

With a mother's imagination: Ignatian spirituality in the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (1846-1879)*

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The Society of the Holy Child Jesus, established in England in 1846 by American-born Cornelia Connelly, was the first new indigenous congregation for Roman Catholic women to be founded on English soil since the Reformation¹ and the only nineteenth-century English congregation that claimed to be primarily Ignatian in spirituality and rule.² After Catholic Emancipation in 1829 congregations from France, Belgium and Ireland gradually began to introduce apostolic female religious life into Britain despite the negative reception afforded them. By the time of Connelly's foundation there were still very few convents of active Roman Catholic sisters in England and the climate had become more hostile because of anxieties aroused by the Oxford Movement, conversions to Catholicism and large-scale migration from Ireland. Even so, Cornelia Connelly had expansive and not unrealistic apostolic hopes for her new Society. Articulated in a private note written in the mid-1850s these included four teacher training colleges across England and Scotland, several chapels, poor schools and boarding schools, retreats, a range of other ministries, "America all our own" and a house in Rome "whenever it is time".³ However, largely as a result of the reputation she attracted – characterised by one commentator as "the enfant terrible of Victorian Catholicism"⁴ and by another as "probably the most controversial nun in England"⁵ – these hopes were only partially realised. Her foundation neither grew as rapidly as did French teaching congregations such as the Faithful Companions of Jesus, nor establish itself as a major force in teacher education, a role filled by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. Yet Holy Child did continue to grow steadily, esteemed for its pedagogy and for a school culture that was perceived as more 'English' than many other Catholic schools for middle class girls. By the end of the century it had about thirty schools across England and a training college in London for secondary school teachers as well as highly-regarded schools in a dozen states across America where it had arrived in 1862. It was one of the first women's congregations to graduate sisters from university, opening its own house of studies in Oxford in 1907 for sisters and other Catholic women. In 1930, building out from its location in imperial Britain and from educational success on both sides of the Atlantic, the Society became a pioneer of girls and women's education in Nigeria and of religious life for West African women.⁶

1. Ignatian discourses: questions of imagination, gender and re-interpretation

Two years before she died in 1879 Mother General Connelly left as her "final instruction" to the community her desire that they keep the practice of "fidelity to the rule and spirit of St Ignatius than which nothing could be found more perfect for the spiritual life. In this rule and spirit, as you know, we have been trained from the first" [original italics].⁷ The history of the relationship between the Society of Jesus and the emergence of an apostolic religious life for women has developed considerably in the past thirty years. One strand of the historiography – which we might label the

* My thanks to Sister Helen Forshaw archivist of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus and to Sisters Judith Lancaster and Anne Murphy for helpful discussions. Thanks also to Kate O'Brien for insights into drama in Cornelian and Ignatian contexts.

¹ Mary Ward's pioneering foundation, the Institute of Mary, had been made at St Omer in 1609; that of the Third Order Dominican made by Margaret Hallahan in 1844 was part of the pre-existing Dominican Third Order tradition.

² A majority of the other native foundations from 1844-1879 were Third Order Dominicans and Franciscans. For a complete list see B. WALSH, *Roman Catholic Nuns in England and Wales, 1800-1937*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2002, Appendix II.

³ C. MCCARTHY, *The Spirituality of Cornelia Connelly. In God, For God, With God*, Lewiston-Queenston, Edwin Mellen Press, 1986, p. 153

⁴ *The Tablet*, 17th August 1963, p. 9.

⁵ J. MARMION, *Cornelia Connelly's Work in Education 1848-1879* [2 vol.], PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 1984, p. 29.

⁶ A. EKAM, *The Contributions of the Holy Child Sisters to Women's Education in the Cross River State of Nigeria from 1930-1967*, PhD Thesis, Catholic University of America, 1980.

⁷ Letter from Cornelia Connelly to the Society 1877 quoted in *God Alone: An Anthology of the Spiritual Writings of Cornelia Connelly, Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus*, London, Burns and Oates, 1959, p. 61.

genealogy of charisma – had its origins in research undertaken by congregations themselves in response to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) injunction to recover their foundational sources of inspiration for the sake of renewal (the return *ad fontes*).⁸ Despite the difficulties that have been encountered in this undertaking, not least because of the lack of any agreed theory or method in relation to the concepts of ‘inspiration’ and ‘foundation’,⁹ it has resulted in significant biographical, institutional and thematic studies written or commissioned by religious congregations.¹⁰ In an article entitled “What is an Ignatian Congregation?” published in the Jesuit journal *The Way* in the early 1990s,¹¹ Mary Milligan drew on this research to propose a four-fold categorisation for how women’s congregations had been affected by the Ignatian tradition: 1) reliance on Ignatian texts in the writing of their own constitutions; 2) the influence of individual Jesuits in the foundation process or constitution writing; 3) the adoption of particular structures or works of the Society, such as formation methods or governance structures; and 4) the less specific but nonetheless significant and widespread “inspiration drawn from the Ignatian Christological and apostolic vision.”¹² Milligan notes that the categories are not mutually exclusive and that ‘Jesuit’ influence is not necessarily the same as ‘Ignatian’. In this schema, as she recognises, the place of the Spiritual Exercises is somewhat problematic both because it cuts across several categories and is so central. For Kate Stodgen, historian of the Sisters of the Cenacle, the Exercises ‘constitute both a record of Ignatius’ personal conversion and a tool for enabling transformation in others’.¹³ In the end Milligan opted to locate the Exercises within the influence of individual Jesuits on the grounds that it was the *experience* rather than the text of the Exercises that was ‘pivotal for some foundresses’.¹⁴

Cornelia Connelly was one of a small number of nineteenth-century female founders who owned and used the complete (translated) Constitutions of the Society of Jesus as well as the Jesuit *Ratio Studiorum* and the Spiritual Exercises, but her experience of the Exercises preceded her exposure to these texts. Detailed analysis of Connelly’s extensive spiritual notebooks and other writings by members of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus has led them to conclude that experience of the Exercises was the most significant influence on her personal spiritual development. Later it became the source, too, of her selection and interpretation of the other major texts for use in her Society.¹⁵

Once the extent of influence or practice of the Exercises has been charted in any women’s congregation, even more interesting questions arise about the meaning of this Ignatian inheritance in the particular context of time and place. What does it mean to describe the founder’s experience of the Exercises as ‘pivotal’? What differences did it make to the core of the Society of the Holy Child’s apostolic activities in the context of a Catholic community that was in the process of re-defining itself? Given the methods of personal appropriation and imaginative contemplation that are so important to the Ignatian spiritual approach what difference did gender identity and subjectivity make to the fruits of the Exercises in the life and work of Cornelia Connelly?

In order to provide some answers these question, I have looked for clues and evidence in the non-verbal as well as verbal discourses that were produced in the environment of the Society of the Holy Child during the founder’s lifetime, assuming, in the words of religious cultural scholar David Morgan, “the relationship of words to actions and things”.¹⁶ The environment created in the Society of the Holy Child was unusually rich in images, religious material culture and practice of the performing arts in worship and in the classroom. While this has often been explained as a product of Connelly’s

⁸ Perfectae Caritatis. The Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life (1965), in A. FLANNERY (Ed.), Vatican II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, Dublin, Dominican Publications, 1992, p. 611-623.

⁹ See M. FINBARR COFFEY, « The Complexities and Difficulties of a Return *ad fontes* », in G. SIMMONDS (Ed.), *A Future Full of Hope*, Dublin, The Columba Press, 2012, p. 38-51.

¹⁰ *Id.*, p. 38-41.

¹¹ M. MILLIGAN, « What is an Ignatian Congregation », *The Way Supplement*, 70, 1992, p. 40-50.

¹² *Id.*, p. 41.

¹³ K. STODGEN, « Expressions of Self-Surrender in Nineteenth-Century France: The Case of Thérèse Couderc (1805-1885) », in L. LUX-STERRITT, C.M. MANGION (Ed.), *Gender, Catholicism and Spirituality*, London/New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 156.

¹⁴ MILLIGAN, « What is an Ignatian Congregation », p. 42.

¹⁵ MCCARTHY, *The Spirituality*, e.g. p. 104; J. LANCASTER, *Cornelia Connelly and Her Interpreters*, Oxford, Way Books, 2004, p. 8.

¹⁶ D. MORGAN, « The Materiality of Cultural », in *Material Religion*, 4 (2), 2008, p. 228.

personal inclinations, my argument is that it was precisely Connelly's engagement with the Exercises that led her to value imaginative contemplation, concrete realisations of faith and embodied practices as apostolic means to arouse the affections and to teach "zeal for virtue, hatred of sin and love of God" through the heart, as Jesuits had done throughout their history.¹⁷

From the time of Ignatius the role of imaginative contemplation had extended out from a method of personal prayer and interiority into the public and missionary domain through the role of the visual and performing arts in the Society of Jesus. As John O'Malley has noted this latter aspect of Jesuit activity has been relatively neglected.¹⁸ However, scholars in drama, social and art history and in the newer fields of material religion and "lived religious history" have more recently revived interest in the explanatory link between the Ignatian spiritual methods and such seemingly distinct Jesuit practices as: the visual environment of their churches in the seventeenth century;¹⁹ the use of theatrical modalities in the conduct of missions in the eighteenth century;²⁰ the place of the performative arts in the extra-curricular activities of Jesuit colleges before the suppression;²¹ and the promulgation of public devotion to the Sacred Heart, particularly after the restoration in 1814.²² Each branch of these Jesuit practices can be seen to have a common root in the Spiritual Exercises and the imagination. In explaining the use of drama in Jesuit colleges Robert Miola makes the connection: "at the centre of Ignatian spirituality lies the imagination... and Ignatius revered its capacity to enkindle the spirit and prepare the soul to receive the indwelling Word."²³

In exploring Connelly's relationship to the methods of imaginative contemplation and embodiment in the spirituality and pedagogy of her Society, I start with the premise that women were never simply passive recipients of religious discourses. As Sue Morgan and Jacqueline deVries make clear in their study of women, gender and religious culture, "women were both the inheritors *and* the makers of their own religious cultures". Even where they lacked power and formal religious authority women "constantly reinterpreted" and invested religious discourses "with new meanings."²⁴ This assumption is entirely concordant with the spiritual process that St Ignatius discovered for himself and set out as a path for others in the Exercises, one that Jesuit scholar Howard Gray has described as "personal appropriation" in which "personal history...is reinterpreted".²⁵

This study uses approaches from gender history in conjunction with the theology of Ignatian spirituality and concepts taken from the study of material religion to gain a better understanding of the relationship between the founder's personal history, her experience of the Spiritual Exercises and her apostolic life as founder of a new Catholic congregation in the context of Victorian England. It explores this relationship in three domains: firstly through the spirituality of the Society of the Holy Child; second, in the embodied and material practices of its liturgical and devotional life; and finally the place of art and drama in its schools.

¹⁷ R.S. MIOLA, « Jesuit drama in early modern England », in A. G. FINDLAY *et al.* (Ed.), *Theatre and Religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 72

¹⁸ J. O'MALLEY, « How the first Jesuits became involved in education », in V. J. DUMINUCO (Ed.), *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum: 400th Anniversary Perspectives*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2000, p. 70.

¹⁹ See for example, A. C. KNAPP, « Meditation, Ministry and Visual Rhetoric in Peter Paul Ruben's Program for the Jesuit Church in Antwerp », in J. O'MALLEY (Ed.), *The Jesuits II Cultures, Sciences and the Arts 1540-1773*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006, p. 157-81; N. VASSALLO E SILVA, « Art in the Service of God. The Impact of the Society of Jesus on the Decorative Arts in Portugal », in *ID.*, p. 182-210.

²⁰ See L. CHÂTELLIER, *The Europe of the devout. The Catholic Reformation and the formation of a new society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

²¹ MIOLA, « Jesuit drama », J. PARK, « Not just a university theatre: the significance of Jesuit school drama in continental Europe, 1540-1773 », in K.J. WETMORE JR. (Ed.), *Catholic Theatre and Drama. Critical Essays*, Jefferson (NCa)/London, McFarland & Co., 2010, p. 29-44.

²² D. JONES, *The Embodied Eye. Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling*, Berkeley-London, University of California Press, 2012, p. 111-137, « The Matter of the Heart ».

²³ MIOLA, « Jesuit drama », p. 72.

²⁴ S. MORGAN, J. De VRIES (Ed.), *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, London/New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 2-3.

²⁵ H. GRAY, « The Experience of Ignatius Loyola: Background to Jesuit Education », in V. DUMINUCO (Ed.), *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum*, p. 4.

2. Cornelia Connelly: wife, mother, exertitant and founder

Cornelia Connelly was introduced to the Spiritual Exercises when she was living in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, and was invited to undertake a three-day retreat at the same time as the Religious of the Sacred Heart in whose Academy she taught music. It was December 1839, she was almost thirty years old and married to Pierce Connelly with three children aged seven (Mercer), four (Adeline), and twenty-months (John Henry). Three months earlier she had lost her fourth child, a daughter, who had died at seven weeks. The Connellys had been Catholics since their reception into the Church in late 1835 and had spent almost two years in Rome in 1836 and 1837 studying and experiencing their new faith at the ‘fountainhead’. Despite the important influence of this time in Rome it was

at her first Retreat of three days she was converted, and... she could not fancy anyone seriously making the Exercises of St Ignatius even for three days without giving themselves wholly to God – She said that all subsequent retreats only completed this one, in which she said the sketch of her interior life was drawn.²⁶

Connelly’s director, Nicholas Point, Rector at St Charles in Grand Coteau introduced her to keeping a spiritual notebook, a practice she long continued and which provides unusually detailed insights of her spiritual life. After the first retreat Point allowed Connelly to make the full eight-day retreat which was not usual for married women. She made three more under his direction in January and September 1841 and October 1842. The year 1840, when she did not make the Exercises, was a traumatic one. Early in the year the Connellys’ youngest son, John Henry, then aged two, died as a result of a tragic accident when a family dog knocked him into a vat of boiling sugar. He was nursed in his mother’s arms for 43 hours until he died on 2 February, the Feast of the Purification, an event that in the Society is ‘perceived as seminal in Cornelia’s spirituality’.²⁷ In October that same year Pierce told Cornelia that he believed he had a calling to the Catholic priesthood and asked her to make an informal pledge of mutual celibacy. Cornelia’s notebooks record that she found this decision extremely painful but agreed to support his vocational search if this was God’s will. She was several months pregnant at the time with their last child, Frank, who was born in March 1841. Her own discernment of a calling to religious life was recorded in her notebook when she made the Exercises in September 1841, although it was not one she expected to be able to follow for some years to come because the children were so young.

In fact this vocation arrived much more quickly than she had expected. In 1843 Pierce asked her to leave Grand Coteau. They were to travel to Rome so they could petition for a solemn papal separation, a canonical process that required them to sign papers individually, be interviewed by a representative of the Pope and make perpetual vows of celibacy. Pierce would then prepare for ordination to the Catholic priesthood, a process that was shortened because he had been ordained in the Episcopal Church before becoming a Catholic. In the meantime Cornelia, Adeline and Frank lived in the Sacred Heart convent at Trinità dei Monti where Cornelia was a quasi-postulant, spiritual director to lay women and teacher. She took as her spiritual director Fr John Grassi, an Italo-American with experience on the American mission who was in Rome as Jesuit General Assistant for Italy. In her spiritual notebook she records in detail the eight-days of the Exercises she made in March 1844:

Refuse no sacrifice that would be for His greater Glory [...] *Do and suffer, one day at a time* [...] I renounce the world, the flesh and the devil and give myself all to Thee, To *know*, to *Love* thee, to *Serve* thee [...] not do my will but *Thine in the will of my Superiors*

and the final note, “Result of examination of vocation *Actions not Words*”, three words which she was later to make the motto of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.²⁸

It was during this period in Rome that she finally concluded it was not right for her to enter the Sacred Heart order because it was too cloistered and because “God had some other work for me”. Pope Gregory XVI, who had a strong hand in the speed with which Pierce Connelly was ordained (1845), made clear that he wished Cornelia not to make her foundation in America as she and Grassi

²⁶ Society of the Holy Child Jesus Archives (= SHCJA), *Documentation Presented by the Historical Commission for the Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly, Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus*, 64, p. 37.

²⁷ LANCASTER, *Interpreters*, p. 5.

²⁸ Excerpts quoted in MCCARTHY, *The Spirituality*, p. 60-61.

were planning, but in England.²⁹ The English lobby in Rome, led by John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, and Bishop (later Cardinal) Wiseman, impressed on Pope Gregory that Cornelia was the ideal woman to found a congregation that would be congruent with English culture and intuitively sympathetic to converts from the Church of England. He wanted schools that would be 'Anglo' rather than French in cultural orientation, responsive to the needs of educated professional English Catholics, old and new. By 1846 the whole Connelly family was in England, Pierce as assistant chaplain to the Talbot family at Alton Towers, the older children all at boarding-schools while Cornelia prepared to make her vows. She was installed by Bishop Wiseman as first Superior General of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus on 21 December 1847.

If this trajectory had continued it seems likely that the evolution of the Society would have gone on relatively smoothly even if in highly unusual circumstances. However, it did not do so. Holy Child sister Judith Lancaster notes that "more biographies seem to have been written of her than of other comparable figures" because her story became "dramatic, scandalous".³⁰ Lancaster's forensic and conceptually framed study of Connelly's biographical history aims to "free Cornelia's story" from myth by placing it within a critical study of saint-making and religious biography. She summarises the historic founding myth of the Society of the Holy Child as the story of

a beautiful bride, loving mother and obedient daughter of the Church who, through her generous response to a series of events not of her making, was transformed into a saintly foundress.³¹

Shaping this myth, she argues, has been the need to defeat the counter-myth about Connelly: that she was an "unnatural mother, unchristian wife, and a scandalous and disobedient religious."³²

What turned a complex family story, with more than its share of suffering, into a religious scandal and tragedy was Pierce Connelly's decision in 1849 to remove the children from their schools and deny their mother access to them as a way to pressurise her into giving him a role in her foundation and a continuing place in her life. This had never been part of any arrangement. Cornelia Connelly was aware that contact between them carried the potential for scandal in the febrile anti-Catholic environment of England in 1849 and 1850 and she refused to allow any communication. It was not long before Pierce Connolly had apostatized and joined forces with one of the leading anti-Catholic campaigners of the day. He exercised his rights under English law to prevent the children and their mother meeting again, and used the legal system to sue for the return of his wife to the marital bed.³³ *Connelly v. Connelly* was a cause célèbre being widely reported in the national and provincial press. None of Cornelia's letters to the children seem to have been passed on. It is clear that as Adeline and Frank were in their father's care and later moved to Italy with him, they identified with him and had bitter feelings about their mother. The oldest son, Mercer, died in America of yellow fever at the age of 20, unreconciled with his mother. As for the Society of the Holy Child Jesus and its founder, they had to make their way in a climate of very great suspicion and loss of clerical support. These are the circumstances in which Cornelia Connelly developed her Society. Nothing could take away from the pain the Connolly children suffered as a consequence of their parents' decisions; nothing could remove Cornelia Connelly's loss of her children and knowledge that they regarded her as having rejected them.³⁴ The sister-companion who wrote the first (unpublished) biography quoted her as saying "The remembrance of my children never leaves me."³⁵ It is the unvarnished reality of the human emotions involved in the situation that, I suggest, Connolly appropriated and integrated into her apostolic life using the method of imaginative contemplation that was by that time the basis of her spiritual life.

²⁹ *Id.*, p. 68.

³⁰ LANCASTER, *Interpreters*, Foreword and p. 14.

³¹ *Id.*, p. 240

³² *Ibid.*

³³ MCCARTHY, *The Spirituality*, p. 73-80 and for a different view LANCASTER, *Interpreters*, p. 157-163, 290-291.

³⁴ For the most evidence-based discussion of the difficult subject of the relationship between Connelly and her children see LANCASTER, *Interpreters*, p. 269-276.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

3. From the Exercises to the Holy Child Jesus spirituality: a mother's interpretation

Working on the Constitutions of the Society Cornelia Connelly strove to express her most personal interpretation of the incarnation. She drafted and re-drafted, crossing out words that did not convey what God had done in being born human. It would be possible for a focus on the childhood of Jesus to produce a sentimentalised devotional sensibility. Connelly's understanding, as it developed, integrated Jesus' early years within the whole Paschal mystery of self-emptying death and resurrection, imaginatively contemplated in all its physical reality, as this section of the introduction to the Constitutions shows:

And what more sublime teaching can we find among these Mysteries than the humble hidden life of the Holy Child? Here it is that God manifests to us in the most wonderful manner the treasures of His Mercy and His boundless Love. In that Child – *enclosed for nine months in the womb of his creature*, born for us in a Stable, exposed to bitter cold and weeping for our sins, now flying into Egypt and then labouring in a carpenter's workshop – we find our Divine Master, and from the living wells of his perfect Humility, His Divine Charity, and His absolute Obedience, we *drink* the Spirit of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus...& *tasting* beside the crib of the Incarnate God the sweetness of suffering and contempt, may we rejoice to labour and to die with Him in the constant practice of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience.³⁶

Writing in 2010 Jesuit spirituality expert, David Fleming, notes that

The best-known example of this use of the imagination in the Spiritual Exercises [placing ourselves in the Biblical story] is the contemplation on Jesus' birth in the second week. Ignatius suggests that we imagine the labors of the journey to Bethlehem, the struggles of finding a shelter, the poverty, the thirst, the hunger, the cold, the insults that meet the arrival of God-with-us.³⁷

Connelly did just this and more. She also 'imagined' the nine months of his mother's pregnancy, creating a sense of growth and development from conception, and of protection and intimacy between mother and child: her meaning-making from personal experience.

The childhood of Jesus seems not to have been adopted in naming orders, institutes and societies of women before the nineteenth century. It then began to be used but remained uncommon: of the almost 400 institutes founded or re-founded in France between 1796 and 1880 only eight incorporated the Holy Child Jesus or Holy Infancy of Jesus in their title.³⁸ Marian titles were much more popular. Cornelia Connelly described how the phrase "Holy Child Jesus" came to her in some supra-sensory way when she was living with the Sacred Heart nuns in Rome.³⁹ By this stage, after making the Exercises seven times, she had already developed an incarnational theology informed by the concrete experience of motherhood through pregnancy, birth, daily responsibilities, growth and fulfilment and the extreme harrowing of the death of John Henry. Analysis of Connelly's written texts has shown the existence of a number of thematic concentrations and a series of connecting theological constructs: there are slightly more references to the Passion and death of Jesus (56) than to the Holy Child (34); the Sacred Heart of Jesus comes between both numerically (46)⁴⁰ and Connelly also locates the Sacred Heart at the centre of her theology of the incarnation. It is the compassion of Jesus, represented by his Sacred Heart as child as well as man that links his childhood with his Passion and death. The childhood is a phase of humble and hidden preparation for the generous giving that is to come, a time of growth and development through the everyday tasks of ordinary family life. In Connelly's imaginative contemplation the everyday family love of childhood and the world-changing love of God's sacrifice are telescoped. This is the religious construction of the incarnation of the Divine

³⁶ MCCARTHY, *The Spirituality*, p. 114 (Italics added).

³⁷ D. FLEMING, « Pray with Your Imagination », <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/pray-with-your-imagination/> (accessed 1 June 2014).

³⁸ C. LANGLOIS, *Le catholicisme au féminin. Les congrégations françaises à supérieure générale au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Cerf, 1984, p. 307, 669-673. There were three institutes with the name Holy Child working in England by 1900 the other two being the Poor Child Jesus arriving from Germany in 1872 and the Congregation of the Holy Child Jesus (more often known as the Dames de Saint Maur) arriving from France in 1892. See WALSH, *Roman Catholic Nuns*, p. 165-68.

³⁹ SHCJA, *Positio, Documentary Study for the Canonisation Process of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly (née Peacock)*, II, p. 714.

⁴⁰ SHCJA, *Positio*, III, note 77, p. 1353. The analysis was undertaken by Caritas McCarthy.

Master embedded in the texts, the images, and the apostolic work of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.⁴¹

Images that would reflect the Society's spirituality were not easy to come by. One of the earliest statues Connolly bought for the Society was of the Sacred Heart of the Child Jesus, a representation which combines a joyous welcoming posture with the (external) compassionate heart of Jesus and the cruciform arms of the cross. It was prominently placed in the chapel at the motherhouse at St Leonards in Sussex and then moved into the newly built Pugin church at St Leonards in 1868. When Mother Connelly restored the medieval Old Palace at Mayfield in 1864 even though few other adornments could be afforded, a painting of the Holy Child was set above the altar.



Fig. 1: The Society's statue of the Heart of the Child Jesus

Ready-made artefacts could not fully express Connelly's theology and so she attempted to do this more exactly herself because images and religious 'things' were a vital part of her spirituality. Her original drawing has not survived but is described as being "the figure of Christ as a boy of uncertain age in front of the cross, within a mandorla with rays of the sun and clouds".⁴² His arms are again cruciform but stretched in welcome. The idea remains in a somewhat clumsy engraver's version of it used in 1879 for Connelly's own memorial card which was then reproduced as a medallion worn by every sister.



Fig. 2: Memorial card for Cornelia Connelly based on her own drawing of the Holy Child

⁴¹ *Id.*, II, p. 719.

⁴² *Id.*, III, Plate XXXII.

4. Embodied devotional practices in the Society of the Holy Child

Ignatius... doesn't want us to *think* about Jesus. He wants us to *experience* him. He wants Jesus to fill our senses.⁴³

The parallel between the purpose of Ignatian spiritual practice as explained by Fleming – to *experience* Jesus – and the theorising of cultural historians interested in “the felt-knowledge that looking, touching, shopping, revering or praying constitutes”, is striking.⁴⁴ In Robert Orsi's exploration of the relationships between faithful believers and the sacred, “the world of the text is really not the world”.⁴⁵ What matters most, according to David Jones, are practices “understood as the cultivation of embedded or embodied ways of knowledge” such as giving house space to a particular sacred image or touching a particular object not because meaning “inheres in things” but “because meaning is activated by them.”⁴⁶ In Ignatian spirituality this would translate as “because God's truth is activated by them”. The context for understanding religious “things”, notes David Morgan, “is practice understood as the cultivation of embedded or embodied ways of knowledge.”⁴⁷

From the Society's first days Connelly set about constructing a community of spiritual practice and ‘things’ focused on the Paschal mystery.⁴⁸ It was within this environment that the sisters and boarding pupils made meaning about their salvation and their relationship to God. For example, the spiritual notes Connelly prepared for Sister Clare Ranger listed practices that would increase her closeness to the Blessed Mother and so to her Son in everyday actions:

Walking: unite your *steps* to hers going to visit her cousin...*Sitting*: See Our Lady sitting with the dead *body* of her Son in her *arms* and asking you to contemplate the wounds and to *kiss* them..*Opening the doors* pray “Mary open to me the *heart* of thy Son.”⁴⁹ [Italics added]

The everyday practices such as opening a door, passing a holy picture, or simply sitting could be intensified during special liturgical seasons by artefacts and visual images, scenes and performances made specifically for that purpose. Connolly, who had studied under artists of the Nazarene school when she was in Rome in 1836-37, took the lead in constructing a strong practice of ‘making’ in the Society. She herself painted full-size portraits in oils (St Ignatius, St Walburga, St Theophilia and the Archangels); the sisters were taught by a professional to carve small statues and their works were to be seen in the chapels and corridors (St Stanislas Koska and St Aloysius Gonzaga); sisters and students used Pugin's Gothic copy books to make richly coloured tapestry church carpets, banners, liturgical vestments and illuminated manuscripts for feasts and special occasions. The convents made indoor and outdoor tableaux for major sacred feasts, like this one for Corpus Christi in 1858:

The decorations in the garden were on a much larger scale there being five altars under the arcade – one a Calvary, representing a rough path up a rocky ascent on which the figure of our Blessed Lord ascending with his cross was represented. There was also an altar dedicated to St Ignatius in the clematis arbour.⁵⁰

They literally made “a composition of the place” which would then be seen, touched, and “performed”.

At Christmas that place was Bethlehem. Mother Connolly instituted a tradition of “live crib” complete with actors, a real donkey and a wax “bambino” created by Madame Tussaud, whose daughter was a pupil at St Leonard's School. Christmas “caves” were constructed at the motherhouse in St Leonards and in other convents, drawing many visitors. In 1849, “it was beautifully decorated and lighted up brilliantly with candles... and a canopy was formed over it of vine leaves and grapes”.

⁴³ FLEMING, « Pray with Your Imagination ».

⁴⁴ D. MORGAN, « The Materiality of Cultural Construction », in *Material Religion*, 4 (2), 2008, p. 228.

⁴⁵ R. ORSI, *Between Heaven and Earth. The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 164.

⁴⁶ MORGAN, « The Materiality », p. 228.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ MCCARTHY, *The Spirituality*, has an excellent section on the *texts* that encourage the sisters to imaginative contemplation, p. 112-113.

⁴⁹ SHCJA, *The Writings of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly*, XXIX, « Spiritual Notes for a Member of the SHCJ », p. 11.

⁵⁰ SHCJA, *MS Sacristy Journal*, 3, 1858, p. 118-119.

In 1854, “for the first time figures of Our Lady and St Joseph were introduced” and three years later “the Crib was made at the end of the cloister... much larger than usual” becoming the “goal of fervent pilgrimages... from morning meditation til the evening examen closed the day”.⁵¹ Another year there was “the addition of rejoicing angels, a flock of sheep”.⁵²

Within the framework of the Church’s liturgical calendar was embedded the Holy Child liturgical calendar reflecting the devotional focus of the Society. Epiphany was the major feast of the Society’s year; the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was conducted with great solemnity. The feast days of Saints Walburga with her healing oil and the Roman martyr Theophila (whose relics had been brought to St Leonards) were celebrated with novenas, as were those of St Ignatius and several other Jesuit saints, particularly those who had died young. St Joseph (always carrying the child Jesus) and St Anthony of Padua (also always carrying the child Jesus) were central devotions. Our Lady of Dolours (visualised in the Society’s copy of Michelangelo’s *Pieta*) was always the Society’s preferred Marian devotion despite the power exerted by newer Marian devotions to Our Lady of Lourdes and Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. The Society’s Mary was first and foremost a mother.⁵³

It has been usual in the Society to ascribe these devotional and liturgical practices to Cornelia Connelly’s time in Rome and, rather unhelpfully, to explain them as ‘ultramontane’ importations of a rather “Italian” kind.⁵⁴ Even the small sample discussed here underlines their relationship to Ignatian spirituality and to a complex threading together of emotions, meaning-making and artistic sources (early Church, Anglo-Saxon and English Gothic revival as well as baroque and Italianate). Underlying the very particular collection of saints and images that clustered around the sanctuary in the St Leonards chapel – a bricolage to those who did not know Cornelia Connelly’s life history – is the Catholic imaginary in which specific heavenly friends can connect and heal: integrating a life with the divine and sacred.⁵⁵



Fig. 3: Interior of the convent chapel at St Leonards in Cornelia's lifetime

There is no space here to demonstrate the unusual extent to which sisters and pupils participated in the liturgy of the Mass through choirs, processions and dressing the altar, but this too was part of the experience encouraged by Mother Connolly.⁵⁶ The Society of the Holy Child created a religious environment for the education and formation of young women quite out of the ordinary in Catholic England at this time.⁵⁷ Its missionary purchase proved to be powerful. Of the 460 girls and young women who attended St Leonard’s school between 1850 and 1879 it is known that 18% entered

⁵¹ SHCJA, *MS Sacristy Journal*, II, for 1854 and 1857.

⁵² SHCJA, *MS Sacristy Journal*, III, p. 123.

⁵³ SHCJA, *The Writings of the Servant of God*, XXIX, p. 13 for the Litany of Our Lady used in the Society.

⁵⁴ *Informatio*, I, p. 20.

⁵⁵ ORSI, *Between Heaven and Earth*, p. 10.

⁵⁶ There is a great deal of evidence in the Sacristy Journals that cover the 1850s and 1860s.

⁵⁷ See M. HEIMANN, *Catholic Devotion in Nineteenth Century England*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995.

religious life (likely to be an underestimate) and many others became committedly Catholic mothers.⁵⁸ The proportion of converts in the Holy Child community was the highest of any religious congregation in England, thus fulfilling the original aspirations of its sponsors.⁵⁹

5. Visual and Performing Arts in the pedagogy of Holy Child Schools

5.1 Pedagogy

In 1863 the Society's printing presses produced the first edition of Mother Connolly's *Book of the Order of Studies*; a gathering together of the pedagogy, curriculum and discipline that had been developed in the Society's schools since 1848. She was familiar with the Jesuit *Ratio Studiorum* and with the Society of the Sacred Heart's *Plan of Study* and her text was an adaptation in structure, but also reflected her own educational philosophy. The preface to the *Order* emphasises that it is not be followed slavishly for "it is simply the same sort of guide as a chart is to the traveller" and she reminds its users that what matters is to understand each child's needs as a learner:

In training and teaching children it is absolutely necessary to walk step by step, to teach line by line, to practise virtue little by little in act after act, and only by such acts of virtue as are suited to the age and stage of moral and intellectual development of those we are guiding.⁶⁰

This educational method of "step by step", unusual in England in this period, is congruent with her incarnational theological emphasis on the hidden but essential years of development in the childhood of Jesus.

As part of this approach Connelly never feared to encourage the pupil-teachers and all the sisters engaged in education to think as mothers would. She inscribed in the Society's constitution that it should be governed "with the strength of a Superior and the heart of a mother".⁶¹ In the reports on the short-lived teacher training college at St Leonards it is possible to see Connelly's model of "good teaching". Inspector T. Marshall described the role of the Principal (Mother Connelly) in leading the pupil-teachers

to reflect upon the discipline of the will as...of the understanding, the motives of human action, and the formation of habits in young children...very practical consequences flow out of such knowledge. All the rules for ...fortifying them insensibly in the deliberate preference of that which is good and true, are founded on principles derived from an exact and thorough appreciation of character.⁶²

The formation of the teacher was, therefore, as much a matter of character as of knowledge, and as such was an apostolic way of living out Ignatian spirituality.

5.2. Art

The *Order of Studies* describes the place of art in the curriculum at some considerable length, fourteen pages in all. In Connelly's educational philosophy art matters because it is a form of visual rhetoric:

In our schools we are not left to consider Drawing as an extra or superlative Art left to the choice of any one to follow or leave out, but, on the contrary, as a Christian Art and one of the most important branches of education, second only to the art of speaking and writing, and in some respects even beyond languages, as it is in itself a universal language [...]⁶³.

⁵⁸ SHCJA, *Documentary Study*, XLII, p. 207-23. List of pupils. See C. M. MANGION, *Contested Identities. Catholic women religious in nineteenth-century England and Wales*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008, p. 84.

⁵⁹ S. O'BRIEN, « Terra Incognita: The Nun in Nineteenth Century England », in *Past and Present*, 121, 1988, p. 135; MANGION, *Contested Identities*, p. 68-69.

⁶⁰ *Book of the Order of Studies*, <http://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:237179>

⁶¹ See Lancaster's discussion of 'mothering' discourse in the Society, in LANCASTER, *Interpreters*, p. 284-287.

⁶² SHCJA, *Positio*, II, p. 883.

⁶³ *Book of Studies* p. 143. Available on-line at <http://corneliaconnellylibrary.org>, "Historical Documents".

The Society quickly developed a reputation for taking art and architectural education seriously. In his study of Cornelia Connelly's educational work, John Marmion believed there was a connection between the founder's experience of the Spiritual Exercises and the place of art and the visual in Holy Child pedagogy concluding that

Connolly's 'application of Ignatian spirituality in this field would seem to have gone further than the traditions of the Jesuit schools had taken it, and is probably an original contribution.'⁶⁴

Marmion's researches led him to believe that art at Holy Child "was broader than anything being attempted at the time even in colleges of art" including as it did "drawing, geometry, perspective, model drawing, illuminating in the old missal style, water colour, guache and oil painting, even ivory miniature painting and some modelling".⁶⁵ Cornelia Connelly taught this curriculum herself, linking it to religious studies, to geometry and to cartography.⁶⁶

Pupils at St Leonard's Sussex who were studying architectural drawing could see the work of a noted architect develop gradually before them as E. W. Pugin's fine chapel for the school took shape in 1867 and 1868. Those at the Holy Child school in Mayfield, Sussex were also beneficiaries of the collaboration between E. W. Pugin and Cornelia Connelly, this time to restore in a sympathetic manner the medieval palace of the Archbishops of Canterbury in the village for use as chapel, school and convent. Mother Connelly appointed first-rate architects and worked closely with them. Mayfield was a major restoration project being the first pre-Reformation building to be reinstated for Catholic worship in the nineteenth century.⁶⁷

Holy Child Theatre

Although Ignatius did not innovate school drama or theatre productions he justified a place for them and as a consequence they became a distinctive feature of Jesuit colleges. In the *Ratio Studiorum* he noted that

Young boys and their parents become marvellously excited and inflamed, and also very much attached to our Society, when the boys are able to play on stage our labours, some results of their study, their acting ability, and some sample of their powers of memory.⁶⁸

Theatre was about winning hearts and was

a considered strategy... aimed to stir the passions in order to foster authentic commitment, in other words to educate by arousing delight, pity and fear.⁶⁹

Much less is documented about drama than art in Holy Child schools not least because, as with the Jesuit colleges, it was not part of the formal curriculum. It was also important to keep a low profile about the role of theatre in the life of the schools because it was generally frowned upon in bourgeois society in Victorian England for girls to perform plays. Holy Child Theatre, as Connelly named the activity, was a joint endeavour of sisters and pupils with the latter being trusted to take responsibility. It involved building the stage and designing the costumes and programmes as well as directing and acting. The first play, Milton's *Comus*, was performed in 1851. Shakespeare plays were a staple of the Theatre as were plays performed in Italian or French by the senior pupils. One of the sisters turned Cardinal Wiseman's novel *Fabiola or the Church of the Catacombs* into a play script. It was so popular that it was performed regularly and even though Wiseman did not approve of girls acting, he did come to watch and enjoyed the performance.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ MARMION, *Cornelia Connelly's work*, p. 372.

⁶⁵ *Id.*, p. 142.

⁶⁶ *Id.*, p. 143.

⁶⁷ K. JORDAN, « Restoring Faith: Cornelia Connelly and the (re)building of Mayfield convent ». Unpublished paper « Revisiting the Cloister », Symposium hosted by the Victorian Society (October 2012).

⁶⁸ MIOLA, « Jesuit drama », p. 72.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ MARMION, *Cornelia Connelly's work*, p. 177-179.

Despite their evident popularity with the girls, reflected in later memories of schooldays, not all the sisters approved of the drama festivals. Even as late as 1871 some sister-teachers were debating with the Mother General the wisdom of the Holy Child Theatre, arguing that “the children are rather injured than improved by the plays”. According to those who opposed them the plays encouraged vanity. Mother Connelly’s conclusion was that even if this was so, “are not the children led to know their own vanity at a time when the correction can be applied [...] are they not thus prepared to meet the temptations of the world?”⁷¹ She stood her ground against the criticisms that came from several quarters pointing out that drama was not only a significant way of engaging with human emotions but that it helped to form the girls in virtue, allowing them to test themselves in new settings. Drama remained a distinctive feature of Holy Child education and continued to be a strong element of school life throughout the twentieth century.⁷²

6. Conclusion

We began with a series of questions about what it means to claim that the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius were “pivotal” to many women’s religious congregations, of which the Society of the Holy Child Jesus founded in England, was one. This paper has argued that the imaginative method and the conversionist purpose of the Exercises, both of which were focused on the heart and affectivity, were absorbed into Holy Child’s spiritual life and teaching ministry to powerful effect. However, it has also shown they did not come unmediated from Jesuit texts or Jesuit fathers. Instead they were inflected on many levels by Cornelia Connelly as founder, in particular through her experiences of motherhood as appropriated and re-interpreted through the Spiritual Exercises. In the two-way relationship between an Ignatian heritage and new meaning-making by the founder, the women and girls of the Holy Child community became confident participants in the creation of Catholic practices of some originality in Victorian England.

⁷¹ Quoted in MCCARTHY, *The Spirituality*, p. 159.

⁷² See, for example, <http://www.holychild.org/arts/performing-arts/cantare/index.aspx> and <http://www.connellycenter.org/>

