



4 th century

“NONE HIGHER STATURE”

By

Mother Mary Eleanor, S.H.C.J.

“After all, the whole point of love is making yourself small,” wrote Thérèse of Lisieux at the end of the nineteenth century. “I understand none higher stature in this life than Childhood,” wrote Mother Julian of Norwich in the fourteenth century. “Does it surprise you to hear that full-grown men of all nations are children in God’s eyes?” asks Clement of Alexandria in the second century.

All were occupied with that paradox of the Christian life which is embodied in Our Lord’s injunction: “Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.” It is an injunction that has been much misunderstood. It has been made to cover a great deal of softness and sentimentality; and perhaps no century has distorted it according to its own heresies more than our own. Yet it holds within it a remedy for many of our ills — our worship of size, of sophistication; our sham and mediocrity; our timidity; our reversal of true values. These maladies were already showing a hundred years ago; and it is indicative of the fact that God does not let a spiritual malady increase without providing a remedy that several religious communities dedicated to the Child Jesus came into being in the middle decades of the last century.

When the little band of Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus set sail from England for America in 1862, they made no stir when they landed. They had not the slightest notion of being a “remedy.” God acts quietly, especially when the “whole point of love is making yourself small.” But echoing in their hearts were the words of Cornelia Connelly, written in 1856:

Be then like the Holy Child Jesus in your thoughts, in your words, and in your actions, cherishing diligence and fidelity in what is called little by daily occurrence, and be persuaded that nothing is little with God.

Greatness in littleness — that was the first ingredient which they brought with them to this country. It was the first sermon which the Child Jesus had preached to the Christian consciousness from the pulpit of the crib. It defines that mysterious connection between putting on spiritual childhood and achieving Christian maturity. The two are intimately related.

Already in the second century, Clement of Alexandria had wrestled to make clear that connection. *Childishness* meant “lacking in intelligence”; *childlikeness* meant “matured in the Word,” — meant “newly become gentle.” He writes:

The newly formed people of Christ are young because they have heard the new good things. The fertile time of

life is this unaging youth of ours, in which we are ever in the prime of intelligence, ever young, ever child-like, ever new . . .

But he perceived that there was only one Child who was really a safe guide, and that was the Holy Child:

What is this Child, this little one, after whose image we are also little ones? . . . O, the great God; O, the perfect Child! . . . Is not the Childhood of this Child perfect . . ., educating us little ones as His children? This is He who stretches out His hands to us, hands so clearly to be trusted!

St. Ephrem made poetry of that paradox of littleness in greatness:

How meek art Thou, How mighty art Thou, O Child . . .

Who can sound Thy depth, Thou great sea that made itself little?

That paradox needed to become part of the Christian character. *Be then like the Holy Child Jesus . . .* Cornelia Connelly sent those young Sisters across the ocean to repeat that paradox in themselves, to teach by what they were. The greatness and the littleness welled up from the same fountain — from “the living wells of His perfect humility, His divine charity, and His absolute obedience,” as their Rule stated.

His perfect humility — that was the second ingredient, the second sermon which the Child Jesus had from time immemorial preached from the small, rough podium of His crib. Hilary used the strong word *ignominy* to describe Christ's human birth; the Franciscans softened the vocabulary into tenderness without romanticizing the circumstances. Poverty and humility are the lessons to be learned — “the swaddling clothes He takes most delight in,” to quote from a life of Our Lord formerly attributed to St. Bonaventure. These “swaddling clothes” the Sisters brought with them.



They understand the Holy Child of Prague.

Yet the seventeenth century had given them a new image — a tiny figure, no longer in a crib, a little King, crowned with a diadem, holding the world in the small hands of a child. It was a fit image to counteract the image of secular kingship in the days of Louis XIV. This little King the Sisters brought with them to America in their hearts. Yet the medal which the Sisters wore on their rosary has an image that is closer to their spirit — the figure of a Child, arms outstretched in welcome, outlined against a cross.

The crib and the cross have always belonged together, since the earliest ages of the Church. That is another of the paradoxes of Christianity. Franciscan spirituality produced a *Stabat Mater Speciosa*, celebrating the mother standing by the crib, paralleling, phrase for phrase, the *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*.

Cornelia Connelly's own personal history fixed unalterably the figures

of the *Mater Dolorosa* and the *Mater Speciosa* in a single view. Devotion to the Child and devotion to the Mother of Sorrows became the two poles of her spirituality during the agonizing hours when she held her own dying child in her arms. Besides, the crib and the cross came from the same wood — the wood of utter self-abnegation.

In the same spirit, her followers brought with them to America, above all, the spirit of *joy*. "Rejoicing, joined to submission," wrote Clement of Alexandria, "with the King as audience. The spirit exults in such merry-making in Christ, attended with submissiveness. This

is in truth goodly childlikeness."

Now, after a hundred years, comes the time of rejoicing — and self-assessment. Do the Sisters still bear "in frail vessels" the same treasure? In America? In Europe? In Africa? They cannot answer; they can only pray in terms of the Little Office of the Holy Child which Mother Cornelia Connelly wrote:

O sweet Holy Child, strong in weakness, have mercy on us . . .

In the spectrum of the Church's spirituality, they know they represent something that the world needs.

MEET CORNELIA CONNELLY

through the Cornelia Connelly Guild

By M. M. Raymond

Ever since the story of Cornelia Connelly was first told, interest in her has steadily increased. People from all walks of life have been attracted to and inspired by her. When Father James Walsh, S. J., Diocesan Postulator of the Cause of Cornelia Connelly, visited America in 1958-'59, he recognized the quality of the interest in her, and supported the formation of an organization which would extend this interest. Then, in 1961, when the Postulator General, Rev. Paul Molinari, S. J., visited the United States, he gave the final enthusiastic impetus to the launching of the CORNELIA CONNELLY GUILD.

The primary purpose of the CORNELIA CONNELLY GUILD is to make Cornelia Connelly better known and loved. But why should she be brought forth from the crowd, to be presented as a candi-

date for canonization? What has she done to warrant this distinction? The answer lies in redirecting the question: *not*, What has she done? *but*, What did she become? How did her life conform to the plan of God for her? Many studies have been made of the life of Cornelia Connelly, and the emerging picture points to an extraordinary loving conformity to God's Will, in the face of almost unparalleled demands. In this age of confusion, suspicion, and fear, she stands out as a symbol of serenity, confidence, and love.

In the bond of the Communion of Saints, the members of the Church on earth turn to the members of the Church in heaven for assistance in spiritual and temporal needs. This is to be expected, since the members of the Church Triumphant are obviously the more