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**From the Editor Emeritus / John F. Fink**

## Possible U.S. saints: Cornelia Connelly

*(Fourteenth in a series of columns)*

Venerable Cornelia Connelly had several things in common with St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. Both were converts, wives, mothers and founders of religious orders. But the circumstances surrounding Cornelia's founding an order were considerably different.

Born Cornelia Peacock in 1809 in Philadelphia, she married Pierce Connelly, vice-rector of an Episcopalian church, when she was 22. In 1832, he became rector of an Episcopalian church in Natchez, Miss., and they moved there. Their first two children, Mercer and Adeline, were born there.

During a period of anti-Catholicism, Pierce and Cornelia studied the accuracy of accusations against the Catholic Church, resulting in their conversion to Catholicism. Cornelia became a Catholic two months before Pierce did.

Pierce, though, not only became a Catholic, he also wanted to become a priest. He traveled to Rome to see how that could be arranged. Pope Gregory XVI suggested that he take his time in making such a decision. So Pierce and Cornelia moved to Grand Coteau, La., where Pierce taught at the Jesuit College of St. Charles and Cornelia gave private piano and guitar lessons.

They had two more children while in Grand Coteau, but their fourth child died when 7 months old. Three months later, 2-year-old John was killed in an accident.

Cornelia was pregnant with their fifth child when Pierce asked her if she would be willing to live a celibate life so he could become a priest. Cornelia very reluctantly agreed, and Pierce left to study in Rome. On June 18, 1845, Cornelia took a vow of perpetual chastity and, three days later, Pierce was ordained a priest.

Now what was Cornelia to do? At the suggestion of her spiritual adviser, Jesuit Father John Grassi, she founded the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. The archbishop of Westminster, England, asked her and three others she found for her society to staff a Catholic school in Derby. The children were put in boarding schools.

Mother Cornelia (all the sisters were called mothers) arrived in Derby in 1846. The school served the English poor and Irish immigrants who had fled the potato famine. The sisters had little money, but they taught children during the day and their mothers at night. During the first two years, 21 postulants joined the society.

Then, suddenly, Pierce showed up. He had changed his mind and demanded that Cornelia return to their married state. She refused. He kidnapped the children. He sued in the court of the Church of England for restoration of his conjugal rights—and won. It took Cornelia two-and-a-half years to win an appeal. Pierce eventually became rector of the American Episcopal Church in Florence, Italy, and succeeded in turning their children away from the Catholic faith.

Cornelia spent the rest of her life with the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus. When she died in 1879 at age 70, the society had grown to 155 sisters in seven houses in England, France and the United States. In Philadelphia, the sisters operate Rosemont College, my wife Marie's alma mater. †

