturgy of the church, for participating fully in the liturgy so that graduates of Holy Child schools would indeed be builders of their local ecclesial communities in adult life. Through her course of instruction her students are to move from a well-fostered experience of the love of God to a knowledge of his revelation in Christ and a will to collaborate with him in the building of the kingdom.⁹ The reality with which she lived with heaven as her goal enabled her to communicate that reality to her students and teachers, as a means of making truly Christian decisions, of developing and prioritizing truly Christian values.

There is an event recorded by Cornelia in her school notes which gives us a rare insight into the depth of her understanding of moral development and the mature liberty of spirit it demands of educators. After twenty years of truly noteworthy and effective dramatic productions in Holy Child schools, Cornelia found herself being questioned by some Holy Child sisters, who were, understandably victorian in their attitudes. She respected their questioning, writing: "The opinion of the Sisters is that the children are rather injured than improved by the plays." Then she detailed their representations: (Her notes conjure up images of their facial expressions and tones of voice!). "Little Gertrude, full of vanity, and not attending to her lessons;" "Carry Rogan assuming the naughty Lolo in 'Beauty and the Beast';" "Agnes Parker -- full of conceit -- full of her beauty;" and the climax for the victorian nuns: "Therese de Laubenque, hitherto so good, now full of her imagined beauty because she was made so by dress and paint"! Cornelia jotted her own response, showing both fair consideration of the representations and her own sound insights into moral development. She wrote: "If the plays are sowing seeds of vanity are they to be upheld or put down?"

Again, if they [the plays] are properly used are not the children led to know their own vanity at a time when the correction can be applied, and when they are safe from the snares of the world? Again are they not thus prepared to meet the temptations of the world and to know how to conquer them? Let us examine the past effects on our children before we come to any positive decision -¹⁰

Cornelia's view of drama prevailed, a view that emphasized its aesthetic and cultural values as well as moral training.

She could be just as courageous with regard to criticism from outside her schools. She continued to emphasize understanding and affectivity in the teaching of religion, even though her students lost ground with the school committee inspectors when they could not simply "parrot" catechism answers.

It's well to remind ourselves that Cornelia's insightful developmental work was done long before Montessori, Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, Fowler, Gilligan.

Our second point, the emphasis Cornelia placed on the formation of educators, must surely have become apparent in the foregoing review of her developmental work. She understood that those who would assist young persons to become most fully themselves, those who would foster student growth toward autonomy, toward full personhood in the unfolding of their unique combination of gifts and talents, must themselves be mature enough, autonomous enough to facilitate the growth of others rather than dominate them, must be always open to their own growth, valuing their own gifts and developing them. She wrote much, in the Book of Studies, in her Constitutions and elsewhere about the forming of the Christian educator; she did much, having been one of the first women in England to apply for a Teacher Training grant, and having conducted a Teacher Training College in England, with plans for others there, in Scotland and in America.¹¹

Nowhere is her integration of the natural and the supernatural, the human and the transcendent clearer than in her vision for forming educators. She had made no split between the roles of "lay" and religious educators. She had seen her role as mother and as lay teacher in the Sacred Heart Schools as a "work of God" for fifteen years before she was given a more formal mission in the Church.

Having seen clearly how important is the human development of the educator, Cornelia spelled out mission, motivation and means at the level where they were most authentic, most efficacious -- the level of faith, of life "in Christ Jesus." She wrote that Holy Child educators:

must esteem above all things in their pupils those qualities which make them truly great in the sight of God.

They must regard them as the children of God, redeemed by His most precious blood, therefore as the most precious charge the love of Jesus could confide to them, and they should cherish a truly maternal love for them.

Let them each day weigh the account they will have to render for the souls which have cost him so dear, and strive to lay within them a solid foundation of faith. . . strive to gain the hearts of their pupils to the love and imitation of the virtues of the Holy Child Jesus. . . by a love that is noble, tender and disinterested. . . ¹²

She spoke of the challenge of the Christian educator: "great things are achieved only by untiring labour and suffering. . . Let us joyfully take pains and accept of labour, piece by piece, week by week, day by day, and thus make sure of our victory."¹³

Ten years before, Cornelia had in her Book of Studies assigned these transcendent motives to the Christian educator. She placed this ministry of education at the heart of each Holy Child Sister's vocation in her Constitutions: Those who "contemplate the Eternal Wisdom in the lowliness of His Humanity," those who are "nourished at the wellsprings of this heavenly fountain," are "to run with ardour in the way that he has pointed out, and to employ every effort to lead others. . . ."

Her Constitutions of 1853 also reflect the urgency she felt about relevance in education, a relevance she felt she found essential to the Church:

And since the Church in her divine universality encourages the means of education best adapted for each particular state of life we are especially bound to act in unison with her, and to meet the wants of the age. . . .¹⁴

Subsequent letters reflect this urgency for relevance: "I think we must make it a point of conscience to get certain specimens of the best books of the day to send from house to house, at least for a time, and just now when the march of teaching is going at such a rate."¹⁵ A Holy Child Sister who had gone through her schools and Training College reported she was "not only up-to-date in the Catholic world but in advance of date."¹⁶ (Cornelia's sense of the need to "meet the wants of the age" . . . "in unison with . . . the Church," challenges us today to act in unison with the American bishops' stand for a more just economic order and a liberation from the oppression of nuclear arms).

Having made very clear that the goal for which her teachers formed themselves, and to which they led their students was nothing less than fullness of life with God in eternity, Cornelia, characteristically, challenged them to develop and use their human abilities, their earthly life to the full. For her, working toward heaven meant working energetically, creatively with the things of earth: A government inspector's report on one of her poor -- i.e. "parish" -- schools, illustrates this in a striking way. The Society was only seven years old and Holy Child sisters had had to struggle for the bare necessities of life -- a roof over their heads and food on the table. Yet, the inspector could write:

Building excellent. Desks excellent. Furniture excellent. Playground excellent. Books abundant and good. Apparatus abundant. Organisation excellent. Methods mixed, and applied with rare skill and judgment. Discipline excellent. Instruction of the highest order.

It is impossible to witness without admiration the results obtained in this very interesting school, in which consummate skill in the art of teaching, unwearied patience, and the most persuasive personal

influence, have combined to accomplish all the rarest fruits of Christian instruction. The school is now one of the most perfect institutions of its class in Europe.¹⁷

The list here, referring to methods, skills, discipline, concern for equipment, etc. indicates the thoroughness with which Cornelia trained in pedagogy. The inspector's report emphasizes what she understood so well: the need in students for the human presence of the skilled educator to stimulate and foster their own growth from within. An inspector's report five years later on the first teachers who emerged from her Training College highlights this: "They are especially remarkable for the personal influence which they exert over the pupils and the improved discipline. . . which always accompanies their presence in the school."

A point added by the inspector shows Cornelia carrying out her philosophy of bringing out the best in each. He wrote of the young teachers she had formed: "Some whose abilities and attainments are only moderate, are quite as successful in the points referred to [personal influence and discipline] as others who have greater natural capacity. This . . . indicates . . . clearly the effects of the moral training they have received."¹⁸

My third point, I hope, has been emerging in my first and second. It is that Cornelia formulated her theology/philosophy and its resulting system upon a fine balance of her own experience, and on the affirming, testing, refining of that experience in studying the educational experts of her time and tradition.

Her family letters which begin when her first child was almost three (1835), and continue through twelve years of her children's growth, show her very much the "educator-mother." She learned about "opening minds," "the activity so natural to children," the "step by step" processes to accompany their stages of development, from her own children. She reported on the progress of her youngest, three and one-half years of age, when she was teaching him in Rome.

"dear little Frank's practice . . . has been to keep still . . . during 10 minutes of study of spelling and 10 minutes of bible story, . . . and . . . during the repetition out of the book to keep his toes out, heels together and hands clasped which is the greatest help in keeping his attention fixed.

Frank's lessons were by no means all discipline: "... he had three little verses that he half sang and half repeated for dear Papa who had brought him a little guitar."¹⁹

We know that Pierce, Cornelia's husband, shared his interest in educational theory with her and that together, in their years together in Louisiana, they were exposed to Jesuit educational theory and practice as embodied in the Ratio Studiorum. Cornelia taught for seven

years -- five in Louisiana, two in Rome -- with the Religious of the Sacred Heart, who, though profoundly influenced by Jesuit education had new emphases from Madeleine Sophie Barat on the potential in girls for true intellectual and cultural development. Her experience of Sacred Heart education in Rome, however, convinced her that she wanted more trust and less rigidity in teacher-student relationships than the French Sacred Heart system allowed.

From October 1846, which marked the beginning of the Society and its schools, she increasingly drew theory and practice, in an eclectic but very coherent fashion from the pedagogical writers of her time, many of whom she cites as authority for method, content and text book use. Perhaps the only names familiar to us today are those of Froebel, the German kindergarten promoter, and Pestalozzi who affirmed Cornelia's own design to match method and content to the age and stage of development of the student. 20

Sr. Mary Eleanor Slater, SHCJ published over twenty years ago a detailed study of Cornelia's use of pedagogical works of her time, finding, as I have noted, a fine balance between her use of experience and external authorities.²¹ A few years before, in a thesis on Holy Child education in America, Sr. Claire Sullivan summarized much of Cornelia's theology/philosophy of education in a remarkable passage on what she termed "a constant quality. . . of balance."²² Rather than weaken by summary what is already synthesized as finely as possible, I have given you Claire's brief excerpt as a supplement to my presentation.

So it is the notion of balance that introduces our final point: that Cornelia's theology/philosophy of education was the expression of a rich Christian humanism and aimed at the formation of humanists, that is, young persons who had developed their rational, aesthetic, religious, moral, affective and physical capacities in a creative balance.

Not only was the range of Cornelia's "liberal arts" curriculum broadly humanistic, but her attitude toward content was equally so. She knew content to be instrumental for the development of the person, that on which the human "chewed" or "exercised," in order to grow. She could match the ancient classical humanists in her zeal for right thinking formed through grammar, logic and mathematics; for right and persuasive speaking and writing through rhetoric and drama.

Nowhere does Cornelia's humanism express itself better than in her philosophy for Art Education:

...we are not to consider Drawing as an extra or superlative Art left to the choice of anyone to follow, or leave out, but, on the contrary, as a Christian Art and one of the most important branches of education, second only to the art of speaking and writing, and in some respects even beyond the languages, as it is in itself a

universal Language, addressing itself to the ignorant as well as to the most refined. It is to be noted that drawing educates the eye in all perceptible beauty and order, and that it leads to the cultivation of a habit of observation, the only habit by which knowledge generally can be obtained. Nor is it to be considered as an accomplishment, but as an Art, which has its philosophy as well as its poetry.

Then the Practical: "For the Poetry of Art we must provide various occasions to allow every grade in the school to cultivate their fancy and taste on all the holidays of the year!"²³

Cornelia's humanism embraced the whole of school life. We learn from a letter from her Jansenistic bishop that "in one of your Houses the pupils have been taught to waltz and dance the polka as well as play whist." The bishop was writing to say "if this . . . be true, stop it quietly, . . . the Archbishop of Dublin has made waltzing a reserved case (sin) . . . make sure it is not done in your Houses."²⁴

We do not know how Cornelia managed to circumvent this Jansenistic command, but that she did we know from a reminiscence of a student:

At recreation times, Mother Connelly would often come in, and if a child was at the piano playing a waltz, she would whisk one of the children round on the "light fantastic toe" regardless of her voluminous habit.²⁵

Cornelia's voluminous habit never stifled her freedom of spirit nor her appreciation of the human. She began her Constitutions with "What more sublime teaching can we find than the mystery of the Incarnation?"²⁶ and drew the inspiration for her Society on the mystery of God's becoming human. From contemplative identification with him she learned, and transmitted to her students the value of all human pursuits, from the simple domestic and recreational to the highest reaches of human creativity in art, music, poetry, philosophy, liturgy, mysticism.

There are some who in her own time and today understandably question the affirmation of the human. Did she not, for the sake of her husband's priesthood, agree to the sacrifice of the most fundamental human good of her own and her children's family life? It is important for us to see that she agreed to this only after doing everything in her power to hold her marriage and family together. She made her sacrifice only when the best possible spiritual discernment available at that time indicated that God was mysteriously allowing this sacrifice in the mystery of the Cross inherent in all human existence. Through sacrifice she rooted her humanism in divine as well as earthly reality -- the only secure base for all humanism. This gave a kind of "Easter" strength, the strength of the "more abundant life" springing from the "seed that dies," to her commitment to her students. She had willingly surrendered a great human good for a greater good. After her sacrifice her human gifts were illumined by the light of the Spirit, gift of the Risen Christ. Her crowning gift as an educator was to bring to her ministry the Holy Spirit's affirmation of all creation.

¹"Preface" to Book of the Order of Studies in the Schools of the S. Holy Child Jesus, compiled by Cornelia Connelly, St. Leonards-on-sea, 1863.

²Bk. of Studies, "Preface."

³Bk. of Studies, "Preface."

⁴Bk. of Studies, pp. 31-32, 46.

⁵Bk. of Studies, pp. 52-53.

⁶M.M. Frances Bellasis, MS Life of C. Connelly, vol. 2, p. 385.

⁷Writings of C. Connelly, referred to as CC, vol. 5, p. 36.

⁸Bk. of Studies, p. 35.

⁹Bk. of Studies, pp. 19-23.

¹⁰CC 35, part 2: 19-20.

¹¹CC 22: 28-29.

¹²Bk. of Studies, pp. 77-78.

¹³Bk. of Studies, "Preface." *

¹⁴Constitutions of the SHCJ, Source, 4: 77-79.

¹⁵CC 7:14.

¹⁶Bellasis in D 76:44; D₋ Documentation compiled for the Cause of CC.

¹⁷Cited by Sr. M. E. Slater, "March of Teaching and March of Perfection," Catholic Educational Review, LX (Apr. 1962), 224.

¹⁸D 37:75.

¹⁹CC 1: 103, 52-53.

²⁰Slater, pp. 227-32.

²¹Slater, pp. 217-35.

²²"The Influence of Mother Cornelia Connelly on Modern American Education," (Immaculate Heart College, Los Angeles, 1959) p. 72.

²³Bk. of Studies, pp. 53-54.

²⁴D 42: 36-37.

²⁵Sr. M.A. Armour, Cornelia, (Society of the Holy Child Jesus, 1979), p. 67.

²⁶Source 4:77.

