

A MISSIONARY SOCIETY

(Reflections occasioned by a recent visit to the Holy Child Missions in West Africa.)

by James Walsh, S. J.

Tradition has it that when Cornelia Connelly, the American wife and mother, was on the point of being sent into England to found a new religious congregation which would devote itself to the education of girls and give special assistance to those newly converted to the Faith, Pope Gregory XVI said to her: "From England let your efforts in the cause of education spread to America". Whether or not this tradition is factual — and it must be admitted that intense and prolonged research has failed to discover any documentary evidence for it, it certainly reflects the essential missionary attitude of Cornelia and her society. It reveals an intense desire to be *sent* by the Church, as Christ was sent by the Father and as he in turn sent his apostles: "As the Father hath sent me, I also send you" (John 20; 21). It reveals a profound awareness of union with the Church in her apostolate of glorifying the Father on earth by furthering the work of redemption assigned to the mystical body of Christ. It reveals the implicit acceptance of the fact that for the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, as for the Church itself, there can never be any self-imposed limits of time or place upon her teaching vocation; "Going therefore, teach ye *all* nations" (Matthew 28; 28). The Child Jesus, lifted up in the arms of Simeon in the temple, is given for the enlightenment of all peoples — *Lumen ad revelationem gentium*. (Luke 2; 32).

When Cornelia was impelled, shortly before the feast of the Presentation 1840, to offer herself unconditionally for the glorifica-

tion of the Father she was responding to her vocation to share, in a special manner, Christ's Childhood and his universal priesthood: "No-one can take upon himself this position but only those called by God... so Christ did not take upon himself the glory of the high priesthood, but it was given to him by the One who said: Thou art my Son: this day have I begotten thee" (Hebrews 5; 4-5). When she said to her husband "I accept the sacrifice", she was accepting the missionary vocation for herself and for the society which she was to found: the same vocation, the same sending which Christ accepted in the first moment of his Incarnation: "Behold I come to do thy will, O God" (Hebrews 10; 9).

It is not surprising, then, that Cornelia's society, in its conception and from the first moment of its birth, was in essence a missionary society. England in 1846 was under the jurisdiction of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. The new society was to devote itself to the consolidation of a renascent Church in missionary territory. Its task was to educate the future mothers of a new Catholic community. It would teach children in such a way that they would be at ease in and contribute to the growth of the social and political group to which they belonged, but would never forget that their true citizenship is a heavenly one. It would teach them to have true ambitions. They would be either mothers of the families from which vocations to the priesthood and religious life

The Corpus
Christi
procession at
the Holy Child
College, in
Lagos.



would flow in abundance, or they would become religious themselves. At the same time, the new society was to take a lead in encouraging and helping new converts to find their vocation in the Church. Hence, when Cornelia insisted that her society must always adapt itself to the wants of the age, she was not merely referring to the necessity of using the most modern or the most efficient methods of teaching. She was always aware that the model of her society's growth was Christ the Child who "advanced in wisdom, and age and grace" (Luke 2:52). "The wants of the age" was a phrase unintelligible to her unless it meant the needs of the Church at any given moment of time.

The pattern of the Society's work - its missionary activity - was thus comprehensively drawn in the first years of its existence: in the establishment of primary and secondary schools first at Derby and then at St. Leonards', London and Preston; in the experimental training school for teachers. Though Cornelia dreamed of her society fulfilling the needs of the Church wherever they appeared to be most urgent (Australia, Japan and Brazil were successively in her thoughts as more obvious 'missionary' territory than England or the U.S.A.), wisdom dictated that there should

be consolidation. Fervent beginnings always carry with them the danger of dissipating one's efforts, even as the excessive desire for stability will cool missionary fervour until the spirit becomes tepid.

Cornelia's wisdom was such that she avoided both these extremes for her young society. Once it had reached its sixteenth year, she felt that it was strong enough to extend its efforts to America. There, the same missionary pattern was reproduced, with the traditional conditions of extreme poverty and hardship, isolation and uncertainty. Cornelia's dreams that her society should carry the Holy Child "to shine on the Gentiles" was not realised in her own lifetime - not for more than fifty years after her death.

When one visits the Holy Child Missions in the West Africa of to-day one's first and last impressions (leaving aside the heat and the mosquitoes) are of the vitality of the Society and its fidelity to the ideals of the Foundress, in the spontaneous, almost instinctive, daily adaptation to the needs of the Church. One sees, for example, in the new secondary school at Abakaliki, a renewal of the spirit which rebuilt Mayfield and which laboured against such overwhelming odds at Towanda. At Ogoja, a well-founded training



With the students at the Teacher Training College in Takoradi, Ghana. *The spirit of Mother Cornelia Connelly is evident in every Holy Child Mission.*

college for elementary school teachers is being closed, and a secondary school is being set up in its place – with great cheerfulness and fervour: the wants of the age in an independent Nigeria demand such adaptation. The readers of these pages are familiar enough with the story of the Handmaids of the Holy Child, and how perfectly that story reflects Cornelia's spirit of love and sacrifice. In Ghana, this story is beginning once again: a very special assistance is being extended to 'new converts' in the formation of a new religious congregation for the Archdiocese of Cape Coast. From the Secondary school at Uyo, the first two aspirants to the Society have just begun their postulancy at Mayfield. In the training College at Takoradi the present political uncertainty can not upset the equanimity and serenity which were constants in the troubled life of the Foundress.

In all this the vocation of Cornelia Connelly is finding its fulfilment. In West Africa one is particularly aware of the fruits of her holiness. Her Society is become another Simeon, holding up the Child as a light to the Gentiles. With the rest of the Church in Africa, the Society realises that the Child she offers is

a sign of contradiction. The sorrow and suffering which her Foundress experienced are hers in abundance.

The Society "on the Missions" shares her joys and sufferings with the Society at home. In all humility she realises that she is the flower and fruit of the holiness of her Foundress; that she is a little reflection of the Church of the Christ who reveals himself as well in the Crib as on the Cross and in his risen glory. She realises that the words which Cornelia wrote in 1849 as a summary of the Society's spirit apply in a special manner to her. It would not be too much to say that the visitor to the Society on the Missions must always come home bearing this same message from its Foundress:

"As the Society of the Holy Child Jesus is spiritually founded on the virtues of Poverty, Suffering and Obedience which our most blessed Redeemer came down from heaven to practise in the grotto of Bethlehem and thence through His whole life unto Calvary, so ought all to begin life again with the most sweet, holy, loving Child Jesus, a humbled God, walking with Him step by step, in the simplicity of the Child, in humility and poverty, mortifying their senses, their imaginations; passions, whims, inclinations, and aversions; that they may finally be united to our crucified Lord and thus look forward to a glorious eternity."