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CORNELIA CONNELLY AND THE SPIRIT OF SUFFERING OBEDIENCE (published in Review for Religious, Vol. 21, 1962, pp.28-32)

Cornelia Connelly, who founded the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ) in England in 1846, saw her work spread to America in 1862 when the first foundation was made in Pennsylvania. Today, a hundred years later, the Society has twenty-eight houses in this country. On the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the Society in this country, this article is offered as a slight memorial to her founder.

The heritage of any religious family is a living tradition distinctive in starting point and attitude (an area hard to define), less so in means, toward a goal recognizable in generally accepted terms. The initial channeling is traced to the instrument God has chosen and guided first to discern, then to execute a pattern which against the ground of particular time and circumstance will manifest in new detail God's plan for "filling up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ." Uniqueness resides in the individuality of the instrument, the religious founder, and in his or her perception of the role of the new institute within the larger grouping that is the Church. This perception, however it may communicate itself person-to-person from the founder to the ever widening circle of disciples, is ultimately formulated in the rule of the congregation where the solemn ratification of Mother Church safeguards it from distortion.

But the sense of mission, of the public life, as it were, of the fully integrated society presupposes a deep interiority, a known way to God that constitutes the individual spirituality of its members. Personal sanctification and the salvation of souls are the twin goals of religious profession, and the former is the matrix. In what concerns the ultimate relations of the soul with God the greatest delicacy is only fitting. Prescriptive norms as such can point

the path then set the soul free to follow "the drawing of that Love and the voice of that Calling". Lived example best helps the hesitant. The working out of the unit figure in the design, seen as God sees it harmonious and whole, is learned indeed by heart, by loving study of the actual steps to perfection of the one who first lived the teachings cherished now by a growing spiritual family.

Cornelia Connelly (1809-1879), foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, gives her children just such guidance--a rule distilled from prayerful experience and tried in the fire of the unitive life amidst the demands of the teaching apostolate. To her words then for definitive statement, to her life for burning confirmation. And in both the same pattern is discernible--love, suffering, obedience (conformity to God's will). These come through consistently as motive, means, and end.

According to the end and spirit of our special vocation, mysteries of the most sublime teaching are to be found in the humble and hidden life of the Holy Child Jesus, in which God manifests in a most wonderful manner the treasures of His Mercy and of His boundless Love. In that Divine Child, enclosed for nine months in the womb of His Virgin Mother, born in a stable, exposed to suffering and poverty, fleeing into Egypt, hidden and labouring in a humble workshop, is found our Divine Master, our Model and our Spouse; and from the living wells of His perfect humility, His divine charity, and His absolute obedience, we are to receive the spirit of the Holy Child Jesus. (RULE SHCJ, par. 2)

In this school of Divine Science, contemplating the Eternal Wisdom in the lowliness of His Humanity, we should seek to attain the knowledge of our own nothingness

and misery, and that of His Infinite love and mercy; we should learn to uproot the evil inclinations of our corrupt hearts, and to cultivate therein the germ of practical mortification, studying in the example of a hidden God the sweetness of suffering and contempt, that we may thus rejoice to labour and to die with Him in the constant practice of poverty, chastity, and obedience. (RULE SHCJ, par. 3)

In the rule on humility (adapted from that of St. Ignatius), we are bidden "with our whole strength to accept and desire what Christ our Lord loved and embraced" to the extent of wishing "to suffer insults, false witness and injuries...through the desire of imitating our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and of being clothed with His shame", so conforming our lives to His.

The order and emphasis are seen to be constant. Love is motive, stressed as knowledge that moves the will, not as emotion. Suffering is means, chosen because of the example of Christ, never in isolation. Obedience is end, perfect union in the conformity of our will with God's. The rule on obedience reiterates this forcefully: "All should give themselves up to perfect obedience, recognising the Superior whoever she may be in the place of Christ our Lord"; "they ought to have before their eyes God, our Creator and Lord, for love of whom they obey His creature"; "All should be prompt at the voice of the Superior as at the voice of Christ our Lord"; "Let each one convince herself that those who live under obedience ought to let themselves be ruled and guided by Divine Providence through their Superiors"; "the Sisters should endeavour to accustom themselves to regard not her whom they obey, but rather Him for Whose sake they all obey, Christ our Lord"; "Each one attending to her own duties and office should patiently wait, as from the hand of God, whatever may be decided for her".

A directive at once comprehensive and specific opens the purely ascetical Chapter 19 of the Rule:

From the Hidden Life of our Divine Spouse we should learn the value we ought to set on prayer and the interior life, making them the basis of our spiritual perfection, and the fountain whence we should draw help and strength to perform in a perfect manner the duties of charity in our active life.

This focuses the attention of Mother Connelly's daughters on the phase of our Lord's life which is least immediately suggestive of suffering, but from the earliest references the association is unmistakable--"In that Divine Child...exposed to suffering and poverty...is found our Model"; "studying in the example of a hidden God the sweetness of suffering and contempt". Love and obedience are inevitably linked with childhood; what insight joins to these suffering, even makes it central? A grasp perhaps of the utter emptying--*exinanivit seipsum*--of the Incarnation, most compellingly evident in the dependence of the Child.

This would indeed be best appreciated by one who had known natural motherhood. We recall the image of that Pietà of February 2, 1840--Cornelia, the grieving mother, holding the body of her two-year old son. He had died in her arms after severe burns resulting from an accident at play near a vat of boiling sugar at their Louisiana home. This incident had followed swiftly upon an oblation made in response to a sudden inspiration of grace. Overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude and wellbeing in the joy of home life and the fervor of conversion, she had cried: "O my God, if all this happiness be not for Thy glory and the good of my soul--take it from me. I make the sacrifice".

This scene prompts further consideration of

Cornelia Connelly's unusual vocation and its acceptance in the instinct for making a religious house or noviceship or school a Nazareth whose inmates grow in age and grace with liberty of spirit and loving guidance. It is less saying "no" to nature than "yes" to God. Positive joyous acceptance of God's way made known through ordinary means, this is the heritage of the Sisters of the Holy Child.

F U N E R A L O N C H R I S T M A S E V E

The dark crib and the waiting Christmas trees
Frame fittingly this Requiem -- close-linked
The journeys to and from eternities,
The two-fold fruit of the same tree, distinct,
Proper. How tender-reverent the hands
Of Mother Church cradling again to earth
The man's body, or holding in its bands
The image of the Child who comes to birth.
She does not put aside appearances
But sacrament and symbol are her speech,
Her children's nurture, given in the ways
That grief and joy are tangible to each
And God is in the heart's knowing; we see
Or bless Him blind before the mystery.

(Fire in the Well, p. 23)