

Cornelia Connelly: Pioneer in education

By Sister Lou Ella Hickman, Contributor

Education, both in England and the United States, during the nineteenth century was based on the Protestant Bible. As a general rule, it consisted mainly of rote memorization. Translation: dull and boring. A Catholic nun named Cornelia Connelly wanted to educate the whole child so she included subjects such as art, music, writing, math and history in her Book of the Order of Studies.

Connelly was born in the United States in 1809 and converted to Catholicism in 1835 with her husband Pierce. Pierce's conversion led him to the priesthood, which meant he and Cornelia had to separate. Pope Gregory XVI granted them a deed of separation in 1844. Two years later the Holy Father sent her to England to begin a religious community of teaching sisters.

Catholic children of poor and middle class families had little or no access to an education so after Connelly established the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, the small community of sisters taught at night and on Sundays in order to make their classes available.

At that time, upper and middle class children were required to attend separate schools on the convent grounds; however, they studied the same subjects and took the same tests. Sister Cornelia believed girls should be as educated as boys and included girls in the same subjects. Even though Sister Cornelia stressed academics and the arts, she also made time for fun.

Though the government was impressed with the school's success, her bishop "was scandalized" by reports that students were being taught to dance and play cards. "If you discover this to be true, stop it quietly," the bishop wrote to Sister Cornelia.

Success was due to Sister Cornelia's wide reading about education and her willingness to try new ideas.

The education of her students did not rest on her shoulders alone, so in 1856, Sister Cornelia began a teacher training college at St. Leonards-by-the-Sea.

Although other religious communities of sisters were teaching prior to Sister Cornelia's arrival, their efforts were hampered by England's anti-Catholic attitude. However, with the Roman Catholic Relief Act in 1829, the Oxford movement of 1833 and the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850 a climate favoring Catholic based education began to emerge.

Sister Cornelia saw to it that religion was as much an intellectual study as other subjects. Yet religion was not merely a heady subject as she also included time for the students to grow spiritually.

Early in her marriage, Sister Cornelia lost two of her children; a girl who died a few weeks after birth and a two and half year old son who died as a result of a severe burn. These experiences helped forge her conviction that each child in the classroom was the child Jesus. Education, then, embraced the whole child; allowing him or her to be uniquely his or herself and to "to make that self just what Our Lord wants it to be."

Today's religious sisters are called to respond to the needs of our times. Sister Cornelia wanted her congregation to meet "the wants of the age."

Some 400 sisters continue Cornelia's legacy of education in 14 countries on four continents. Students continue learn to dance, sing and paint in all the various ways God gives each one.

The sisters are also health care professionals, social workers, pastoral care workers, as well as parish administrators and lawyers.

"It is not presumption to have hope and joy and confidence in God's grace," Sister Cornelia would say.

January 21, 2011

From: "South Texas Catholic; Roman Catholic Diocese of Corpus Christi."
<http://www.southtexascatholic.com/display.asp?id=1091>