

MAIN LINE FAITH

Local celebrations for the Society of the Holy Child Jesus

By DAVID ROBINSON

As the 200th anniversary of the birth of Cornelia Connelly — foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus — approaches in 2009, her order, The Society of the Holy Child Jesus, will begin the celebration next week at Rosemont College.

Connelly's early efforts began with the poorest of the poor in the slums of England and the education of young women. Through the early struggles and onward, she encouraged her fellow sisters "to meet the wants of the age" through "actions, not words."

Connelly's personal story is a remarkable tale of a woman raised with no thought of a life of service. She was married to a controlling man, whose vanity led him to switch from Anglican minister, to Catholic priest, then back to Anglican minister. Most biographers would agree that he served Anglicans, Catholics and God as poorly as he served Cornelia as husband and as father to their children after the pope granted the couple a deed of separation so that he might become a priest.

Philadelphia of the 1800s...

Her story began in Philadelphia of the 1800s, then moved to the backwaters of Louisiana, Catholic high society of England and the splendid Vatican halls of Rome following her husband's career. When he took his vows — under the mandated separation — she was free to follow her own spiritual life, which eventually led to England. Though separated from her husband, she was not entirely free of his meddling efforts to control her, and then his vindictive lawsuits to keep the children away from her and turn them against her.

Founding the order...

Yet her diligence, dedication and sacrifice serving God through those in need led to slow steady growth of her order. The first Holy Child sisters arrived in America in 1862. Today, the Holy Child network of schools is an association of 10 Catholic, independent elementary and secondary schools. The Society also partners with other religious and non-profit organizations to operate four collaborative inner city schools that serve more than 600 at-risk youth.

The order has expanded its mission to assist those in need with life care and spiritual services. With international growth, the Society now contains American, African and European provinces. The American province includes Chile and the Dominican Republic.

Leading the order...

Currently leading the American Province, in a six-year term, is Helen McDonald, S.H.C.J., from offices in Drexel Hill. Locally, she is remembered



Leading the American Province Office of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus is Helen McDonald, S.H.C.J.

as a former head of Rosemont School of the Holy Child, and she presently serves on the board of trustees at Rosemont College.

"As Sisters of the Holy Child, our mission is to help others to believe that God lives and acts in them and in our world, and to rejoice in God's presence. Worldwide, we have nearly 400 Holy Child Sisters, with 181 serving in the American Province and 85 of them serve in the tri-state area," she explained. "Rosemont College was founded in 1921, and when I attended in the 1960s, the faculty were mainly sisters in the order. Today, while we still have a few teachers, others serve in school administration, social, legal, health and spiritual care services. Two are lawyers, and one is a medical doctor."

Among the sponsored ministries of the Holy Child Sisters is an African educational effort, a law center for immigrants in San Diego, a spiritual retreat in Chile and a medical clinic and educational center in the Dominican Republic. At Casa Caritas, a house of prayer and discernment in Philadelphia, the order welcomes those thinking of or weighing a decision to take vows. "We have two women in discernment,"

McDonald explained. "The steps are discernment, candidacy and novitiate. The novitiate is located in Washington, D.C. There are two American women taking final vows this year."

One of the order's most famous former members is author Karen Armstrong, whose books on the world's religions are popular to a global audience. Armstrong humorously admits that she was a failure as a nun, yet now lives the religious life she dreamed of when she entered the order: studying the world's religions, contemplating man's search for God, and writing and speaking about the "one-world" connections of the major faiths. "She entered the convent at 17, which is very young," McDonald said. "Today, we don't consider candidates at that age because we have found that women today have so many opportunities and need to experience the world before making a lifelong commitment." This past year, Armstrong and the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus conducted a symposium in Canada.

"Lay people seeking a closer commitment to the spirit of Cornelia Connelly's work in the world can enter a process of becoming associates in the Society of the Holy Child," McDonald noted. "We have about 50 associates at this time, both men and women. Most are Catholic, but some are not Catholic." Some associates help with the Society's ministries, but the emphasis for associates is to deepen their own spirituality through personal prayer, reflection, spiritual development and community.

The yearlong celebration...

An opening event to the yearlong celebration of the birth of Cornelia Connelly was held at Rosemont College's Heritage Day, Wednesday, Oct. 8. At the college's main building, there was a

Liturgy, with McDonald reflecting on her memories of Mother Mary Lawrence S.H.C.J., a member of the Society and a teacher whose classrooms provided memorable experience. "We used to say that when she taught history, it was as though we walked up the scaffolding with Mary Queen of Scots," McDonald said with a laugh. A luncheon followed, and Eileen McDevitt, S.H.C.J., director of the Holy Child Network of Schools discussed how Rosemont's mission flows from Cornelia Connelly's philosophy.

Another celebration of Cornelia Connelly's life will take place in Philadelphia at a Mass Oct. 12 in St. Agatha-St. James Church, followed by a reception on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. Events will also be held throughout the United States and at the church of the Trinita dei Monti in Rome, where Connelly discerned her vocation to begin a new religious order.

In April, at an awards dinner in the Marriot West Hotel in Conshohocken, the Society will honor J. Cordon Cooney with a Faith In Action award for his lengthy commitment to justice. "He is chair of the Board of Trustees as Rosemont School of the Holy Child and an area lawyer who worked at freeing a condemned man after 18 years imprisonment, using DNA evidence," McDonald explained. In May, there will be a tour of significant Philadelphia landmarks connected to the Society.

Also adding to the bicentennial year are the retired sisters of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, living at New Sharon, across from Rosemont College on Montgomery Avenue. They are making a quilt with the portrait of Cornelia Connelly that was painted by Ellen Cooper. The quilt will hang in Holy Child Center at New Sharon when completed.

For a complete listing of events honoring Cornelia Connelly, visit www.holychild200.org.



Born in Philadelphia, Cornelia Connelly, founded the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.



Mother Cornelia Connelly, foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. She was declared "venerable" on June 13, 1992. This is part of the process in being declared a saint. The Archives contain the documentation for her cause.



At the Archives is this original notation of the hymn *Ave Maris Stella*, hand-written by Mother Cornelia Connelly. The copy was used for singing by Connelly and the sisters who accompanied her during the Novena made when Mr. Connelly — at a civil trial in England — tried to force Mother Connelly to leave her order and return to him.



DAVID ROBINSON/MainLineTimes

At the Archives of the Society of Holy Child Jesus is a silver cross that was conferred at final vows for Sisters of the Order. This cross was designed by Sr. Cornelia Connelly with "Action, not words" inscribed on it. She presented the cross to Pope Pius IX for approval. The pontiff suggested that the engravings at the top and bottom be simplified and subsequent crosses are simpler and carry the inscription, "One heart and one spirit." The Archives in Rosemont will display these and other artifacts from the life of Sr. Cornelia Connelly July 1 through Nov. 1, 2009.



Frank Connelly, the youngest son of Cornelia Connelly, became a famous sculptor who exhibited at the 1876 Centennial in Philadelphia. This statue by Frank Connelly is at the Archives. The model was his sister, Adeline Connelly. She took care of her father, and upon his death, returned to the Catholic Church.