

*Be yourselves, only make those selves all that God wants them to be. CC*

## CORNELIA THE EDUCATOR

We do not know much about how Cornelia was educated. Tutors probably came to the house; she did not go to school or college. But she was an educated person in every sense of the word: she was able to take advantage of everything the dynamic and culturally rich city of Philadelphia had to offer: she married an educated man and shared his ideas and interests; as a parent she studied her children to discover the secret of each one's originality; in Rome she was avid to learn from the people who surrounded her and from the very churches and museums, and she studied Italian, painting, piano and voice; from her spiritual directors she learned about the spiritual life; and at Grand Coteau and the Trinità she learned how to teach in a formal setting. We know Cornelia was thinking of opening a little school in Natchez to help provide for the family when they came back Catholics. And certainly, Cornelia learned a great deal through her contact with Emily Bowles, an experienced educator.

Cornelia's originality in the field of education consists in her ability to absorb ideas from many people and places and combine them in a system completely her own. For example, she kept abreast of the best texts and educational theories, drawing from them whatever fit into her ever-evolving synthesis.

The object of her synthesis was the unique person, and her model, the incarnate Son of God – the Holy Child. Each person who passed through her hands was of infinite value, dignified by a shared humanity with this Child. Each one was destined to grow into an original variation on the model with talents and gifts just suited to that purpose. Cornelia, therefore, understood education as an organic incremental process in which each one's potential would gradually be called into realization until the plenitude ordained by God was reached. She took it for granted, therefore, that education began in the cradle and was life-long. The school years, the formal part of the process, were to be organized in such a way that body, mind and spirit found delight in becoming, and just the right stimulus to open up to the next stage of becoming. Graced with the Ignatian optic, Cornelia saw connections, not divisions; God in all things did away with false distinctions between sacred and secular. A geology lesson was as much about God as a religion lesson.

The year 1856 was a high point in the application of Cornelia's educational insights. She opened the teacher training college at St Leonards (formerly called All Souls). Already she had collected material for her future Book of Studies, a manual for teachers giving detailed directions for the teaching of each subject – so she knew precisely what she wanted to impart to the young student teachers. Through them, she would multiply her influence and diffuse her philosophy and methods in many directions.

Educational authorities noticed the success of the schools run by Holy Child Sisters in different places and the inspectors of Catholic schools praised their thoroughness and excellence. Cornelia was recognized as a pioneer, very sure in the methods she employed and systematically practical, even daring.

In a time when education for girls was generally superficial and banal, Cornelia conceived a way of educating that was integral and demanding. It included the subjects boys were expected to study. Once when a government examination sent watered-down questions to the girls in a subject studied by both girls and boys, Cornelia was indignant.

In the schools of the Society, each child learned through interacting with her peers. Recreation, spontaneous celebrations, games, outings, concerts and plays brought fun and variety to the school experience. Cornelia taught the children to meditate and they learned to recognize God's closeness in the chapel before the Blessed Sacrament and to carry that awareness to whatever activity awaited them outside. Each part of the day had its part to play in forming character and instilling values.

Cornelia wanted the learning process to be dynamic and lively, full of satisfaction for the children. The joy of mastering a single step brought its own reward. She placed special emphasis on the education of the senses and emotions. Art, music, movement and drama helped children to see, hear, taste and touch the beauty of the invisible hidden in the here and now.

The boarding school at St Leonards for upper and professional class pupils and the school for the middle classes, both on the same property (in England of the day, they

could never be mixed together), served as proving grounds for Cornelia's educational theories. Although the schools were separate, the children studied the same subjects, took the same examinations and reached equivalent levels of proficiency. Often, too, the children came together in the choir, at Mass, at games, and in dramatic productions.

Having been a mother, Cornelia knew how important a warm home atmosphere was for the happiness and growth of each child. In Cornelia's system, discipline was never rigid or hard but encouraging of self-discipline, integrity and honor. Trust was the corner stone of all her dealings. Throughout her religious life, with both religious and children, she projected a youthfully fun-loving, enthusiastic and infectious spirit. School was a happy place and the nuns made it so by their naturalness and affectionate way with their charges – as mothers with their dear children. But they were discouraged from creating dependencies and little cliques. They were to direct the children's affections to God. If the model was the Holy Child Jesus, his attractiveness and his own reaching for growth and maturity, day by day and step by step, was to inform the growth of each child.

St Leonards was called specifically a "School of the Holy Child" because it was meant to be just that. It was the cradle of a typical spirit. But in all the schools inspired by Cornelia's methods, there could be found the same climate of happy diligence, freedom of spirit, affection, and desire to give of one's best on the part of teachers and pupils. To this day, in Holy Child schools, there's something of what an early St Leonards pupil called a spirit "delicious and heavenly". It is Cornelia's spirit and her legacy to us passed on from generation to generation, but very particularly through her educational vision.

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(from an unpublished work in progress by Elizabeth Mary Strub, SHCJ,  
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