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THE 1880 CHAPTER AND THE CUSTOMAL

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After April 18, 1879, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus knew that one phase of its life was over and that it was entering upon a new and critical period. It was a time for stock taking, a time to press harder for approbation of the rule, to some extent a time for codification. Much that had been implicit must now be written down lest it be lost. The strong, loving, suffering, personal presence of the mother would sustain her daughters in other ways than when she lived among them.

Cornelia's lifelong habit of making notes and copying extracts for possible future use had extended to include directions for going about daily tasks or helpful ways of performing religious duties and conducting oneself generally. The practice of existing congregations could be a guide to a newly constituted body. The writings of spiritual masters should be available, at least in selected passages, to communities that had few books. As the Society developed its own ways of doing things it was desirable to perpetuate what was valuable and distinctive. Cornelia's common place book was a compendium of this sort of thing and much more; it was the natural parent of the several smaller and more specific manuals of good advice which we will describe as early customals.

The first mention of the customal in the minutes book of SHCJ general chapters occurs in the record of the opening formalities of our third chapter, August 1880, sixteen months after Cornelia's death. The entries are terse; a few seem highly charged.

Two secretaries were elected "to receive

all the amendments and observations on the rule" (Danell's still). "A member of the Chapter was also elected to keep order"--Mother Angelica Croft, by majority. (She had been on the general council since the first chapter, 1874. In 1877 she was elected first assistant general and monitress. As vicar upon the death of the superior general she was responsible to prepare and convoke the new chapter.) "A committee was elected to revise the Customal. A committee was elected to revise the 'Book of Studies.'" There were four on each committee; then six "copyists" are listed. Of the nineteen capitulars nine were veterans of 1874 and 1877, while six were at a chapter for the first time. The Society numbered 190 professed and 27 novices.

The elections were early in the chapter (August 6). Angelica Croft became the second superior general by a vote of 17-1-1; she was reelected three more times, dying in office in 1902 at the age of 63.

The rule was the principal business of 1880 chapter (as it will be in 1980). Deliberations included the Directory and Summary (see Source #4, pp. 22-23). The ceremonial was also read. The "provisional government for America," operating as set up earlier, was "arranged" (it would be revised further in 1886 when the American province was erected). The taxation of the various houses was voted in detail--this was a regular feature of the general chapters from the beginning. The formula seems to have been some percentage of 3/4 of the income of the house, e.g., 5% for St. Leonards, 2½% for Blackpool. Some houses received a subsidy instead; some paid only their own rent. And "the monies which should by rule be paid by the houses in America to the General

Fund, shall be considered to constitute a fund for the American provisional government. . . . It is strongly recommended that the whole fund should not be spent on the Novitiate" (Minutes Book, pp. 31-32).

It is evident that in all these carefully thought out provisions "law" followed "life." As Caritas McCarthy reminds us, "the founder's constitutional synthesis is found by rediscovering the relationship of her continuing efforts to achieve a written formulation to the life it sprang from, and, in turn, guided and fostered" (Source #4, p. i). So in all that Cornelia learned or adapted from other congregations' ways of doing things and from other writers' ways of expressing these, the mark of authenticity is the pragmatic test of daily helpfulness for growth, the Ignatian tantum quantum. Her own flexibility within freely embraced guidelines is part of her bequest to us and part of the understanding she conveyed somehow to the periodic legislative assemblies, the general chapters (she herself experienced only two of these, and in the last five years of her life). Minor regulations should be subject to review; sensitivity to changing needs should be balanced with the values of uniformity. Even at moments in our Society history when minutiae loomed large in the name of fidelity, the principle of life before law could reassert itself in the name of Cornelia's largeness of heart.

In 1880 the wish to have things written down extended very particularly to "the question regarding the Vows of the Sisters who did not say the word 'perpetual' in their formula of Vows" (MB, p. 35). Those professed between 1859 and 1874 were obliged by Bishop Grant to

use an indefinite vow formula.¹ In 1874 the Danell rule restored the Society's original practice of making perpetual vows (although after a period under temporary vows instead of immediately after the noviceship as had obtained), but there had been no formal "finalizing" of the vows of the previous fifteen years. Notwithstanding assurances of validity (from Cardinal Simeone, Prefect of Propaganda, in July 1881, from Father Cardella in November 1887)², Mother Angelica³ and sisters of the generation affected, e.g., Mother Mary Francis Bellasis, longed for the express bidding of the Church to renew their vows publicly and be ratified, as it were. This came from Cardinal Mazella, Dec. 12, 1887: "If there were any ground for anxiety, which, I repeat-- there is not, this renovation /Epiphany 1888/ would be enough to entirely remove it" (D 58: 203).

Something of Mother Angelica's determination is reflected in the remaining minutes of the 1880 chapter. Although on the Feast of the Assumption "the Chapter did not sit" (MB, p. 35), on Aug. 16 those "who were appointed to

¹ See Bisgood, pp. 255-256; D 58:188.

² MB, p. 41; D 58:190.

³ Angelica Groft's own vows were made on Jan. 13, 1859; Bp. Grant's letter explaining "the peculiar circumstance" preventing perpetual vows is dated Sept. 8, 1859 (D 51:28). Lucy Ignatia Newsham, one of the Towanda pioneers in 1862, was the first to feel the prohibition. The word "perpetual" is crossed out in her signed copy of her vows, Sept. 9, 1859 (D 51: 29).

do the Customal worked all day," and through the 17th "the deliberations on the Customal continued."

Three propositions conclude the 1880 entries:

1. That the collect "Absolve we beseech Thee" be said daily in each House of the Institute during the next six years for the repose of the soul of the Rev^d Mother Cornelia Connelly Foundress --
Unanimously voted.
2. That a Lady altar be erected at Mayfield in memory of our Foundress--the expenses to be defrayed by the voluntary offerings of the houses of the Institute, within the next six years.
Agreed to unanimously
3. A copy of the Customal "Ad experimentum" will be sent to each house to be followed as far as possible during the next six years.

(MB, pp. 35-36)

What was this customal?⁴ Probably a small bound notebook, five by seven or so, handwritten like the five uniform books preserved in our generalate archives and the three diverse manuscripts from which the others seem to have been copied. One of the five matching books, R27 #4, appears to have had its first sixty pages tied together with tape for the sake of a new start on p. 61, which is inscribed:

⁴ See "Cornelia's Auxiliaries," Source #4, p. 145.

To

Rev Mother Maria Rita
Oct. 27th 1880

Then after ten blank pages, p. 73 begins with

Customal
1880

Preface

As the object of the Customal is to preserve uniformity in external observances, all must remember that no one can establish a new custom.

The "Morning's Oblation" follows immediately with the rest of our spiritual duties and the order of the day, etc., concluding on p. 140:

At St. Leonards

copied Oct. 27th

Another of the five, R27 #1, has lettered on its flyleaf in simplified Gothic:

Customal
of the
Society of the Holy C' Jesus
Novitiate
Mayfield August 1868.

#3, without date, identifies itself in large script as "Noviciate Customal," comments in pencil "All ill-arranged & to be re-copied," and adds as "Our Mother's direction," "To be read once a month--viz--on the Saturday after the 1st Friday unless it should be Chapter day when it shall be deferred till the Monday." Inside #2, "Customal Notes &c &c of the Holy Child Jesus," a slip tells us to "see Middle & end of Book for notes on other subjects,"

which include "Instructions & Regulations for Certified Industrial Schools" and "Scotch Time Tables."

These five books are based on three earlier sources:

1. Cornelia's Common Place Book, a large bound volume on whose first flyleaf someone has lettered in ink: "First customal & book of general notes in the Society belonging to Rev^d Mother Foundress--1844.
2. The "Little Red Book," penciled on whose flyleaf is "Very valuable CC The 1st Customal of the Society." Parts of this in fine careful lettering could well be a fair copy of common place book items.
3. R 28, unbound but stitched foolscap sheets making 28 pages, written, with some headings lettered in the same size and style as the little red book, and marked outside: "To be written out again with certain other advice."

A tentative examination of textual variants suggests that R 27 customals #1, 3 and 4 are closest to CP and R28 (more conveniently referred to as "F"), while LR, 2 and 5 seem to constitute a family. The distinctions are not rigorous. Completeness and consistency do not appear to have been high priorities for the copyists. Differences between "spirit of silence" (CP, F, 1, 3, 4) and "spirit of religious silence" (LR, 2, 5), or between "days of great recreation" (CP, F) and "days of grand recreation" (LR, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) are hardly of such magnitude as to cause confusion about the message conveyed.

A look at the common content reveals much that we recognize from the printed customals of 1911 on, or that sounds familiar from chapter notices whose force was of uncertain duration. On this last point we can smile sympathetically with the exasperated secretary

general after the 1924 chapter (in Rome where the generalate had just moved) which, although called to elect a new general, Mother Mary Etheldreda being too ill to continue after two years in office, began another period of tidying up:

/half sheet, not dated or signed, clipped to two pages containing notes from 1904 through 1922, typed on the same typewriter --"C" out of alignment--with "Heading?" written top center and a row of ? under it/

1. A number of changes in the Customal during the General Chapter of 1910 were made and a new edition of the Customal was printed shortly afterwards.
2. The last note on the above paper, "Chapter Notices," requires that these notices are to be read by the Superior twice a year. The members of the last Chapter, 1924, asked that something be done, as notices in a later Chapter often contradicted those of a former Chapter, e.g., dropping the prayer after Litanies for Rev. Mother Foundress, etc.
3. Candidly, I think the paper I am sending is useless:
 - a. We have no Customal to which to refer and find out definitely whether or not some of the notes are contained in it.
 - b. No papers sent to the houses after Chapters are in Rome to which we may refer (except the Chapter Notices of 1924), therefore how can we be sure we have entered or omitted the needed notices.

The concern for Society tradition and an understandable watchfulness lest disorder intrude or disparity of practice weaken family solidarity are in themselves part of Cornelia's bequest to her widening circle of daughters--sisters, yes, but the motherly note in her instructive passages is both unmistakable and characteristic. The subject matter of the early customals were well. A typical table of contents (from R27 Customal 1) follows:

The Morning's Oblation		
Dressing		
Meditation		
Spiritual Reading	(see CC 23:11)	
Particular Examen of Conscience		
Adoration B. S.	(CC 23:11)	
Night Prayers		
Great Silence	(CC 23:12)	
Office BVM	" "	
Holy Mass & Communion	(CC 23:12-13)	
Breakfast	"	
Strict Silence ⁵	"	
Dinner	"	
Refection ⁶	14	
Supper	"	
Recreations		
Spiritual Exercises	(CC 23:14-15)	
Notices upon which to renew our obedience		
Continuation	(CC 23: 27-29)	
Common Faults to be avoided		
Answers to the question how we may make acts		

⁵ It is only in 1922 that the "Sacred Character of a Community Refectory" is mentioned as a reason that silence there "ranks with that of Church & Sacristy."

⁶ At this point Customal 3 adds in pencil "tea" between "coffee" and "or beer."

Part II

Refectory Penances
Public Penances
General Examen
Novenas of Acts of Virtue
Novenas of Actions
A Set of Practices
Examen . . . Ordinary Actions
Examen for the Retreat of the Month
Notes from an Epiphany Retreat

There follows another "Second part containing penances to be read in the refectory" and a collection of extracts suitable for short readings plus a few more regulations, some with special reference to novices. Yet more miscellaneous material includes menus, lists of clothing for postulants, notes for the kitchen and housework, and information about other schools.

An interesting inclusion in the common place book and most of the early customals, still there in some of the later printed ones, is material related specifically to the children, who in the boarding schools must have been very present--apostolate and spiritual life were intertwined as a matter of course.

In looking over the customals and related writings one is struck again by the primacy and the everydayness of the spiritual in SHCJ lives, by the delicate attention to detail not at all inconsistent with liberty of spirit, by the wholeness and the practicality of Cornelia's grasp of the human situation. "Regulations" had their place, but were not retained beyond their usefulness; constant adjustment was an expected function of the general chapters. And in all, the test of quiet experience was honored. The unglamorous sojourn at Nazareth was seriously proposed as a model for a good part of our lives.