

CORNELIA'S GEOGRAPHIS AND SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

This file is a resource of material that may be useful to you in school during the Cornelian year

INFORMATION ABOUT HER LIFE

Beginnings

Cornelia was born in Philadelphia in 1809 and she seems to have imbibed there a vitality and radical turn of mind and sense of adventure, the very spirit of America's recent Declaration of Independence.

She was the youngest child in her family and, though we don't know for sure, it is assumed that her lively mind was broadened by the freedom to join in the education her older brothers and sisters were receiving.

She developed into a petite, attractive and gifted young woman and by the time she was 20 she was already in love with Pierce Connelly, a dashing young clergyman at the local Episcopalian church.

Her father had died when Cornelia was nine and her mother five years later; her sister, Isabella, with whom she was now living, strongly disapproved of Pierce and of the proposed marriage. But Cornelia was determined, and in spite of the clash with her family, the couple were married on 1 December 1831.

Possible Connections for Assemblies etc:

Cornelia seems to have had a happy childhood. What are your own early memories of parents, relatives, friends?

A lot happened to Cornelia before she was 16; her life was turned upside down by the death of both her parents. What events have influenced and shaped your life so far?

Cornelia clearly learned a lot from her older brothers and sisters as well as from her parents. Who are the people who have been important in your life? Try to identify the particular gift each of them has given you.

Early Married Life

In the early years of their marriage Cornelia and Pierce were blissfully happy: '... they are and always have been about the happiest couple that ever breathed,' wrote Cornelia's sister. Pierce has property in Natchez, hundreds of miles from Philadelphia, down the Mississippi valley, and he became the rector of Trinity Church there. Here their first two children, Mercer and Adeline, were born.

But less than four years after their wedding, there were developments which changed their lives forever. Pierce was a successful and popular minister in a small, wealthy parish. He was also a man of considerable intellectual ability. After examining the claims of the Catholic missionaries at work in the Mississippi valley, 'My faith is shaken in the Protestant religion,' he wrote.

In 1835 Pierce renounced his Anglican orders and took his wife and two small children on an arduous journey by boat from America to Rome. They were at sea for over two months, in confined quarters, with all of them sick, especially the children, and without even the possibility

of washing clothes. Before they set sail from New Orleans Cornelia was received into the Catholic church; Pierce waited until they reached Rome.

Possible Connections for Assemblies etc:

Making choices: Have you ever realised that you needed to make a big change in what you were doing? In difficult situations how is it possible to know what is the right thing to do?

Journeys: What long journeys have you taken? How are they different from the journey Cornelia and Pierce took? Can we talk about life as a journey?

Europe

Europe, and especially life in Rome, was a revelation to the American Connellys – ancient buildings, beautiful works of art, the society of many cultured Catholics. As an intelligent and vivacious couple they were invited into the homes of many influential people, in particular that of the English Earl of Shrewsbury. Cornelia developed a close friendship with his daughter, Gwendoline, who introduced her to work among the poor of Rome, and who was to die a few years later when she was only 22.

The Connellys' understanding of Catholicism grew and deepened: they read, attended sermons and lectures, and discussed the faith with their many friends. For Pierce, being a minister had been all he wanted to do with his life. He tried to discover at this time whether there was any way in which he could be ordained a Catholic priest. The break up of her marriage and happy family, which this would have involved, was the last thing Cornelia wanted. For the time being the sacrifice was not demanded.

Possible Connections for Assemblies etc:

Friends and friendships: Do your friends encourage you to be a better person? Is being with them helpful for you? Are you a good friend to other people?

Reading and Learning: Who helps you to learn new things? Are there any scripture passages, books, talks, that have been particularly helpful for you?

Grand Coteau

The Connellys began to travel in Europe, and in Vienna a third baby, John Henry, was born. About this time serious financial losses forced them to return to America. 'Cornelia is dancing with delight at soon being back in our old home,' wrote Pierce. But in truth this was a time of great anxiety during which the family needed all Cornelia's level-headedness and cheerful resilience. It was no longer possible for them to live as they had done before in Natchez. They accepted an invitation to work with Catholic missionaries in Grand Coteau, an isolated outpost in Louisiana. Here Cornelia contributed to the family income by teaching guitar and singing in the Sacred Heart convent school.

Once again they established a happy family life. Pierce complains of the difficulty of writing letters in the same room as 'three of the sweetest – and the noisiest – in America'. Cornelia was playing the piano to 'send them all dancing, or rather stamping round and round.' Then the family gathered for night prayers before the children were put to bed.

Cornelia and Pierce continued to develop and sustain their life of prayer. They kept spiritual notebooks and made regular retreats. Each of them had a spiritual director at the local Jesuit college and they were learning a good deal about finding God in the midst of a busy and active life.

Possible Connections for Assemblies etc:

Prayer: For Cornelia and Pierce prayer was part and parcel of daily life. Do you manage to pray every day?

Their prayer and their relationship with God was changing and developing. Has your prayer life changed or developed at all over the last few months?

Do you ever have a sense of being close to God? When does that happen? What is it like?

Suffering

Cornelia was to need her strong and confident relationship with God in the sorrows which faced her in the coming months. The Connelys had a fourth baby, Mary Magdalen, in July 1839. In September Cornelia fell ill and the baby died. The following February John Henry – the ‘delight of my eyes’ Cornelia called him – a beautiful fair-haired toddler was knocked into a vat of boiling sugar by a big Newfoundland dog. He suffered multiple burns and Cornelia nursed him for 43 hours before he died.

By October Cornelia was pregnant again. Pierce had been making his retreat and told her that he finally knew that God was calling him to the Catholic priesthood. Cornelia responded characteristically, ‘Think of it twice and with deliberate attention, but if the good God asks the sacrifice, I am ready to make it to him and with all my heart.’ That day they made a promise, which they kept faithfully, to prove themselves by abstaining from sexual intercourse.

Possible Connections for Assemblies etc:

Suffering, Facing Hard Things in Life: This was a time of great suffering for Cornelia. What have been the hardest times in your life? How did you cope? Who helped you through?

Rome

Pierce needed to return to Rome to gain permission for his ordination. Surprisingly, on the way he spent 14 months travelling in Europe. All this time Cornelia stayed at Grand Coteau waiting, reflecting and praying – and her understanding grew of what God was asking of her through all this. In Rome Pierce found that Cornelia’s presence and consent were needed, so he uprooted his family once more and brought Cornelia and the children to Europe. Pope Gregory XVI took an interest in their case. They were granted a formal separation from their marriage, and Pierce was given permission to proceed to the priesthood provided Cornelia made a solemn vow of chastity. Cornelia went to live at the Sacred Heart convent in Rome, taking the two younger children with her. She shared the regular life of the nuns without actually joining the community. Here in the convent chapel Pierce was ordained, and at his first Mass their daughter, Adeline, received her First Communion, whilst Cornelia sang in the choir.

But Cornelia was not happy. God did not seem to be calling her to join the Society of the Sacred Heart, yet she could not see clearly what else to do.

Possible Connections for Assemblies etc:

Making decisions: Think about some of the difficult decisions you have had to make. What made you realise something was wrong? What helped you eventually to find the best way forward?

Derby

In the months that followed Cornelia was reflecting, as she told her brother in a letter, on ‘the wants of the age’ and how she could respond to them, with her particular gifts and talents. So when she was invited to go to England to found a congregation which would educate Catholic girls she decided not to return to America, and by October 1846 found herself with three inexperienced companions in a vast, rat-infested convent in Derby.

Inside this enormous building the sisters were to live in considerable poverty – money was often a worry for Cornelia. The day they arrived someone had kindly provided a meal of a leg of mutton which was cooking in the kitchen; but there were no plates, knives or forks, and Cornelia had to borrow these before the little group could eat.

In the England of 1846 Catholics were treated with suspicion and women were second class citizens. Derby was a city in the heart of the industrial midlands and Cornelia and her companions set to work immediately providing basic education for the girls who worked in the silk mills and factories which surrounded the convent. Besides a poor school and a school for young ladies, the little group ran a night school for about one hundred girls, and even on Sundays taught not just religious instruction, but reading, writing, sewing and arithmetic. And all this time Cornelia was also concerned for the spiritual growth of the stream of young women who were joining her in the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. So from the earliest days active work for others went hand in hand with a life of prayer and reflection.

Within two years it became apparent that the situation in Derby was totally unsuitable and Cornelia, with the encouragement of Bishop Wiseman, moved her community to St Leonards-on-Sea. Here the work and spirituality of the young Society was consolidated. The sisters not only ran boarding and day schools, but they established a teacher training college and were involved in writing books, in translating, painting, producing and publishing religious art and literature, giving retreats and instructing converts.

Possible Connections for Assemblies etc:

Knowing our gifts and using them to help others: The first Holy Child sisters used all their abilities and talents to help poor and underprivileged people in nineteenth century England. Who are the people who really need help in society today?

What abilities and talents do you have which you could use for others?

St Leonards

Cornelia was a first class and extremely creative educator, daringly providing in her schools a very wide curriculum, including drama, Greek, geology and logic. She believed firmly in the value of trusting and encouraging her pupils. And all this at a time when many girls were lucky to receive any schooling; and when what schooling there was was all too often rigid, unimaginative and uninspiring.

There was always a lot of fun in Holy Child schools. The bishop was scandalised by the rumours that reached him, and wrote to Cornelia, 'Inquire prudently, as it is said that the pupils have been taught to waltz and dance the polka as well as to play whist. If you discover this to be true, stop it quietly.' Cornelia knew it was true; she had originated the whole idea. The same bishop, when he heard that the sisters had been going into the sea at St Leonards, suggested it would be preferable for them to add salt to their bath water.

Cornelia had a natural sympathy with people and this underlay both her educational principles and the religious formation of the sisters. No one, she maintained, should be allowed to think herself a failure. Cornelia's cheerful, encouraging spirit was one of her most attractive traits.

Not for nothing had she chosen the title 'Society of the Holy Child Jesus' for her new congregation. The mystery of the Incarnation – God choosing to become a human being – was at the heart of her spirituality and it led her to value and reverence every human person. Today, over 160 years later, in all the diverse works they undertake, Holy Child sisters continue to be concerned to help others to lead fully human lives. As Cornelia herself wrote, this requires 'an almost unlimited elasticity and simplicity of spirit among us.'

Possible Connections for Assemblies etc:

Living live to the full: Iraneus said that the glory of God was the person fully alive.

Cornelia's relationship with God and her love of people made her a woman fully alive.

What makes you feel fully alive?

What things or people or activities or situations make you feel energised, happy and fully alive at present?

What can you do to help other people to feel fully alive?

Later Life

From its base at St Leonards the Society began to expand. Less than ten years after Cornelia came to England, the sisters were working among the poor in the slums of London, Liverpool and Preston, and by 1862 the first sisters had left for America. By the time she died in 1879 the Society was flourishing in both England and the United States, and Cornelia had fulfilled her dream of establishing houses in France.

Cornelia saw all the hardships, poverty and inconvenience the sisters encountered in those early years as opportunities to find and love God. In London, as elsewhere, the sisters lived and worked in depressed and derelict areas. 'As you step on through the muddy streets, love God with your feet,' Cornelia wrote. Finding God in the ordinary circumstances of daily life was an important part of Cornelia's spirituality.

All this time, as her congregation expanded and developed and her educational work flourished, Cornelia had been torn by great personal suffering. Her husband Pierce had angrily abandoned his priesthood and the Catholic faith. He had taken the children from their boarding schools and then denied Cornelia all contact with them, in the hope of regaining her as his wife. He had even gone so far as to take out a case against her in the English courts for the restitution of conjugal rights – a case that put Cornelia into the headlines of the national papers.

Her educational and spiritual aims and ideals also brought her into conflict with church authorities in England. So she found herself under attack on many fronts – hounded by the press and denounced in pulpits and lecture halls. At one stage the bishop even declared that he

would allow no more sisters to make their vows in the Society. Life was full of such enormous problems and anxieties that anyone with less resilience and unwavering trust in God would have been overwhelmed.

Life was for Cornelia, as it is for all of us, a continuing mixture of happiness and sorrow, of failure and success. Through all that happened to her she heard God speaking; and she responded to God with a wholehearted generosity. In all the events of her life she found God, and clung to him and to what he seemed to be asking of her. And so she became holy.

Possible Connections for Assemblies etc:

Generosity; willingness to think about God's invitations: God spoke to Cornelia, and God speaks to you and to me. Can you listen? Are you willing to respond generously to what God is asking?

CANDLE PRAYER

This candle has been given to us by the Holy Child sisters to mark 200 years since Cornelia was born. We ask God to bless us in this school as we light it, today, and whenever we use it in the year ahead. We pray too for all the schools in Africa, America and Europe which exist because of Cornelia.

Let us pray
God of love, we know you are always with us,
Whether it is light or dark.

Light the candle

In the light of this candle
May we experience your light,
In our hearts and in our lives,
A light that shines in darkness,
A light the darkness can never put out.
May the living flame of your love
Be kindled within us
And always burn brightly. Amen.