



**Cherwell
Papers**

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Frances Connelly

Editorial Note

Participants of the Cherwell Conference will find in this second of the Cherwell Papers familiar themes, but they will also find that this paper by Radegunde Flaxman, SHCJ presents a view distinct from the one presented in Oxford. Its genesis and inclusion requires some explanation.

In Oxford, Radegunde explored Cornelia's sense of self. She was "*a cosmopolitan*," a woman whose experience and energy would not be specified by geography nor culture, nor for that matter, the nineteenth century. This was an insight well suited to the conference audience representing three continents, five countries and ten metropolitan areas. It provoked discussion and animated conversation which catapulted us out of the nineteenth century into the twentieth.

Subsequently, Radegunde was asked to speak to the Boards of Trustees in the United States on the subject of Cornelia as educator. Because Cornelia's educational philosophy was the keystone of the Cherwell Conference and because we are bold enough to presume that the conference gave stimulus to consider Cornelia the educator we have included this paper among the Cherwell Papers.

This paper, also, universalizes Cornelia. But here Cornelia is not cast as a cosmopolitan. Cornelia is viewed primarily as one consumed with a mission of mercy and justice, a person drawing on her motherhood to give vitality to the work of education. The mystery of the Incarnation is the well-spring from which all this flowed.

This is a fresh perspective on the Society of the Holy Child Jesus' mission in the schools. Some may find they are not in full accord with Radegunde's bifurcation of works of mercy and school ministry, but all will find the paper as provocative as the one given in Oxford.

Ann Marie Durst, SHCJ,

March 7, 1993

Cornelia, Educator

Radegunde Flaxman, SHCJ

Cornelia Connelly. To look at her, I hope you will find, is to receive inspiration for the schools now. If I want to know the values that have to underlie and create the particular ethos of Holy Child schools, then it seems to me (whether we are trustees or sisters, or parents or teachers) we have to know first who she was, what mattered to her, and above all — when she became a religious founder — how she perceived what was vital to the mission God gave her. And we'll begin with that — even though it will at first seem to have little to do with education.

People sometimes say that the Society was founded for education — a very misleading statement. It ignores what is the basic and continuing inspiration. It confuses what is primary with what is secondary. Cornelia's primary purpose was to exercise spiritual mercy. In the documentation that goes back to the very beginnings of the Society it is not the word 'education' that keeps cropping up but the expression '*the spiritual works of mercy*'.

We rarely use that expression nowadays. But for Cornelia's story we can not ignore it. Newman, telling a friend about the Society just before Cornelia arrived, wrote: its "*works will be all spiritual works of mercy*". Cornelia herself, on the brink of beginning in Derby, told her brother she was starting there because the "*immense number of converts*" in England made it "*so large a field for Spiritual Mercy*". Bishop Wiseman, too, uses it in his 'charter' letter sent as soon as they were installed at Derby. He does not speak directly of schools or education, but makes his points about the field she has chosen (he says) under the heading, "*the exercise of spiritual mercies*".

My purpose here is not at all to underrate the place that schools have in the Society's life history. Cornelia and her first little group started that tradition when at Derby they at once took over the parish school. What I am saying, in the first place, is that what she *founded* was a community whose inspiration was the Incarnation; that is, the Society is fired to ministry by God's greatest and continuing work of *mercy*. Some of you here will know what she wrote in her basic statements for our guidance:

What more sublime teaching can we find, than the mystery of the Incarnation! Here it is that God manifests to us in the most wonderful manner the treasures of his mercy and of his boundless love.

And I'm therefore also saying that the primary object of the community's life was to reveal those treasures, that merciful love. She told the sisters they had come into religion to minister to others — *i.e.* they were to reflect the compassion of God. This was their primary object. Anything they set out to do was to be a means to that end. For many reasons schools soon became not the only means but the primary one and remained so for more than a century and are still important. But whatever the means, the sisters were energized for their visible activity by an inner awareness and pursuit of God's merciful purpose in the Incarnation. This has recently been summed up for us in the materials presented in Rome on behalf of Cornelia's Cause and which led to the recent decree by the pope that she is worthy of veneration:

In her conception, the Society's primary mission was to live the Incarnation by being the presence of God's merciful love in the world. This took priority over any specific work.

So a school in which the spirit of Cornelia's Society is at work is part of that "*large field of spiritual mercy*" which she mentioned to her brother. And nowadays, it is not just the sisters who need to know this, but also all who are associated with Holy Child schools — trustees, benefactors, parents, teachers, helpers of any kind. All of us have a place in this field of spiritual mercy, and all of us need to understand what that means. So before moving on to Cornelia herself, let's think about the expression '*work of mercy*'.

Perhaps we do not care to think of what we do, as a work of mercy. Perhaps it sounds condescending. But there is a book by an American writer, Sidney Callahan, called *With All Our Heart and Mind*. That book suggests a way in which we can think of a work of spiritual mercy which does not smack of condescension, and it seems

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to me well suited to our times because psychologically we are so knowledgeable. She calls it

... a conscious effort to enact God's love and imitate God's mercy in the inner life of thought and feeling.

The 'work', she is saying, is inner. But nevertheless that is love in action. Even though it is inner she says, it is a way of meeting the inner human need of others, because between human beings there is consciousness-to-consciousness communication. We enrich each other as we reach out. In a school, for instance, all those concerned in it educate each other in this way. Cornelia's own very great reverence for other persons shows that there was no condescension in her attitude. She understood the mutuality. She would have met the inner need of others in all humbleness and *thereby* be able to educate. Listening, paying attention, she taught the sisters, were important. The real life of her schools, the beating heart, we might say, without which they could not have been described as hers, would have been this inner relating. She would not have expressed it so, but I think they were to be communities linked by an inner, active communion.

What in Cornelia's life, in particular, had brought her to this level of perception?

Motherhood and a heart moved by such inner '*works of mercy*' seem to me to belong together. Of the many experiences of Cornelia's life that enabled her for the work of education, the most vital and far-reaching, I believe, is that she was a mother. I think also that this is mostly what distinguishes the spirit of the Society and its schools from other religious communities founded in one way or another in response to God's mercy in the Incarnation.

In Cornelia's personal life God's mercy had touched her profoundly. There are obvious examples. There was the grace of conversion: "*O my sisters, what is all that this world can give or take away compared to the joy of feeling yourself in the true way*". Preparing to make her religious vows, she signed herself "*the sinner Cornelia*". And it was to the mercy of God that later she entrusted her apostate Pierce: "*What is to become of him unless our Lord will be himself the good Samaritan and bind up his wounds and heal them?*"

She rarely refers to God's mercy at length, but it was a given of her life and unforgettable. I think it seized her soul, so to speak, at the time of John Henry's death. Her 2 year old son fell into a pan of boiling sugar juice and lay dying in her arms for 43 hours. It was then apparently that her own compassion for her child was, we might say, married to God's for all humankind. During those cruel hours, it would seem that she remembered God as Child, remembered that he

came precisely to save, and remembered that in the end he rose from death. Between the time of this death and her husband's announcement of his priestly vocation which she knew would mean separation — another death dealing blow — she quoted (in Latin) something from the Old Testament in her notebook, and it shows she was already caught up in the mystery of God's mercy: "*I will have compassion on this people*". And six years later she committed her life to the spiritual works of mercy when she started her first community in Derby. The apostolic impetus with which she fired the Society seems to derive from that particular experience of the mother when, amazingly, the compassion of God-made-flesh apparently seized her.

We know that the early married life of this mother was a deeply happy one. And that to her the children were "*my darling children*". As one of the sisters said who knew her intimately, to give up her loved husband to be a priest was one thing, to give up the children, inconceivable. It is clear that she planned to have them with her and it was unforeseen circumstances, and betrayal by Pierce, that combined to snatch them away. One evening in the boarding school at St. Leonards as she went round to say goodnight and bless each child, she replied to the sister who was with her, "*The thought of my children never leaves me*".

Those pupils were other people's children, and they had become her second family. It is interesting to know that two of the sisters who later opposed Cornelia disapproved of precisely this aspect of the religious life she set up: one apparently wanted a rule which confined itself to regulations, and the other said that the community at St. Leonards was too like a family. Cornelia made school a home. Parents were glad to entrust their own treasures to her, and she would re-assure them: "*Your two darling children are quite well and good and they have everything to make them enjoy their sunny, sinless childhood*". Whenever she had to be away, the sisters, she said, will have "*a mother's care*" of them.

Of course she was running a boarding school and it was very small. It didn't have as many as 50 students until 1863, so making a home was a great deal easier than in present day conditions. But the principle remains: a mother's care. And is not any good mother's love a reflection of God's because it is tempered by mercy? Basically she will not condemn her child, but she will do all she can to encourage growth for good. And that is to exercise spiritual mercy.

It was Cornelia's love of husband and children, of family life, that made the thought of separation so terrible. The possibility dangled over her for nine years, and during that time the depth of her love for her family must have thrust itself up and up into her consciousness. The ultimate decision of course would be the pope's, but from later evidence we know that she eventually gave provisional consent believing that the children would be hers, and that

Pierce would never do anything about them without her agreement. We also know that not long before Pierce's ordination she offered to return to family life with him and he refused. The suffering, pondering, praying of those nine long years formed Cornelia to be the woman of human and spiritual wisdom to whom parents could entrust their daughters. The experience qualified her, we might say, to be one day an educator to whom young and old, pupils and parents, turned for guidance, one who mothered the work of the Spirit in each. It was not for nothing that she came to be known among those who knew her as Mother Connelly. And that tradition survived. When I was a young sister I remember being asked, "*Are you one of Mother Connelly's nuns?*"

It was in these years of unusual suffering that Cornelia learned to turn to Mary as Mother of Sorrows as her '*alter ego*'. But Mary was also the Mother of Mercy. Since the Incarnation is *the* great work of divine mercy, the reign of God on earth was made possible by her co-operation. Cornelia too would co-operate. And with this as the continuing horizon of her mind, she often used another expression we no longer use: "*the salvation of souls*". The sister who knew her so well and wrote her first biography (unpublished) said this was Cornelia's greatest concern. For nowadays we could paraphrase the expression: perhaps '*being apostolic*'; or '*opening hearts to God*'; or '*working for the inner reign of God*' — and working for it not only through piety but also through meeting human need. It too, therefore, is a way of expressing the purpose of the Incarnation.

On the same subject there is what she said about ministry:

Let all engrave these words on their hearts and daily recall them to mind, I came not into Religion to be ministered unto but to minister unto others, and to be ready to give my life for the salvation of souls.

Apply this to what goes on in a school. To minister is a personal activity, one person reaching out to another in need. It is creative of relationship, the interaction opening both to God's mercy. It was to be at work in Holy Child schools because it is what Jesus's life, from crib to cross, is all about. Cornelia chose the works of spiritual mercy, I presume, because she wanted all to put their personal qualities of feeling and thought, all their interior gifts, at the service of others. So wherever we are, and whoever we are, we are companionship others on the way to being more fully human and to finding God's presence in the world. And this is especially possible in a school because it is a community.

Now before we go on to what is more concrete, I suggest you turn to your neighbours for a few minutes and ask yourselves a question: Does what has been said, matter?

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We have been thinking about Cornelia and the mystery of God's mercy in the Incarnation. There is another way of approaching it. We find it in the concrete ways through which she sought to become God's mercy in the world. And here the field of education is prominent. So I am going to mention — very briefly indeed — first, some aspects of her own earlier life that prepared her for the work; then some of the actual things she attempted; and finally, even more briefly, relate her effort to the Incarnation.

The preparation that life gave her to be an educator. Her family; it was affectionate and caring, and her home was a place where she learned to trust and be trusted. I would put that as of primary importance. Then her formal education was very good for that time, covering much more than basics; with tutors she studied logic, mathematics, history and literature, languages, art, music. Religion? Like her family, she took it seriously, married a clergyman and later made her own decision before he did, to become a Catholic. She experienced a husband's love, bore and loved her children and created a happy home. A stay in Europe of nearly two years, with husband and children, enriched her formal education — it introduced her to other cultures and other ways of thinking; extended her language skills, heightened her appreciation of history, art, music; imbued her with a love of the universal church so deep that although she saw some of its abuses and was to suffer enormously at the hands of some of its officials she remained lovingly faithful all her life. We can justly say that her time in Europe gifted her yet more to mother and teach her own children, and also all their successors. And after so much experience that was positive came another kind of education. Before she at last agreed to the Separation, she had learned the bitter side of life, the temptations and sorrows of the human heart and learned it without becoming bitter herself. Out of all this came a woman — not professionally qualified as an educator because in those days such a possibility didn't exist, but qualified by life. What she attempted often reflected her past experience, and if not that, her capacity to learn quickly. I think she became a great sifter and assimilator of what life offered.

When Cornelia found herself with the responsibilities of educating, what did she attempt? I will mention first something grounded in her character.

Closely allied to mercy is justice. Desire for justice for others is the inevitable issue of a merciful heart. Concepts which motivate us nowadays meant nothing to her or her contemporaries. Unjust structures were not recognized for what they were; sin was not seen as social, social analysis was not yet born. But personal relationship with Christ and his relationship with those around him meant a great deal, and what Cornelia did was to keep her eye on Christ merciful and just. To act justly in all her dealings with individuals (and to forgive injustice) was markedly part of her integrity and of the influence she had as an educator. Students remembered it about her, and she had seen to it that in school they would be taught to be merciful and just by both example and precept. The teachers in school were then all sisters, and for them Cornelia quoted from her own catechism on the works of mercy:

. . . they that instruct many to justice shall shine as the stars, for all eternity.

To move to what she did that is more measurable. In 1846, the first challenge that met her was to take over at once a quite large school for the very poor — with very little earlier experience of teaching anything but music, and that in Sacred Heart schools for the well-to-do. Every morning with the other two or three sisters, she now taught the illiterate and poverty stricken. A government inspector visited, a convert like herself, with wife and children. They became friends. Through him she obtained the blessing of state aid for the school's support, and over the next ten years a great deal else. She learned the ropes of the existing poor school system; heard contemporary theories, got the best books, and taught the sisters how to use mixed teaching methods; had access to information about schools to visit, and a whole network of information about the state of education in the country generally. Within ten years after arrival, there were Holy Child sisters teaching in schools for the poor in St. Leonards, London, Liverpool, Preston.

Through this same inspector she later set up a college for training teachers of the poor. This involved her in seas of administrative work with the Catholic Poor Schools Committee and with government. Nevertheless she contrived to keep its direction in her own hands. She saw to it that the curriculum included subjects well beyond government demands for the training of a poor school teacher, *i.e.* drawing, music, French, and daringly for those days, geology. She herself taught the course on principles of education; art and church music; and she often spent recreation time with the students.

Then there was her *School of the Holy Child* at St. Leonards. Here were quite wealthy children and they came to her for perhaps as long as twelve or fourteen years. She treated them as a mother would, lovingly, firmly. The naughty ones, the sisters said, were Rev. Mother's Gems. All of them, I am sure, were to receive the education she would have liked her own children to have had. And there was ample time, that commodity which nowadays we always seem short of. The school year, customarily at that date, was ten consecutive months long. We would not now approve of this for a variety of reasons but there were compensations. Each child in her tiny class could go at her own pace, be helped to understand "*step by step*", as Cornelia said they must. One of the sisters who had worked in school and training college and knew well what Cornelia's ideals were tells us how broad and sensible (for those days) the studies were. She wrote:

Geology and all the other sister sciences were to be taught the upper classes and in every way the mistress and pupils were to be kept up to the mark of the learning and science of the nineteenth century.

Another sister who had been a pupil at St. Leonards explains another time consuming policy. The older girls were expected to study '*general outlines*' of many extra subjects because Cornelia believed that "*education does not cease with the school career but continues all through life*". The outlines would provide for them "*a solid base for the future growth and development of knowledge*". She liked the word '*solid*'.

There was time too for music and drama and art. Every year for two weeks there was the Holy Child Theatre, a sort of workshop. Pupils and students and sisters together, led by Cornelia, presented several plays. At least one was in a foreign language. When some of the sisters objected that acting encouraged vanity, she maintained that it taught the children to understand the text and themselves better, and stuck to her guns. For her, education had to give meaning to living and drama helped the process.

So, even more deeply for her, did *art*. In Rome Cornelia got to know the work of the Nazarenes. They argued that the essential character of christian art was in its purpose, to manifest God, and when Cornelia first met them she was herself studying painting. When she had a school at St. Leonards, their paintings and theory figured in her art course, and in school the beauty of surroundings was something she was always trying to achieve. For her art had become an essential part of finding the invisible God. When Bishop Grant insisted that less time be given to it in the government-aided college so that more could be spent on religious instruction, she

grieved because to her art was an aspect of religious education, and in her School of the Holy Child where she could make such decisions herself and time was not a problem, the full course was retained.

Then there is her *Book of the Order of Studies*. There were young sisters to train as teachers somehow. At first she drew chiefly on what she already knew from the Sacred Heart schools. Then a Jesuit gave her a copy of the Jesuit *Order of Studies*, and she began to put together something for the sisters. Lists of books were accumulated, outlines for class work in various subjects, notes for class mistresses, general principles. And in 1863, when need arose because the Society was spreading and the sisters needed something to keep with them, she printed it up in book form.

A final scene of Cornelia working to educate. She was told by the doctor to spend the winter in a mild climate. Ill as she was, she saw this as a chance to test the ground for starting a school in France which she very much wanted. So three sisters went with her to Hyeres, plus five older children. Two were her nieces and she told her sister-in-law: "*They will go on with their studies, more particularly in French and Drawing, and see something of the world . . . of France and Italy*". Lessons began at once, speaking French became the rule. A few French children joined them. Cornelia, in a wheel chair, often accompanied them on expeditions. They visited shrines and beauty spots, took picnics, sketched views. It was concluded that Hyeres was not the place for a school, but she decided the search must go on. And in the end the Holy Child sisters took over in Toul what would have been — had war not broken out — a very new venture. They expected to have German and French students as well as some from England and Ireland, what we would now call an international school.

How are we to associate such efforts as these with the Incarnation? We must turn from that abstract word, Incarnation, to the human reality of God, the Word made flesh.

Think of her with the Child in Bethlehem. Cornelia must have spent many, many hours of her life pondering this mystery, adoring this fact. A baby in its mother's arms. Here was God, who had entered creation as a human being. By doing that, he had made being

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human something wonderful. So for every human being ever born, to become more fully human and more one's own special self, was to give God glory. From that, for Cornelia everything else flowed. The children in her schools were to be helped to grow as the Child Jesus grew, so that they might live as did the Man Jesus, compassionately, justly. Thus they would contribute to the reign of God in hearts.

What did the growing require?

It required affectionate relationships: she quoted in a notebook that the child's habit of showing affection becomes the main-spring of character.

It required a growing in knowledge, knowledge of every kind: — self-knowledge (and therefore firmness and reproof had their place, as well as sympathy and praise); — knowledge of all that God has called into being (and therefore why not study geology? In spite of the religious fears of the time: are we not to understand and care for all that God made and sustains? Why not study the history of the earth?); — knowledge of human aspiration and achievement and failure (so why not Church History with all its warts? and poetry written by protestants? and acting the dramas of human fall? for all of which she was criticized).

It required aid in recognizing beauty of whatever kind. Was it not the invisible God made manifest?

It required hard work and active energy in order to be happy and creative.

It required enjoyment of sheer being (and so why shouldn't the children play in the fields? and go on picnics? and even — which Bishop Grant disapproved of — dance the waltz?)

It required mutual trust, and above all, reverence — towards each other, towards the poor, towards all human beings — one of whom God mercifully became.

All of that, to use her language, was equally for "*the glory of God and the good of souls*," which is a way of describing why the Word was made flesh and lived a fully human life. Education, in her view, was to give the children meaning for life. For that, human potential was to be developed, belief in God nourished; each child to become more fully her true self, learning to *act* accordingly. Then they too, each to her degree in her way, would reflect God's merciful love in whatever part of the world they were to live their adult lives.

Cornelia was too much of a realist to suppose her vision could be fully realized, and my time is running out. But that — it seems to me — was her theory, her ideal, her longing. She did not preach it, but she lived out of it, and her continuing inspiration was the merciful love of God-made-flesh. So I leave you with the question I've already asked: Does that inspiration still matter? Does it inspire us too? Without it there would have been no fire in Cornelia to educate as she did, and all of us here care about the education in Holy Child schools. Does it matter?

Cherwell Papers

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