

Presentation to the Chapter
6 February 1992
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Cornelia and Rome

CORNELIA AND ROME (accompanied by a booklet with maps, by three portraits displayed on an easel and by two pictures on the wall: the Spanish Steps and Fra Angelico's Annunciation).

One of the ways to think about Cornelia's life is to approach it through the word 'separation'; how for instance, as Paul put it, the word of God working on her cut like a sword between marrow and bone -- something very inner; how she grew into freedom through successive, long-pondered, choices. They were lifelong inner separatings; we could call them *fiats, forward into unknowns*.

It would probably never be possible to follow that in detail and certainly not today, but events in Rome levered it. What was finalised here, the legal separation, led her into the depths of the paschal mystery, into separatings undreamed of. That is, into the *soil* of our charism. Each stay here took her further along that path. As I talk I'll be referring to some of the places in Rome associated with Cornelia, but I will also say a little about that 'taking further'. Not much will be new to you, but you will see - I hope - that each visit reveals a different aspect of her, and that in turn confirms for us something of who we are, even now.

First I want to help you imagine ROME as it then was.

At the back of your booklet, there's a very simple sketch of ROME-THEN. Your neighbour, the Colosseum, is almost in the middle with a red ring round it. The sketch tells you -- amongst other things -- the *size* in Cornelia's day -- it was very small. Walls all round, and very little outside. You could walk across it in two hours, and most of the buildings of whatever kind were packed into the corner by the river opposite the Vatican. The rest of the space inside the walls was vineyards and gardens, and -- all round us here -- grassy ruins where cows grazed.

The Tiber had no embankments and it flooded into the crowded houses. Cholera was common. The Jews had to live in a ghetto on the river bank. There were two river ports (# 11 & 12). Streets were mostly narrow and cobbled -- unlit by night. There were hundreds of churches, all in use. Every corner had its shrine. Miraculous pictures of Our Lady, or the Aracoeli Bambino, were carried through the streets to avert plague. A priest scurrying to bless the sick, attended by a torchbearer, was a common sight.

It was picturesque but there was injustice, violence and crime. Reputedly the Papal States were the worst governed country in Europe. The masses of people were wretchedly poor while the great Roman families and some of the princes of the Church lived in vast palazzos, fantastically splendid. And, traditionally, it was they, because no state provision existed, who tried to meet the desperate needs of the poor by their personal concern, and by founding and endowing institutions.

The pope was a familiar sight in the streets. In religious processions, for instance carrying the Blessed Sacrament across the city on Corpus Christi, he walked accompanied by red-robed cardinals. En route for business or pleasure from one or other of his palaces to chancellery to basilica, he rode in a glass coach. And sometimes it took him near the Trinità up on the Pincian Hill where he got out for a walk, and talked with the mothers and nursemaids also walking there.

What is hard for us to remember is that the pope was monarch as well as pope. Rome was the capital of the united Papal States in the middle of Italy, and he was their ruler. His power was temporal as well as spiritual. I have to say something about this because it affected Cornelia.

When the Connellys arrived, the pope, as temporal ruler, was treading a dangerously tight political rope. Think of the map of Italy, a long skinny peninsula. The little Italian kingdoms and duchies north and south of him wanted a united Italy -- with a civil, democratic government; but he and his States were in the way. Both Connelly popes, Gregory XVI and Pio Nono, were unsympathetic to the democratic demands of the day. The French Revolution had created chaos in the Church. To defend it and reform affairs they clung to their temporal power over the Papal states. Also -- more relevant to our interests -- as a matter of policy, they gradually centralised church structures at the expense of collegiality. More than that, Pio Nono worked for the *declaration* of papal infallibility. Declaration, he and his party thought, would unify and strengthen the Catholic body everywhere; and incidentally increase Catholic influence in the world. During all Cornelia's visits, to say nothing of her life in England, this centralising effort created the religious climate in which she lived. Inevitably it was part of her formation as a nineteenth century Catholic. She breathed it in, especially through some of the ecclesiastics she came to know during her first visit here. The declaration was achieved only a year after her final stay, in 1870 as you know, during Vatican One.

Now: *The Cornelia of February 1836*

Here was a young wife and mother -- she was 27 -- with her husband and two children, age 3, and 10 months. She had sacrificed their home and risked the voyage for Pierce's sake, and here she was, a very recent convert, her heart wide open to all that God might offer or ask. They had lodgings in the part of Rome most patronised by foreigners and especially by artists: *Via della Croce*, near the Spanish Steps and the Trinità above, and at least once stood at their foot chatting with American acquaintances. Perhaps Merty played at the fountain. She saw the flower sellers on the steps and the artist models waiting to be hired, and she visited studios nearby.

Rome rejoiced her, even though -- as she said -- she saw its abuses. To the *artist* in her it was beautiful, splendid, full of ancient history and of precious works of art. "Seeing it won't do" she said; "it must be studied". The *convert* was moved by the faith and devotion she found in shrines and churches; taught by the course of homilies she followed at San Carlo on the Incarnation; inspired by the good and holy people whom she met, and by a new realisation of the universality of the church. For the *American* it was a European experience -- in those days not yet common; and the particular social circles in which she moved, both lay and ecclesiastical, were not only Roman but cosmopolitan. All was new to her and she reached out to life took lessons: singing, painting, French, Italian; almost certainly met the international artist world in the Caffè Greco; took Merty on drives; dined in the palazzos of interesting people; made many friends, visited the poor with one of them; and told her sister "I feel my faith, my hope, my happiness increase every day".

But there was a shadow and I think we see it in this portrait [*Portrait*]. That reproduction is based on a drawing done by one of the Colonna family during this first stay.

The shadow. When the Connellys arrived in Rome, the first thing Pierce did was to visit Cardinal Fransoni at the *Propaganda* and then Cardinal Odescalchi, the pope's vicar-general, at his palace [#13]. They discussed ordination and he was advised to remain a layman. You'll remember that at first he accepted, then changed his mind. Apparently when he had his audience, the pope left the door open for future decision. We know Cornelia's first agonised re-action:

"Is it necessary for Pierce to make this sacrifice and sacrifice me? I love my husband and my darling children. Why must I give them up?"

But a week later -- when ordination in the future was no longer an impossibility -- Pierce committed himself to the Church. Then it was with joy that Cornelia wrote home:

"Pierce has made his abjuration. Oh my dear sisters, what is all that this world can give or take away compared with the joy of feeling yourself in the true way".

So, in a matter of very great moment, she has prioritised. For the husband she loves, this is the gift she most desires -- even though it makes possible what she hopes will never happen. It is as though someone were dancing in a great space, free as a bird; is suddenly brought to a halt; and then returns to a more measured tread. There she is -- at the beginning of a long road.

Her desire and duty now is to continue to do all she can to sustain their marriage. They had arranged to move to an apartment in the *Palazzo Simonetti*, the Shrewsbury's Roman residence and Pierce goes away to England. The apartment becomes home. She nurses the children through whooping cough, prays for Merty at the shrine of Aloysius in *Sant' Ignacio* just round the corner; writes encouraging letters to Pierce when he is depressed; lends books and patterns to friends; and for herself arranges to have spiritual direction from the rector of the *Propaganda*. The future is unknown and it is now that she tells her sister one must be willing to be led like a little child. When Pierce returns, the bonds between them are strengthened by the conception of a third child. For seven months they lead a stimulating and happy life in Rome, John Henry is born in Vienna, and before they leave Europe a few months later, a letter from a Roman friend describes the family as "a true glory of our Holy Church".

For us in the Cornelia of this first visit there is already much that inspires our lives in the Society: the love of life; the readiness to risk; the serious cultivation of personal gifts, the openness to all that is human and true and beautiful; the willingness to pursue the ordinary round, nurturing those close to you; the capacity to do what you can and trust the rest to God; the deep sure joy of belonging in the Church -- "am I not one of its children without a wish that is not connected with it?", she wrote.

But the brink of an unwanted path has opened before her. Not certainly there, but an unforgettable possibility. A path into the paschal mystery, one might say. She is still the enthusiastic woman, one whose vision of God at work in all things is greatly enriched by her Roman experience; still the responsive artist; still the hopeful loving wife and mother. Not less sure of the goodness of God; but more sober, I think. There is a thoughtfulness in that portrait.

They took back with them to America a reproduction of Fra Angelico's Annunciation. what had it come to mean to her? What place was this mystery to play in her life? -- in our lives?

The second stay in Rome, 1843, the time of the legal separation. She is 34. It is 6½ years since the first stay in Rome. Who is Cornelia now? a woman on the brink of immense loss. Pierce has asked the pope for ordination, and the pope has to consult her before making his decision. They arrive in Advent -- Ady, the 3 year old Frank, a nurse, and Pierce's charge, young Robert Berkeley. So the family, as it still is for these last 4 months, settle into an apartment. There are old friends to meet and entertain who know nothing of why they have come.

The special places to look out for are the two palazzos, the *Doria Pamphili* and the *Borghese*; and of course the Trinità. If you are ever free in the morning, the Doria is worth a visit because they show the state rooms. Cornelia and Pierce knew the Dorias and during this stay they came here visiting the family and for carnival receptions. The Borghese you can't get into, but it is worth walking round the outside just to see its vastness. Here they were invited even more often and had the Separation been delayed Cornelia was to live there pro tem with the family.

Here the Deed of Separation would be signed. The building is no longer in existence, but on the table outside is a picture which shows it. Place yourself there. Let imagination take over for a moment. Its windows overlook the riverport of Ripetta and across to fields on the other side of the Tiber. Recall the momentous events of the next 4 months: the audience with Gregory XVI -- we know nothing of it except the consequences; the time of waiting for his decision, with prolonged carnival festivities, and then Lent to be lived through; her retreat at the Trinità whilst Pierce prepares the text of his petition; the pope's decision -- Connelly may be ordained when his wife has made a vow of chastity; the signing of the deed of Separation on Passion Sunday. "Actions not words" she had written in her retreat notes -- some of them are on the table outside. A Fiat is made -- "I am willing". Holy Week passes and in Easter Week she goes to the Trinità. Four heavy months.

[PORTRAIT] Here is a portrait of her there, photographed by Maria. It was painted for her children, and Teresa Hanson treasured it for posterity.

At the Trinità

No-one knows the whereabouts on the Trinità property of the house which was home for her there. Ady was in the boarding school, Frank and his nurse lived with her, and Pierce visited once a week. But you can go through the *convent door* at the top of the steps, into a courtyard Cornelia knew, up stairs she trod and into the upper indoor cloister where she helped with the fresco of the young Our Lady. In the *church*, Pierce was ordained and offered his first mass, Cornelia sang in the choir and Ady made her First Communion.

Let me remind you of the facts of the next two years:

The understanding when she arrives is that she will be a laywoman there for perhaps four years when Frank will go away to school; and then, as agreed with Pierce, she will take vows in the Society of the Sacred Heart. Meanwhile he will study for the priesthood and then become a Jesuit and she will live the religious life as best she can: all that was agreed between them. What in fact happens?

1. Pierce visits regularly. He changes his mind about being a Jesuit which disturbs her deeply. And she is finding that life in the convent conflicts with being a mother.

2. After eight or nine suffering months Grassi becomes her director. She tells Mother Barat that her religious vocation is not to the Society of the Sacred Heart, but is allowed to stay on until her way is clear. She helps create the fresco *Mater Admirabilis* in which the young Mary is so thoughtful as she spins the thread of life through her fingers. The picture is important I think. In it a lily stands, symbol of chastity, and originally the fresco was called *Madonna of the Lily*.

3. When the time for the ordination is in sight, her vow of chastity will be due. Fearing for Pierce, apparently, she offers to return to family life. He refuses.

4. About to make the vow of chastity, she is pressed by some to take the other vows of religion as well but the Cardinal Vicar says there is no obligation at all of this kind; her first duty is to care for her children. "My heart palpitates with joy" she said. So she makes the vow, to free Pierce for ordination. In the church of the Trinità he is ordained and offers his first mass. She rejoices that he is a priest.

A definitive turning point in her life has been reached-at last. And a current of joy re-enters her life.

Encouraged by Grassi she prepares for an uncloistered religious life. It would allow her to keep her children with her (as had two other American mothers whom Grassi knew); and it would also meet the wants of the age through the works of spiritual mercy. A title comes to her in prayer. A sketch of a Rule is put together. Plans to begin in Boston fall through. The Pope tells her to begin in England instead; she obeys. And when she leaves the Trinità it is as she came -- a mother with her children and their nurse.

She has been treading a paschal path: separation provisionally agreed in Via Ripetta, and then, at the Trinità, separatings in the heart -- expectations reversed; of what life there would be like; the solemn undertaking to be a Jesuit ignored by Pierce; doubts about him; her future unclear; the generous offer to him to sacrifice her own desire to be a religious rejected; and finally separation made irrevocable. Out of all of which came life. If Grand Coteau was seedtime, Rome was birth time to the Society. Through a labour of rising pain during the two years at the Trinità, she has arrived at something not thought of till now, the creation -- as she said -- of 'something more for God'. Or, put another way, through agony, passion and death, -- or yet another way, through discerning, accepting and obeying -- God has brought forth new life in her, a new way of religious life. We can try to see how that came about.

Imagine her day by day at the Trinità. The thought of God's compassion is presumably often before her because she lives and prays with the nuns of the Sacred Heart. But day after day the three-year-old Frank is with her, reminding her of John Henry and those others, calling forth her own practical, maternal love, that cannot be denied. Meanwhile, in statues, books, pictures, scripture she sees the Holy Child in the arms of his mother. Long ago she had quoted in her notebook "I will have compassion on this people". Perhaps now personal experience eventually shows her God's compassion for herself and all humankind, not primarily in the Sacred Heart but in the Mother and Child, in the Incarnation. She 'conceives' the Society. It is her God-prompted response. How did she dream of it? Maybe as a union of hearts and minds in religion, where this merciful love of God's would be given flesh, in ordinary, *family-like, human* circumstances.

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There were to be *two more visits to Rome, 1854 and 1869*, both of them as a religious, accompanied not by her children but by SHCJ. In 1854 she came for the first time, age 45, on behalf of her second family for God, the Society. And for this too, as for the other, she was already a mother bearing sorrows. By this date, very probably, she had painted Our Lady of Sorrows for the St. Leonards community -- Mary left alone at the foot of the empty cross. Here is Maria's photograph of the original [CHANGE PORTRAITS].

In 1854, who is the Cornelia we meet?

She has lost all her children of that first family: two are buried in Grand Coteau; three were abducted by their father -- Merty, far from her, has just died and to the other two she has no access even by letter. Now her second family for God is imperilled. In Rome her husband has posed as founder. In England he has taken her to court and made her name a byword. She can no longer count on Wiseman for support in either place; and he and Grant want Cardinal Frasoni, the Prefect of Propaganda, to prevent her from going back. Mary alone at the foot of the cross.

If you go near the Propaganda, remember that here she came to talk with her aging friend, the cardinal, about the Society and her troubles. He turned a deaf ear to the request of Wiseman and Grant. The Rule approval was delayed for ten years but that was no fault of his and she was sent

back with encouraging words. He recognised her as founder and Grant was urged to do all he could "for the good of this devout Society."

Before that however, she and the two sisters with her had to linger in Rome for more than three months, not knowing what wheels were turning, and occupying themselves as best they might. Three months of suspense and prayer. She saw Gregory XVI's successor, Pio Nono, on several occasions, and spent time househunting because she wanted a Holy Child community here. When you are in the Gesù, remember that they stayed in the piazza just outside, on the corner near the entrance to Ignatius' rooms. She must often have prayed in the church, and the general, Fr. Beckx, befriended her. And it was on this visit, keeping herself creatively occupied in the midst of the waiting, that she began to paint a triptych for behind the altar at St. Leonards, and began with Ignatius.

Throughout, anxiety for the Society was her daily companion -- whether she would ever get back, whether it would survive, concern for the sisters committed to it and for the apostolates they conducted. Yet the Rule she brought with her, in paragraphs written only *just* before she came, calls us to confidence in the treasures of God's boundless mercy; urges us to run with ardour, to allow ourselves (in the French version) to be "flung forward from the heart of love". And the letter she writes to the sisters at home admits the heaviness of life, but even so we are to go on loving. What is this loving?

Cornelia's devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows is something we have lost sight of. Perhaps we are now being called to rediscover it in a new way -- I don't mean having statues around, but in our hearts. Mary at Christ's death bore in her arms the victim of the world's hate and injustice. Cornelia in her arms bore her two stricken families. This was the love that suffers *with the other*, compassion. We too are now called to this, more than ever before, given the world's violence and greed. We too -- figuratively -- hold victims in our arms. When, three years later, Cornelia told us in a letter that cooperation with Christ's passion is the one essential, it surely signifies for us now, cooperation with Christ's com-passion.

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Fifteen years later, 1869, Cornelia returned to Rome. She is 60. [Change Portraits]

She brought with her -- at last with Grant's approval -- the version of the Rule which she hoped would be final. Society affairs in England were such that for survival Rome's official approbation had to be won. She came expecting that what she brought needed little to be done to it, and found she was wrong. For nearly three months she and her two companions "worked very hard", she said, "in doing and *undoing*" parts of it, and sometimes having to accept what they did not want. So if you climb the steps to the church on Aracoeli, think of them going up day after day to the monastery there for two months -- (with a difference. Then it so hot that they came out in heat spots!) As to the work itself, a Franciscan was appointed to direct them. Discussions have to be imagined since no records exist. But one point can be made.

Earlier I referred to the nineteenth century Church's policy of centralising its authority. The Franciscan consultor gives us a fleeting glimpse of a Cornelia unwillingly caught in this. It also encourages me to believe that in terms of charism and government -- which are inseparable -- we have moved since the Special General Chapter in 1967 in a direction which Cornelia would understand, i.e. into something more participative and collegial. All work being finished, he told Cornelia that the "rules are now perfect" and his final report to Propaganda recommended approbation. But incidentally, he remarked in it that the government of the Society would have

been weakened had her desire to reduce the superior general's authority been acceded to. I presume he meant (given church policy then) that government could be good only if every aspect of religious life, down to local detail, was ultimately subject to a superior general's decision. Reputable scholarship of to-day establishes that everywhere in the Church at that date, authority and obedience were being elevated to the detriment of collegial responsibility; and also that officials in Rome saw to it that this pattern was built into new constitutions. Which included us.

Nevertheless, in spite of having to give way in several other matters as well -- a paragraph on enclosure, for instance -- this visit was a time of joy for Cornelia. She returned to England confident that approbation was at last -- after 23 years of striving -- assured. It would authenticate the Society's way of life in the Church, (I am using her words on an earlier occasion); be a bulwark against scandal and opposition. It would provide the means to maintain what she described as "a right spirit in those God has given us." It would ensure stability for "the work of God and the good of souls". We of course know what she did not, that this version of the Rule was to be the beginning of the greatest crisis of her religious life; but when she *came* to Rome in May 1869, the life of her second family for God was at stake, and by July there was joy instead, that all was well.

And it is from this visit we see how, in spite of difficulties about the Rule, she still loved Rome and what it stood for. "What a blessed place", she called it. For her and for her contemporaries, it was not only the Eternal City but also the *Holy* city. The pope, by right of his office, was the *holy* father, the representative of Christ himself upon earth, the one above all others to be revered and obeyed. Their audience with him was something she could "remember for ever". He turned to her and assured her that the Rule was being dealt with; and in language which sounds extravagant to us, she wrote that "As he walked away it was like a vision of a little bit of heaven gradually disappearing".

The city was filled with what she saw as the "magnificent monuments of the Roman faith...splendid churches with precious relics and crypts and paintings", she said, and she and her two companions often went visiting. One church I feel sure she returned to was Sant Ignacio, where in 1836 she had often prayed for the son who since died, Merty. Over its altar are the words which Ignatius heard in the vision at La Storta: "In Rome I will be good to you". Imagine the faith and hope, given all the opposition and injustice she had endured at the hands of Church officials, with which she will have read those words: "In Rome I will be good to you". And her Society *did* eventually survive. And here are you in Rome, with the Society in *your hands*. So I would like to conclude with a special word from Cornelia to the chapter.

She believed the Society was God's work, not hers; but she cooperated in the style of Mary, the woman who listened, questioned, pondered, accepted, acted -- and *thereby* gave life. Cornelia's life was a discerning one. She lived, it seems to me, day by day and in great things and little, from within the mystery of the Annunciation. "Has my soul been a listening soul? she says. I believe that *this and the obeying in which it issued*, is fundamental in our charism. Cornelia moved from annunciation to annunciation, one might say; and in *that* way little by little she did what you have come here to do, she gave the Society life.