

*Source*

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*The Spirit  
of Society*



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# The Spirit of Childhood

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**T**HE SPIRIT OF the Society being *that of the Holy Child Jesus* FT 15

What is the spirit of the Society — the spirit of the Holy Child Jesus? How do we see it today and how did Cornelia see it? When we look at it again at the end of the 20th century, in the light of current thinking in the fields of human development, psychology, theology (particularly Karl Rahner's exploration of theology of childhood<sup>1</sup>) and so on, we find that the seeds of what is being said now are there in Cornelia's early writings and inspirations. She draws us back to our roots: "Mysteries of the most sublime teaching" are to be found "in the humble and hidden life of the Holy Child Jesus . . ." "God manifests" himself through this. We are to "study in the example of a hidden God."<sup>2</sup>

Cornelia draws us back to our roots to search and study in the example of the hidden God. And when we turn to the gospels we discover that the first recorded words of Jesus are to his mother: "Did you not know I have to be about my Father's business?" So we learn that his relationship to his Father and his mission from his Father are essential to Jesus' expression of himself, of his spirit. He taught us, his followers, to pray "Our Father" so that we too may grow up into children of the Father.

Rahner, speaking of God's decision to give himself as a child, says that God came as a child because the child is the grown adult of the future; the child is the father of the adult; the child contains seeds of the adult. We leave biological childhood behind, but we do not leave the qualities of childhood behind. We carry them throughout our lives so that we may become children of the Father, which is what Jesus wants us to become.

Jesus began as a child, and grew up as a child of the Father, all the time stressing his relationship with the Father. And so, speaking to his disciples — a mature man to a group of mature followers — he said, "Unless you turn and become as this little child . . ." (Matt 18:3) Jesus did not want them, and does not want us, to become stuck in the developmental stage of biological childhood; rather, he presents children as examples of lack of false ambition and indifference to honours.

When the sons of Zebedee wanted the best places and an argument arose between the apostles, Jesus brought a little child and said, "Unless you become like this little child . . ." He was contrasting the qualities of the child — lack of false ambition, indifference to honour, modesty, simplicity — with the responses of adults. (Matt 18:2, 19:13) So when Jesus points to a child as an example he is not pointing to the innocence of the child; he is saying that like children we can be without worrying before God; we can receive knowing that in ourselves we have nothing on which to base a claim. We can have complete trust in God our Father.

Rahner says childhood is openness, and that the mature childhood of the adult is infinite openness; being open, trustingly and courageously in the face of the experiences of life. We are only truly children when we have stood the test of remaining a child, of becoming more and more a child, and when we have realised the childlikeness in Christ's divine Sonship. The task of the maturing process, of growing older, is becoming more and more a child of God. We put aside our biological childhood but we keep its qualities because we can only understand the meaning of childhood when we mature. And the meaning is that we keep those qualities and grow up eventually with the grace of God to become children of God.

The ministry of the Society for children is very important because, whatever we do, we are in the service of the child, which is not something sentimental but a deep concern for the eternal dignity of the person who must become a child of God.

In the light of all this I want to look again at Cornelia who, in paragraph two of the Constitutions, speaks of living wells. 'Wells' imply that we will have to draw up the water, and 'living' wells suggests that the water is constant, never finished. We have to go on and on and drink the water. This is not just copying what Jesus did. Cornelia knew that as we went on into the 19th and 20th centuries we would be learning new things and that we would have to draw water from the well continually. We are to seek to attain, cultivate, study, run with ardour in the way. It is all movement and seeking and learning, open to the future; we are to use every effort; we are to labour with all our strength; we are to cultivate assiduously;

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constantly strive; make progress; grow in zeal; always to advance in the divine service, to grow in devotion, to be constantly more and more effective. The movement, the developmental approach in what she writes is very apparent; nothing is fixed or static.

At the beginning I noted Jesus' words, "I must be about my Father's business." In Cornelia's day the church expected women religious to be more enclosed, praying, concerned for their own perfection and so on. Cornelia, however, very definitely saw that as only one part of a twofold end. She stated that serving and apostleship and missioning — if you like, evangelization — was an equal end of the Society and was the purpose for which the sisters were to strive for improvement.

We are at the service of Christ's mission and Christ said, "I have to be about my Father's business." So many of the examples Jesus used in his teaching speak of growth and development: the seed growing and bringing forth grain, the vine growing and bringing forth fruit, the branches etc. All is movement, growth, development. . . . And now we too must be about Jesus' business and God's business: Cornelia made that very very clear from the beginning to the end.

1. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Volume 8
2. See Foundation Texts 2 & 3

## Love is His Way, Love is His Mark . . .

Katherine Holmstrom SHCJ

“IN THE NAME of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” I offer a few thoughts, or at least beginnings of thoughts, on the spirit of the Society as it reflects for us something of the Trinity of God.

I begin, obviously, with the second incarnate person of the Trinity. Because so much has already been said, and well said, I will add very little. Simply this:

In the name Cornelia gave the Society she expressed her insight into the mystery of God the Son made human to save us. The humble, hidden life of Jesus is the well-spring of the spirit of the Society. (Cons 3)

In that divine child . . . we find . . . our model. (FT 2)

Spiritual childhood seems above all to be an attitude before God, before human beings and before the rest of creation; a spiritual stance of transparency, smallness and readiness to receive the utter gratuitousness of God's gifts. It has something to do with what St Paul calls "the folly of the cross," with "the power of God triumphing in weakness," (II Cor 12:9) with the beatitudes, with the grain of wheat dying in order to produce a rich harvest. (Jn 12:24) In fact, there is something paschal about it, something too of John the Baptist's "decreasing so that he (Jesus) may increase." (Jn 3:28)

And now, God the Father. The comment has often been made that we in the Society inherit from Cornelia, a mother, a special characteristic of "motherliness". Not every congregation adopted, as we did, the title of "mother" for all finally professed members as well as for superiors. (Indeed, the old rule stressed the maternal solicitude of the superior and the child-status of all other members in a way that is no longer appropriate.) But many of us feel at home in the attitude of trusting, friendly and at the same time "educative" love that we have been encouraged to exercise towards those we try to walk with, especially the young. It was perhaps the experience of this womanly and motherly love which nurtured a number of us, and drew us to become SHCJ.

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