

Religion: Scandal Revisited

One morning in 1840 in Grand Coteau, La., a young mother shooed her 2½-year-old son outside to play with his big Newfoundland dog. Somehow, tumbling about with the dog, the boy got too near a boiling sugar vat and fell in. He was 43 hours dying. In his mother's diary, his death and the long watch at his bedside are recorded in three stark words: "Sacrifice! Sacrifice! Sacrifice!"

The child's death was a bitter milepost in the life of an extraordinary woman—a life that began in a fashionable, upper-class Episcopal home in Philadelphia, ended in an English Roman Catholic convent, and may be crowned by beatification by the Roman Catholic Church. In *The Case of Cornelia Connelly* (Pantheon; \$3.75), British Roman Catholic Author Juliana Wadham brings back to life a reverberating scandal that burst upon the U.S. and Britain in 1849, when the Catholic Church was struggling to re-establish itself in England.

Ready to Submit. To gay, pretty Cornelia Connelly, her son's death was a clear and overpowering answer to a prayer she had made the day before: she felt that she was too joyous and too fortunate, and asked to be allowed a sacrifice to give her love of God a deeper meaning. The source of both Cornelia's joy and piety, and the corrosive catalyst of the remainder of her turbulent life, was her husband Pierce Connelly, a charming, hypnotically persuasive ecclesiastical eclectic.

A young Episcopal clergyman from Philadelphia, Pierce showed intense ambition from the time he married wellborn, well-educated Cornelia Peacock in 1831. He took her to Natchez, Miss., where he had been offered a parish, preached there four years, then abruptly resigned his pastorate and announced his intention of becoming a Catholic. While admitting misgivings ("I once thought all Catholic priests instruments of the Devil"), Cornelia wrote to her sister: "I am ready at once to submit to whatever my loved husband believes to be the path of duty." The path was clear to Pierce: it led to Rome. Cornelia was converted and made her first confession in New Orleans before they sailed; Pierce, with unerring dramatic sense, waited until they reached the Vatican. Cornelia's buoyancy and Pierce's social agility made them favorites in the lofty Catholic society surrounding the papal court. Back in the U.S. once again, Pierce taught English at a Catholic college in Louisiana, suffered with his wife through the loss of their small son. At the college he was an "amateur among professionals, a layman among priests." Abruptly, Pierce told Cornelia of his new ambition: to be a priest. He presented his soul-rending corollary to the decision: Cornelia must become a nun.

Although now a devout Catholic, Cornelia was also the devoted mother of two surviving children (with another on the way). But again she submitted to Pierce's judgment. Four years later, in Rome, they were legally separated. In 1844 she was accepted by Rome's Sacred Heart nuns as a postulant. Their oldest child was placed in a church school, but Cornelia was allowed to keep her two younger children, Ady, 9, and Frank, 3, in the convent.

Ready to Switch. The Connellys progressed spectacularly. Pierce was ordained a diocesan priest in the unheard-of time of one year, and Cornelia, although still a postulant, got an even more unusual advancement: by papal command, she was to go to England and found a teaching order. In 1846, Cornelia and two other novices set up a convent and school for the poor at St. Mary's, Derby. Submissive, obedient Cornelia showed another facet as superior of her little group: facing down carpenters and tradespeople, she got the new Society of the Holy Child Jesus off to a strong start.

Meanwhile, Pierce had come to England too, as tutor for the son of a prominent Catholic peer; he tried to take a strong hand in running Cornelia's society. In Rome after their separation, the Connellys had seen each other every ten days; but in Protestant England even the most carefully chaperoned visits could start tales of convent immorality. He alarmed the hierarchy by bursting into Cornelia's convent.

Bitter over the furor that arose, Pierce retaliated by taking their three children to Italy. In 1848 he returned to England, made a second descent on the convent, and raged at the chaplain for six hours because Cornelia refused to see him.

To the antipapist English press of the period, Pierce's next move was meat for scandal. In 1849, only a short time after he had tried unsuccessfully to get a cardinal's hat, he made another spectacular switch ("my allegiance to Rome was a culpable delusion"), sued Cornelia for resumption of his marital rights, and renounced his priesthood. He won the judgment; the Court of Arches ordered Cornelia to leave the convent and return to her husband or go to jail. For weeks Cornelia kept street clothes in her cell, ready to leave the country if Pierce or the authorities should try to seize her. Wild rumors had it that Pierce was waiting in a yacht off the coast, ready to carry her off. Ready for Glory. Cornelia eventually won her appeal to the Privy Council, but not before *Connelly v. Connelly* became the focus of a violent newspaper battle between British Protestants and Catholics, with U.S. papers echoing both sides. Pierce again became an Episcopal rector (after a brief dalliance with a sect prophesying the imminent Second Coming), and led the fight against Rome, firing off pamphlets informing readers that a "Roman Catholic may any day have the duty of shooting his sovereign imposed on him" and that celibacy was a "myth without basis in Catholic dogma or fact."

The scandal had its inevitable effect on Cornelia's new religious order. It was not until eight years after her death that full papal approval was granted to the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. But in spite of opposition from the hierarchy and sniping from Pierce (he continued to flail the Catholic Church until his death at 80 in 1883), Cornelia enlarged her order. The society spread throughout England, and in her lifetime chapters were opened in France and the U.S., where the society now runs 36 schools, including Rosemont College on Philadelphia's Main Line. In 1879, at 70, Cornelia Connelly died, leaving for church investigators now weighing claims for her sainthood a revealing passage written before she became a postulant: "It is for the glory of God that we should be saints . . . God wills me to be a saint. I will to be a saint. Therefore I shall be a saint. Live for Eternity. Eternity. Eternity."

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