

From the Archivist's Desk

Cornelia Connelly and the Christmas Crib

Her experience of the exuberant Roman celebration of Christmas, in which the *presepio*, the crib, played such an important part clearly captivated Cornelia's heart. In 1846 she created no less than 3 cribs for the first SHCJ celebration of Christmas at St Mary's Convent, Derby, as this extract from her Christmas letter to Merty up at Stonyhurst reveals:

"Then I must tell you we have three such nice presepios such as we had at Rome and described to you last year - and besides we have a little Altar for the Holy Child Jesus with a little wax figure that I brought from dear Rome. You would so like to see it."

Sister Aloysia Walker mentions one of these cribs in her wonderful account of the early days at Derby. "On Christmas Eve she put together a pretty crib in a corner of the room we then used as a Chapel"

The Annals for the early years of the Society, put together in 1904 by M M Theophila Laprimaudaye from a variety of sources, record that at Christmas 1849 in the temporary Chapel at St Leonards "was beautifully decorated and lighted up brilliantly with candles, placed in sconces at intervals on the walls in bunches of ivy. The little wax image of the Holy Child brought by our Mother from Rome was laid on moss over the Tabernacle, and a canopy was formed over it of vine leaves and grapes. The effect was most devotional though not rubrical and after many years the practice was given up." In addition to this unrubrical devotion there would have been a crib and the Annals show how Cornelia gradually expanded the cribs, presumably remembering how well populated Roman cribs were. Thus in 1854 we read that:

"The Crib at Christmas to represent the Grotto of the Nativity, was made by Rev. Mother herself, with great skill and taste and for the first time figures of Our Lady and St Joseph were introduced, watching over and adoring the Holy Babe."

Three years later, 1857, there was an innovation.

"This year for the first time, and every succeeding year till the Church was finished in 1868, the Crib was made at the end of the cloister outside the Chapel. It was much larger than in previous years, and the figures of Our Lady and St Joseph adoring the Infant King gave a life-like reality to a scene which presented the cold and poverty of the stable at Bethlehem. It was the goal of fervent pilgrimages from Christmas Eve till after the Epiphany, and silent worshippers might have been seen there from morning meditation till the evening examen closed the day."

It was even more devotional the next year and Theophila gives this description from the Sacristy Journal:

"For Christmas the Crib was as before in the lower cloister, with the addition of rejoicing angels, a flock of sheep, and more efforts to make it a better representation of nature."

In spite of the comment above, the location of the Crib was changed for Christmas 1860, when it was "arranged by our Mother in the chapter-room. She had painted for it a scene

representing in the distance the country round Bethlehem with a lake and a chain of mountains and sheep guarded by their shepherds. The Holy Family was grouped under broken arches and the effect of the whole was extremely devotional. A triduum of public processions to the Crib was made singing the 'Adeste' and saying the Holy Child's Litany."

Theophila's sources for the annals of the other growing number of SHCJ convents were very scrappy - it seems that house journals/ diaries, if kept at all, were usually thrown away after the brief report from the house to the General Chapters had been compiled. The 1904 General chapter ordered that in future every house must have someone appointed to keep a house diary so that the annals of the Society could be maintained.

From chance surviving records as well as from General Chapter reports and other sources, Theophila was able to compile brief annals for some houses before 1904. And so we know that at Layton Hill in 1875, "The Decorations exquisite of the Crib under the Altar." And that, in the following year, the crib had been enhanced: "The Crib was most lovely with a scene beneath the Altar newly painted by M.de Britto. The house also was most tastefully decorated and another crib in the cloister for the children nearly as beautiful as that in Chapel."

(Helen Forshaw SHCJ December 2006)