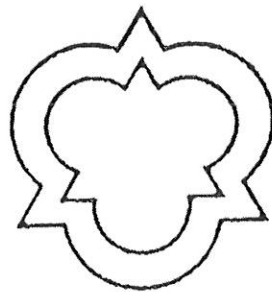


Society of the Holy Child Jesus

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“Handing on the Charism:
Cornelia Connelly’s
Vision for Education”



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Handing on the Charism : Cornelia Connelly's Vision for Education by Anne Murphy SHCJ.

The Prospect before us : Crisis

In these past weeks since 11 September 2001 we have made our corporate journey through shock , grief, anger, fear and have heard the many arguments for and against conciliation or retaliation. The landscape of our minds has radically changed as we contemplate the prospect before us in the 21st century and the future of our children. As one commentator remarked , much of what we saw as urgent before, seems trivial or at least postponable in the light of present uncertainties. The keystone of Cornelia Connelly's vision of education was 'to meet the wants of the age', so it is impossible to write this paper and ignore what is filling our thoughts at present. Retrieving her charism has nothing to do with antiquarianism, or nostalgia, or a heritage trip into our 19c past. Her vision, as indeed the whole Christian message, has to be for now, a vision to live by so that the future may be constructed. This is not to undervalue the fact that her educational vision has inspired many in the past 153 years. But it is its dynamic quality that we need to grasp, not just the fact of its survival.

A Teaching Charism .

St Paul (1.Cor 12 4-11) speaks of differing Charisms or gifts within the Christian community . Some have the gift of healing, others of wisdom, of administration, of communication, of teaching. A charism is given not for oneself, but for others, for the building of the community of faith. As teachers and educators, we recognise that many who have gone before us were particularly gifted in handing on the faith, either as individuals or communities. Within the great Christian Tradition, there are little traditions, or charisms of education : the Benedictine, Dominican, Ignatian, or Salesian. Recent scholarship has 'retrieved ' or made visible the great contribution made to Christian education by women: Angela Merici and the Ursulines, Mary Ward and the IBVM's, Madeleine Sophie Barat and the Sacred Heart sisters in France, Catherine McCauley and the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland. These women were pioneers in education for girls and met the wants of their age. The prospect before them was bleak and unpromising . Most of them were practical visionaries, whose contemplative life flowed into an intensely active one. The American born Cornelia Connelly belongs to this group of 19c women educators and founders (French, English, Irish) and we would not want to view her work apart from theirs .

There is a certain irony that a fuller appreciation of their work coincides with a decline in vocations to the congregations they founded. The 19c convent school, poor school or training college was part of what they created. In most cases their work has been handed on to others. Handing on always involves letting go, and Religious sisters have learned to be non-possessive about this and to be grateful that we had the privilege of a major share in educational

leadership in the 19c and 20c . But can the charism which inspired our work and served us so well for so long, continue to be relevant for you in the changed educational circumstances of the 21st? Was Cornelia's charism for a time only , or has it a relevance for today? If so, how is it best handed on?

Tradition & Change : An Analogy

At the start of this talk I want to illustrate what I mean by continuity and change using a musical analogy. In recent years considerable effort has been made by musicologists to produce a performance as near as possible to what Bach, or Handel might have experienced: period instruments, small choir, correct score, exact location. To hear Bach played on a German organ in Leipzig, or the Monteverdi Vespers in San Marco, Venice , would be to replicate as nearly as possible the composer's intentions. All very well, said a wise observer, but what about the audience? A 17c or 18c audience would 'hear ' music differently from us. Our 21 c. 'ears' have experienced jazz, rock, soul, not to mention a-tonal music. We 'receive' Bach in a different way. And so it is with our Christian faith. I can never have the faith of my Irish Grandmother ; but I am the kind of Christian I am because I 'received it' from my parents and grandparents, and friends . But I receive it as a 21st century person, not as they did. I hear the music of the Christian message with ears attuned to 20c sounds. Each of us has to replay, reread, or re-appropriate the Christian message, and by implication the Cornelian vision, for our own time. Our performance will be both creative, but at the same time faithful to the original intentions of the composer. So **creative fidelity** is the key to handing on the charism.

Cornelia's Story

The principal of creative fidelity has to be applied to the way in which **Cornelia's personal story** has been handed down in our Society and in our schools. I think in the past SHCJ sisters thought we knew the story, and felt we had caught the 'Holy Child spirit' almost by osmosis. It somehow got transmitted and we were pleased when another generation seemed to have caught the charism, which seemed clear and uncontroversial. Then came Vatican II, and the need to rearticulate our 19c Constitutions in a way more relevant to the late 20c. The archives of Cornelian material were made available, and the work for her canonization began. Today we have a fuller picture of Cornelia than any of her early biographers. We now recognise that they wrote in a broadly hagiographical way, for our 'edification' and certainly for an 'inhouse' convent culture. One of our sisters, Judith Lancaster SHCJ , is working on a critical study of the six English biographers of Cornelia from Maria Joseph Buckle (1890's) to Radegunde Flaxman (1991). Almost every generation seemed to need a 'new' biography , to tell the story in a fresh and more contemporary way. Judith's work promises to be a facinating account of how the story of Cornelia and her vision was 'handed on' among her own sisters. It is a story of differing perspectives, significant omissions, new insights, and personal preferences. In the end we begin to hear the multiple voices which have transmitted our charism and the creative new ways in which it can be adapted. We have French, English and American interpretations of Cornelia. We await the first African one.

In this Conference group where some are more familiar than others with Cornelia's story, a short outline may be necessary. Cornelia Peacock was born in Philadelphia in 1809; her father a Yorkshire man, died when she was nine; her mother, of German descent , died

when she was thirteen. Cornelia went to live with her half sister. As far as we know, she never went to school and presumably was educated at home. In later life Cornelia does not speak about her parents, and we know very little about her early family life. We know a great deal about contemporary Philadelphia, proud of its Quaker origins and its role in the Declaration of Independence a generation earlier. Aged twenty-three she married Pierce Connelly, an Episcopalian minister. She and Pierce settled in Natchez, Mississippi, where she fulfilled the role of pastor's wife and where their two eldest children were born. Within five years they had both decided to become Catholics. Cornelia was received into the Church in New Orleans. Her profession of faith was made in the old Ursuline convent, the site of the first Catholic school for girls in Louisiana. Pierce delayed until they made their journey to Rome. Their equivalent of the grand tour of Europe and their stay in Rome was deeply formative spiritually and culturally. It has been said that Rome was Cornelia's 'university', where she explored French, Italian, history, art, music and some theology.

In 1537 a financial crash called Pierce and Cornelia back to Natchez, and the need to earn a living. Pierce found it difficult to find suitable work and finally was offered a position as teacher at the Jesuit school in Grand Coteau, Louisiana. He remained restless and unsettled. Cornelia taught music at the Sacred Heart convent close by. The deeply French missionary culture of the Church in Louisiana was in marked contrast to the Anglo/American culture of their native Philadelphia. One of the bishops in Louisiana at that time said 'To be French is to be Catholic; to be Anglo American is to be Protestant'. Cornelia's time with the Sacred Heart sisters was her first formal experience of schooling for girls, and the evidence is that it was very important for her own educational vision. During this time in Louisiana, Pierce and Cornelia lost two of their five children, one as a result of a tragic accident. The little grave at Grand Coteau where they were buried, was a constant reminder of their loss. It was also a prelude to the extraordinary circumstances which led Pierce and Cornelia to petition for a separation so that Pierce might be ordained as a Catholic priest in Rome (1845).

By 1846 Cornelia was on her way to England, at the request of Pope Gregory XVI, to found a congregation whose main work would be the education of girls of all classes. This was a huge challenge, even for one who had already crossed so many cultural and spiritual boundaries. A few years earlier Bishop Wiseman had seen the need for 'non-cloistered religious trained in the spirit of which St Ignatius is the master; who, while deeply religious, would know the world and the needs of the world'. Cornelia, it seemed to him was uniquely fitted for this task. Later this quality of being 'religious yet in touch with the contemporary world' would work against Cornelia. The clergy almost always called her Mrs Connelly; she retained something of the status of married women even if separated from her husband. She was a good business woman, counted influential laymen among her friends and could hold her own in most company. She was not the docile, religious woman expected in Victorian society. The Connelly v Connelly case gave her unwelcome notoriety and the 'scandal' of her apparent abandonment of her children led to the perception of her as an 'un-natural mother' in non-Catholic circles.

Those of us who feel the pressures of contemporary life, and the paper work and exacting demands on teachers, especially heads, will empathize with Cornelia. Her educational vision was forged against a background of exceptional emotional strain in the loss of her children, litigation in Court, endless administrative difficulties over property, and internal difficulties in her order. She was constantly interrupted when trying to write letters or collect her thoughts.

It sometimes must have seemed that Education had to be fitted in what time was left. We could have no better model for courage and resilience under pressure.

Sources for Cornelia's Educational Vision : 1846-1879.

Cornelia and her sisters settled first at Derby, then at St Leonards-on Sea in Sussex, and from there to London, Preston and Blackpool, and then to America and France. How do we know about Cornelia's educational principles? Most importantly from her many letters to and from sisters. In the early years she was both religious Superior and teacher- trainer to those who taught in the schools and this required her constant direction and encouragement. A second important resource was reports from Inspectors. Thomas William Marshall was appointed the first 'faith' HMI for Catholic schools in England, Wales, Scotland, holding the post from 1848-1860. He was an admirer of Cornelia, her methods and results. He noted that her schools were above all 'happy schools' and this is also attested to by parents and former pupils. By 1863, Cornelia was confident enough to produce her Book of Studies. One of the sources for this was the important Jesuit *ratio studiorum*. Cornelia's Latin was weak and she asked Sr Maria Joseph Buckle to produce a translation for her. At first glance this is a Victorian handbook, up to date with the best educational method of its time, but hardly a blueprint for our own. Its language and rhetoric can be alien to us. But on its own terms it embodies a deeply Christian and humanistic approach to child centred education, undoubtedly based on her own experience as a mother with practical insight into child psychology.

Those who have studied Cornelia's educational vision agree that she was not an original thinker but her particular genius lay in identifying and implementing the best practice of others and learning from her own experience. She was to spend some thirty three years (1846-79) forging a coherent system of education which included teacher training (tertiary level), girl's secondary schools, and the primary or parish schools. In this talk I would like to identify certain principles underlying her vision of education.

1. Original Mission Statement :For the glory of God and the salvation of souls

Ad majoriam Dei Gloriam (to the greater glory of God) was for Cornelia, as for the Jesuits, an important mission statement of what she was about. *Dieu Seul* : God alone, was a frequent heading on her letters and is found in many of her writings. The phrase 'for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls' would have been the preferred mission statement for most religious orders in the 19c. As our old rule expressed it :

The end of this Society is not only to attend to our own salvation and greater perfection, but as far as possible, with the help of Divine Grace..... to employ ourselves in procuring the salvation and perfection of our neighbour'. (Constitutions of the SHCJ 2:6)

This mission statement was translated into educational practice, not always in accordance with the original intentions. (A teacher in St Joseph's College Blackpool said the brothers there had set out to make the boys saints, gentlemen and scholars in that order. We had a parallel tradition). Recently a critical observer of the changes in the Society of the Sacred Heart noted that in the late 20c they had dropped these fundamental aims from both the Constitutions of the Order and from goals for schools. She argued that they had betrayed their original charism, by

a focus on justice in this world rather than salvation in the next, on the importance of horizontal relationships at the expense of our vertical relationship to God. Such conservative criticism can make us pause for thought. However, 'Love God, love thy neighbour' are not mutually exclusive but inter-related commandments. Today our revised Constitutions say :

'For this is our mission to help others to believe that He (God) lives and acts in them and in our world, and to rejoice in His Presence' (Constitutions SHCJ :1994, p.10)

Following the call of Vatican II, we want a 'this worldly' spirituality' and see the building of God's kingdom of justice and peace here and now as constitutive of the preaching of the gospel. Cornelia's vision was always of Jesus Christ as the mercy and compassion of God, made visible. She understood that the glory of God was men and women fully alive (Irenaeus). Far from betraying our original charism, its re-statement in the late 20c, promises to 'foster a faith commitment that engenders a joyous personal response to God in the challenges of the World' (Goal 1. SHCJ schools in USA). The school as a community of faith, is a non-negotiable priority and this is to be demonstrated through 'its use of resources and structures, including personnel, time and scheduling, finances, places of worship and prayer, quality of religious education and sacramental programme' (Goal 1.c) It goes without saying that though our schools foster faith within the Catholic tradition, they 'welcome people of all faiths who support its mission and goals'(Goal 1.e)

2. The name : The Holy Child.

There are several strands to Cornelia's choice of a name for her Society. First her experience as a mother; she was to lose all five of her children, either by death or separation. She said the thought of her own children never left her and she had a special devotion to Mary, Mother of sorrows. Theologically she was drawn, not to the infancy of the Holy Child or the 'baby Jesus' but what is known as 'boyhood Christology' : to the years when Jesus grew in 'age and wisdom and grace'. (Lk 2.52) She was amazed that God incarnate could have allowed himself to grow through all the stages of human development and maturation, just like us. When she applied this to the education of children, long before the insights of psychology, Cornelia had grasped the developmental nature of education.

'In the training and teaching of children it is absolutely necessary to walk step by step, to teach line by line, to practice virtue little by little ... as .. suited to the age and stage of moral and intellectual development of those we are guiding' (Preface : Book of Studies)

Maturity was a matter of slow, patient growth, not artificially forced.

Cornelia's system of education was based on trust and reverence for the dignity of every human person. She was totally committed to the moral, physical, spiritual and environmental welfare of each child. In the Common Rules for the Mistresses of School (Book of Studies 1863) she wrote

'Let them not be more familiar with one pupil than with another, neither let them seek private conferences with any of the children during school hours except shortly and in an open place not closeted privately (Rule 15: on impartiality)

And again

‘ Let the mistresses not be too hasty in punishing , nor too eager in seeking faults and not only must they never use corporal punishment , but they must abstain also from any abusive word or action, neither must they call any pupil by any other name than her Christian or full name , nor by her surname only (Rule 27: On punishment)

When our Province of the SHCJ was drawing up a Child Protection policy earlier this year(2001) we could draw on this heritage which recognised that children could experience physical or emotional abuse from teachers and older people, and that we had a duty to prevent and protect those who are most vulnerable. It seems to me that our heritage calls us to pay particular attention to the child abused, abandoned or exploited in our society, and to support and implement child- protection policies in our schools . These areas are among the most serious problems of our age, and are only just beginning to be addressed by our local churches.

3. Meeting the wants of the Age

Cornelia Connelly wrote ‘ we are especially bound to act in unison with her (the Church) , and to meet the wants of the age, while leading our children to true and solid virtue’.

Some of us are so familiar with the phrase that we miss its almost prophetic ring in an age which more usually equated ‘**handing on tradition**’ with repeating’ it .The concept of *aggiornamento* or updating in response to new demands , is more Vatican II , than Vatican I. Cornelia had an acute sense of responding to current needs, not those of a past age. .Education must prepare children for tomorrow not yesterday. She told her sisters to order and read the latest books on education method .

‘I think it a point of conscience to get certain new books (to send from house to house) of the specimens of the day, and just at this time when the march of teaching is going at such a wonderful pace’ (To Superiors , March 26, 1855)

She met a specific need in Victorian England : to educate girls , from all walks of life, because little provision had been made for them up to that point. This required trained and dedicated teachers, and ‘good’ schools. When she had established her schools in England , she sought to expand, and start all over again.

What does this have to say to us ?

- Cornelia was prepared to meet the challenge of her time because of the many boundaries spiritual, cultural and geographical, which she had to cross in her lifetime. She had to learn to be flexible, to be uprooted and to re settle elsewhere, again and again.
- She was the opposite of parochial . ‘ I’m a cosmopolitan; the whole world is my country and heaven is my home’ she wrote . Her vision embraced the whole world.
- Her charism calls us to cross the boundaries in our contemporary society, perhaps above all at present the boundaries between East and West, Christian and Muslim. If we are in danger of being trapped in a Western mind-set, we are called to try to understand the ‘other’ and not be quick to demonise.
- We are also called respect the differing cultural expressions of Christianity in the world and among our children. In our schools we usually deal with a racial and cultural mix which she would not have known
- Current educational and pastoral practice, evident in our conversations here, would allow teachers, students and others to identify their own needs, rather than assume we can

identify and address them by ourselves.

- 'The wants of our age' are many and insistent. They include racial injustice, world poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, the arms trade, aids victims and now terrorism. We may have to be selective in what we directly undertake to redress. But an educational programme sensitive to the many sided aspects of justice and peace in our world, with some practical hands-on experience, should be constitutive of it. That is our heritage.

4. 'Be yourself': A life affirming, humanist tradition

Cornelia's best known and best loved adage is 'Be yourself but make that self just what Our Lord wants it to be'. The 'spirit of the Society', or what we have imagined it to be at its best, is where people are allowed to be themselves, and encouraged to develop talents and discover their potential. Teachers as well as children could only give of their best if they were themselves and this is only possible in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. So there were comparatively few school rules (by Victorian standards), and no hint of spying in the system of supervision. 'We will never know what we can do until we try' Cornelia wrote. The girls were given responsibility for themselves and for one another and encouraged to take initiatives and to learn from their mistakes.

She was convinced that a 'happy school is necessary for good learning' and child development. This included attention to the classroom environment, and the structure of the curriculum. She had natural breaks between classes, and valued the importance of recreation & occasional treats. She was criticised and reported to the bishops for introducing whist, dancing and sea-bathing into her programme- not usual in schools of her day. School plays were very important to her educational vision. She felt she could get to know the girls by the way they played their roles. Art, and music were also very important.

Cornelia's vision for education was holistic, life-affirming and deeply humanistic in its traditional Catholic sense. She believed in the formative power of beauty, truth and goodness and wanted her educational choices to reflect this. Just as she 'despised duplicity' in human behaviour, she also disliked the showy, the shoddy, or the ersatz in anything. A child could learn to feel and experience the truth in the grain of wood, or the shape of a stone, or an authentic performance in a play. For her substance always took priority over appearance; any kind of 'spin' in our modern jargon, would have been anathema to her.

Much of Cornelia's educational practice would no longer be considered innovative. Today some may regard it as incurably 'elitist' and the postmodern educationalist would no longer subscribe to such absolutes as 'beauty, truth and goodness'. But her vision, pushing the boundaries of the possible, re-affirming the power of the beautiful, especially in the most deprived and unbeautiful places of our world, has a redemptive quality which we can retrieve and live by. The only obstacles are the windings of the human heart which prevent us 'being true as God is true'.

5. Actions not Words : The Way Ahead

Perhaps the next best known adage of Cornelia is 'Actions not Words'. We are here at a meeting

with a purpose reflected in the title of my talk :Handing on the Charism. Can anything practical come out of this meeting or does it remain at the level of reflection and discussion? I would like to end by trying to identify both the difficulties and opportunities inherent in remaining within a network of Holy Child schools, linked by a common heritage , mission and goals . We differ from the USA network of schools, because our schools have been in three countries (England , Ireland, France), each with differing educational systems , and a differing history of church /state relations.

a) Other religious orders

Early on in this talk I suggested we viewed Cornelia's work as part of the work of education undertaken by other religious orders in the 19c. Today, other religious are engaged in 'Handing on the Charism' to others and we can learn much from their experiences.

- Yesterday Luke Monahan CM spoke of how the Irish Christian Brothers asked their past pupils and teachers how they saw the continuing tradition of Edmund Rice. Given their recent sad history , they were unexpectedly affirmed by what they heard , and by the love and esteem in which many of their men were held.. Have we consulted many of our past pupils to find out what they think?
- The English Benedictines held an International Conference at Worth (1999) in the wake of one forced school closure and falling numbers in their schools. The delegation from the Philippines took the Conference by storm. They have fourteen schools and some 40,000 pupils. The special thrust in the girls schools was to use the rule of St Benedict as a vision to enable women to take their place in modern Philippino society. Even St Benedict may have been surprised to know his rule was a model for liberated women. A tradition has many hidden possibilities.
- The Jesuits have a whole network of schools in Europe (Jesuit European Committee for Secondary Education). It is worth remembering that St Ignatius never intended to found schools but was forced to change his mind. Later Fr Aquaviva held that the ideal number of Jesuits on the school staff should be fifty (small schools) , or eighty (middle sized) or one hundred and twenty (large schools). That would be impossible today. The Jesuit adaptation of the *ratio studiorum* , especially altering its pyramidal structure to a more collaborative one, has relevance for us.

b) SHCJ Practice

- In past the SHCJ Charism was most usually seen to be handed on in context of a religious community owning and having large presence in school, secondary or primary. But there was also the model of an SHCJ head in a state school, where her staff were predominantly lay staff. And there was a long tradition of the Sisters who worked in the parish schools (often made to feel they were not working in one of 'our schools'). They and their staff handed on the charism in the context of a lively parish community and to thousands of boys and girls. This is a neglected model in our tradition.
- When a school is first handed over to lay management , there is usually a strong desire for continuity on behalf of a new Head and the Governors. Name , crest, traditions etc. are retained . But the Head may find that the staff have left the 'religious' side to the sisters, and are slow, reluctant , even unwilling, to take it on. The role of 'faith

leadership ' is more difficult for the new Head than for the former religious. The Governors , including foundation Governors, are broadly committed to continuity , though they may wish to shed the image of 'a convent school' .

- Down the line , when the school has had two or three changes of leadership and Governors, the situation changes. The links are still there in the neighbourhood , through past pupils, but the school itself has moved on , sometimes physically and certainly educationally . Most of the schools represented here, are at that stage, or need to prepare for it .
- Sr Eileen McDevitt has shown us how the USA Holy Child network of schools prepared for this some time ago, and we have much to learn from their practice. The desire of the Head to maintain links, may not stretch to a new group of Governors who may know little or nothing of SHCJ heritage. What is the responsibility of the foundation Governors here? Would inset days help? Are there ways of linking with other Holy Child schools?
- There are problems on the side of the sisters also. Sisters are fewer, and not all have educational experience . So, for example, a younger sister may be drawn to the original charism of Cornelia but her work may be in a parish, or in a barrio in Chile, or working with refugees. She may feel ill equipped to speak about formal education in school.
- Or she may be tempted to give a 'spiritual input' and hope it may be translated by practising teachers into their context. Now this has its dangers. It makes an artificial division between the spiritual vision and educational practice. In Cornelia they were indivisible. She and her sisters passed on their vision by doing, by the daily grind which poses its own problems and yields its own solutions. If, as Holy Child sisters, we are not directly involved in education, our contribution as will be limited. If we see our apostolate as broadly educational, we have to speak from our experience to yours , and not as we would like to see you develop.
- Finally I would express a strong desire on the part of the SHCJ to recognise our educational colleagues as ' associates' in our common mission of sharing in, and transmitting Cornelia's charism .

Conclusion

When I was writing this paper , I saw many problems relating to 'Handing on the Charism' . But the actual experience of meeting each other at this conference, and visiting two schools (active engagement rather than theory) has convinced me of potential and promise. The Holy Child Charism is alive and well among us; creative fidelity is patently at work in the schools we visited whose staff strive to meet the wants of the age in new ways. We have shared best educational practice and been energised and renewed. And the USA network shows what can be done in another context. We are jointly engaged in our ministry to be God's mercy to the world and there are ways of maintaining former links and forging new ones (for example, a schools project linked to SHCJ work overseas). So , in the words Luke Monahan quoted yesterday ' If you think something can't be done, do not interrupt those who are doing it' (Chinese Saying).