



The life of Catholic foundress Cornelia Connelly was ruled by men. Was her obedience to them holy?

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“O my love, I have wished to be a Catholic in my acts of love but I am afraid in truth & spirit have been but a discontented protestant,” Cornelia Connelly wrote to her husband. He had just informed her that they would be converting from Episcopalianism to Catholicism, and she would be required to become a nun so that he could become a priest. She complied. Yet to Cornelia, that was insufficient—it was not enough to go willingly. She had to go joyfully, too.

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When Cornelia Augusta Peacock met Pierce Connelly, she was an orphaned heiress whose wealthy Presbyterian relatives disapproved of her marrying a middle-class vicar—let alone an Episcopalian. Young, smitten and economically independent, they were married in 1831 anyway. They immediately disembarked to Natchez, Miss., where Pierce had been offered a rectory. Between her family fortune and his land investments, the couple fit well into Natchez’s planter class, to whom they ministered at Trinity Episcopal Parish. Meanwhile, they welcomed two children, Mercer and Adeline. They were, by all accounts, happy.

Over the course of their time in Mississippi, Pierce began to wrestle with his faith. He was dissatisfied with the Episcopalian tradition’s claim on divine origins and found himself attracted to what he perceived as the more straightforwardly absolute authority of Roman Catholicism. He resigned his parish—and his family’s financial security—in August 1835. In his letter of abjuration, he wrote: “Subordination I consider the first principle of all law... I must have some guide to lead me into truth; I must have some power to obey.”

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Cornelia struggled to follow her husband's convictions at first. Even so, she supported his decision to resign his parish and committed herself to accompanying him on his theological journey. She wrote to her sister Adeline, "I am proud to say that against all my prejudices [*sic*] and the horrors which I have nurtured for the catholic faith I am ready at once to submit to what ever my loved husband believes to be the path of duty."

Pierce appeared to genuinely believe Catholicism to be the path of duty, but he also thought it the path of efficacy. The Connellys, who were enthusiastic investors in sugar plantations, were surrounded by the hysterical rumors of slave rebellions that pervaded the South in the 1830s. His writings make clear that he saw the Catholic Church's hierarchical bent as an effective tool for pacifying the enslaved: "I saw in the Church of Rome not only an ability to conquer, as I supposed, unto God, but an ability to control effectively and to satisfy the spirits of those it conquered." Cornelia did not express her husband's enthusiasm for hierarchies, but she certainly played her part in upholding them. According to her biographer, Sister Mary Catherine Gompertz, Cornelia purchased a young enslaved woman named Sarah Goff (or Gough) "in gratitude for her conversion." She catechized and sponsored Sarah at her reception into the Catholic Church and allegedly emancipated her when the family left the United States.

Hierarchy was so central to the Connellys' conversion that even after resigning his parish, Pierce delayed his reception into Catholicism until he could travel to Rome and secure a personal audience with the pope. He had decided to become a Roman Catholic "wholly and solely on the ground of there being amongst men a living, infallible interpreter of the mind of God, with divine jurisdiction and with authority to enforce submission to it"; it was no wonder that he wanted to lay eyes on the man. Moreover, Pierce had had ambitions to a bishopric as the chairman of the Episcopal Convention of the Southwest and hoped to lay the groundwork for a future as a Catholic bishop instead.

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Cornelia may have converted on Pierce's terms, but it quickly became clear that she did so for her own reasons. In telling her conversion story, she cited the nativist attacks of the era on Catholics. To her, this violence indicated that the church was "preaching Christ crucified," as her "faithful followers are now suffering martyrdom in Asia as the early Christians once did." Moreover, once she had adopted the Catholic faith, she saw no need to wait to go to Rome for the sacraments. She was received into the church in New Orleans.

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The rest of the family was received into the church in Italy, where they stayed with the prominent English Catholic Lord Shrewsbury. The Connellys then briefly moved to Vienna and welcomed a third child, John Henry. However, Pierce's land investments suffered massive losses during the bank crisis of 1837, and the family returned to the United States to look for work. They ultimately settled alongside the Jesuits in Grand Coteau, La., where Pierce taught English and Cornelia taught music.

The family's years in Grand Coteau were incredibly difficult and spiritually formative. Cornelia's lifelong devotion to Mary as Mother of Sorrows began at the foot of her children's double grave: John Henry died in a tragic accident, while a fourth child named Mary Magdalen did not survive long after birth. Meanwhile, both Cornelia and Pierce began to go on retreat with their Jesuit neighbors.

In October 1840, Cornelia was four months pregnant with their fifth child, Frank, when her husband returned from making the Spiritual Exercises with a startling announcement. Pierce was certain of his vocation to the priesthood and, as such, expected Cornelia to take a vow of perpetual chastity. He abruptly sold the family home, tried and failed to join the Jesuits in England and set off to try his luck in Rome. He was encouraged to take Holy Orders in an Eastern Rite in the interest of keeping his family together, but he refused, perhaps in part because of the prohibition on married clergy becoming bishops.

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Ultimately, Cornelia—and the pope—agreed to a formal deed of separation, and she moved into a convent in Rome while Pierce began his seminary studies. She raised her infant son at the convent and taught English and music at the attached school, where her daughter was boarded. Pierce visited weekly and was ordained in the convent chapel in 1842. Cornelia sang in the choir at his first Mass; their daughter received her first Communion from her father. During this time, she wrote to her brother-in-law John:

it is not for nothing that I have given [Pierce] to God... we ought to look for a greater share of the divine love in proportion as we are willing to sacrifice our natural happiness A. M. D. G. [*ad majorem Dei gloriam*], and look too for even more in eternity.

Soon, Cornelia was asked to sacrifice an even greater share of her “natural happiness.” When Pierce was assigned to England, Cornelia was invited to follow him there. Bishop Nicholas Wiseman charged her and several companions with the care of a school and convent in the bustling industrial town of Derby. In 1846, it became the first house of Cornelia’s new congregation: the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. She thrived in her new role as a foundress, but she still had a superior in Bishop Wiseman, who served as her spiritual director. He quickly limited her contact with Pierce to correspondence only and directed her to send her children away to boarding school for the duration of her novitiate. While the separation of her family was devastating to Cornelia, she had no reason to think the arrangement was permanent.

In 1847, Pierce came to see Cornelia unannounced, and she refused to see him without Bishop Wiseman’s permission. Pierce had already perceived the bishop as an intruder on “his” territory but was now positively obsessed with the man’s role in Cornelia’s life. He ferociously set out to regain control over his wife.

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The month after Cornelia took perpetual vows, Pierce kidnapped the children from their schools and took them to Europe in an attempt to get her to follow. Distraught though she was, she remained faithful to her vows and stayed. His first attempt having failed, Pierce then presented himself in Rome as the co-founder of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. He submitted a “rule” for the congregation of his own devising, which would give him more control over the society and therefore over Cornelia. (She foiled his attempt, but this caused such a mess that the society’s actual rule was not approved until after Cornelia’s death.)

When Pierce moved back to England, he had lost all pretense of Catholicism and was taken in by Henry Drummond, a fanatical anti-Catholic member of Parliament. From there, Pierce launched his final, most bombastic effort to recapture his wife: He officially renounced the Catholic Church and his priesthood, began to publish virulent antipapist screeds and sued Cornelia for the “restoration of conjugal rights.”

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The case, *Connelly v. Connelly*, gained notoriety rapidly in England. Pierce won, but Cornelia won her appeal two years later. The case was dropped, but it remained in the court of public opinion, where Cornelia was made out to have abandoned her children. She never regained custody of her children and rarely saw them again. Because of this, Cornelia said that the society was “founded on a broken heart.”

Even after the saga was over, Cornelia clearly still loved Pierce and worried for his soul. She wrote notes in the margins of his anti-Catholic pamphlets, praying in one “that his eyes will be opened and his heart be touched.” To her sister, she reported that “an anonymous letter was sent saying he was advised to take a wife—If it could be without sin by his vows being dissolved I should be very glad, but could he ever be happy again?”

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Meanwhile, Cornelia threw herself into the work of her congregation, teaching everyone’s children but her own.

When the fledgling society was founded in Derby, it was specifically commissioned by Bishop Wiseman to educate the “future mothers” of the “higher-class.” Cornelia accomplished that task by offering day school for those who could pay tuition, but she devoted the majority of the nascent congregation’s resources to educating child laborers, particularly mill girls, through night and Sunday school. She sent sisters to teach poor children in London, Preston, Blackpool and even back across the ocean in Pennsylvania.

Cornelia’s 1863 *Book of Studies* outlines the progressive educational philosophy which was to guide the society’s schools. She upheld high standards in writing, arithmetic, geography, history and music, while integrating subjects that were traditionally exclusive to male students: philosophy, geology, Latin and Greek. She also replaced deportment and speaking lessons with theater, which was key to her curriculum. Religious education was prioritized above all, and Cornelia insisted that church history be taught in full. Her biographer, Sister Gompertz, recalled that “Mother Connelly had no sympathy with the timid spirit which would hide from the children the knowledge of unpalatable historic truth. Ecclesiastical History, like secular history, abounds in scandals.” She knew from experience that the hierarchy’s missteps could be weaponized to disillusion or confuse, but she preferred to use them to testify to the divine providence that sustained the church against all odds.

To reflect upon Cornelia’s life today is inevitably to lament it.

Providence sustained her until the age of 70, and it sustains her order today in over 14 countries. Her schools still teach that *Book of Studies* and add to it every year. For all Cornelia did not get to control within her own life, she now has influence over hundreds of educators and their thousands of students. For the children who were taken from her, she has helped raise countless more.

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“Why are we not all Saints?” Cornelia wrote to her brother in 1846. “Only because our hearts are not fixed in God.” For Cornelia, it really was that simple. She took on vows that oriented her toward service of God and other, first in marriage and then in religious life, and she obeyed the men who directed her in those vocations without question. It was not that she saw Pierce Connelly and Nicholas Wiseman as infallible—she often pushed back against or privately lamented their decisions. Rather, she trusted absolutely that God would use her to accomplish his will. The postulator of her cause for canonization, Paolo Molinari, S.J., wrote of her:

There was no servility or fawning about Cornelia’s obedience. It was the free act of an intelligent woman whose will was set on God’s will legitimately expressed in the Church and who was ‘ready to grind herself to powder’ to accomplish that will.

Even with heaven in mind, to reflect upon Cornelia’s life today is inevitably to lament it. It is difficult for a contemporary Catholic woman, in particular, to watch Cornelia submit over and over again to arrogant, misguided men and for that obedience to be called holy instead of pitiful. In fact, she faced such sentiments from her brother Ralph, to whom she wrote an exasperated response: “why will you not let every one follow their vocation in peace—It is very little consequence to me what any one says about me.”

That obedience is, of course, both holy and pitiful: the tragedy of Cornelia’s earthly life is not that she submitted like the church to Christ but rather that she was not loved as Christ loved the church. That tragedy is compounded by Cornelia’s inability to recognize and repent of her own subordination of the people she enslaved, with whom she did not fully share the freedom she encountered in the Gospel.

Cornelia was right, though, to trust that God would bring holiness out of her obedience, no matter how painful the circumstances. The Society of the Holy Child Jesus continues to be a testament to her conviction that her broken heart would not be the last word. It was her perseverance and the great fruit it bore in her order that led her to be declared venerable in 1992. It is these contemporary Catholic women who work for justice in her name who do not just honor her legacy but improve greatly upon it.

