

### ***Notes for talk on Cornelia Connelly's approach to the education of children.***

I am going to begin by reading the 1853 report on the poor school at St Leonards on Sea written by the Government Inspector of Roman Catholic Poor Schools, Mr Thomas William Marshall (1818-1877). He was a convert Anglican clergyman who had been appointed to this post in 1847 and therefore had 5 to 6 years' experience of inspecting Catholic poor schools by this time. He follows the structure laid down for the Inspectors' reports: they had to comment in order on 1) desks and furniture; 2) books and apparatus; 3) organization; 4) instruction and discipline; 5) methods; 6) master or mistress; 7) special items.

*"Saint Leonard's-on-Sea: 105 Girls*

*Buildings excellent. Desks excellent; furniture excellent, play-ground excellent. Books abundant and good; apparatus abundant. Organization excellent. Methods mixed, and applied with rare skill and judgment.(sic) Discipline excellent; instruction of the highest order. It is impossible to witness without admiration the results obtained in this very interesting school, in which consummate skill in the art of teaching, unwearied patience, and the most persuasive personal influence, have combined to accomplish all the rarest fruits of Christian instruction. The school is now probably one of the most perfect institutions of its class in Europe. "*

What a tribute! Especially when we look at the background. By then the Society was 7 years old; most of the Sisters in the community were very young in years & would have been either still novices or just professed; the school at the gate for the girls of local working class Catholic families was opened only 4 years previously in 1849. It was Cornelia herself who was training the Sisters in the art of teaching and obviously doing it so successfully that an experienced inspector could deliver an almost ecstatic report. How had she come by her vision of what a truly Christian education should be and how did she impart this vision and the skills needed to implement it to her Sisters?

The vision was rooted in her own life experiences and in her attraction to the theology of Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, really growing, through infancy and childhood," in wisdom, stature and in favour with God and men." (Luke 2:52) I'll come back to the theology later and now just comment briefly on the life experiences which contributed to her particular philosophy of education.

Cornelia had received a broad liberal education in the city of her birth, Philadelphia. Wealthy families like hers employed governesses and tutors to educate their children at home and it is clear from occasional references to her accomplishments as a young woman that she was fluent in French, played the piano and guitar well, was an avid reader and had had singing lessons. Later as a young married woman she was involved, as parents are, in the early education of her children and then from 1838 she taught English and music at the Sacred Heart convent school in Grand Coteau, Louisiana. Pierce taught in the neighbouring Jesuit College and through this she became familiar with the Jesuit Book of Studies, the basis of the Jesuit system of education, which had also influenced the Sacred Heart system. Finally, having received from Gregory XVI the mission to go to England and found a religious congregation with a particular focus on the education of Catholic girls of all classes, she spent 3 months in Paris, studying the methods used by the newly founded Sisters of the Assumption. From the books that have survived that were used by her and from her own Book of Studies, finally printed in 1863, it is clear that she had gathered an impressive range of manuals on teaching methods in the first years of her work in England, including books in French and German. So the vision that lay behind the impressive results recorded in the Inspector's report in 1853 was an amalgam of personal experiences, wide reading, observation of different teaching methods and a natural gift for, indeed passion for teaching,



so as to enable each child to grow in wisdom, stature and grace according to her or his potential as a human being, made in the image of God.

In reading Marshall's report I was struck by his analysis of why the school at St Leonard's was so remarkable: "consummate skill in the art of teaching, unwearied patience, and the most persuasive personal influence, have combined to accomplish all the rarest fruits of Christian instruction." I am going to take these three elements and expand them, using Cornelia's writings, to show how fundamental they were to what, by 1851, she was referring to in her letters as "our system of education."

### 1) "Consummate skill in the art of teaching"

From the beginning Cornelia was totally committed to the thorough professional training of teachers, first her own companions and later young Catholic women through the Training College at St Leonards and the pupil teachers system in the parochial schools. She also impressed on her Sisters the need for regular professional updating. She was in the vanguard of those educationalists of mid 19<sup>th</sup> century England who realised that teaching was an art and not a matter of simply pouring lists of facts to be memorised into passive pupils under the constant threat of the cane. Proper training would replace this reliance on rote-learning and the cane.

For instance, in her Rule she begins the chapter on the Choir Sisters, earlier referred to as the School Sisters, with these words: (Rule, ch. xiv, par. 103)

*"As teaching is the chief employment of the Choir Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus every care should be taken to secure that the Sisters apply themselves seriously to their studies, in order to be able to give to their pupils a solid education as well as a sound religious training. Therefore classes shall be established ...for the instruction of those Sisters {who} possess the requisite capabilities."*

In a later paragraph, which she had taken from another source because of its appositeness, we read of the need for a "discreet zeal, which leads us to instruct ourselves before attempting to teach others". (ibid: par.108)

In February 1856 the St Leonards Training College opened although the building had not yet been completed and when Marshall inspected it later in the year he was once again very impressed with what he found, even after so short a time. In fact the level of the instruction being given rather takes the breath away. After praising the well-designed building which included dormitories designed to accommodate 60 students eventually, he turns to the course of study for the first year students.

*"(It) appears to me, as far as I have had opportunities of judging, to be prudently and skilfully arranged; but it certainly makes a large demand upon their powers of application. More than eight hours of daily study, and two of prayer, meditation, and other spiritual exercises, implies energetic discipline both of the conscience and the intellect. It is true that in this distribution of the day's work is included not only the study of French, but also of music and drawing, which may be fairly regarded as recreative subjects. Nor does this amount of labour appear to be irksome or oppressive to the students. They acknowledge that it keeps them fully employed, but they do not seem to wish for relief. Indeed, their cheerful zeal and docility sufficiently attest their keen appreciation of the advantages which they enjoy. I must add that their vigorous health refutes the notion that more relaxation is required."*

He comments on the fact that while the usual popular text-books on the principles of training teachers are used, these are supplemented here by much more profound works – the Catéchisme de Persévérance of the Abbé Gaume; La Théologie Affective, ou St Thomas en



Méditation (1855 edition); and the Meditations of De Ponte. He says that the first of the principles derived from these books is *"that charity is the true motive, and humility the only strength, of those who undertake the instruction of others."* The last mentioned work, the Meditations of De Ponte, a Spanish Jesuit, consists of 6 volumes of meditations on the Mysteries of the Faith, based on the method of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises – weighty stuff indeed for 17 and 18 year-olds even in its English translation!

The effectiveness of this ambitious programme was evident at the inspection three years later, in 1859, when Marshall was struck by the quality of the young trainee teachers and their attitude to their role as teachers. He waxes eloquent on a "certain simplicity and generosity of character" which they display. He goes on to say that *"they work with zeal, but with calmness and composure; they are often singularly unselfish and though encouraged and rewarded by the approval of others, seem to care more for the welfare of their scholars than for their own credit. I conclude that they owe this peculiar character to the teaching and example which they had the advantage to enjoy during the period of their training."*

We know that during these inspections Marshall not only observed the teachers, SHCJ and others, at work, but studied their notebooks and talked to Cornelia about her vision of what the role of the Christian teacher should be. This is reflected in a very interesting comment in the section of the report on the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the training course. He says that

*"perhaps the most valuable instruction which they receive in these difficult subjects (logic and Christian ethics) accrues from the careful religious and moral training which they individually undergo. They are taught, apparently not without success, and certainly by teachers who have a deep practical insight into such truths, that nothing can afford so intimate a knowledge of the hearts of others as that which we possess of our own. ...whoever would learn to penetrate the character of others, including that of young children, with which these students are particularly concerned, must begin by acquiring a complete knowledge of his own."*

Note that the training has been focussed on the students as individuals and it has encouraged them to reflect on themselves as unique individuals and to bring that individuality to bear in the way in which they relate to their pupils. Likewise, they are to see them not *en masse* as it were but as unique individuals and consequently to take into account each child's particular needs.

Finally, in her letters to members of the Society Cornelia encourages them to keep themselves up-to-date, recommending newly published textbooks for example. This letter to the Sisters who had recently gone up to Preston to work in the parish poor schools, written probably in 1853, begins:

*"My dear Sisters*

*I wish you all to get "Bromby's Grammar". It is the most perfect little logical thing to be found & has reached the eighth edition without ever coming under our notice. I think we must make it a point of conscience to get certain new books (to send from house to house) of the specimens of the day. At least for a time & just at this time when the march of teaching is going at such a wonderful pace."*

And in 1874 she writes to Mother Catherine Tracey, headmistress of the Girls' Orphanage school at Mark Cross near Mayfield, telling her that she has ordered a few books from London *"that I think you ought to have in order to carry out all that you need for the Training Class of 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> year ..."* Have you Hardinge's Elementary Art? and all the Maps you need? Have you Bromby's Grammar for Methods? (CC Writings: vol.viii)



The Sisters in Preston soon made big improvements in the first poor school they took over in the town. This was St Ignatius Girls' school and before the end of 1853 the Government Inspector for Catholic Poor Schools in the North, Mr Scott Nasmyth Stokes, was reporting very favourably on the improvements made since the Sisters had come from St Leonards. (He was, by the way, another convert Anglican). After describing the physical improvements and the ample supply of books and apparatus, he says:

*"This school must soon attain the first rank of instruction for elementary education. Conducted by teachers whose accomplishments are excelled only by the devotion which placed them at the service of poor children; actively superintended by the clergy and liberally supplied with requisites, with a carefully prepared staff of pupil teachers, it remains only to raise the character of the institution and extend it to all subjects."* (This & the next quotation taken from John Marmion's Cornelia Connelly's work in education 1848-1879, vol. 1, pp.266-68).

On 27 December 1856 the local newspaper, The Preston Guardian, gave the following details of the inspection of St Ignatius Girls' school:

*"The examination of the pupil teachers and children attending the Convent school of St Ignatius was held on Tuesday last (that would have been just before the Christmas holiday) and the proficiency which they exhibited, and the satisfactory manner in which they responded to the questioning and cross-questioning of each other elicited marked and unqualified approbation. Indeed it was evident to all that both great pains and great care had been taken by their instructors – the nuns of the convent – in the training and education of the children. The subjects embraced in the programme of the examinations were numerous and varied, comprising not only the usual studies pursued at such schools, but physical geography and grammatical analysis, music and singing. A scene from Milton's Comus was also enacted by the pupil teachers. ..."*

To sum up: the first element required for sound effective teaching is a well trained teacher, who has good self-knowledge, values herself, appreciates the importance of ongoing formation both as a person and as a teacher, and who is imbued with the desire to help her students grow into mature, independent, well-integrated human beings.

## 2) "unwearied patience"

This I take to be the way in which the good teacher actually practices the art of teaching and it embraces both patience in coping with the demands of teaching a subject - preparing lessons, setting and marking homework, making sure you cover the syllabus, and so on – and patience with those being taught – the 15, 20, 30 or more individual characters each at a different point of their development as human beings, alert and responsive or bored and slumped before you first period on Monday morning or the last on Friday afternoon. Where the first kind of patience is concerned the sources reveal how insistent Cornelia was that fidelity to a syllabus, accuracy in detail, conscientiousness in preparing lessons etc really mattered if one truly respected the pupils entrusted to one's care.

In the Rule for the teaching Sisters, for example, (ch. xiv, par. 110), she writes:

*"The Sisters must follow with great fidelity and exactness the syllabus and time-tables of their respective classes as well as the approved system of teaching, and they must also use the text-books assigned to their class."*

As for the second kind of patience required, patience with the difficulties or waywardness or stage of development of those being taught, Cornelia has much to say. One of the best-known passages in this context is her preface to the Book of Studies.



*"Though we so well know, that great things are achieved only by untiring labour and suffering, we sometimes forget that 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. Let us not want "to fly" by ourselves, lest we leave our pupils behind to be lost in a mist. Line by line, and step by step, in all learning and in all virtues, form the whole educational system."*

And now comes a rather endearing image as she continues: *"See the little birds how they carry insect after insect to the nestlings, just so must we give moral and intellectual food to our dear pupils, that from this labour of love may flow the desired result."*

In the paragraph on zeal in the Rule for the teaching Sisters we find the same message: *"a patient and persevering zeal, which knows how to bear with the defects and weakness of children and the poor, and which, without being discouraged when labour is not crowned with success, continues to sow and water, waiting in patient hope for the increase that God will surely give to those who confide in Him;"* (ch. xiv, par.108). I'm sure we've all had that experience of wondering if one is getting through at all to a particular class or individual and discovering, years later, that they had taken in far more than you realised - & possibly far more than they realised - at the time. I should think that Cornelia's experience as a mother would have contributed much to this appreciation of the need to proceed patiently, step by step & to be aware of the different ways in which we all learn, and the different rates of intellectual and moral development of children, not just in the same class but in the same family. Some notes she made for 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Novices illustrate this in a very attractive way. (Positio, vol.2, pp.895-6) They are headed "How to keep your class attentive" and then come 6 points:

1. *Prepare the lesson well.*
2. *Frequently run your eye over your class.*
3. *Avoid Monotony*
4. *Be active.*
5. *Try to excite the interest of the pupils (be interesting)*
6. *Be firm, this ought to be the last resort."*

She goes on to offer advice on how to secure the attention of the pupils in the first place.

"a. With regard to the subject taught

1. *It must be suited to the class.*
2. *Taught by suitable methods observations and illustrations.*

b. With regard to the teacher.

1. *The manner sympathetic*
2. *Language simple.*
3. *The whole mind engaged*
4. *Vigilance should never flag.*

c. With regard to the children.

1. *Character of each child considered*
2. *Sympathy of members brought into play*
3. *Attentive children have opportunities of distinguishing themselves.*
4. *For young children frequent change of position & exercise. "*

The novices also have more detailed instructions in the Book of Studies – for example, the guidelines for teaching Reading to the youngest children begins:



*"First Stage. – The "Look and Say" method, of reading without spelling..is to be used for very young children.*

*Apparatus. – Large and small alphabets, cards of letters, Letterbox, Reading Cards, on which to find the letters."*

(Read rest from Book of Studies, pp31-2)

### 3. "the most persuasive personal influence"

With this element in Marshall's analysis we move to the most vital and delicate area that that divides the poor or ineffective teacher from the good. Think back to your own days at school and I expect you will most quickly remember the utterly dreadful, hopeless teacher and the one or ones who really inspired you. By and large I think the really good teacher is one who loves both the subject she/he is teaching and loves, in a very genuine, unselfish and unsentimental way, her/his pupils. Cornelia has some lovely things to say about this aspect of the teacher's relationship with those who are being taught.

In chapter 1, par. 7 of her Rule she puts this relationship between teacher and taught on a very high spiritual level:

*The particular means by which the Sisters who are engaged in the great work of training children may acquire and preserve the proper spirit of the Society, will be to cultivate assiduously a loving devotion to the Holy Child Jesus. Thus, they will constantly strive to see Jesus in each of the children whom they have to train, and they will often call to mind what their Divine Spouse has Himself declared: "Whatsoever you do unto one of these my least brethren, you do it unto Me", and again, showing His disciples a little child: "He who receives one such little child in my Name, receiveth Me"."*

The same idea is expressed in the Book of Studies. The mistresses must regard their pupils *"as the children of God, redeemed by His most precious blood, therefore, as the most precious charge that the love of Jesus could confide to them, and they should cherish a truly maternal love for them."*

It is worth remembering here that the vast majority of the children taught by Holy Child Sisters were the children of the "labouring poor", to use the language of the day. The pupils in the Catholic poor schools of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century came from families which constantly faced the prospect of destitution. Many of these children were chronically undernourished, poorly clothed, infested with body lice and fleas and subject to numerous endemic diseases related to squalid, overcrowded and unhygienic dwellings and work places. Some extracts from the log book of St Ignatius Girls' School, Preston in the 1860's illustrates this very poignantly. The major industry in Preston was weaving cotton & during the American Civil War, 1861-5, the Confederate ports were blockaded preventing the export of cotton to Lancashire. By the spring of 1862 over 10,000 of the 25,000 men and women who worked in Preston's 71 mills were unemployed & faced destitution.

*"1863. 321 pupils Head, 2 assistants, 4 PTs.*

*Ap.-May. 3 girls from Class 1 to factory; 2 to workhouse.*

*1.May. 10 girls to workhouse*

*...*

*10.11.63 Fr Cooper brought tickets for clogs for most needy.*

*30.11. 64 Typhus and scarlet fever – scarcely a single street free"*



And remember too, that there was a level of serious and routine child abuse – physical, sexual, mental, and affecting all classes – that was only just beginning to be seen as wrong at the time when Cornelia was evolving her educational principles. No wonder that she put such an emphasis on the importance of the personal relationship between the teacher and each pupil, and that it should be a relationship of love and respect.

One of the early members of the Society, Mother Mary Francis Bellasis, records in an unpublished life of Cornelia that she instructed them to *“love your children with a true Christian love – a self-sacrificing love. Love the soul you cannot see, more than the body that you can see. Lead the children to God not to yourself.”*

And again she comments that *“Our Mother used to say, ‘I like the children to like all the Nuns.’”* And in both the Rule and the Book of Studies we find this directive couched in the language of the day:

*“They (the teaching Sisters) must watch over themselves carefully lest they utter any hasty words, or show contempt in their demeanour, or precipitation in punishing the guilty. In their intercourse with the children let them seek to be amiable though not familiar; gay but not noisy; patient though not indifferent; vigilant though not anxious, having ever in view the sweetness and unchanging meekness of our Blessed Lord.”*

She often refers to the love the teachers should have towards the pupils as a maternal love, and she warns against a love that is really selfish and sentimental. In a list of her recommendations compiled after her death we find two of particular interest in this regard: *“The sisters should not allow the children to caress or fondle them.”* and *“Do not make milksops of the children by encouraging them in tenderness for themselves”*. The latter, of course, would be directed at those teaching in the fee-paying boarding schools. And in the Book of Studies she stresses the importance of impartiality in the classroom: *“Let them not be more familiar with one pupil than another..”*

In letters to individuals or to all the Sisters she comes back again and again to the quality of the relationship between teachers and pupils. (Taken from CC Anthology)

*“The pupils must be watched over and spoken to with the greatest sweetness and charity.”*

*“Stiffness and rigour will not bring forth love and these are not the spirit of the Holy Child. But pains-taking for the eagerness of love will always bring forth delicious fruit.”*

*“Trust the children and never let your confidence in them be easily shaken. Confidence begets confidence. Let them show themselves in their true colours and then we shall see the highlights and what needs toning down.”*

On the question of punishment and using fear of it to control children, which was so common in all kinds of schools at that time, she has strong views. For instance in the Book of Studies she urges the teachers to *“remember that more can be successfully done by exciting a desire for honour, hope of reward and sense of shame, than by fear of punishment, and let them generally lead their pupils by love rather than fear.”*

And I have always particularly liked the paragraph on Punishment. *“Let not the mistresses be too hasty in punishing, nor too eager in seeking faults, but let them dissimulate when they can do so without injury to anyone, and not only must they never use corporal punishment, but they must abstain also from any abusive word or actions....”*

Francis Bellasis records the corollary of this: the teachers were told to *“Encourage your children. Let them see you are on the look out for the good in them....Seize every opportunity, she would say to us, of praising a child for any advance in a virtue you wish her*



*to acquire. Work on every good point in her character, and don't peck at her weak and faulty "points".*"

The persuasive personal influence of the teachers on their pupils, so admired by Marshall, owed much to the mutual respect and support amongst the teachers. For Cornelia that personal influence should never be an exclusive one. The wording in the Book of Studies on this point of mutual respect is very strong:

*"The Mistresses shall on all occasions shew great respect for each other; one must never countermand the orders of another, but on the contrary uphold each other's authority by every means in their power. Community affairs are never to be spoken of to the children, nor remarks made upon the Mistresses, except such as are edifying. One Mistress is not to be compared with another...."* And towards the end of this paragraph comes the observation that the children *"will never respect any one who does not respect herself."*

Finally, the exhortation in the last paragraph of the Rule for the teaching Sisters has probably not lost its relevance 150 years on for any team of teachers:

*"Let the Mistresses among themselves as well as with others avoid that dictatorial tone which the practice of teaching often gives, and if any have contracted such a habit they should rejoice in being warned of it. Let concord and union reign amongst them, and to this end let them speak to one another with sweetness, forgive one another, and overlook one another's failings with true charity."* (par. 118)

I hope that this day together will strengthen the bond between you yourselves, and thence the loving bond you create with the students entrusted to you, as you once again resume what Cornelia Connelly calls *"the sweetly laborious duty of Education."* (Preface to Book of Studies).