

Part II. CORNELIA AND GIOACCHINO VENTURA

● *Sr. Mary Ursula Blake, SHCJ*

One of the chief tasks of the Institute of SHCJ Studies is to rediscover the background reading which Cornelia Connelly used in building up her spiritual teaching, especially her masterly dogmatic passages on the Incarnation composed for her Constitutions in her earliest days at St. Leonards-on-Sea. A possible source of inspiration for these passages turned up in 1969 in the most obvious of places—the very room at St. Leonards where Cornelia worked and slept for over thirty years, what is now a small oratory. It was among books that were kept there, either because she was known to have used them or simply because she had written her name in them.

Perhaps this book has been overlooked until recently because it is in Italian and has the rather general title, *La Bellezze della Fede*, “The Wonders of the Faith.”¹ It was written by Gioacchino Ventura, an ex-general of the Theatines, and is mainly concerned with the Incarnation and the manifestation of Christ at the Epiphany as understood by the Fathers of the Church. The fly-leaf tells us that it was

“The gift of
Placido Doria
Rome March 23, 1843”
to “Cornelia Mor. A. Connelly”. [sic]²

Cornelia's name appears on another page with “Rome” below. Actually only Pierce was there at that date enquiring about his chances of being accepted for the priesthood. The book must have travelled a great deal in Cornelia's luggage and been with her at the Trinità, in Paris, Derby and finally at St. Leonards. That it is a serious theological work should not be obscured by us by the differences in style between early nineteenth-century Italian and mid-twentieth-century English.

A few notes about its author will place the book in the context of his life and time: Ventura, a Sicilian who lived from 1792-1861, spent most of his life at Sant' Andrea della Valle in Rome. He tried to build both philosophical and political bridges between the old and new Europe. It was he, it seems, who pressed for a return to patristic studies and to Thomism. He was, moreover, defined as “The man with one idea: the Christian idea; the man with only one book: the Bible.”

Yet he certainly worked for his idea in a great many fields. He was an educationalist and left the Jesuit scholasticate in Sicily because there was an attempt to impose on the schools “pre-Suppression” theories of education. He was a publicist and responsible for founding *L'Enciclopedia Cattolica* (1821-3). He held the Chair of Canon Law at the Sapienza in Rome and had a considerable influence on his students.

Though there was a certain naiveté about Padre Ventura who perhaps looked back too often to medieval Christendom and the Guelph City States, he also had a feel for the social needs of his day. He worked for a confederation of Italian States under the presidency of the Pope and tried to get Pius IX to give a Constitution to his own States. He even developed a plan for suffrage and for a house of peers, as well as for a railway network in the Papal States.

His manifold activities did not keep him from the ministry of the Word. He was chosen four times for the Lenten sermons at St. Peter's, as he was later for those at La Madeleine in Paris. At the request of St. Vincent Pallotti, Ventura preached the ecumenically inspired sermons for the Octave of the Epiphany at Sant' Andrea della Valle. These were in connection with the celebration of a different rite of the Mass each day of the Octave, an event which was—and is—a great feature of the Roman Christmas season. Hence he became quite a specialist in speaking on the Incarnate Word; on the Child at Bethlehem giving light to the Gentiles. He is also reputed to have been the pioneer in opening up in these homilies a sound new vein of Mariological teaching in regard to Mary as mother of men. These sermons were published in essay form in three volumes under the title: *Le Bellezze della Fede*. The first of these volumes, at least, was presented to Cornelia Connelly who may have attended the Epiphany Octave in January 1836, since it was preached only ten minutes' walk from the Connelly's apartment in the Palazzo Simonetti (the present Banco di Roma in Via del Corso).

If Ventura's essays on the Incarnate Word seem to breathe a somewhat pessimistic air concerning “our corrupt hearts” (an aspect which Cornelia modified considerably in the opening passages of her Constitutions), at least he worked without counting the cost in health or reputation to spread the “Good News” of Christ to both the Church and the world. His basic aim was to bring man to know God's *goodness* and so replace fear by love.³ None could read *Le Bellezze della Fede* without being struck by the author's “courageous . . . disinterested and . . . persevering zeal . . . to draw hearts to God.” (Cf. SHCJ Constitutions, par. 108)

Below are translations of those passages (pp. 29-62) which seem to find an echo in Cornelia's writings:

The Word of God made Man
The great bulwark of the Faith

*When Jesus was born in
Bethlehem of Juda in the days
of King Herod. (Mt. 2:1)*

... How comes it, ask the commentators, that man receives such special treatment, such care and love at the hour of his creation; he is

inferior to the angels by nature, "thou has made him a little less than the angels" (Ps.8) and hence he is neither the greatest nor the most perfect of God's works?

In a word or two St. Paul reveals the mystery and answers the question; for he says that the first Adam is the figure of the Second Adam, that is, of Jesus Christ. "Adam prefigured the one to come" (Rom.5:15). . . . [pp.29-30]

Like all other Christian mysteries, this mystery is explained not only by God's goodness but also by man's need. . . . [p. 33]

Thus, the Christian mysteries are meaningful not only because of the infinite perfection of God's nature and the wonderful outpourings of his tender love, but also because of the infinite misery of man, to which sin has brought him, and because of the need he has of supernatural and divine remedies to effect his cure.

One such mystery is that the divine Saviour who, *manifests* himself first of all not only as true man, but as man-child, as poor, humble and suffering like the least of men to establish with men a permanent alliance, a perfect communion of equality and love.

Human reason, left to itself, cannot grasp this at all. On the contrary, it gets upset or puzzled or out of its depth. As St. Paul says, the obstinate Jew finds this holy mystery a scandal because of the majesty and grandeur of God; the blind Gentile rails at it as a foolish bit of credulity: "to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Gentiles foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:23). But the true Christian who walks in the paths of eternal salvation, receives the mystery with joy, is attracted by it, delights in it, venerates it and admires it as the masterpiece of the most tender love, of the boundless power, and wisdom of God.

This is because the Christian is instructed by the light of faith by means of which—according to Christ's saying—the heavenly Father reveals the greatest mysteries to those who are lowly and loving and gives them a practical understanding of them which he denies to the pride of profane learning. "Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them to little ones" (Mt. 11:25).

With the help of faith, they understood that it took this immense humiliation of God to raise man from the abyss of miseries, from the deep abasement to which he had fallen on account of sin.

In the eyes of faith, therefore, this great and joyful mystery—of a God who manifests himself to men in the miserable condition of a poor and unknown little child—has its source not only in the infinite condescension of God, but also in the great need which man had of a Saviour who would, above all, inspire him with love and trust and through this trust and love would draw him and lead him to God himself. [pp. 34-5].

Adam and Cain after their sins. The sense of fear and lack of trust was dominant in the heart of man prior to the coming of the Saviour. . . . [p. 36].

The God who had been offended, tempered the rigours of justice with his mercy by making his loving promises at the same time as he pronounced his terrible warnings. When he described the series of misfortunes that man would encounter as his punishment, he pointed to the Redeemer who would provide the remedy. This was the loving ruse by which divine wisdom drew the dearest of his earthly creatures from the abyss of his sin. Thus hope strengthened man against himself. (cf. Ws. 10.1)

Despite the fact that this wonderful promise of a future reconciliation was spread abroad and perpetuated, nevertheless the concept of God's indignation, of his first anathema, of the sentence against human nature on account of sin was so deeply rooted in man's mind that trust in the coming Mediator was difficult for the majority of men. A few there were, however, whose livelier faith and purer love raised them to the level of intimate and loving communing with God. But, all in all, the enigma of salvation and the mystery of pardon which, as St. Paul says, the ancient Fathers saluted as far off in the mists of a remote future (Heb.11) did not succeed in eliminating fear. . . . [pp.37-8].

This fear of God—so different a thing from the holy fear which makes men wise—only corrupted man the more and estranged him the farther from God.

It is true that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Eccles. 1:22) and is the ordinary way in which grace enters and becomes mistress of the soul, but the holy fear which has these effects is rooted in a hidden love of God. It is really no more nor less than sorrow for the loss of grace or a fear of losing it—that grace which belongs to the God who is severe in his chastisements and is rich in his rewards. This type of fear does not estrange the soul but draws it to God. It is love but of that reticent, reverent kind which befits a son or a bride. . . . [p. 39].

It was difficult for man to return to trust in God and to love for him. God himself, therefore, had to come down as his equal.

How in the world could man arise from this abyss of misery, abasement and brutality into which he had fallen? He had once been so noble and perfect a creature but now he had become so degenerate and crippled in all his thinking and willing, with forty centuries of crooked ways, error, superstition, and crime that were, by now, second nature to him. How could he be reclaimed?

So great a reform could only be brought about by means that were diametrically opposed to those which had brought man to such a plight. . . .

But was this an easy matter, to make man pass over from servile fear—the reason for his debasement and dejection—to a filial love of God, which was the condition on which depended his conversion of heart and the restoration of his dignity as man? . . .

To carry out a reform of this magnitude, a renewal which involved the depths of man's being, God himself had to come in search of his creature across the immense chasm which sin had caused between heaven and earth, between God and man; but he needed to come in the guise of his greatest mercy and most tender love.

Even in human relations, those who are of little or of less account, who are feeble or poor do not dare to approach the great and powerful, the rich and the strong—much less feel at ease in conversation with them—unless the latter make the first advances and treat them more or less as equals.

Likewise, a child does not love its parents unless they have first come down to its level, making themselves little for its sake, taking its small interests to heart, imitating its ways and talking its language; it is the mother's conversation which stimulates its mind and shows it how to talk; it is the mother's smile and show of tenderness which warms its heart and brings out its trust and love.

If this is true of human behaviour, how much truer of the relationship between man and God. . . .

A child who has made his father angry is frightened when he sees him coming and runs away. Even if the father is looking for his wayward son to hug him, the boy will never come near his potential judge unless he can see a kind expression on his father's face. In the same way, says St. Bernard, if God wanted us to feel enough courage to approach him, he had to show himself in the guise of a Saviour clothed in gentleness and kindness, as St. Paul describes him; else, at his first appearance on earth, man would have fled from him, even as Adam did from before his sight. Man would have succumbed to desperation and fear on hearing that there had come on earth the God whose laws he had violated, whose patience he had tried, and whose love and gifts he had spurned. (Cf. St. Bernard, *I de Epiph.*).

To stop man in his flight . . . God needed, not only to show himself but also to hide the splendour of his majesty and the reasons for his anger beneath a veil of humility, clemency and sweetness and to come appraised in the most attractive way possible.

According to St. Paul's wonderful teaching, God our Saviour found it necessary to become like man in everything, to become his brother, to come down to his level and show him the familiarity, trust and affection of the kind which belongs to people of the same condition. In this way he would become known as the God of mercy, drawing man to himself by sheer goodness: *Per omnia debuit fratribus similari, ut misericors fieret* (Heb. 2:17). . . .

The same prophets who had carried heavenward the desires of earth were commissioned by God to announce consoling promises on his behalf: that the Saviour would indeed be sent in visible form and as mercy personified (Ps. 56:4), and that this same mercy would rush to find humanity which was lost, bring him back holding him to his heart (Ps. 22). [pp. 41-5].

To man's express need, Jesus Christ made answer by being born. The resemblance of his humanity to ours.

And so we come to the mystery of boundless mercy, of unbelievable condescension, and of most tender love which the Son of God fulfilled by becoming man, by being born as man, by manifesting himself to men in the very substance of humanity: *cum in substantia nostrae mortalitatis apparuit*, as the Church sings (Epiphany preface).

This is a great, sublime and inexpressible mystery which astonishes and numbs the mind of man while it speaks sweetly to his heart filling it with love and trust. Yet it is all summed up in St. Matthew's simple phrase: "*Jesus being born in Bethlehem. . . .*"

Let human reason, therefore, says St. Peter Chrysologus in his eloquent second homily for the Epiphany, stop teasing itself in the following way: How *could* the infinitely great God, who is infinitely rich and powerful, come into the world as a real man and on this account submit to the humiliation of being enclosed in the womb of a young maiden, to be born from her flesh, to be wrapped in poor swaddling clothes, to cry and beg for his early sustenance from his mother's breast, to suffer all the troubles and disadvantages of infancy, pass through all the states and conditions of man, and experience all his needs. . . .

However incomprehensible and strange this abasement of the divine majesty may seem, the whole difficulty is resolved by the facts of God's infinite mercy and the infinite misery of man. Because it was a case of bringing man the grace of reconciliation and pardon, of dispelling the fear in his heart and of exciting trust and love with a view to transforming man's heart, it was essential for God to come to man in this manner. . . .

In fact, we all know—says the same Father—since daily living is our guide, the power of attraction which a baby has. There is no roughness it cannot conquer, no ferocity it cannot soften, no cruelty it cannot hold back. The sight of a baby mollifies hardness, tempers strictness and extinguishes anger. . . . Contrariwise, it demands love, captivates the affections, awakens grace, implants charity . . . "*sic ergo nasci voluit qui amari voluit non timere*" [St. Peter Chrys.] . . .

Let us penetrate still further into those mysterious depths of God's mercy which St. Paul calls *profunda Dei* (I Cor. 2:10). Granting that—according to what the same apostle has told us—only a perfect likeness of the Saviour to ourselves could make him really one with us and inspire us with complete confidence, what could the Divine Word do to acquire this perfect resemblance?

Firstly, because we are poor little creatures made of flesh and blood, he had to assume flesh and blood himself (Heb. 2:14). Secondly, because we are men, he did not assume just any type of flesh and blood but that of man, that is a true human nature like ours (Phil. 2:7). In becoming man, he might have taken it as it was in the state of

innocence and had the prerogatives of that happy state: to be healthy, strong, incorruptible, immortal, while we are weak, infirm, subject to corruption and death. But to ensure an absolute resemblance he took, not only flesh, human flesh, but one which could suffer like our own, and be subject to all the miseries and pains which result from sin, without being guilty of it (Rom. 8:3). [pp. 45-9].

First effect of the birth of the incarnate God: the visible manifestation of divine goodness. . . .

Apparuit gratia salvatoris nostri Dei

Apparuit Benignitas et Humanitas (Ti. 20:3). . . .

The Epiphany, therefore, is not just any manifestation of the divinity but specifically of the God who loves and who wants to be loved. . . .

Moses made known God the creator, master and sovereign, the God of power, of terrible severity; Jesus Christ appeared on earth and made known God the saviour, loving, tender and compassionate, God who is father, brother, bridegroom, and friend. . . . [pp. 49-52].

Second effect, . . . the hope of pardon.

This wonderful manifestation of divine goodness in the birth of God incarnate is not only made in order to enlighten man's mind about the dearest of God's attributes. It is also to fill his heart with the certainty of this consoling truth: to be gentile or a great sinner is no obstacle to mercy and pardon. . . .

Jesus was born in order to destroy, cancel out sin, and to save the sinner. We cannot, therefore, fear—continues St. Bernard—that he who is truly God and Son of God has not the power to save us, nor lacks the loving intention and the sincere will to do so, since he was born truly man and a son of man, like ourselves. . . . [pp. 52-3].

The very state of childhood in which he is born tells us better than anything how easy it is to placate him. Everyone knows how easily a child forgives: *Parvulus est, leviter placari potest, quis enim nesciat quia puer facile donat* (St. Bernard, *I de Epiph.*).

We are poor, we have little or nothing to give. Yet—if only we want to—we can become worthy to be reconciled with God through this Child. . . . Not that this reconciliation can ever happen without repentance, but our mere repentance would be a very tiny thing to merit divine pardon. . . . We must, accordingly, take from him to supply for our indigence: we shall take his little body in our hands as though it were our own. Since he is born of our stock, it is our very own as it is written: "a child is born to us and a son is given to us" (Is. 9:6) [Cf. St. Bernard, *I de Epiph.*] [pp. 58-9].

The third effect of the coming of the Word of God made man. Confidence in God and familiarity with him.

Man has no adequate expression of his misery and only God can provide a remedy: it is hard for man to remain away from God. Yet God's majesty is boundless and man's mind boggles at the thought of his immensity; the very idea makes him tense. . . .

For the God he needed had to be accessible, someone who trusted him, an equal: this did indeed foreshadow the great mystery of the Man-God which alone could satisfy this great need of man. Only thus could the dialectic be restored and man's heart find peace. Tertullian says that one of the most valuable things resulting from the birth and manifestation of the Man-God is that man gained courage to present himself before God without fear, to trust him like an equal and love him like a bride (*Adv. Marcion*, II, 27).

In fact, the apostles had hardly begun to announce the *Good News* of this dear coming when an astounding transformation began in the very depths of human nature: the heart of those who listened gladly was raised—as David had prophesied—to the very height of which creaturely affection is capable: they passed from fear to love, from disgust to familiarity, from hatred to the love of God (cf. Ps. 63).

We Christians, born and brought up in the bosom of Christianity who absorb with our mother's milk a habit of confidence in God and of the true faith which is its source and strength, we who learned in infancy to say "Our Father" to God and "our brother, our friend" to Christ, we are in the happy impossibility of knowing and weighing just how much the Man God has done for us in starting our lives on this path of intimate love and trust. We are inclined to think that these frequent spontaneous feelings are natural to the soul. But to be convinced that they are not so natural after all, but are the result of God's coming in human form amongst us, it is enough to glance at the people who have not known this coming and who do not possess this faith. . . . [pp. 59-61].

The second part of *Le Bellezze della Fede* [pp. 67-307] consists of comment on the spiritual interpretation by the Fathers of the Church on several Old Testament episodes, notably that of Joseph and his brethren and of Rebecca as the bride of Isaac, in both cases as types of Christ and his Church.

A great deal is made of the two encounters of Rebecca at the well and of frequent other meetings at wells of living water which occur in the Old Testament, leading up to the great encounter of Christ and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well and "the spring", as Padre Ventura describes it, "to which Jesus Christ in his Gospel invites all who have a genuine thirst, that is, a true desire of the knowledge and the grace of God". The well where Isaac first sees Rebecca is called "the well of Living and Seeing" and the author makes much of Origen's comment on this name and on the way in which the Patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, as well as Moses, conclude the ceremonial of their espousals beside wells, "because", says Origen, "these

espousals signify the union of the faithful soul with the divine Word." And he adds: "The well is the prophetic doctrine of the Scriptures which must first be received and believed in before the soul can become Christ's spouse." (Orig., *in Gen.*)

St. Gregory adds further comment on the same topic: "The well is Sacred Scripture in which—like water in a well—the deep science of God is to be found, that God who lives and sees within [us]; by giving our minds to drink of the mysteries of this divine book, he lives and sees in us, that is, he vivifies and illuminates us. Before the coming of Christ, however, this book was closed and sealed, as the Apocalypse tells us. No one could open and read it, much less understand it. It was the pride and glory of the divine Lamb, the Lion of Juda, to open the mysterious seals and give the book to all men so that they might read it. This he could do; they are all *his* prize, redeemed with his blood. . . . The road where Isaac walks and which leads to the well is the humility of the passion of God's only Son, *Via quae ducit ad puteum est humilitas Passionis Unigeniti . . .*" (cf. "to run with ardour in the way", Constitutions of the SHCJ, par. 4).

FOOTNOTES

1. G. Ventura (Rome, 1839).
2. The name "Placido" has not been found in the genealogy of the family of Prince Doria who married Mary, daughter of Lord Shrewsbury, and who was a friend of the Connellys.
3. This account of Ventura has been culled from *regnum Dei*, Collectanea Theatina, XVII (1961), pp. 1-268 passim, a volume devoted to studies on Ventura.

RESPONSE from England

SOURCE was welcomed in the English province, and many individuals wrote or spoke their pleasure. A student, for instance, said: "I would like to record my appreciation and enthusiasm"; and another sister well into the seventies, wrote: "I think it is very helpful and should help us to get to know dear Mother Foundress better, somehow she seems to be very near us lately, and I am sure she is pleased with the way we are trying to move with times". Sr. Marie Thérèse Bisgood sent her congratulations. A few sisters found time to respond to the invitation to share their ideas with us, and though it is not possible to print all their contributions, we should like to thank them and refer rapidly to some of their points.

Sister Mary Magdalen O'Brien asked: "Should we not be relating our own contemporary Christological insights to the charism of Cornelia—the rock from which we S.H.C.J. are hewn? Karl Rahner's suggestion that there is a true sense in which the writings etc. of the saints are a real source of theology in the Church would seem very applicable here" (Yes, indeed). Sister Helen Forshaw thought we should be considering (and how right she is) "... the work done in schools, the sort of people entering, the influence of priests and contemporary spiritual writers, and so on. There must be many of us now who find it very hard to imagine what life was like when the convent schools were small with tiny classes, and the differences between these schools and the parochial schools were very sharp." Sister Pamela Mary Hussey drew attention to the elements in Cornelia's life which made it so deeply paschal, the dying to live, "loss without losing" as Sister put it. Sister Mary Cuthbert urges us not to lose sight of the place that faith played in Cornelia's life and concluded her letter by saying: "... the more each member of the S.H.C.J. can approximate to the immense faith which animated Cornelia Connelly, the more we shall be living authentically according to the pattern she set".

One contribution we are printing in full, that by Sister Mary Virginia Wallwork. Sister finished reading theology for the S.T.L. at Heythrop College in July 1970, and for her third degree at the School of African and Oriental studies of London University in June 1971 before joining Sister Catherine Hallahan in West Africa. We print her complete paper, hoping that it will challenge you to fruitful discussion.