

IN SEARCH OF CORNELIA CONNELLY: BIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES

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A look into the question: who is Cornelia Connelly? reveals a trail of materials from full length biographies and biographical articles, fifty-six volumes of her personal writings, to doctoral dissertations, dramatic works, and, finally that most comprehensive work prepared for the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints, the *Positio*.¹ This document consists of over sixteen hundred pages with one of the volumes, the *Informatio*, containing a *Biographical Synopsis* that serves as an invaluable guide through the careful documentation of the *Positio*. Looking into some of these rich resources with the initial question in mind will help to cast light upon those critical questions raised by a serious study of Cornelia Connelly's life.

Notable in the history of biographical works on Cornelia is a 1920 article by Augustinian, Francis Tourscher, entitled "Sketch of the Life of Mother Cornelia Connelly" (the first full length biography had not yet been published). The article appears in none other than the *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* bringing this current volume full circle in recognizing the significance of her story for Catholic history, education and spirituality.² One of Cornelia's later biographers, Caritas McCarthy, SHCJ, calls the article "remarkable."³ Tourscher's work is striking because of the immediacy of his sources, an unpublished biography by M. M. Francis Bellasis, SHCJ, a contemporary of Cornelia, and "the recollections of living sisters who knew Mother Connelly personally."⁴ Already leaning heavily on the letters available at that time, Tourscher presents Cornelia with great sensitivity to her gift of discernment, and the profound suffering in her "inner life," as well as the kindness and empathy which consistently marked her dealings with others. Although the article is

¹ *Positio for the Canonization Process of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly (née Peacock) 1809-1879*, 4 vols. (Rome: Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints, 1983, 1987).

² F.E. Torcher, "Sketch of the Life of Mother Cornelia Connelly, Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, 1809-89," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia*, 31 (Mar., 1920) 1-42. Noted in the Sources and Select Bibliography, Caritas McCarthy, SHCJ, *The Spirituality of Cornelia Connelly*, (New York, Edwin Mellen Press, 1986) p. 223.

³ McCarthy, p.223. In the case of Cornelia Connelly and Caritas McCarthy, using the first name seems appropriate. It is used here with the greatest respect

⁴ Tourscher, p. 1

literally a "sketch," there is adequate basis for understanding both the continuity in her vocation, and the chronology of her life and that of the developing Society and its foundations. Tourscher concludes by remarking on the "portraits of Mother Connelly which remain. Peace, tranquil repose, reserve and spiritual control are written in every line and feature of her face."⁵ These are precisely the observations which become critically important as later biographers sort out questions about her virtue and the consistency of her spiritual life as a Servant of God.

In 1922 a major biography appeared by Catherine Gompertz, SHCJ, entitled *The Life of Cornelia Connelly*.⁶ Authorship was simply stated: "by a Member of the Society" emphasizing the interpretation of humility in the context of her day. Gompertz is significant in that she sets an important precedent for letting Cornelia speak for herself in the texts of her letters and instructions to her sisters. In the preface of this book, Cardinal Francis Gasquet (Rome) notes that these letters will "well repay reading and study, for they breathe in every line the spirit of God," and he concludes that "Mother Connelly was indeed a wonderful woman and a true saint."⁷ As in the case of Tourscher's article, Gompertz draws on the unpublished biography of M.M. Francis Bellasis, SHCJ., but also on another unpublished work by M.M. Joseph Buckle, SHCJ.⁸ Buckle, who, at the urging of Mother Angelica Croft, began to "assemble her materials only six weeks after Cornelia's death on April 18, 1879,"⁹ was actually considered Cornelia's first biographer. By using the testimony of these contemporaries of Cornelia and the primary sources available to her at the time, Gompertz brings to light the complexity of that era of church history for Cornelia and her foundation especially as it relates to England, America and Rome. A treatment of Cornelia's spiritual life is included in one chapter with the focus primarily on her life as founder and the spiritual traditions from which she drew inspiration. Gompertz

⁵ Ibid., p.42.

⁶ M.C. Gompertz, *The Life of Cornelia Connelly, 1809-1879, Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1922.)

⁷ Ibid., p. xiii.

⁸ *Positio, Informatio*, Rome, 1987, p. iv.

⁹ Ibid. *Informatio* author, Elizabeth Strub, SHCJ notes that "Buckle's *Life* passed into the hands of Mother Mary Francis Bellasis who was told by Angelica Croft, for some unknown reason, to destroy it. After consultation with a priest, Bellasis conscientiously disobeyed this order and thus, when she came to write her own life of Cornelia, she had this precious manuscript to consult." (*Positio*, 1127)

demonstrates good insight into Cornelia's personal "characteristics," with a reflection on faith and the ability to respond to God through the many voices calling to her in the apostolate.¹⁰ The work of Gompertz continued to be a staple for those interested in Cornelia's life story and for use in the formation of the sisters. There are several editions over time, the latest being the fourth edition, abridged and revised in 1950.¹¹

In 1929, Joseph Code, a priest on the faculty of St. Ambrose College in Davenport, Iowa, published a book entitled *Great American Foundresses*.¹² He provides a careful look at the lives of sixteen women from Elizabeth Seton to Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, among them is Cornelia Connelly. It is significant for American Catholic women's history that Code states that the purpose of his volume is "to lift the veil that hides a number of America's greatest women."¹³ Far from images of blind obedience and subservience, these women are depicted with strength of character and the ability to navigate the often troubled waters of their times. The central focus of all of the stories is that greatness which he calls the "true measure of sanctity."¹⁴

For the piece on Cornelia, Code drew his material from the biography by Gompertz, and the story is well told.¹⁵ One important insight that Code recognized when studying her "educational system" was that "Mother Connelly's moral training was a spirit rather than a system - firmly rooted in unchanging principles, yet varied in application and elastic in detail."¹⁶ He refers to the fact that Cornelia inserted into the rule that her sisters were bound to "meet the wants of the age while leading their children to true piety and solid virtue."¹⁷ The emphasis on this theme is found across

¹⁰ Ibid., Chap. XIV.

¹¹ London: Longmans Todd, 1950.

¹² Joseph B. Code, *Great American Foundresses*. (N.Y: Macmillan, 1929).

¹³ Ibid., vii. It is interesting to note that Mother Katherine Drexel declined when asked to be included.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. x.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 423

Ibid. Three recent dissertations written on the topic of education are: Lorna Mary Anne Bowman, *SHCJ Cornelia Connelly Educator: Her Charisma And Its Institutionalization*, (Columbia University Teacher's

the decades by all who write about the Society.

The 1930's brought forth another biography from France, *Cornelia Connelly*, by M. Marie Osmonde de Maille, SHCJ.¹⁸ According to those who remember Mother Osmonde, she was a talented woman respected in religious circles in France and, as an architect, her mark was made on the construction of the compounds in the African missions.¹⁹ This biography circulated Cornelia's story to a much wider audience. De Maille's work was especially important for its treatment of those last year's of Cornelia's life, not only in her struggle with the Rule, but also in relations with her own sisters. The book was later revised in 1962 under the title *Du Mariage Au Cloître, Une religieuse américaine, Cornelia Connelly*, and included a preface by Michel de Saint-Pierre, SHCJ.²⁰

In her work on the early lives of Cornelia and Pierce Connelly, Caritas makes clear that these initial biographies recorded "only the barest outline" of Cornelia's early life in Philadelphia.²¹ Despite the fact that Cornelia's story often attracted wide public interest she was "reticent about her own life."²² In looking at Cornelia's life from the perspective of her whole spiritual journey, Caritas McCarthy, although aware of the lacunae in the works of Gompertz and de Maille, recognizes the importance in these early biographies of the "fundamental insights that Cornelia's holiness lay in her unreserved fidelity to God's successive calls, that the core of her teaching was self-oblation in Christ."²³ Along with Cornelia's own writings, these early works bear many of the marks of nineteenth-century piety but there is no mistaking the complexities of the personal relationships and institutional

College, 1984), John P. Marmion, *Cornelia Connelly's Work In Education, 1848-1879* (University of Manchester, 1984) and Roseanne McDougall, SHCJ, *Something More for the Glory of God: Cornelia Connelly's Development of Education for Girls of All Classes of Society* (Columbia University Teacher's College, 1991).

¹⁸ Paris:1931.

¹⁹ Learned in conversations with Barbara Linen, SHCJ and Dorothy Wilson, SHCJ (who lived for a time with Mother Osmonde).

²⁰ Paris: Editions France-Empire, 1963.

²¹ Caritas McCarthy, SHCJ, *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia*, LXXII (Sept.-Oct., 1961) p. 93.

²² Ibid.

²³ McCarthy, p. 223.

struggles rich in their testimony to Cornelia's integrity.

As members of the Society were continuing research on the life of the Founder, the next biography to appear in the United States (1950) was a little book, *The Triumph of Trust, Story of Mother Connelly* by M. Mary Eleanor Slater, SHCJ.²⁴ Written in a style and format suitable for younger readers, the resourcefulness, love of children, and love of life are emphasized with no attempt to gloss over Cornelia's hurts and woes, all in the context of her abiding trust in God. The book is further enhanced by the illustrations of Victoria Donohoe, a Rosemont College graduate and local artist and writer.²⁵ Slater's work is noted by many of the later biographers as having captured something of the spirit of Cornelia.

The 1950s would yield two more popular versions of the story. One appeared in an anthology by Sheila Kaye-Smith entitled: *Quartet In Heaven*.²⁶ Kaye-Smith writes about the lives of two "matrons," Catherine of Genoa and Cornelia Connelly,²⁷ and of two "maidens," Isabella Rosa de Santa Maria de Flores and Therese Martin. Her work is lively and dramatic, and its intent is what Smith calls "psychological rather than biographical."²⁸ In her casting of Cornelia's life there is a realism about the difficulties which, instead of leading her to insanity, became the strong basis for what Smith calls "one of the sanest, healthiest specimens of mental integrity that ever responded to spiritual inspirations."²⁹ Perhaps this realism comes from her astute reading of Gompertz, *Life of Cornelia Connelly*.³⁰ Cornelia easily takes her place in the heavenly quartet. Such a judgment was not so clear in another quite popular work by Juliana Wadham, *The Case of Cornelia*

²⁴ Philadelphia: 1950.

²⁵ Permission has been give by the artist for use of her sketches in this issue of *Records*.

²⁶ Shiela Kaye Smith, *Quartet In Heaven* (London, Cassell and Co., Ltd., 1952).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. viii. Smith notes in her *Forward* that "Cornelia Connelly is the only member of my quartet who has not been canonised", she uses the word saint in the "second sense" and. "I accept unreservedly the judgment of the apostolic See, which alone has the authority to pronounce to whom belongs the character of a saint."

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

*Connelly, Wife, Mother, Nun-Saint?*³¹ The question mark in the title unleashed a spirited debate about the suitability of Cornelia's cause for canonization. It "...sounds far more dramatic and impossible than a work of romantic fiction. . . All readers will find it a thrilling and inspiring tale" was the quote from *America* used on the front cover of Harper's paperback edition.³² Caritas mentions Wadham's writing as being in a popular style, but more critically maintains that the work is "characterized by misinterpretation and inadequate use of sources, and by real insights drawn from the author's own life experience as wife and mother."³³ The fact that Wadham is a laywoman is not at issue here but her apparent lack of knowledge in the area of spirituality was problematic in looking at Cornelia's life as a whole.

At the time the Case was published, there was an immediate response by James Walsh, S.J. who was the diocesan postulator for the Cause of Beatification. The real irony in this situation is that the book appeared just as progress was beginning to be made on the Cause. Walsh wrote an article in *The Month* entitled "*The Vocation of Cornelia Connelly.*"³⁴ In the opening Note of a pamphlet which the author had reprinted from the original article, one sees immediately his fear that *The Case of Cornelia Connelly*:

may well be an obstacle to the spread of devotion to the Servant of God -- a belief borne out by his personal experience whilst promoting the Cause in recent journeys in the USA. Hence he has considered himself obliged to subject this book to a searching criticism, from the point of view of Mother Connelly's reputation for holiness. He has no desire to impugn the book's substantial merits in other directions, and least of all, its author's personal integrity.³⁵

Although probably not her original intent, Wadham's story of the marriage and subsequent conversion of Cornelia and Pierce Connelly was

³¹ London, 1956; American edition, New York: Doubleday, 1957.

³² NY: Image Books edition, 1960.

³³ McCarthy, p. 223.

³⁴ *Month* 20, No. 5 (1958).

³⁵ Ibid. from author's Note.

interpreted by many readers as grist for the mill, casting a shadow on Cornelia as wife and mother bent on her own idea of the will of God (her own will?) and with little concern for her family and their needs. From his textual analysis, Walsh is able to show that Cornelia, although anxious and bewildered by Pierce's requests and actions, did indeed seek assurances, was a woman of prayer through it all, and was never accorded by Pierce "respect for the totality of her rights and duties in the context of her vocation."³⁶ That Wadham was getting the story out to a wider audience was good --the book was never meant to be a scholarly treatise but, with its wide circulation, Walsh found all the more reason to issue some correctives. One important legacy of the preceding biographies was that Cornelia's vocation was not seen as a single event in her life but was based on the continuous discernment which marked all periods of her life. She was always a questioning woman. Walsh, in his efforts to preserve that insight, deepens his own conviction that Cornelia's uncompromising strength of character (which others interpreted as a flaw) is intrinsic to understanding her life. He holds Pierce responsible for his own immaturity on every account. "Pierce was not a child who must be humoured in his tantrums, but a priest, whose life was supposedly dedicated to the salvation of souls."³⁷

Controversy over the issues raised by Wadham and others did not diminish and the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* for 1963 contains the evidence. In February of 1963, a priest, Leonard A. Whatmore (one of the historical *periti* for the *Cause*)³⁸ put forth his argument on behalf of Cornelia's cause in an article , "*Cornelia Connelly: Gold in the Fire*."³⁹ He acknowledged the concern of many over that interpretation of her story, that continued to underline the legitimate questions about her role as wife and mother. At the same time, he maintained that these questions were often removed from the dynamics of the fuller story with all of its complexities. A few months after Whatmore's article, there was a letter to the editor of the Review by Joseph H. O'Neill, given the caption: "*No More Support Here For*

³⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 30 in reference to the incident when Pierce presented himself unannounced and Cornelia refused to see him.

³⁸ Whatmore was from Oxon and a member of the Royal Historical Society. *Informatio*, p. xxxi.

³⁹ *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, 63 (February 1963), pp .400-7.

Mother Connelly's Cause."⁴⁰ He finds Cornelia guilty, as others before her, for "walking out" on their children to enter religious life. He calls for a closer look at the more contemporary theology of marriage (a theology which the author feels would never support her actions) and concludes that Cornelia "is not a model for these times. Quite the contrary."⁴¹

The Homiletic and Pastoral Review published a final article on the subject by Jesuit, Paul Molinari, "*Commitment to Love: Reply to Cornelia Connelly's Critics.*"⁴² Molinari's careful and respectful reply to all of the negative criticism is grounded in his thorough study of Cornelia's life and context, especially as these were revealed in her own writings. At the time the article was published, he was already involved in the first phase of work on the Cause. In June, 1960, he had been appointed Postulator in Rome.⁴³ The spirit of his earlier article in reply to the critics is later captured succinctly in the *Positio* in which Molinari judges Cornelia to be "an exemplary wife and mother, an outstanding religious and foundress, and above all, a woman entirely open to God's demands and his unfathomable and mysterious ways of love."⁴⁴

As controversy continued over the Cause, another full length biography by M Marie Therese Bisgood, SHCJ, *Cornelia Connelly, A Study in Fidelity*, appeared on the scene in the early 1960s.⁴⁵ Herself an educator, Bisgood was asked by the Society to turn her attention to writing this biography, which was important for the light it shed especially on Cornelia's later heartaches concerning her own children, her dealings with English Bishops: Wiseman, Grant, Danell, Ullathorne and Goss, and her interactions with the members of her developing Society. More primary source material, such as letters and instructions, was available than to the earlier biographers. More attention was being paid to the exceptional nature of Cornelia's strength, confidence and maturity in her dealings with the hierarchy, both in her educational philosophy and in her inspiration for a rule of life.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 63 (June 1963), pp. 744-50.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 750.

⁴² Ibid., 64 (October 1963), pp. 21-9.

⁴³ Noted in the *Presentation* by the Postulator of the Cause in the *Positio*, *Informatio*, pp. xxxi-xxxvi.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. xxxvii.

⁴⁵ M.M. Marie Therese Bisgood, SHCJ, *Cornelia Connelly, A Study in Fidelity*. (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1963.)

In the author's *Forward*, Bisgood remarks that there is "no bibliography in this book because so few printed books have been used in preparing it." Although she acknowledges quotations from published sources, she maintains that the rest of "the material used has been taken entirely from the documentation collected and classified in the archives of the Cause of Cornelia Connelly in the Old Palace, Mayfield, Sussex"⁴⁶ The work also includes a list of other archives consulted.⁴⁷ Despite the author's word about her sources, one reviewer for *Cross and Crown* stated that the book needed "further documentation," the lack of footnotes is often a frustration.⁴⁸ Another critical point was the recognition that there needed to be a more "detailed unfolding of Cornelia's spiritual development," the very topic that becomes important in the following decades. Yet the biography was well written, leaving the reviewer "in awe of Cornelia's steadfastness and courage in the pursuit of her religious ideals."⁴⁹ Perhaps because of its grounding in archival materials, Bisgood's writing was considered a kind of antidote to books like *The Case of Cornelia Connelly*. As a matter of fact there is an *Introduction* by James Walsh, S.J. who had so passionately responded to Wadham's popular story.⁵⁰

The famous court case, *Connelly vs. Connelly*, would find expression in a play by Irish Dominican, Brendan Larnen titled, *Connelly vs. Connelly*.⁵¹ It was produced by the Blackfriars Guild, one of the oldest off-Broadway theaters, during their twentieth season. The play opened on January 17, 1961 and ran for eighty performances.⁵² Actress Adrienne Hazzard was cast as Cornelia. As in any drama based on history, Larnen took dramatic license with the story. The play opens in the courtroom with a

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. xiii.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 318.

⁴⁸ Lydia Avery, *Cornelia Connelly: A Study in Fidelity*, in *Cross and Crown*, pp. 359-60.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 360.

⁵⁰ One emeritus faculty member at Rosemont College remembers that each of the faculty received a copy of Bisgood from the president for Christmas the year of the publication

⁵¹ Brendan Larnen, O.P. *Connelly vs. Connelly*, (NY: The Blackfriars Guild, 1961).

⁵² Ibid. p. 126. This last page of the play also notes comments from various reviewers.

series of flashbacks revealing scenes from Cornelia's early life with Pierce. (One scene, for example, implies that Pierce ran away from home for those forty three hours of pain when their son, little John Henry, was scalded, he just could not handle the trauma). *New York Times* reviewer, Milton Esterow, judged those scenes to have "an affinity for clichés."⁵³ Nevertheless, he found the courtroom scene, where Cornelia appears in her own defense, a very compelling scene, even though the event never happened in real life. Esterow thought Blackfriar's production of *Connelly vs. Connelly* was "interesting, but in the last act it becomes lyrical."⁵⁴ The most thorough critique of the play is found in a typed manuscript in the archives at Rosemont College library by James Walsh, SJ, who seemed to keep vigilance over the popular telling of the story, with line by line corrections to any misinformation that he detected in the script.⁵⁵ The play has continued to be performed and discussed through the years.⁵⁶

A biography in the 1970s by Mary Andrew Armour, in collaboration with Ursula Blake and Annette Dawson, all members of the SHCJ, is simply titled *Cornelia*.⁵⁷ As in many of its antecedents, there is an emphasis on Cornelia as a woman of faith. Armour writes a preliminary *Note* which states that she is not so concerned about footnotes, "the story is the thing," and this time the story is based almost exclusively on "the extensive documentation gathered for the introduction of Cornelia Connelly's Cause for Canonization."⁵⁸ Cornelia's spirituality is a major theme woven into this abbreviated version of the life. She is presented as the American woman that she undoubtedly was, and her ability to be creative in difficult times was interpreted as an extension of the "pioneer spirit of her American

⁵³ *New York Times*, Feb. 20, 1961.

⁵⁴ Ibid. There are two later plays, one by an SHCJ member from Birmingham, England titled: *Cornelia Connelly* (1986) the other by American dramatist, Roberta Nobleman titled: *White Blossoms* (1996).

⁵⁵ Rosemont Collection, A Text/SHCJ Related, Box 2.

⁵⁶ See M. Dennis Lynch, SHCJ, "Connelly vs. Connelly: Aftermath – Trial By Press." and B. Hargrove, SHCJ, "Connelly vs. Connelly," both articles appeared in the Society's publication, *Source*, 6 / 7 (1977), pp. 5-9, 10-23; 30-50.

⁵⁷ Mary Andrew Armour, *Cornelia, The Story of Cornelia Connelly, 1809-1879, Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus*. (Pompano Beach Florida: Exposition Press, Inc., 1977).

⁵⁸ Ibid., *Editor's Note*.

compatriots."⁵⁹ The story behind persons and events surrounding the Rules of the Society and the rocky road to final acceptance of the Constitutions, based on the Founder's original drafts, is told with clarity.⁶⁰ Both Armour as well as her collaborators were not new to the research; all three had been writing articles on various aspects of Cornelia's life through the 1960s and into the 1970s and 1980s.⁶¹ In addition, Ursula Blake and Annette Dawson had both worked for years on the Positio.⁶²

Before taking a closer look at the valuable contribution of Caritas on the spirituality of Cornelia, which came to fruition during the 1980s, mention should be made of a beautifully crafted little essay, *No Reserves With God*, by poet and writer, Mary Anthony Weinig, SHCJ, which appeared in an anthology, *Portraits in American Sanctity*.⁶³ Weinig, who was professor of English at Rosemont College at the time, had previously written substantive articles on aspects of Cornelia's life, most notably an article in *Review for Religious*, "Cornelia Connelly and the Spirit of Suffering Obedience."⁶⁴ Written in the wake of post Vatican II revival of interest in the lives of the saints, this essay in *Portraits* is brief, yet not oversimplified. The geography of Cornelia's successive journeys is presented as symbolic of the intensification of her life of prayer, discernment and suffering. Weinig was successful in capturing Cornelia's spirit and her many talents, above all, the stability and maturity with which she faced life with the deepest confidence in God's presence.

Courage, confidence and cheerfulness was a down-to-earth saying of Mother Connelly. . .providing a glimpse of the natural foundation for the work of grace in her for whom the grain of wheat dying, and the vine trimmed to the quick were images of fruitfulness.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 39.

⁶⁰ Ibid., Chap. 12, pp. 69-80.

⁶¹ These articles appear mainly in the SHCJ periodicals, *Pylon* and *Source*. For a complete listing of the works see, McCarthy, 224-225.

⁶² Noted by P. Molinari in the *Informatio*, p. xxxi.

⁶³ Joseph N. Tylenda, S.J., ed. *Portraits in American Sanctity*. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982).pp. 197-208.

⁶⁴ *Review for Religious*, 21 (1962), pp. 28-30.

⁶⁵ Tylenda, p. 197.

The extensive research and writing produced by Caritas McCarthy, both in its depth and breadth, is matched only by her love and devotion to Cornelia Connelly. Her published articles go back to the early 1960s and serve as an indicator of various topics that she featured in her later work, such as Cornelia's early life, her charism as founder, her devotion to the Holy Child and the spiritual roots of the foundation.⁶⁶ The years of working in collaboration with community archivists and those researching the Cause, in both the United States and abroad, along with her passionate interest and competency in church history, theology, Christian spirituality and women's studies, enabled her to achieve a certain integration, especially in the later work.

Caritas was convinced that all roads in the research of Cornelia led to the study of her spirituality. She maintained that : "to study Cornelia Connelly's spiritual itinerary is to take religion out of books and theories and to see it tested in the most fundamental and varied, complex and challenging of woman's life experiences."⁶⁷ Her doctoral dissertation for the faculty of Theology and the Institute of Spirituality at the Gregorian University in Rome was the fruition of her many years of research and was accepted in 1981 with the title: *The Spirituality of Cornelia Connelly, A Study of the Charism of the Founder of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus*.⁶⁸

As Vatican II called for the renewal of religious life, many studies of the charism of the founders of religious communities were undertaken.⁶⁹ Caritas took the position that "charisms touch the whole of human reality, individually and collectively."⁷⁰ Cornelia's spirituality is seen as forged by the Spirit in the turmoil of her life and times. And further, "the questions raised in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are not only understandable but useful in challenging us to confront honestly the flawed

⁶⁶ McCarthy, p. 225. Under *Selected Studies on Cornelia Connelly since 1955* there is a list of all articles.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. xiii.

⁶⁸ Rome, 1981. Excerpts of the dissertation were published in the U.S. under the auspices of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Rosemont College, Rosemont, PA, 1981.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 22. Mention is made here of the study of M. Milligan, *That They May Have Life, A Study of the Spirit-Charism of Father Gailhac, Founder* (Rome, 1975). This work is often referred to in Caritas' work.

⁷⁰ McCarthy, p. 22.

human conditions in which God chose to incorporate Cornelia into his redemptive mission."⁷¹ For example, Caritas maintained that out of deep respect for the sacrament of marriage it was indeed important to be asking questions about Cornelia's marital situation. It was by facing these questions squarely that some light could be shed on that "crucible of suffering" which prepared Cornelia for her "charismatic service of the Church."⁷² A real insight into this research is found in the following observation:

It has become obvious today that teaching on marriage and the family was defective in Cornelia's milieu, as was understanding of her husband's psycho-pathology which manifested itself in his religious sentiments. Defective also was British law regarding the rights of women. We cannot measure Cornelia's choices by today's theology and today's rights of women. Determining her milieu helps us to understand more clearly what choices she made, and what sufferings she had to endure from the flawed conditions in which she made them.⁷³

It is in the context, then, of these "flawed conditions" that a careful examination of the charism of the founder is considered. Inspiration drawn from the hidden life of the Holy Child as the spirit of the Society is central for Cornelia. It is this vision that attracts followers and gives institutional shape to their mission. The virtues characterizing the spirit of the Society -- simplicity, humility, obedience and charity --also flow from that original vision. Caritas makes no attempt to gloss over anything in this work. For example, when writing about the years of turmoil over the Constitutions, she is clear that the "tensions and divisions brought the Society to the brink of schism in the 1870's." But there were lessons to be learned here. "There was, besides rancor and bitterness, an element of maturity developing in sisters who wanted to assume more responsibility for their government. The maturing process was to continue in the midst of pain, and to unite the

⁷¹ Excerpts, pp. 8-9.

⁷² Ibid., p. 6.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 4

Society again before Cornelia died."⁷⁴ This interpretation of the story, confusion and pain as growth and maturity through the guidance of the Spirit, is basic to Caritas' understanding of spirituality and, she would maintain, to Cornelia's.

The invitation by Edwin Mellen Press to publish Caritas' research on the spirituality of Cornelia as part of the series on Studies in Women and Religion was an important affirmation of her years of research.⁷⁵ The book grows out of the thesis with its emphasis on the charismatic dimension of the Church. The new title, *The Spirituality of Cornelia Connelly: In God, For God, With God*, is simply another expression of that original charism. A review in *Theological Studies* notes the importance of the work for its contribution to American Spirituality as well as "women's contributions to that history."⁷⁶ Reviewer Annabelle M. Melville makes special note of the impressive documentation (over 27 pages).⁷⁷ The Appendices contain a survey and analysis of the writings of Cornelia, an outline of SHCJ Constitutional history and a list of sources and select bibliography. The "works consulted" include a detailed bibliography of the spiritual tradition from which Cornelia drew.

The 1980s would also see the culmination of decades of research on Cornelia's Cause for canonization. The first three volumes of the *Positio*

⁷⁴ McCarthy, p. 90.

⁷⁵ The same year (1984) Edwin Mellen Press also published a work, under the *Studies in American Religion* (Vol. 18), by D.G. Paz, *The Priesthoods and Apostasies of Pierce Connelly, A Study of Victorian Conversion and Anticatholicism*. He shows the many connections between American and British religious history and studies in detail Pierce's story (in the context of nineteenth century apostate priests) whom he claimed, "loved the Church more than God." Paz concludes that "surely Pierce must have been mad, or unbalanced. This was the judgment of his contemporaries." P. 218. He offers his book in thanks to the Society of the Holy Child Jesus who gave him "hospitality and free access to the archives at Mayfield." p. xvii. The appendices in this book include the pamphlets and letters of Connelly and there is a substantial bibliography.

⁷⁶ Annabelle M. Melville, *Theological Studies*, 49 (Spring, 1988): pp. 545-547.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 546.

were published in 1983⁷⁸. Principal researchers, Ursula Blake and Annette Dawson, were said to have presented a "gold-mine of information. . . with accuracy and precision according to the scientific requirements of the historical Office."⁷⁹ Yet the work did not seem to be finished. According to postulator, Paul Molinari, "the complexity of the events which typify Mother Connelly's life and activity has demanded that some fundamental options be made."⁸⁰ To group the documents chronologically would not suffice. It would be clumsy to try and piece together the whole story in this fashion since there were many side issues that would result in "losing sight of the weaving thread which runs through the development of the major issues."⁸¹ So a final phase of preparation was developed which resulted in a fourth volume, the *Informatio*, which now serves as an introduction. This volume opens with a report by the Realtor of Cornelia's Cause in Rome, Peter Gumpel, S.J., who outlines in detail the steps leading up to this final report and the criteria for judging her suitability for canonization. Although credit for the meticulous preparation goes to many, the task of pulling together this presentation of Cornelia's story was entrusted to Elizabeth Mary Strub, SHCJ, who had been Superior General of the Society for ten years.⁸² The trust was well placed.

The Informatio, structured in three parts, is eminently readable. The first part covers the history of the Cause. Part two gives a biographical synopsis tracking Cornelia's life year by year until her death. (This synopsis is recommended to anyone who wants to become acquainted with the events and the people in Cornelia's life.) The information given is at once succinct and thorough. The third part is a study of the evidence for her holiness analyzing her "character and natural gifts," the "core of her holiness formed at Grand Coteau;" it includes a section called "the single eye" underlining a theme of many of the previous biographies that "her life holds together only

⁷⁸ *Informatio*, p. xxxiii. The formal title is: *Documentary Study for the Canonization Process of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly*. Vol. I, "Early Years - Wife, Mother, Convert- Founder of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus"; Vol. II, "Middle Years - Expansion - Apostolic Spirituality - Death"; Vol. III, "Notes - Appendices - Archival Sources - bibliography - Index."

⁷⁹ *Informatio*, p. xxxiii.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., xxxv.

in God," and finally provides a detailed study of the virtues evident in the unfolding of her life. This section reminds one of the experience of listening to a finely tuned organ playing with all of the stops -- the virtues are not afterthoughts but are heard in the harmony and discord of Cornelia's story.

The *Informatio* is also featured in the book, *Making Saints*, by Kenneth Woodward who understandably becomes fascinated with Cornelia's case.⁸³ As the subtitle of the book, *How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't and Why*, indicates, Woodward analyzes the politics of saint-making in the church. For Woodward, "of all the historical causes to reach the congregation since the reform of 1983, none is more arresting than the case of Mother Cornelia Connelly Certainly it is one of the most delicate and complicated to confront the congregation's judges."⁸⁴ He is aware that the questions raised by the Cause - marriage, family, conversion, and even the issue of a married clergy -- are loaded questions for the church in our own time. Woodward notes that "Cornelia's reputation was such that some English bishops and priests stoutly opposed the society's efforts to open a process for her canonization."⁸⁵ Description of the sessions of the Diocesan Tribunal in the *Informatio*, however, indicates that the process did not side-step any of the questions that might show Cornelia in a negative light. Those involved were fully aware of her "reputation" (for some of the English, her name conjured up the image of "an intractable American nun," one who was "constantly defying the directives of her ecclesiastical superiors.")⁸⁶ But the positive evidence was compelling and, in the end, of the sixteen witnesses called to testify, there was only "one who was actually opposed to her beatification on the grounds that it would downgrade marriage and family life."⁸⁷

Woodward's assessment that this was a complicated case was accurate. His interest led him to Gumpel and Molinari who sent him directly

⁸³ Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints, How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 266. Woodward also notes that "as late as 1946, the centenary of the society's founding, the bishop of Southwark refused the sisters' request to open an Ordinary Process on behalf of their foundress."

⁸⁷ *Informatio*, p. xi.

to Strub, whom he calls "a pioneer: the first woman to prepare a document for the congregation's judgment."⁸⁸ It was in a meeting with Elizabeth Strub that Cornelia's story really came alive for Woodward. His own retelling of the life draws heavily on the *Informatio*.⁸⁹ During their conversations he learned that Strub had chosen, as her guiding principle, to look at Cornelia as a "whole person." She said, "I use only those categories that Cornelia dictates to me, not what I dictate to her. I want to present the evidence for holiness according to her own inner logic and experience of grace."⁹⁰ It is this understanding and presentation of the heroic virtue required for sainthood in the church that Woodward judges to be Strub's important theological contribution to the methodology for writing this type of a document, one which sets Cornelia's *Positio* apart from others.⁹¹ In evaluating the *Positio* as a whole, Woodward believes "an account of the moral faults or other weaknesses of character others saw in her," is lacking.⁹²

The 1990s would see another biography published, this one by an English member of the Society, Radegunde Flaxman, entitled *A Woman Styled Bold*.⁹³ In the *Forward* by Rosemary Haughton, there is ample witness to the staying power of Cornelia's story. "Over the years I read whatever I could find about Cornelia, whether in convent libraries or on retreat."⁹⁴ Although others might judge Cornelia to be a scandal, Haughton is clearly an example of one who finds this "woman styled bold" a model for our own times.

Flaxman availed herself of all of the materials gathered and published over time -- she mentions that all are collected in the archives of the Society in Rome -- and draws attention specifically to the *Positio*.⁹⁵ Her

⁸⁸ Woodward, p. 253.

⁸⁹ Ibid. See Chap. 8, *The Harmonics of Holiness: Interpreting the Life of Grace*.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 274.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 279. A valuable review of Woodward's book is by Gordon Zahn. *Commonweal*, vol. 117, Nov. 9, 1990, pp. 664-65.

⁹² Ibid., p. 278.

⁹³ Radegunde Flaxman, *A Woman Styled Bold*, (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990).

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. xi.

⁹⁵ Ibid. p. xiii.

work is organized in two parts. Part I covers the years 1809-1851, and Part II 1849-1879.⁹⁶ Primary source material is used in a way that highlights Cornelia's vision and her struggles. Flaxman sees her as a woman ahead of her time, a woman of prayer who evolves her own understanding of religious life in the turmoil which often seems to threaten its very foundation. There is no attempt to shorten the story; the book is longer than any of the other more recent works.

A reviewer for the *Heythrop Journal*, V. Alan McClelland, suggests that because Cornelia "challenged some of the more important social and religious mores of nineteenth century English Catholicism, she [Flaxman] has found it difficult to adopt a fundamentally critical approach to her subject."⁹⁷ He notes further that there is a tendency in Flaxman's presentation to treat people who differ from Cornelia, whether in her early or later life, as "automatons rather than as people with virtues and views of their own." This seems true; however, it often appears that Flaxman is protective of Cornelia in much the same way that one would protect a loved one. In the last analysis, McClelland praises Flaxman for her careful research and contribution to the study of Cornelia's life. After reading *A Woman Styled Bold*, a student at Rosemont, herself a wife and mother, said that this telling of the story conveyed a "timeless message of strength and hope for women of any age or occupation,"⁹⁸ much the same response found in Rosemary Haughton's *Introduction*.

Caritas' last article, "*In this flesh*" – *Cornelia Connelly and the Incarnation*, appeared in 1995 in *Women and Theology*, a publication of the College Theology Society.⁹⁹ The article was an analysis of Cornelia's life as "witnessing to her union with Jesus manifested to her in the Gospels as "Word made flesh" (Jn. 1:14)¹⁰⁰ The phrase, "In this flesh I shall see my God!" was exclaimed three times with "great decision" by Cornelia on her death bed. The article traces the story of her life reflected through this phrase. "Her powerful faith-witness in her death agony can be seen as a final

⁹⁶ The overlap in years is the author's choice.

⁹⁷ V. Alan McClelland, *Heythrop Journal*, 34 (January 1993): 342-44.

⁹⁸ Statement by Eileen Laskas, May, 1996, written in response to the book.

⁹⁹ Caritas McCarthy, "In this flesh" – *Cornelia Connelly and the Incarnation* in *Women and Theology*, Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis Kaminski, eds. (New York: Orbis, 1995).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

contemplative utterance, crowning a life of affective, imaginative contemplation of Jesus in the gospels which, through all vicissitudes, had integrated her prayer and life, led her to union with her God."¹⁰¹ The article, so stark in its recognition of the ultimate meaning of Cornelia's life and death, is really a summation of Caritas' many works. She leaves an important legacy through this research done so thoroughly and lovingly.

It is a long road from M. Joseph Buckle's unpublished biography of Cornelia to the present day. What one learns from the journey is that there will most likely never be a definitive work, and yet the writing will continue, providing new insights along the way. In her study of the biographical materials, Caritas commented: "Cornelia Connelly has not lacked biographers." Amen.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

