

JAMES WALSH, CORNELIA CONNELLY

AND THE

SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS

JAMES WALSH, CORNELIA CONNELLY
AND THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS

The Roman archives of the SHCJ are a rich repository of source material on James Walsh: he reveals himself very three-dimensionally in his letters. It seemed to me best to make an annotated chronology of his dealings with the SHCJ, and after that to add some evaluative remarks.

January 1958: James was appointed Vice-Postulator of the cause of Cornelia Connelly in the diocese of Southwark by Archbishop Cowderoy. His appointment was 'seconded' by the SHCJ in a formal document signed by the then Superior General. The cause had been officially initiated in 1953 with historical commissioners and a "Devil's Advocate" and the full time work of three SHCJs who collected and prepared documentation at Mayfield, Sussex.

Spring 1958: James went to Rome to confer with the S.C. of Rites (which then dealt with causes) and with our General Council. At this time he and Paul Molinari (who was made Postulator in 1960) also conferred about the cause. During that year he visited the Mayfield 'cause room' and began to acquaint himself with the growing collection of documents and the three SHCJ most involved in the work: Mother Mary Evangelist, Mother Marie Madeleine and Mother Mary Clara. He dubbed them the CCCC (Cornelia Connelly Cause Committee).

September 1958 to March 1959: James went to America: to collect further documents in SHCJ convents; to see for himself how the charism was understood in the farthest outposts of the Society (Pasadena and Portland); to educate SHCJ and their clientele about the cause and Cornelia - Philadelphia, Grand Coteau, Natchez and New Orleans. - and to search for more material in those places: he found a cache at Grand Coteau.

Throughout the autumn he carried on an emotionally charged correspondence with the SHCJ in the cause room over two articles he had written for *The Month*, which they objected to in part and in which they found historical inaccuracies. Juliana Wadhams's biography of Cornelia

(she was an SHCJ old girl) had just been published under the title, *The Case of Cornelia Connelly*; James thought it left the reader in two minds about her sanctity and he sprang to Cornelia's defence (which was an offence to the author, whom the nuns did not want to see under such an attack). James was on the west coast in Pasadena and Portland, writing to the CCCC and probably to Fr Caraman as well. This whole episode coloured the working relationship from the outset, but it did not obstruct the work. James was very humble about it, corrected his mistakes and filed down his barbs. Even so, when they finally appeared in 1958 and 1959, there were reactions to the articles from Jill Wadhams's admirers.

While all this was going on James, as he said, "lived, ate and slept Mother Foundress". In September 1958 he was in Pasadena: he gave a series of homilies on the Beatitudes during what was known as the 'Strong Novena' in the SHCJ; he linked them with Cornelia and her life story. They were spontaneous, fresh and 'vintage James'. They were appreciated enough to be copied down almost verbatim and duplicated (in purple), and they had a wide circulation. From Pasadena James went to Portland, where there was a cluster of SHCJ houses, returning to Pasadena in December. Correspondence with the CCCC reveals a misunderstanding about the agreed time of his return to England, the CCCC thinking the plan was to present the collected documents to the diocesan tribunal in December; but it looked as if James would be on the road till March. In fact he prolonged his original trip by about three months in order to see other SHCJ houses and Cornelian places.

When he returned to Pasadena (California) in December, he gave the community the Epiphany triduum for the renewal of vows, with four talks a day. He linked the vows and our way of understanding and living them with Cornelia. I was part of the Mayfield (Pasadena) community and remember that James had been ill and looked ghastly. Yet he poured himself into this retreat. It was more like a short course on Cornelia, stressing her participation in the paschal mystery through her adherence to the incarnate

Christ in the spirit of the Third Degree of Humility. These talks were taped and transcribed, and disseminated in a kind of 'samizdat' edition. In fact, almost every formal word James spoke in Pasadena was recorded and transcribed, and people treasure these transcripts to this day.

Combined with this presentation of Cornelia's spirituality was James's effort to form and reform the SHCJ in her spirit. He did this through personal contact with individuals and in the confessional, and through spiritual direction in the informal sense. This first contact between James and the SHCJ on the west coast had a lasting effect.

Between January and March 1959 James travelled to other parts of the US, to SHCJ houses and Cornelian places. His reception was mixed. Some found his presentations wearisomely long, convoluted and unintelligible. Others were touched and awakened to an exciting new grasp of their own grace.

April 1959: James was back in England and paying flying visits to the cause room at Mayfield. In April he gave a talk (which was summarised) to the Mayfield Old Girls, in which he compared Cornelia to Our Lady in her passage from physical motherhood to spiritual motherhood through the cross.

June 1959: James was once again in Rome on cause business. He had written a prayer for Cornelia's beatification which needed *imprimatur* from church officials. There was some controversy over this prayer, which he was reported to have written in five minutes in the Mayfield parlour after others had spent long hours in attempts at composition (this was in the autumn of 1958). At the Casa Madre he gave two talks on the reasons for canonisation and Cornelia's special contribution to the holiness of the Church. James presented her as reflecting the fidelity of God in her own attachment to his will. He returned to the theme of spiritual motherhood and divine adoption as God's children.

December 15, 1959: The cause began officially before the Southwark diocesan tribunal. As Vice-Postulator, James presented the collected writings of Cornelia Connelly on

which the process would be based. Although much, or most, of the work of gathering documentation from the four winds had been done by others, James had responsibility for the format and organisation of the material.

May 27, 1960: The diocesan tribunal officially handed the sealed documentation to James to despatch to the S.C. of Rites in Rome. It went by diplomatic bag. This was after the third and final session of the diocesan tribunal.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's James visited the English houses of the SHCJ and went to Nigeria and Ghana, where there were Holy Child mission houses. Everywhere he met SHCJ and spoke about Cornelia and the cause. As Vice-Postulator he understood himself to be its promoter. In Africa he tried to enlist bishops to the cause.

August 1962: James gave the Long Retreat at Mayfield, Sussex, to the set preparing for final vows. This was a 'first' in the province. Before this the English tertians went to Rome and were guided by an SHCJ in the Long Retreat. Those who made this retreat were so positively helped that they asked that James should be invited to give their profession retreat at Easter 1963, and he was.

March 1965: There is a record of a talk given by James at the provincial house, New Sharon, Pennsylvania. Vatican II was in progress and many Pandora's boxes were flying open. The talk appeals to Cornelia's balance in the midst of her own chaotic upheavals. James seems to be urging his audience to think and move with the Church without throwing everything overboard. The word 'submission' is used frequently of Cornelia, but submission is qualified by an enlightened search prior to every obediential act. There is an implied caution against a too literal or static interpretation of the charism.

June 1966: James is once again in the U.S. He preached an eight-day retreat at the SHCJ convent in Portland (four talks a day). This time his theme was *Perfectae Caritatis* and the SHCJ charism. Again his talks were taped, transcribed and circulated through the SHCJ underground. All these taped versions found their way to the generalate as well.

Probably on this trip to the U.S. James met Sr Caritas

McCarthy SHCJ, and together they conceived the idea of an Institute for studies of the SHCJ charism. The idea may have originated with James: at least, he was the moving spirit and used his influence with provincials to enlist their support and that of the general council. Sr Caritas was the one who became the director of the future Institute.

September 1967: The first plan for an "Institute for Historical Studies of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus and its Spirituality" was formulated. James, together with Paul Molinari, was to be a theological adviser. The scheme of the Institute was presented to the Society in a letter from the Superior General, Mother Mary Laurentia. She writes: "Father James Walsh S.J. and Fr Paul Molinari S.J., to whom not only the Institute but many of the precious graces of our renewal owe their origin and inspiration, have generously agreed to act as theological advisers to the Institute. Their aid has brought, and continues to bring, very great knowledge and experience in the renewal of religious life, and a special concern for the fruition of Mother Connelly's mission in the Church."

December 1967: The first session of the special General Chapter was held at Rosemont, Pennsylvania. James and Paul were both present as advisers. James spoke about the SHCJ rules as composed by Cornelia from many sources over a span of years. This helped to break down resistance to change.

Easter 1968: During two weeks at Eastertime the Institute held its first working session at Cavendish Square, London, and at Mayfield, Sussex. James was present for most of this meeting which laid out the plan for channelling into the next session of the special chapter, and into the 1970 chapter, research into Cornelia and the Society's patrimony undertaken by Institute members.

August 1968: The second session of the special General Chapter was held at Mayfield and James was again present as an adviser. We have in written form two talks he gave: one on obedience and the spiritual content of accountability and subsidiarity, and the second on Cornelia's vision of the Society as revealed in her Epiphany letters. Several of

James's homilies were also circulated in typescript.

After this second session, the Institute was restructured and given a special mandate to help prepare for new constitutions. It was also asked to study and report on the influence of the Spiritual Exercises on the spirituality of the Society (HCJ).

Christmas 1968/69: An Institute workshop was held at Rosemont College, with the purpose of researching Cornelia's writings with reference to each week of the Spiritual Exercises. James was present and brought to the task his own newly reformed understanding of the Exercises. A master file relating Cornelia's writings to the themes and weeks of the Exercises was built up and remains an invaluable research tool. At this session it was decided that the Institute members should themselves experience the Exercises in their fulness if they were to penetrate the SHCJ charism in depth.

January 1969: The full documentation (86 volumes) on the cause was presented to the S.C. for the Causes of Saints together with a petition from the Postulator that the cause might go forward.

January 29, 1969: Receipt of the documentation was acknowledged by the S.C., together with approval for the cause to proceed. This closed the diocesan process and brought James's formal work as Vice-Postulator to a conclusion. On February 11 the Superior General, Mother Mary Laurentia, wrote to James to thank him for all he had done. The letter is very warm in its expression of thanks, and includes the following: "We feel particularly gratified to have you so intimately associated with the Cause of Canonization for Mother Connelly, for you bring not only a high standard of research and a meticulous care for detail, but a zeal for the promotion of her cause and a deep understanding and appreciation of her spirit."

August 1969: James directed the Long Retreat at Rosemont College for Institute members and some others. It was more than a retreat, even though there was individual direction, four or five hours of prayer daily and silence: it included study of Cornelia's charism via-à-vis the Exercises, mini

courses on discernment, the vows and affective prayer; a liturgical workshop and an intense experience of SHCJ community. James was the moving spirit behind these multifarious activities. Again, his talks were transcribed and circulated along with the essays each participant was asked to write. Topics included 'composition' (a broader concept than composition of place), application of the senses as a contemplative prayer, the third degree of humility, and the unitive character of the vows.

January 1970: James was once again present at the General Chapter in Rome. The first interim legislation of the SHCJ was circulated as the *Documents*. It represented a process of maturation spiritually and theologically in the Society's self-understanding and incorporated all the themes and insights which James had been developing with us since 1958.

November 20, 1970: This is the date on a decree from the S.C. for the Causes of Saints which declares that there is nothing in the writings of Cornelia, or the writings about her, to impede the cause. It was printed and issued together with the assessment of the two censors (the third was waived) only in 1972.

December 1970: The Institute, again modified in structure as a result of the 1970 Chapter, met in Rome for what was, I think, its last session. James was again present. Henceforth the Institute would explore the idea of mission and apostolate as understood by Cornelia and as clarified by insights from Vatican II. It also projected written studies and a series of study sessions for all SHCJ on christology and the incarnational spirituality of the SHCJ. Its new focus would be on research, publication and area activities in different sectors of the SHCJ.

The Institute had been since its inception, and continued to be until 1976, a major vehicle for the Society's renewal – and James had everything to do with the Institute. As new needs emerged, it was there to supply a theological response to them and to relate to our sources all that was happening. Gradually the Institute's work merged, first with the cause, and secondly with the preparation of new constitutions. Throughout its span of time it was a means of ongoing

spiritual and theological formation for members of the Society. Its research papers fed directly into the *Positio* to be written 1973-83 and into the Society's renewal documents.

1973: Sr Ursula Blake SHCJ took over the commission from the Postulator and from James as Vice-Postulator to write the *Positio*. The way for this had been cleared by the decree from the S.C. for the Causes of Saints in 1970. James and Ursula were old family friends: both had grown up in Accrington, and there was between them a community of interests and many common gifts in the spiritual and intellectual order. At the beginning of the work Ursula leaned heavily on James's knowledge of Cornelia. As she expanded her own research, and as James's horizons widened to include many other projects and renewal work with other congregations, Ursula was more and more able to out-argue James on a point to do with Cornelia, but she still sought his approbation for what she had written. This became increasingly problematic for both of them as time went by. James would look at a large chunk of finished work and have a 'better idea' about how it should have been approached. Ursula was working to order under the guidance of a mentor from the S.C. for Saints and was pulled between him and James. Little by little James lost touch with the evolution of the *Positio* and had many contradictory attitudes towards it: at one moment he was extolling the finished work as monumental, at another he said it was impossibly long and unnecessarily detailed. But, in the end, I think he was pleased. After all, it was in a way the crown of his own work on Cornelia.

1976 and 1980: *Chapters*. James was invited, along with Paul Molinari, as theological adviser 'emeritus'. He did not attend chapter sessions, but was 'around' for liturgy and for personal and group contacts. He was not present full time, but would come and go.

1976-1986: The Institute as an inter-provincial structure under the generalate went out of existence in 1976. James's contacts with the SHCJ were more on a personal than an institutional basis. He always stayed at the generalate when he came to Rome, and the members of the generalate

community loved him, drank in his ideas especially at liturgy, and learned how to sift the wheat from the chaff. Contact with him in this informal way was an enrichment. Through his friendships he continued to influence the 'mind' of the Society, for his friends were in formation work, in SHCJ government and in spiritual ministries. Personally, I tended to disregard his 'practical' suggestions while paying great attention to the direction of his ideas and to the things he said during his homilies.

Liturgy was often the occasion when James was able to reach most deeply into his own being and draw up a synthesis of what his prayer, his experience and his reflection on it told him. It was in the liturgy that he often communicated his most penetrating, if stammering, insights into Cornelia and the spirit of our Society. Those who were with him in spirit as well as in body caught, out of the corner of their eyes as it were, a flash here, a hint of darkness there. His eucharistic celebrations could be memorable and formative events.

At an early stage of his work for the cause of Cornelia, James revealed himself as a polemicist. Fearing the possibly negative effects of Julian Wadham's biography of Cornelia, James sat down and wrote two counterblasts. I noted earlier that these had to be toned down, and even then they gave offence to some people. The two articles were reprinted in pamphlet form and circulated as part of the cause promotion. Some of the clearest statements about Cornelia's holiness (equated by James with her absolute and perfect submission to God's will) are to be found in this reprint from the *Month*.

Besides all the other things he did for us, James also launched in 1960 a promotional newsletter in the U.S. and its 'parent' organ, the Cornelia Connelly Guild. It reported favours granted and provided information about Cornelia and her cause.

Often James took up his own pen to make Cornelia better known. He wrote a preface to a collection of her writing in a CTS pamphlet, *God Alone*, and a foreword to Mother Mary Thérèse Bisgood's biography, *Cornelia Connelly: a study in*

fidelity. He also wrote at least five articles for the SHCJ mission magazine, *The Pylon*. The titles speak for themselves: "Pilgrimage to Natchez" (1959); "Grand Coteau Revisited" (1960); "The Spirit of the Holy Child Jesus" (1968); "Why an American Foundress for England?" (1961/62).

Finally, in 1984, with only an introductory piece to the *Positio* still unfinished (the *Informatio*), James was asked to undertake the work. He accepted and made gestures towards getting into position to write it, but by this time he was pretty ill in a chronic way. My instinct tells me that he rationalized putting it off on the grounds that all causes were being held up by the patterns of beatification and canonization introduced by John Paul II, telling himself there was time enough, but that in fact he lacked the energy and clarity of mind to make what he thought of as a grand summing up of all he knew of Cornelia's holiness. He died without beginning the *Informatio*.

- o - o - o - o - o -

How did James influence the Society? First, he communicated to us his own devotion to Cornelia, his conviction of her exceptional grace as foundress and as a woman of God, the beauty he saw in her as a reflection of the self-giving, self-emptying Christ. The Society, or at least many in it, were able to look at Cornelia through James's eyes and to see, as if for the first time, the person God gave us as a model in our beginning, and to respond with affection and admiration. James made Cornelia a human person, a real woman whose physical experience of marriage and motherhood shaped her spiritual life. Because he obviously found in her an inspiration for his own life with God and was so well able to articulate that inspiration, he validated her holiness for us.

James also awakened in many of us a more explicit understanding of the grace of our own personal vocations. His grasp of Cornelia's vocation and his rightly taking it for granted that we were called in the same way made many SHCJs esteem more fully their personal call. There was a

real avidity on the part of many to hear what James had to say about the spirit and spirituality of the Society. He was able to lay his finger on the central grace and so release personal and corporate aspirations to seek their object.

James was also a teacher in our midst. With sureness and inner coherence he brought more and more clearly into focus the Society's apostolic identity. As theology developed through Vatican II and after, he too developed – in his understanding of his Jesuit identity and of the Holy Child identity. He never stopped trying to explicate this, to set the new theological vision into the context of Cornelia's understanding, to relate developments in the Church to the Society's tradition of fidelity to God's will revealed in the Church. He urged the Society to seek its roots by moving ahead, not backwards. James fulfilled the function of a kind of corporate spiritual director to the Society. He also entered into personal relationships on both human and spiritual levels with many members of the Society. He allied himself all the while with God's purposes for the Society and its members. He embodied in himself a challenge from God to live more deeply the unfolding charism and to respond more authentically to the grace shared with Cornelia.

Because he really loved the Society of the Holy Child Jesus as the realisation of God's work in Cornelia, he enabled us to love it more, especially through the successive stages of renewal which sometimes revealed our more unlovely features.

If today Cornelia has for the SHCJ much the same capacity to inspire that Ignatius has for Jesuits, it is largely because of the efforts of James – in the research he encouraged, the theological reflection he stimulated and in his own witness to her. Through his knowledge of spiritual theology and his scholarship he helped SHCJ to grapple with some of the 'problems' of being a Society of adults whose devotional life pointed towards a Child.

Who was the Cornelia James revealed to us out of his own contemplation? Without repeating the facts of her life, one could say that James's Cornelia – and she is the Society's Cornelia, I believe – was a woman whose grace was so to

unite her will with God's that she recapitulated in her own life the incarnational self-emptying of the Son. She was one whose joy and consolation and wholeness sprang out of her identification with her crucified Lord through a lifetime of extraordinary despoilment. In fidelity and hope she clung to her faithful God and so traced the paschal route from physical maternity to spiritual maternity, as had the Mother of Sorrows.

Some of the topics and themes which James dwelt on and explicated in his work with the Society were: the vows, especially consecrated virginity and obedience; the third degree of humility, spiritual discernment, the meaning of the hidden life as understood by Cornelia, mission, the contemplative dimension of the Society's calling, the life of charity in community, the devotional life of the Society, incarnation and kenosis, the paschal mystery, affective prayer and spiritual motherhood. No small syllabus!

James set Cornelia's spiritual teaching into the tradition of western spirituality, situating it, putting a foundation under it. He also helped to clarify for the Society the context of 19th century ecclesiastical life in England.

Perhaps the greatest contribution James made to the Society's self-awareness was to affirm its call as an unambiguously apostolic congregation in the Church. At the same time he insisted on the validity of the contemplative tradition in the SHCJ. Because he was struggling towards a renewed understanding of the Ignatian vocation, he was able to struggle with us towards an integrated view of our own.

I think James sometimes used the SHCJ as a testing-ground for his own evolving ideas. He cut his wisdom teeth on us. We were able to serve as a platform from which he could launch himself on other ventures in renewal among other apostolic religious. One might say the relationship between James and the SHCJ was a symbiotic one: each fed on the other, was built up by the other, grew in relation to the other. Yet if there was mutual blessing, there was always, not far under the surface of the relationship, an abiding pain.

I do not mean by all that I have said that James was *wholly* responsible for our renewal. Many other people within and

outside the SHCJ made enormous contributions. But I think I can say that no other person worked so long or at such depth to refashion us in the image of our foundress.

Not everyone in the Society would agree with that. Some of James's foibles and patterns of behaviour blocked the appreciation he might have had from all (was this the source of the sadness?). Some people are accident-prone: James was misunderstanding-prone. Wherever he went there were several interpretations of what he had said or done or of arrangements made. Many are full of apologies, clarifications, better ideas. And they are usually long enough to create new misunderstandings . . .

One had to know James to love him. A complex man and clearly out of the ordinary, he left some just as happy not to know him. Those who swallowed his quirks along with the man usually moved from awe or puzzlement or discomfort in his presence to care and affection; so that, for the sake of the love he evoked, they were happy to bear his burdens with him. Though he might have been 'caviar to the general' as far as some were concerned, yet through those whose work was formation or administration or who went to chapters over a number of years his impact reached the general in ways they did not realise.

Sister Elizabeth Mary Strub, S.H.C.J.



FR. JAMES WALSH

R.S.P.
✠