

*The institutionalization of Cornelia Connelly's charisma  
in her schools and its expression today*

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It is a privilege for me to be part of this meeting of Holy Child schools -- and a special joy to be here with Sr. Radegunde. I remember going to hear Raddy talk about Holy Child education in New York City in the early eighties while she was in the U.S. researching aspects of her wonderful biography of Cornelia, *A Woman Styled Bold*. During the summers of 90 and 91 I spent time in Rome at Casa Cornelia doing some work in the archives and we became friends. I never cease to be amazed at her penchant for sharing her great knowledge of the Cornelian sources and the significance of those sources for an understanding of what Cornelia was about in her apostolate of education.

We live in an age of transition -- personally, socially and globally. Words from our childhood take on new meaning.

"Who are you?" said the Caterpillar....  
"I-I hardly know, Sir, just at present," Alice replied rather shyly, "at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then."<sup>1</sup>

How many roles have you left behind in order to be part of this conversation today? That of parent, teacher, administrator, other professional responsibilities ...? Have you stopped recently to note how many areas of your life are in transition?

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (New York: Signet Books, 1960), p. 47.

### *Being in transition*

We live our lives *in transition*. I teach graduate students in a Faculty of Theology. In a course last year entitled "The Educator and Theology" the students identified themselves as "ministers of transition." These adults (median-age 35) were referring to the challenge of being religious educators in a world and society undergoing momentous social, economic, cultural and religious reordering. They were also responding out of the concrete demands of their own cultural context. (In 1985 the United Nations identified Toronto as the most ethnically diverse city in the world; it is possible to obtain information from the public transit system in 140 different languages; numerically there are more Sikhs than Presbyterians in the once predominantly Protestant city; officially the liturgy is celebrated in 22 different languages every Sunday but I understand that the actual number of languages is more like 85.)

This was also a time of personal transition for these students at a religious level. For many, particularly the women students, their own religious experience which had been nurtured by primarily patriarchal and masculine images and symbols no longer satisfied. They found that they were living in a neutral zone -- experiencing a certain disconnectedness from their religious pasts but not yet able to focus their energies in the present towards the future.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most significant, however, was their increased awareness of what means it to make a radical

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<sup>2</sup> See William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1980).

response to the gospel in light of the needs of the marginalized and oppressed in our society and around the world -- but their seeming inability to do so because they are so immersed in the materialistic and professional demands of their own culture and find that their local Christian communities do not really understand their concerns.

This experience is particularized but not unique to Canada. The United States has become a multicultural democracy. Manning Marble, Professor of Political Science and History at the Center for Studies of Ethnicity and Race in America at the University of Boulder points out that

By the year 2015, the majority of the working class [in the United States] between the ages of 20 to 40 will consist of people of color. And not long after the mid-point of the next century, no later than 2056, we will live in a country in which whites will be a distinct "minority" of the total population, and people of color will be the numerical majority. The next half century will be a transition from a white majority society to a society which is far more pluralistic and diverse, where multiculturalism is increasingly the norm, where diverse cultures, religions, and philosophies are a beautiful mosaic of human exchange and interaction.<sup>3</sup>

This is the world for which children and adolescents in Holy Child schools today are preparing.

We live in a time of transition. But the experience is not unique to persons of the twentieth century. We are here today because of the legacy of the way in which Cornelia Connelly moved into and with and through the transitions in her own life. Her comment of herself: "I am a cosmopolitan. The whole world is my

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<sup>3</sup> Manning Marble, "Multicultural Democracy: The Next 500 Years," *Creation Spirituality* (September/October 1991) 24.

country and heaven my home." is well-known. What a marvellous perspective from which to develop a philosophy of education!

There are three aspects to my reflections today. Firstly, we need to ask what has sustained Holy Child Schools through other times of transition. Are there resources there for today? Secondly, in this time of transition, what are the underlying values to which Holy Child Schools must remain faithful? And thirdly, how are these values called forth in the context of our time? In other words, what are the values of the educational heritage of Holy Child schools that we need to reflect on in the present in order to prepare Holy child students for the future?

**The institutionalized expression of Cornelia Connelly's charism**

Some of you may wonder about my interest in Holy Child education. The response is not unrelated to what we are about today. In February of 1976 I was invited by a teaching colleague in Ottawa to dinner because a sister who had taught in Africa would be visiting their convent. (I had previously taught in Zambia.) Albeit that Africa is very large -- and this meeting was taking place in Canada -- and the sister was an American en route from Nigeria to NYC -- and I was not at that time a Catholic -- within five minutes of our meeting Sr. Catherine Hallahan and I established that we did in fact have mutual acquaintances in Africa. Furthermore, I was familiar with the former Holy Child school at Suffern, NY because my previous work

had included giving seminars there for the new occupants of the school.

At that time I was working part-time on a master's degree at Columbia University Teachers College and Catherine was formulating plans for Dalton Center for Mission and Peace. She suggested that I stay with the Society in NYC the following summer. This was to be my first experience of how the Society approaches transition.

The New York Archdiocese had provided facilities for Dalton Center. It consisted of a four-story brownstone which had been thoroughly institutionalized. What the Society inherited was a building painted an institutional green within, equipped with rather uncomfortable furniture and a number of not very attractive religious pictures and statues.

The summer of 76 brought about a reclamation of the building. Mary Ann Buckley, Catherine Hallahan and I resided there but numerous Holy Child sisters came at different times to repaint and redecorate. By mid-August the "institution" had become a "home." The furnishings were simple but tasteful; artifacts from the missions replaced the dated statuary and pictures.

It was during this transition that I first learned of Cornelia's commitment to good religious art -- and of the Society's decision, with the renewal of Vatican II, to remove all poor artwork from their houses and schools. I also experienced a joy among the sisters. What impressed me was that they were (in

my perception) first of all persons with their own identities; they were thoughtful and well-educated; their spirituality was integrated into the whole of their persons; numerous conversations pointed to their commitment to education; their corporate commitment to the work of the Society was most evident; they were also very welcoming to non-SHCJ and open ecumenically.

Later that summer I visited Rosemont College. What I remember most from that visit was a conversation with Sr. Caritas McCarthy who was completing her doctoral dissertation on Cornelia's spirituality. I remember arguing that it was not Cornelia's spirituality which was so unique but her giftedness as an educator. (I would now qualify that statement because I believe that the two are inseparable.) But my experience of the SHCJ I had met during the summer left me convinced of the importance of Cornelia's ongoing and living contribution to education.

My first experience of the Society points to what I have come to identify as the essence of Holy Child education -- the incarnation in the lives of Holy Child sisters and others of the gospel vision which inspired, nurtured and sustained Cornelia Connelly in her personal life and in the work of education she established. Holy Child education continues to be nurtured and sustained by this shared gospel vision. Theologically this is referred to as the charism of the Society. It is this charism which is responsible for the "distinctive spirit" of the education offered in schools of the Holy Child Jesus. Sr.

Radegunde has described its roots in Cornelia's life. Cornelia's charism has been made accessible to others in an institutionalized form, in the Holy Child system of education she established. I want to emphasize that it is living and tangible today; it imbues the work of Holy Child education; it is the particular grace of God which has sustained Holy Child schools through times of transition in the past; it is the force which is responsible for the values which characterize the ethos of Holy Child schools.

What I am saying is that the values which are central to Holy Child education have their source in Cornelia's relationship with God and the aspects of that relationship which she felt it essential to foster in others -- not only the women who joined her but also the students and pupils whom they taught.

#### **The mystery of the incarnation**

The values and commitments which we have come to take almost for granted in Holy Child schools are the fruit of human struggle through good times and difficult times to recognize the presence of God. Several years ago at the time of the sugar cane harvest I was in the part of Louisiana where Cornelia had lived with her husband and children. I visited a sugar refining plant and saw the great open cauldrons of boiling cane syrup. I was reminded of the tragic accident in which Cornelia's son, John Henry, was knocked into a vat of such boiling syrup by a Newfoundland dog. Cornelia held John Henry for 43 hours until his death. I cannot



imagine a more painful experience for a parent. In contemplating Mary with her son Jesus, Cornelia found consolation and a new appreciation of the mystery of the incarnation.<sup>4</sup> A seed was sown for the future Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

### Holy Child philosophy of education

Often we talk about the philosophy of Holy Child education. When we speak of a philosophy of education, we are simply talking about why we do what we do in the educative process. The most concrete and practical expression of Cornelia's educational philosophy is found in the *Book of Studies*, the handbook she developed to incarnate her gospel vision in a curriculum to be used in all Holy Child schools. A second document, the Society's *Constitutions* provides a purview of the ideas, beliefs, values, attitudes and commitments she wished to cultivate through its learning activities. I believe that it is necessary to examine these documents together to understand why Cornelia did what she did in the schools. In the principles, qualities and standards that I identify as the underlying values of Holy Child education I make reference to both of these documents. Holy Child education provides a holistic approach to education -- all the goals are of equal importance. For this reason I have chosen to organize my thoughts around a number of broad themes.

### Liberal education

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<sup>4</sup> See *Informatio* p. 110 ff.

The essence of a liberal education is that it provides persons and communities with knowledge of the past accomplishments of their culture, with access to the tradition that has shaped its present and with the wisdom necessary to provide guidance for the future. The ideal of providing a truly Christian education for young Catholic women that they might come to "view [every] matter in a Christian light" was the animating spirit of Cornelia's philosophy of education.<sup>5</sup> Building on the classical tradition of a thorough grounding in languages -- but with a special emphasis on the vernacular (a value she may have brought from America) -- the *Book of Studies* provides specific methodologies for the teaching of Religion, Grammar, Spelling and Dictation, Reading, Arithmetic, Geography, History, Composition, Drawing, Music, Needlework -- and Geology. Every subject was taught with the ideal of the Society in mind: the Sisters were to devote "themselves with their whole hearts to their [the students'] salvation and making each branch of education secure to this end."<sup>6</sup> Teaching was not only to facilitate subject mastery but also to contribute to character development and religious formation.

The first published biographer for Cornelia writes that Cornelia believed "in a liberal rather than a specialized [translate, "practical"] curriculum for women; [and] that they should be acquainted with all the great branches of knowledge

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<sup>5</sup> *Book of Studies*, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> *Book of Studies*, p. 53.

technical work in which the majority of the population will eventually find employment.

If Professor Hogan is providing a rationale for a new approach to education in the United States, the right to a liberal education becomes a justice issue. What does this say to Holy Child schools? Cornelia was committed to the education of females of all classes and whenever possible she provided the same quality of education for all pupils. Is it enough that Holy Child independent schools provide an alternative education or are your commitments such that you are able to make your voice heard regarding the priorities you have and their significance for other educational systems?

#### Full human personhood as an educational ideal

As I examine Holy Child documents I am aware that there is a concern to make young persons full participants in the living cultural traditions to which they belong.

The preamble to the prospectus for Cornelia's first boarding school reflects this commitment:

The objects ... are to give, upon the basis of the practice of all their religious duties, such a solid education ... as will best enable them to fill their office in Society, while at the same time, they will be thoroughly instructed in the details of the domestic life, and in all such arts as are most practically useful in the service of ... the Church.<sup>9</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Her purpose was to provide a solid education based upon the practice of their faith that would enable young women to

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<sup>9</sup> *Catholic Directory, 1847*, reprinted in Gompertz, *Life*, p. 121.

because of socio-economic, racial or cultural origin. The work of Carol Gilligan has begun to conscientize us to the critical period of female adolescence as potentially a time for girls "losing their voice and thus losing connection with others, and also a time when girls, gaining voice and knowledge, are in danger of knowing the unseen, and thus losing connection with what is commonly taken to be 'reality'."<sup>13</sup> (In a sense, young women can't win.) The cognitive dissonance experienced by many young women in their educational and faith lives is a concern to feminist educators. This matter has implication for the education of both girls and boys. How do we translate Cornelia's commitment to full human personhood as an educational ideal in today's world?

#### The dignity of every person

Several weeks ago I attended a meeting of the Canadian History of Education Association. Papers were presented by academics from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, and the United States. Much of the educational history attended to had to do with the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Somewhat to my surprise the common theme which emerged was the role of discipline in educational formation. My own paper made reference to the standard set by Cornelia for Holy Child education.

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<sup>13</sup> See back cover of Carol Gilligan, Nona P. Lyons, and Trudy J. Hammer, eds., *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

In the *Book of Studies* there are several sets of "Rules" which may be read as "exhortations and prescriptions" for persons with responsibility in the schools.<sup>14</sup> The love and respect which Cornelia had for the individual child, and the consequent concern for the best educational climate possible, is a value which is repeated throughout -- "The pupils must be watched over and spoken to with the greatest sweetness and charity ...."<sup>15</sup> In an age when the Biblical dictum "spare the rod and spoil the child" was virtually unquestioned in England, Cornelia wrote on the subject:

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 abusive word or actions, neither may they ever call any pupil by any other name than her Christian name or full name, nor by her surname only.<sup>16</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Both physical and psychological damage were guarded against.

Kenneth Woodward, in his book *Making Saints*, notes that Cornelia's "greatest challenge to the British system [of education] was her attitude toward discipline."<sup>17</sup> We know she disapproved of the use of corporal punishment in the school attended by one of her sons and wrote to her sister-in-law in the

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<sup>14</sup> As was the case later, they might have been more appropriately included in the *Constitutions*. See McCarthy, "Study of the Constitutions," p. 1. The "Rules for Prefect of Studies" were included in the SHCJ Constitutions of 1887 which received Papal approbation. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>15</sup> *Book of Studies*, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>17</sup> Woodward, *Making Saints*, p. 265.

United States, "The English boys are rough fighting boys ... they get flogged too .... I have always regretted having sent dear Mercer to an English College ...."<sup>18</sup> Whether or not this provides the full explanation for the instructions given to the Sisters, Cornelia's values and priorities are clear. Her approach to the children entrusted to the care of the Society grew out of her experience as an American mother and led her to view the school as a home and the Sisters as mothers who were to respect, love and trust the children in their care. She wrote in the *Rule for the Society*,

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 train .... He who receives one such little child in my name, receiveth Me.<sup>19</sup>

Her religious commitments reinforced the values she established.

Trust and reverence for the dignity of *their* person is a value to which many in our society aspire. We are uncomfortably aware of the many kinds of physical and psychological abuse to which children are exposed -- both directly, and indirectly through the media. This issue may be addressed in various aspects of your current Holy Child curricula. However, I carry a concern from my own area of work.

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<sup>18</sup>CC I: 27-28, [1846].

<sup>19</sup> *Rule, SHCJ, In God Alone: An Anthology of the Spiritual Writings of Cornelia Connelly* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1969), p.25.

Research has shown that between 40% and 70% of all persons (male and female, Protestant and Catholic) preparing for ministry in the United States are survivors of abuse. Yet I do not know of any seminary or theologate which addresses the students' needs in this area as part of their formation program.<sup>20</sup> The trust and reverence for the dignity of every person which is an underlying value of Holy Child education must, I believe, include providing children and teachers today with the ability to address the question of abusive relationships just as directly as Cornelia addressed her concerns in the first Holy Child schools.

#### Ways of knowing

The educative and formative influences in the life of Cornelia Connelly, prior to her founding of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus in 1846, were significant for her approach to education.<sup>21</sup> Cornelia appears to have been a student at heart, always open to new knowledge: "knowing by doing" in John Dewey's words.<sup>22</sup> Of her music teacher in Rome she wrote: "I am delighted with his method and hope under him to acquire full

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<sup>20</sup> The course, *Pastoral Ministry Among the Abused*, offered at St. Michael's Faculty of Theology attracts many students seeking to understand the abuse they have experienced in their own lives.

<sup>21</sup> This theme is traced in Lorna M.A. Bowman, *Cornelia Connelly Educator: Her Charisma and Its Institutionalization* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, [1984] 1985).

<sup>22</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), pp. 184-195.

knowledge of the science."<sup>23</sup> The pattern in Cornelia's life was consistent. Ill in 1858, at the time of her son Mercer's death, she sent for a copy of the newly published *Burchett's Geometry* and proceeded to assign herself several problems daily -- perhaps to mitigate her overwhelming sorrow.<sup>24</sup> However, she "not only mastered the content but also designed a graded system for the school."<sup>25</sup> Significantly, I believe, the *Book of Studies* places this course in a section on "Perspective" in the Drawing syllabus.<sup>26</sup>

It is the Art or Drawing unit of the *Book of Studies* which is most uniquely Cornelia's own in her educational system.

Cornelia introduces the subject as follows:

In our schools we are not 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 the languages, as it is in itself a universal Language, addressing itself to the ignorant as well as the most refined.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> CC I: 65, 1836.

<sup>24</sup> Gompertz, *Life*, p. 186.

<sup>25</sup> Isabel Shields, "Resumé of *The Book of Order of Studies*," in Caritas McCarthy, "Study of the Constitutions," p. 149. *Source*, no. 4 (Winter 1975), pp. 1-161.

<sup>26</sup> *Book of Studies*, pp. 54-56. The term "Drawing" includes sketching, water colours (including illuminating) and oil painting.

<sup>27</sup> *Book of Studies*, p. 53. This is very different from James Currie to whom CC refers in many subjects. He writes: "In speaking of drawing as part of the work of the common school, we do not seek to place it on the same level of importance with writing or the other branches of elementary instruction: for it cannot be said to be necessary to the pupil in the sense in which those are." James Currie, *Common School Education* (Cincinnati:



For Cornelia, Art was a "universal Language," the means by which the fullness of human experience and awareness of the Divine could be brought to consciousness. The value of drawing is that it "educates," Cornelia exhorts. "It is to be noted that drawing educates the eye in all perceptible beauty and order, and that it leads to the cultivation of a habit of observation, the only habit by which knowledge generally can be obtained."<sup>28</sup> The Drawing course is also a frequent topic in Cornelia's correspondence with her teachers. One letter comments: "I have never asked the parents abt the Drawing as it is *our course* of education whether it is desired or not. They will soon take to it when they are enlightened."<sup>29</sup>

In Holy Child schools drawing was not to be considered as an accomplishment "but as an Art, which [had] its philosophy as well as its poetry."<sup>30</sup> As a "universal Language" it set the tone for an approach to knowledge; as a course of study it was Cornelia's attempt "to gather together the varied details of the world and life into a single inclusive whole."<sup>31</sup>

Cornelia's approach to "knowing" through art resonates with the contemporary educator. One is impressed by her striving for

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Robert Clarke & Co., 1884), p. 329. CC used the earlier British edition.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> CC VI: 8, 19 September [1868?], Mayfield, England.

<sup>30</sup> *Book of Studies*, p. 53.

<sup>31</sup> Dewey, p. 324.

integration of the various dimensions of life. She desired that the children might "be led to view the invisible things of God through the medium of the visible."<sup>32</sup> This was to occur not only through the art but in all subject areas.

It is to be remembered that Cornelia made full use of the best educational methodologies of her day and Holy Child schools do the same today. We now know that drawing develops right-brain learning and gives expression to intuitive knowing. The education of the human spirit which occurs concomitantly in the artistic endeavor is a value intrinsic to all human cultures.

Increasingly we are also aware of the need to be responsive to *how* persons learn. A Toronto newspaper recently carried an article entitled "An all-woman's college tries female-pattern learning." Ursuline College in Ohio has introduced a compulsory program for all students based on the book "Woman's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind."<sup>33</sup> Resources available to educators today to assist in understanding students' learning styles and preferences are unlimited -- and I expect are used in most Holy Child schools. But Cornelia's basic instinct about art as a "universal Language" and as a way of knowing is also important in this technologically-driven age.

#### Spiritual legacy of Holy Child education

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<sup>32</sup> *Book of Studies*, p. 80.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Field Belenki, Blythe McClinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger & Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

Part of Cornelia's *Constitutions* for the early Society

reads:

Thus the end of this Society is not only to provide for our own salvation and our greater perfection, but as far as possible with the assistance of divine grace, and as far as accords with humility, to employ ourselves for the salvation of our neighbour, especially ...In the education of females of all classes of society.<sup>34</sup>

For Cornelia "salvation" began as a manner and attitude towards life to be cultivated by the individual in the world. Its source was God's loving and sovereign presence to humanity in the person of Jesus. This incarnational Christology is the source of the educational system Cornelia developed based on trust and reverence for the dignity of each person. She recognized Christ's presence in those around her. This recognition carried with it a freedom to be who one was. "Be yourselves," she would say to the students, "only make those selves all that God wants them to be."<sup>35</sup>

Cornelia educated from the perspective of her Christian faith -- and Holy Child schools continue to do so. P.D. James, author of the current best seller *The Children of Men*, received a Holy Child education in England. She has a pithy comment in one of her novels. She writes, "'The trouble with a religious education, if you're a pagan like me, is that you're left all your life feeling that you've lost something, not that it isn't

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<sup>34</sup> *Constitutions of the SHCJ, Abridged, 1861*, in McCarthy, "Study of the Constitutions," pp. 79-80.

<sup>35</sup> Gompertz, *Life*, 3rd ed., 1938, p. 69.