

Blessed
among all
Women

*Women Saints, Prophets,
and Witnesses for Our Time*

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Cornelia Connelly

Founder of the Society of the
Holy Child Jesus (1809-1879)

"Is not our faith a sword of strength? I feel it so, my Lord."

Through much of her life Cornelia Connelly struggled hard to discern her vocation amid the claims and demands which others made on her. But when she was certain she had heard God's voice she stood firm, despite the terrible sacrifices this entailed.

She was born in 1809 to a wealthy Philadelphia family. In 1831 she married an Episcopal priest named Pierce Connelly. When his studies convinced him that Catholicism was the true religion, he renounced his Anglican orders and entered the Catholic Church. Cornelia joined him. Although in her conversion, as in many subsequent decisions, Cornelia was to some extent carried along by the tide of her husband's strong will, she too felt a call to holiness. She hoped to discover this in the setting of family life; circumstances dictated that it should come instead through suffering and sacrifice.

In 1839 Cornelia and Pierce, with their three children, were living in rural Louisiana, where they both taught in Catholic schools. A fourth child, Mary Magdalene, died after only seven weeks. Five months later, while this wound was still fresh, their two-year-old, John Henry, was pushed by a dog into a vat of boiling sugar cane juice. He died forty-three hours later. During that time, as all the while she held his scalded body, Cornelia experienced a deep identification with the sorrows of Mary. When the child died on February 2, the feast of the Presentation, Cornelia wrote in her diary, "He was taken into the Temple of the Lord."

Later that year Pierce confided that he wished to seek ordination as a Catholic priest. Cornelia was stricken. It would mean the breakup of the family and, for her, a lifelong commitment to celibacy. To her spiritual advisor she asked, "Is it necessary for Pierce to make this sacrifice and *sacrifice me*? I love my husband; I love my darling children; why must I give them up?" Still the dutiful wife, she tried to believe in the coincidence between her husband's wishes and the will of God. So she agreed to cooperate with her husband's plan. She accepted the trial of the celibate life and remained behind, pregnant with her fifth child, Adeline, while Pierce went off to Rome to explore the possibilities for his vocation.

Eventually Pierce summoned the family to join him. He had secured an audience with Pope Gregory XVI, who accepted his vocation and cleared the way to his ordination, provided Cornelia would make a vow of chastity. While Pierce pursued his studies, Cornelia lived with her children in the Sacred Heart convent on Trinità de Monte. Though Pierce visited once a week she was, for all practical purposes, quite alone. Prayer offered little consolation. She wrote, "Incapable of listening or understanding or thinking...I forced my will to rejoice in the greatness of God."

In 1845 Cornelia made the requisite vow and Pierce was ordained. It was not clear what she was now supposed to do. She supposed she would return to America. At this point, however, several bishops and priests urged her to go to England. There the struggling Catholic Church, emerging from long suppression, was undergoing a period of expansion and renewal. It was suggested to Cornelia that her true calling was to establish a religious congregation in England for the education of girls. Cornelia accepted the challenge, provided she could keep her children with her. And so in 1846 she arrived in England to take over a newly built convent school in Derby.

There were numerous twists and turns in the foundation of this school and the community that attended it. But within a few years Cornelia had achieved some eminence within the English Catholic Church. In 1847 she took religious vows, and Bishop Wiseman formally installed her as superior of her congregation, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. The name reflected her profound devotion to the Incarnation, specifically to the "humbled God" who had revealed himself in the form of a helpless infant. In this spirit she instructed her Sisters, "As you step through the muddy streets, love God with your feet; and when your hands toil, love Him with your hands; and when you teach the little children, love Him in His little ones." Her toil at this point was only beginning.

After only three years of her new life a new round of trials began. By this time Pierce had grown restless and dissatisfied with the priesthood. At first he tried to interfere with and take over Cornelia's congregation. After she asked him please to stay away from her convent, he announced that he was leaving the priesthood and wished her to resume her marital duties. Once again Cornelia was appalled. Though her husband's will had led her to the religious habit, now that she wore it, it was her own, and she would no longer accept his word as the word

of God. When she refused his demand he brought a suit against her in a high ecclesiastical (Anglican) court. Now a professional anti-Catholic, Pierce painted a lurid picture of his wife being held captive by agents of Rome. Nevertheless, the court decided in Cornelia's favor. Enraged, Pierce retaliated by kidnapping her children and taking them out of the country. She was never to see them again.

Cornelia remained the superior of her congregation for over thirty years. During those years she saw new schools established in England, America, and France. Her congregation did much to promote the advancement and education of young women, especially the poor. Nevertheless, Mother Cornelia always bore the weight of her many sorrows. Toward the end of her life she suffered from an excruciating case of eczema that gave her the appearance of a leper — as though, it was said, "she had been scalded from head to foot." It seemed she was revisiting in her illness the experience of her greatest sorrow as well as her deepest identification with the Holy Child. Now it was she who was to be offered in the Temple. On the day before she died, on April 18, 1879, she turned to the nursing Sister and exclaimed, "In this flesh I shall see my God!"

See: Mary Andrew Armour, *Cornelia* (Society of the Holy Child Jesus, 1979); Juliana Wadham, *The Case of Cornelia Connelly* (New York: Pantheon, 1957).

Maude Dominica Petre Catholic Modernist (1863–1942)

"The church has lighted my way. Instead of struggling through a wilderness I have had a road — a road to virtue and truth. Only a road — the road to an end, not the end itself — the road to truth, not the fullness of truth itself. . . . In one word, she has taught me how to seek God."

Throughout the nineteenth century a number of Catholic intellectuals sought a way to reconcile the church with the positive features of modernity. By and large their efforts were scorned. By the turn of the century, faced with the rising tide of liberal and secular modes of thought, the church had come to define itself against the dominant social and political values of the age. With a state-of-siege mentality, many