

FORGOTTEN NEWSMAKERS

CORNELIA CONNELLY (1809 – 1879) Mother & Nun Who Founded a Religious Order

In Catholic Church, Italian History, Victorian Women on July 25, 2011 at 10:44 AM



Mother Cornelia Connelly

When someone tried to tell Cornelia Connelly what to do, she responded with stubborn determination, choosing what she knew was right for her. The primary guiding force of her life was her faith, and she was willing to obey God and sacrifice whatever He asked of her. When she made that promise, however, she had no idea how heartbreaking that sacrifice would turn out to be.

Connelly was born into a prominent Philadelphia Episcopalian family. Her father died when she was nine years old and her mother died five years later. The fourteen year old girl and her five siblings were not orphaned, however, as several relatives incorporated them into their families. Connelly was adopted by a half sister, Mrs. Montgomery, and was given classes in music, painting, modern languages and the social graces.

Mrs. Montgomery took seriously her responsibility to prepare her charge for a proper suitor, but she was no match for the curate of St. James Church. Pierce Connelly was charming if not handsome, intelligent and an ambitious, charismatic minister. Unfortunately, Mrs. Montgomery did not think his family was of worthy social standing, and she forbade Connelly to marry him. That wasn't a compelling enough reason for Connelly to stop seeing him, and she ran away to live with her sister, Adeline Duval, who was much more sympathetic to matters of the heart.

<https://forgottennewsmakers.com/2011/07/25/cornelia-connelly-1809-%E2%80%93-1879-mother-nun-who-founded-a-religious-order/>

Connelly was 22 years old and Pierce was 27 when they got married in December 1831. The groom undoubtedly promised to love his bride until death separated them, and the bride in turn promised to obey her husband. Whether he kept his promise or not depends on a definition of love, but she obediently followed him until it conflicted with her commitment to God's will.

As newlyweds, the couple moved to Natchez, Mississippi where Pierce became the rector of Trinity Church. One year later a son, Mercer, was born followed by a daughter, Adeline, in early 1835.

A CONVERSION EXPERIENCE

In August, Pierce had a crisis of faith and renounced his Anglican Orders in order to study Roman Catholicism, which in his mind necessitated selling their property and going to Rome. Connelly believed in the sincerity and integrity of her husband's calling and found virtue in converting to Catholicism herself. She followed her husband's lead, but she did it her way. Pierce was adamant about waiting to take the sacraments in the holy city, but his wife was ready immediately. When the voyage from New Orleans was delayed several weeks, Connelly was received into the Catholic Church and took her First Communion before leaving the States.

After 60 days at sea and a stop in southern France, the Connellys finally reached Rome in February 1836. Pierce was received into the Catholic Church on Palm Sunday. As a married couple with two children coming all the way from America to join the Church, the Connellys were a novelty. They quickly integrated into local society, had an audience with Pope Gregory XVI and were frequent visitors of the influential Borghese family. A son, John Henry ("Harry"), was born while they were in Europe.

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU PRAY FOR

About a year later, the Connellys had to return to Louisiana to take care of a financial crisis, and Pierce got a job as an English professor, giving them a place to live on campus. Another daughter was born, but she died after only a few weeks. For a couple of years the family lived an idyllic life, and Connelly blissfully filled her days teaching with the nuns at the Convent of the Sacred Heart. One day while watching the children play outside, Connelly prayed, "My God, if all this happiness is not to Thy greater Glory and the good of my soul, take it from me. I make the sacrifice."¹ The next day while Harry was playing with the dog, he fell into scalding liquid in the sugar boiler and subsequently died in Connelly's arms.

To further deepen his faith, Pierce went on a retreat in October 1840 and had another epiphany: he was being called into the priesthood. He revealed his decision to his pregnant wife, and she dutifully accepted it as God's will, although the implications for the family were drastic. He made it clear that for them, following God's will would require immediate celibacy, and eventually they would have to live separately. Connelly was heartbroken but willing to make whatever sacrifices God required of her. In January she went into retreat where she reaffirmed her commitment to her own spiritual journey, and in March her son Frank was born.

<https://forgottennewsmakers.com/2011/07/25/cornelia-connelly-1809-%E2%80%93-1879-mother-nun-who-founded-a-religious-order/>

The following year Pierce had an opportunity to work in England as a tutor and to give Mercer an English education. He and his son left in May 1842, and Connelly and the two younger children joined the Sacred Heart community, living in a very small cottage next to the convent.

Because he was married, approval for Pierce to become a priest had to come directly from Rome, and Connelly had to accompany him there to sign a petition for separation. Before leaving Louisiana, conflicted Connelly offered her husband an opportunity to change his mind and reconcile the marriage. He remained steadfast in his desire to join the priesthood even if it meant splitting up the family.

POVERTY, CHASTITY & OBEDIENCE

In the fall of 1843 Connelly and her husband presented their petition to Pope Gregory XVI, and the following spring they were granted a Deed of Separation. Pierce began his ecclesiastical studies, and Connelly, who had become a postulant in America, remained true to her calling and entered the Sacred Heart convent. Mercer and Adeline were at boarding school, but Connelly was able to keep young Frank with her.

Pierce visited his family weekly, and when he was ordained, he said his first mass at his wife's convent. It was a very emotional experience for Connelly to receive Holy Communion from her husband and for Adeline to receive her First Communion from her father.

In the 1840s there was a sectarian movement whose aim it was to influence Britain toward being a united Catholic state. It seemed logical that raising children with a Catholic education would be a good place to start. Because of her talent for teaching and compassion for children, Connelly was handpicked to start a convent school in Derby, England. By now she was accustomed to following God's orders for her life, so she packed up the children and went to Derby.

"Sister Connelly" started wearing a habit in December 1846, and some months later she took her temporary vows. Rather than join an established order, it was Connelly's mission to found a new order which she called the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ). As Superior, she and the nuns that joined her opened a boarding school for girls with a full curriculum including English, foreign languages, social studies, arithmetic, music, art, and needlework.

Connelly devoted her full energy to the success of the school until Pierce became dissatisfied with his status again and swept up his wife into another drama. Pierce had gone to England to resume his work as tutor, but that didn't last. Money was tight, and he wanted to be more integrated into Connelly's life and work. On March 4, 1847 Pierce showed up unannounced to Connelly's convent and demanded to see her. For the first time, she did not acquiesce to his demands and refused to see him. Her decision was supported by the bishop, but Pierce was not amused.

<https://forgottennewsmakers.com/2011/07/25/cornelia-connelly-1809-%E2%80%93-1879-mother-nun-who-founded-a-religious-order/>

TRIALS & TRIBULATIONS

Pierce tried various ways to regain control of Connelly. She had submitted the Rules for her new order to Rome, modeling them after St Ignatius. Pierce went back to Rome and made an attempt to get the Vatican to support his efforts, insisting that she use St. Francis de Sales as the model. Then, he began writing to her directly, requesting a personal visit. When she didn't reply, Pierce convinced himself that Bishop Wiseman was manipulating her. He could feel his wife slipping out of his grasp and claimed he feared for the future of his children.

In October, Pierce's next move was to demand that Connelly not take her final vows on the grounds that since they were still legally married, he would be responsible for any debts she or her order might incur. Connelly's religious journey stayed its course, however, and she took her final vows in December, becoming Mother Connelly.

Pierce retaliated against his wife's defiance by assuming custody of the three children and taking them to Italy without her permission. This left her with two choices: give up her religious life to be with her children or give up her children. In the face of the ultimate sacrifice, Connelly prayerfully refused to submit to her husband's ploy, writing in her diary, "I Cornelia vow to have no future intercourse with my children and their father, beyond what is for the greater glory of God, and is His manifest will through my director, and in case of doubt on his part through my extraordinary [confessor]."² She never saw Mercer again.

This was not the decision that Pierce anticipated, and he couldn't accept it. He went back to Derby a few months later and demanded to see Connelly. Again she refused. He flew into a rage and would not leave the waiting room for six hours, trying every way he could think of to get to his wife, to no avail.

This left Pierce with only one card left to play. In January 1849, Connelly received a subpoena to appear in English court. Pierce was suing her for restoration of conjugal rights. Connelly was not only concerned about the outcome of the trial, but also that Pierce would exhaust his ability to provide for the children in attorney's fees and that he would mislead the children away from the Catholic Church. By now he had renounced his vows and reverted to Protestantism.

Connelly vs. Connelly came before a judge in May, but the defendant did not appear. With her life's work at stake, her counsel cited the legal separation granted them in Rome. The judge ruled in favor of Pierce saying that the decree of separation from Rome did not hold up legally in English court. Connelly's attorneys filed an appeal which went to court in 1851. This time a Judicial Committee ruled in Connelly's favor, and since Pierce had no further financial means to pay his legal bills, he was forced to drop the case. Connelly was able to continue her mission, but the children stayed with their father.

<https://forgottennewsmakers.com/2011/07/25/cornelia-connelly-1809-%E2%80%93-1879-mother-nun-who-founded-a-religious-order/>

Connelly was able to compartmentalize the heartbreak she felt at losing her family and focus her outward attention on her mission. The Society of Holy Child Jesus expanded, establishing convents with schools in other English towns, France and Philadelphia. Connelly wrote the Book of Studies in 1863 as the basis for her curriculum, which emphasized compassion, imaginative teaching, the importance of the arts, and lots of outdoors activities for developing youngsters.

STAY CALM AND CARRY ON

It seemed that Connelly was destined to have nothing come easy for her, and getting her Rules for the SHCJ approved by the Vatican was a lesson in patience and steadfastness. Twenty-seven years after Connelly submitted her first draft, Bishop Danell summoned representatives from each convent to convene for the purpose of debating the Rules and electing a Superior General. Connelly was respected by most of the nuns in her order, but there was some dissension in the ranks which she was totally unaware of. At the gathering, Reverend Mother Connelly was elected as Superior by a majority vote, but Bishop Danell appointed himself as Bishop Superior of the Institute, rendering Connelly's authority ineffective. In addition, he substituted some rules that he concocted for those that the sisters had been living under for almost three decades. Connelly had no choice but to accept them. Until Connelly's Rules were approved, the nuns were restricted to only taking the temporary vows and were not able to fulfill their spiritual commitment with final vows.

Connelly's health was another nagging issue over many years. She suffered from rheumatic gout, and bronchitis. She became bedridden and was given last rites in January 1878. She managed to hang on another 15 months, and the reward for her endurance was that in January 1879, Bishop Danell allowed her novices to take their perpetual vows.

Three months later Connelly was given Last Rites again, and on April 18, 1879 she died, 33 years to the day after she left Rome to start her order. She was given a Requiem mass and was buried at the convent in Mayfield, England. Eight years after the death of their founder, in August 1887, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus was informed that the Pope had approved their Rules as Connelly had written them. Today, Connelly's legacy through the Society of the Holy Child Jesus has established convents and schools in the United States, Europe and Africa.

QUESTION: What would you be willing to sacrifice to stand up for something you believe?

©2011 Debbie Foulkes All Rights Reserved

¹Mother Marie Therese, p. 27

²Wadham, p. 114

Sources:

Mother Marie Therese, *Cornelia Connelly, A Study in Fidelity*. Great Britain: The Newman Press, 1963.

<https://forgottennewsmakers.com/2011/07/25/cornelia-connelly-1809-%E2%80%93-1879-mother-nun-who-founded-a-religious-order/>

Wadham, Juliana, *The Case of Cornelia Connelly: Wife, Mother, Nun-Saint*. New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1957.

<http://www.shcj.org/society.html>

<https://forgottennewsmakers.com/2011/07/25/cornelia-connelly-1809-%E2%80%93-1879-mother-nun-who-founded-a-religious-order/>