

Theological Reflections on the Educational Philosophy of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus

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Introduction

By this stage in the conference,¹ after so much input and a day at Mayfield that provided another dimension and perhaps time to mull things over, you may well be bursting with ideas of your own and certain that another talk is not what you need, especially from someone who hasn't been following the play here. My hope is that what we do today will provide you with a transition to tomorrow's symposium, that is, it will provide a jumping off point for your own thoughts. My treatment will be "reflective," in distinction from being highly systematic. I'll also be taking seriously the word "theological," since that's the milieu in which I've largely been operating for the last few years. So these will be thoughts that have emerged from my particular experience as a member of the SHCJ and a teacher of theology (scripture, for preference); they will open out into an invitation to you to consider your own standpoint from which to reflect on the Society's educational philosophy. I plan to talk fairly steadily for about 40 minutes or so; then we'll have a short break and reconvene to look either at some of the issues I've raised or at questions they raised for you. As we all know, the questions that arise out of a presentation often lead to much more interesting places than the presentation itself.

The shape of the talk will be this: first, I want to say a little about how I shall be approaching the notion of SHCJ educational philosophy and (more briefly) what I take to be the basis of Cornelia's expression of it. After those preliminary remarks, we'll be considering and reflecting theologically on five aspects of that philosophy. At the end, I'll say where I think we've been and in which direction we might take the next step. You have in your handouts the headings of these divisions and some indication of their contents.

Preliminary Clarification of Two Issues

a. SHCJ Educational Philosophy: Apprehended, not Formally Defined

My qualification for speaking about the Society's educational philosophy is not the formal one of having studied it, as people like Radigunde and Caritas have. It is rather that sometime in 1968 or '69, as a recent biology graduate taking a one-year course that would qualify me as a school teacher, I was profoundly and quite unexpectedly impressed by the lives and educational ideals of the group of women who were running the college. This was by no means my first encounter with a group of competent women: it came on top of a convent schooling and three years at Girton College, Cambridge, which was at that time one of only three women's colleges of the University. The SHCJ at Cavendish Square were different, however, in ways that I still find hard to specify in words—and I suppose that that difference is at least partly what is designated by the phrase "educational philosophy of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus" that appears in the title of this presentation. I can feel and recognize the distinctiveness of SHCJ educators (and have done so often in various Holy Child sisters and institutions) without being able to define it, which is, of course, too bad when it comes to talking to people about it! I can, however, delineate what are for me its chief features and speak of their grounding in theology. I'll be doing this by concentrating on CC's understanding of education as I gleaned this from some of her writings, but that understanding is not hers alone. It is shared by the vast majority of the SHCJ with whom I've worked, and many of the lay people, too. So, although I'll not formally define it, I'm confident that you, too, have a pretty good idea of what's meant by "educational philosophy of the SHCJ"; if you haven't, I'm really in trouble!

b. The Basis of Cornelia's Understanding of Education

When one reads excerpts from CC's writings, it is often hard to guess whether they belong in the context of the religious formation of sisters or the apostolic enterprise, and many of her sayings can

apply to both. This is because her educational practices were deeply rooted in her life as a whole. There is, furthermore, a continuity in the way she views God, the world, and humanity that results from her appreciation of Creation and the Incarnation. Let's try to unpack that a little, under the five headings on your handouts.

1. Reality as Foundational

CC had a strong sense of the actuality, the "isness" of things. The concrete reality she encountered from day to day was as it was, and no other way. She was not given to illusions, to pretending that things were other than they were. I think that this attitude lies behind her insistence on humility: she writes that "*humility is the ground which is to be cultivated to bring forth the flowers of all the other virtues.*" That is, in order to grow things (the "things" being "virtues," a word derived from the Latin word for "strength") one must start by preparing the soil, work from the ground up, so to speak. (I wonder if she associated "humility" with *humus*, the Latin word for the ground?) Her aim here is not the cultivation of humility for its own sake but rather for the sake of the subsequent virtues that will not grow in its absence. There must be preparation of the ground, and this involves work. In our culture, humility is about as undiscussable as sex was in Cornelia's world: it is hard to say that someone is humble without seeming to put them down and, indeed, in my recent experience the word is hardly ever used seriously. (The only context that comes to mind is the quip that so-and-so is a very humble person with plenty to be humble about!) A display of humility is rightly regarded as a species of passive aggression intended to manipulate people; it may be the only such weapon for many of those who experience themselves (rightly or wrongly) as oppressed. And yet such so-called "humility" is obviously a distortion of a concept that is fundamental to adult human behaviour. For all other good qualities can only develop and be profitably exercised in a person who recognises who she is and is prepared to function on the basis of that recognition.

It's easy enough to prescribe this for others. We all spend time and energy trying to convince students (or, more often, their parents) of things like "If you really can't handle chemistry perhaps it would be good to think of something other than medicine as a career?" For ourselves, however, as individuals and members of institutions, this acting in accordance with reality may be more difficult to sustain. Do we never allow ourselves to be deluded into thinking that things are other than they are, in order that we might go ahead with our pet schemes? Decisions here are not always easy: there can be, for example, a conflict between humility and, say, hope. To what extent do we let ourselves be limited by such factors as finance, personnel, demographics, or the expectations of our culture, and to what extent

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attempt to break out of the limits that they seemed at first sight to impose? The notion of humility is vital here, for a biased self-understanding warps one's reading of the external factors, just as a faulty lens distorts the objects of vision.

At one level, what we are talking about here is simply the Delphic "Know Thyself." Cornelia is, though, no mere pagan, however good. Her "Know Thyself" certainly includes serious reflection but is not restricted to that and, indeed, does not begin there, either. She writes to her brother George Peacock in 1844: "*Many think their motives pure because they do not know themselves—God teaches us to know ourselves.*" In this Cornelia is clearly in the biblical tradition, in which God is the source of all wisdom. Proverbs 2:6, for example, reads: "*For the Lord gives wisdom, from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.*" These gifts, knowledge and understanding, are not given indiscriminately to all, however, but (at least according to biblical understanding) only to those sufficiently aware of their value to ask God for them. The Book of Wisdom (not a canonical book for all Christians) gives a sample of how to do this, in a prayer put into the mouth of King Solomon:

*God of my fathers, LORD of mercy,
you who have made all things by your word
And in your wisdom have established humankind
to rule the creatures produced by you,
To govern the world in holiness and justice,
and to render judgment in integrity of heart,
Give me Wisdom, the attendant at your throne . . .*

Wisdom 9:1-4a

Yet mere asking is not enough, either: one must value the gift when it is given. Again, Solomon is the example:

*I prayed, and prudence was given me;
I pleaded, and the spirit of Wisdom came to me.
I preferred her to scepter and throne,
And deemed riches nothing in comparison with her . . .*

Wisdom 7:7-8

Other strands of biblical tradition give the lie to this as what Solomon actually *did* during his reign. It's easy enough for us to see where he went wrong: to begin with, he married all the wrong wives! Yet the ideal that tradition imputes to him is a noble one, and our own experience tells us that complying with the demands of wisdom is an exceedingly difficult practice to sustain for a few days, let alone a lifetime. To return to Cornelia: she understood well that, like everything else, knowledge (including self knowledge) is a gift, and

one that brings responsibilities with it. Accepting that one's motives are "not pure," is all very well, but one is then left with the obligation to try to do something about the situation, and that can be much more arduous.

2. The World as God's World: Creation and Incarnation

We started these considerations with Cornelia's respect for reality. I like to think that her concern for accuracy reflects the same thing: "*Be accurate in all you teach, in all you say, in all you do; be accurate above all in your statements.*" It's not exactly deathless prose, but it expresses an attitude that is appropriate if, as the NT claims, the world was made through the divine Word, the Logos, expression of divine reason. As St. John puts it at the start of his gospel:

*In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came to be through him
and without him nothing came to be.*

John 1:1-3

Notice here the connections with Genesis 1, which also opens with the words "*In the beginning . . .*" and in which an ordered world is created by God's fiat: the repeated "*And God said, Let there be X; and there was X*" (Gen 1, passim).

Similarly, in the letter to the Colossians we find this:

*(Christ) is the image of the unseen God
the Firstborn of all creation.
For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth
things visible and invisible
All things were created through him and for him
and in him all things hold together.*

Col 1:15-17

We could spend a long time discussing just what each of these NT passages means, but at the very least they, first, re-express the traditional Jewish conviction that there is an order in the universe that is there because God put it there. Secondly, they make the radically new claim that the Christian community's experience of Christ is profoundly relevant to their experience of their world in its totality and, conversely, that (like the figure of Wisdom and many Jews' understanding of Torah) Christ was not an afterthought that God happened to have, but is from the first an inherent part of the way things are.

Now, for those who do not see the universe in this way, but regard it as a random collection of matter (and antimatter), there need be no particular problem with inaccuracy of human expression. Such a deliberate lack of attention to precision might be unscientific and therefore fall short of the best of which humanity is capable, but if the universe does indeed lack a reference point that is somehow "beyond" itself, there is nothing or no one to whom peoples are answerable for their inaccuracies of expression, and such inaccuracies would, perhaps, simply be in keeping with the haphazard nature of things. By contrast, for those of us who experience the world as intelligible by God's design, a concern with accuracy of expression is a concern for conveying at second hand our response to the creator's work; it's analogous to the respect we give to others by taking care to quote them correctly.

Of course, our accuracy of expression always has a provisional quality about it, in both the sciences and the humanities. For, at the same time as we carry out the process of discovery and self-discovery, we continue to give meaning to our world, and we do so with a degree of accuracy that is necessarily limited by the circumstances in which we live. At any given time, we, as individuals and as a race, can only know so much, and this changes with the years and centuries. The ostensibly solid wooden table turns out to be mostly space with particles whizzing around in it, and (contrary to earlier post-Enlightenment expectations) it transpires that there is a certain randomness at the very heart of things. Yet if the world (and the rest of the universe) is, indeed, created by God its meaning is to a large extent "given." This is because the world is that which links us to the creator. Therefore, the meaning that we give to the world and try to express as best we can is a most important component of our relationship to God. We need to get it as right as we know how. And so it matters a great deal what we decide to teach our students in each subject on the curriculum.

All that began with what was probably a mere chance remark of Cornelia's about accuracy. Let us now take another look at how she understood reality. Underlying her attitude of practical realism is, of course, the doctrine of creation. She had a very strong sense of the world as God's world. As she was primarily concerned with forming people and not with theological or scientific speculation, this attitude of hers is evident particularly in the way she speaks of what it means to be human. Thus, "*We are what God sees us and knows us to be, nothing more*"² And nothing less, either: "*Be yourself but make that self just what Our Lord wants it to be.*"³ Each person's potential is God-given. Elsewhere Cornelia writes: "*Do not wish for more than God wishes from you, but simply and only that his holy will and designs be accomplished.*"⁴ She has seen clearly that it is totally futile to try to be other than what we are created to be, but it's amazing how often we find ourselves trying. A large part of the problem is that we don't

actually know what we were created to be, but have to spend our lives finding out. It would be so much easier if every baby came equipped with a full instruction manual, but they don't (in case you hadn't noticed), and so we occupy ourselves trying to work out (figure out) what are God's designs for us as those are revealed in our physical and mental makeup and our total situation in the world and in history. What I'm doing here is expressing in creational terms what we considered earlier in terms of Wisdom: just as Wisdom must be (in some sense) asked for and then cultivated when given, so self knowledge involves the interaction of a divine gift (in this case, oneself, with all its potentialities) and a personal commitment to making use of it (in the present case, finding out exactly what it is that one has been given and what it can best be used for). It seems as though in Christian understanding, human development always entails an ever-evolving interaction between God's gift (which must be accepted and recognized for what it is) and the person's effort to use the gift.

The doctrine of the Incarnation is relevant here, too. For not only is it inappropriate for a creature to try to be something that it is not, but it is also contrary to the perspective of Jesus as the gospels portray him. The milieu in which he carried out his ministry made it all but inevitable that his work would be, humanly speaking, a failure. Whatever form the Jewish people expected God's salvation to take (and there was a wide variety of such expectations in the first century), someone like Jesus was not it.

In the NT, the Letter to the Hebrews and the gospels according to Matthew and Luke suggest that Jesus' life should have gone differently from the way that it did. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says that Christ, although Son, "*learned obedience through what he suffered*" (Heb 5:8). Just what this means, in the light of the understanding of the person of Christ that emerged from the fifth-century Council of Chalcedon, we cannot be sure: for it is hard to imagine that a person who is truly divine could be disobedient to God in the way that we have to struggle against being, and yet the gospels all testify to Jesus as one who suffers excruciatingly because of the way he understands his Father's will for him. Less perplexingly, Matthew and Luke preface their account of Jesus' Galilean ministry with stories of his encounter with Satan in the desert. This encounter is preceded by Jesus' baptism by John, during which God acknowledges Jesus to be "*my Son*." The temptation in the desert that follows deals with the issue of what it means for Jesus to be the "*Son of God*". Three times he refuses to take easy ways to quick popularity that would be bought at the price of compromise with "*Satan*." Instead, he chooses to go along with God's will. This choice leads to a number of consequences: the slow treks through Galilee and the surrounding regions and eventually to Jerusalem, the general disapproval (and, ultimately, hostility) of those whose views counted for anything in

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his society, and the company of little people who, although basically loyal, were usually uncomprehending and ultimately more fearful for their own wellbeing than concerned about his. Yet Jesus' attitude of doing what God wants of him never wavers, as is clear in the much more severe test in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Take this cup away from me, yet not what I will but what you will" (Mark 14:36 and par.). We have the distillate of that in the petition of the Our Father, "Thy will be done . . ." Creation and incarnation are not separate here: the obedience of the Son in his created humanity is somehow the human race's model as free, rational, and intelligent beings.

Let's now draw some conclusions from this second aspect of SHCJ educational philosophy. It seems to me that the concept of the world as God's world is deeply embedded in our thought as SHCJ educators, and that this is (or should be) of great importance to us. For one thing, it's amazingly easy to forget that it is so and to think, for example, that ultimately everything depends on us. But it doesn't. The world remains God's world and always retains a significant measure of mysteriousness for us, however much we come to know about it. For example, we belong to the Christian community, in which the central datum of faith is that we are somehow saved through God's response to the crucifixion of an innocent man around AD 30. Who could possibly have figured out that *that's* how things are constituted? Since, therefore, we are not ultimately in charge, our natural (and good) tendency to take initiatives, to explore, to change and invent things, must be accompanied and balanced by an attitude of trust in God, of waiting to discover reality. Teilhard de Chardin and other mystics are more reliable guides here than those who claim to be able to reduce everything to physics. It's not that I have anything against physics: that it, along with all the other sciences and the humanities, has a very significant place, I have no doubt; but it is not ultimate. From within the faith community there is a real sense in which theology is "queen" (if one can say that these days?), for a created world cannot ultimately be understood except as it relates to its creator.

3. A Fallen World

On the other hand, the world is a fallen world. Each individual is not yet "*that self that Our Lord wants it to be,*" not only because we are still growing and developing as persons, but also because of an inherent tendency to sin. So the grain of wheat must die if it is to bear fruit, although why it should be so, we do not know. Even as a young wife and mother at Grand Coteau, Cornelia made the connection between this text from John 12 and her own situation: she recognized the need for the death of that in her which was "*not worthy to live—pride, frivolity, vanity, caprice, weakness, vice, and passion.*"⁵

(This looks to me like a pretty good checklist for women's sins, or at least the start of one—we could, perhaps, argue about this!) She knows well the human capacity for self-deception: in the letter to George Peacock quoted above, she wrote that he was to “*reject what is double, I mean what is not from a pure motive, what is from human respect or any human motive.*”⁶ And I daresay she would have had equivalent things to say about our communal selves, although that was not a significant part of the nineteenth-century agenda. In the Christian understanding of how things are, we can become what God would have us be through (and only through) the workings of divine grace, as she saw: “*It is not presumption to have hope and joy and confidence in God's grace.*”⁷ That is to say, the world is a fallen world, but grace is available.

4. The Importance of Trusting Those Being Educated

People (including children) can only come to trust in God's grace (and in themselves) in freedom, however. In other words, they must experience themselves as trusted, and not as having another's will foisted on them. So the basis of Cornelia's educational philosophy was a profound trust in those for whose education she had accepted responsibility. “*Trust the children and never let your confidence in them be easily shaken. Confidence begets confidence.*”⁸ I think it is difficult to overemphasize the importance that this attitude had for her, and I have good reason for thinking that it remains a hallmark of all those imbued with her spirit.

Having trust in others is, furthermore, consistent with the character of the God who is revealed in the Old and New Testament, for God always invites and never coerces. One is always free to refuse. Any other kind of God would not have had to tolerate all the nonsense that Israel came up with between Egypt and the Promised Land, or with the repeated turning aside thereafter. A God who did not hope for humanity's free cooperation would not have “*sent his only Son*” (John 3:16) but would instead have sent a successful military Messiah who could not be withstood, as much of Israel had been expecting. I have heard of (but never read) a poem of Peter Levi's in which he explains in these terms the tradition (found in Exod 33:18-23) of Moses' not being allowed to see God's face but only his back: he suggests that Moses would not have been able to cope with seeing a God who weeps. This is, surely, the God revealed by Jesus. For Luke notes that Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, the city that, like the Galilean towns in which Jesus began his ministry, will not respond to what God is offering in the person of Jesus (Luke 19:41; 10:13-15, par. Matt 11:20-24). Neither God nor Jesus will coerce them, but the cities will eventually lose out because they did not recognize and freely accept what God was then offering. Right up to that last point, the trusting never ceases: the repentant are always

given another chance, the fig tree in the parable gets to live another year and is given every opportunity to produce fruit, and the prodigal's father is always out on the road, anxiously scanning the horizon. It seems that God, like Charlie Brown on the baseball diamond, never learns!

Despite the detail into which she goes over school organization in her *Book of Studies*, Cornelia, too, has this basic trust of people and insists that those who educate in her schools should have it, too. It is really very practical. For only when they are trusted will children, as she says, "*show themselves in their true colours, and then we shall see the highlights and what needs toning down.*"⁹ The pupils are to be led "*by love rather than fear.*"¹⁰ Isn't that just about what God does? We are free, at least in a qualified sense, to develop all sorts of possibilities, good and evil, and only in exploring these possibilities do we discover which ones are consistent with our most authentic selves. And of course in our better moments we all recognize that not trusting people warps human possibilities and leads to a miserable kind of existence all round. What is learned by those who conform because of fear of reprisals is not to be themselves but to be devious, and the effects run deep and are very difficult to eradicate. It seems that the former Soviet Block countries are providing ample evidence of this, though I suppose we can also find plenty of examples closer to home.

5. Individuality: the Importance of Being Oneself

Underlying this attitude of Cornelia's is a pronounced sense of people's individuality. The Novice Mistress

"is not to expect that the novices will form their spirit on their own, but she is rather to bend hers to theirs, making herself all in all to them to assist them to advance in their way. All ought to form themselves according to their vocation and thence to the spirit of the Society,"

she writes in her *Customal*, quoting a text that originated with the Daughters of the Sacred Heart. With children it cannot be quite the same: the task of the novitiate differs from that of the school, and novices are not children. In fact, the emphasis of the *Book of Studies* is rather on conformity to the regulations and conventions of the schools. Despite this, she would surely have applied the same principle, *mutatis mutandis*: that, always with due allowance being made for the degree of maturity of those concerned, people must be treated as individuals. Her successors have certainly done so (as have all educationalists with any claim to merit, of course!).

Saint Paul has much in common with Cornelia here: a concern for conformity that is, in his case, explicitly related to the

needs of the community, combined with a profound sense of people's individuality. We shall be concentrating on the latter, the individuality, particularly as expressed in the twelfth chapters of the Letter to the Romans and the First Letter to the Corinthians.

Romans was written after 1 Corinthians, to a community that Paul did not know directly. We shall consider this letter first, since Paul here summarizes in a general sort of way the position he developed first with respect to the particular problems of the Corinthian community. He begins in Rom 12:3 by asserting the realistic attitude that we noted above in Cornelia:

For by the grace given to me I tell everyone among you not to think of himself (or herself) more highly than one ought to think, but to think soberly, each according to the measure of faith that God has apportioned.

The reality concerned is that the community "in Christ" is to be understood by means of the metaphor of the human body in which "not all the parts have the same function." Although he begins by noting that the body is one and individuals are, therefore, parts of one another, Paul's primary point here is that, since the gifts differ, they must be used. "If [your gift is] prophecy, [it must be used] according to the faith; if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching" and so on. This precept of Paul's can, of course, be misused to keep people in what someone else considers to be their place, but fundamentally it allows us to rejoice in each one's uniqueness.

In 1 Corinthians 12 we find in more detail this idea of the body and its parts, written with direct reference to the problems of a community that Paul knew well—probably rather too well for their own comfort at times! Here again, in verses four through six, he begins by emphasizing the unity, this time by his insistence that the gifts that people have all come from the same divine Spirit and are used to serve the same Lord. Verses 12 and 13 make the same point in terms of the body image:

As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.

In the context of 1 Corinthians he is stressing the unity because there have been divisions within the community, as one can see right from the start of the body of the letter in chapter 1 (1:10-30). But in the course of dealing with this problem in chapter 12 he goes on to develop at length the necessity for the various parts to be different, for in showing how the different parts need one another, he

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insists on the absurdity (indeed, the impossibility) of a body that is not differentiated into parts.

"If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended. If they were all one part, where would the body be?"

1 Cor 12:17-19

Cornelia's Novice Mistress would surely have recognized this, and (despite strongly prevalent ideals of uniformity in both education and the church as a whole) so have Holy Child educators. The "little individuals" of Joyce Grenfell's nursery school (kindergarten!) are unlikely to lose their distinctiveness if they are then sent to our schools, although, following Paul, we endeavour to direct their uniqueness so that it both makes its particular contribution to the community as a whole and allows fully for the uniqueness of others. This, of course, is the ideal; it doesn't always work out like that in practice, although I think we usually do better than the Corinthians were doing before Paul took them in hand.

What I have been saying here, then, is that in trying to give full scope to those in her charge while at the same time taking very seriously her responsibility for them as minors, Cornelia set up a system that is in keeping both with the God who makes people different and includes free will in the mix, and with Paul's Christian anthropology. My experience of Holy Child schools and educators supports the idea that our fidelity to Cornelia's ideals consists in taking up those ideals and, at the same time, modifying their implementation in the light of the best knowledge of our time, as she did in the nineteenth century. I think that pondering these chapters of Paul's letters may help to keep us on track.

Conclusions

You've spent most of this week in the 19th century; today's presentation started from that, too, but tried to connect at least some of Cornelia's fundamental educational principles with the grounding in biblical theology that I think they have for us in the last decade of the twentieth century. Her own theological reflections would have been very different, and others have written about them in various places. Our task this morning is not to go over that again, but rather to examine the tradition that we have received from her and to put it alongside some aspects of our more general Christian tradition and our present day culture as a whole, and let all three of them speak

with one another. In the last 40 minutes or so I have started to do that in a very limited way, but have paid practically no attention to contemporary culture. It is to a broadening of that conversation that we now move, with all the resources that we can bring to it.

Notes

1. This paper was prepared for and presented at the Cherwell Conference, Oxford, England, Summer 1992.
2. "Writings of the Servant of God, Cornelia Connelly, foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus" (henceforth: CC) 22:11; also in *Cornelia Connelly Anthology: Selections from the Writings of Cornelia Connelly* compiled by Philomena Power, SHCJ, and Catherine Quinn, SHCJ, (privately printed, 1983) p. 32.
3. "Documentations presented by the Historical Commission for the Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God, Cornelia Connelly, Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus" (henceforth: D) 73:174; *Anth*, p. 30
4. CC 54:71; *Anthology*, p. 23.
5. D 64:67; *Anthology*, p. 14.
6. CC 1:102; *Anthology*, p. 29.
7. CC 21:7; *Anthology*, p.32.
8. D 74:324.
9. D 74:324-25; *Anthology*, p. 10.
10. CC 37:80; *Anthology*, p. 9

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