

## SOME EASTER REFLECTIONS ON CORNELIA

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It was Easter Friday when Cornelia died. An eyewitness described how, the day before, she had struck her own hand three times repeating each time, "In this flesh I shall see my God." The Jerusalem Bible has it: "After my awakening he will set me close to him and from my flesh I shall look on God." (Job 19:26). Though it was Friday, Cornelia was in Easter week; like Job, she was blighted in the flesh, but she believed that in the same flesh she would awaken in glory. She died as she had lived bearing witness to the pivotal mystery of the resurrection.

As I look back on her life from the vantage point of her death, I have in my mind an image of Cornelia rising again and again -- through an endless chain of death-dealing situations and events. It is as if she had an overabundance of that spirit "who raised Jesus from the dead." I like to think that the "awakening" of the Job passage happened for Cornelia in the midst of life and that the sight of God which she caught set her so close to him that no force could again hold her in its death-grip.

We have become so accustomed to Cornelia's story that we tend to extract the essence of this quality or that, this grace or that virtue, from the raw material of her life. I find it more and more rewarding to enter the human predicament she grappled with because it is there that grace took root. It is out of the ground of her human experience that she keeps rising up. The more I meet her there, in her struggle, the greater the sense of kinship, the deeper the admiration I feel.

In this context, I have been pondering a bit the strange evolution of Cornelia's vocation.

We know that even before his reception into the Catholic Church Pierce entertained the thought of the priesthood. In the first instance Cornelia was relieved that their marriage made the priesthood impossible. When he persisted and raised the possibility of separation, Cornelia took fright. To follow his own star, Pierce had to labor to bring his wife to the conviction that God's will was that she should sacrifice herself to his high calling. However much a woman might love and admire her husband, however united in spirit she might be with him, such an appeal would normally evoke a sense of personal rejection, anger at being used and manipulated in the name of God, contempt for such transparent selfishness, outrage on behalf of children placed in jeopardy. Despite Pierce's protests of affection, and in low moments, Cornelia would at least have felt that she had lost her attraction for him, that she and the children mattered less and less in his life, that she was expendable, and that there was little in life to hope for. It does not do her credit to imagine that she would have been immune to such dark emotions.

At this stage, I see Cornelia shadowing Pierce, in a sense trailing sorrowfully behind him, unsure of the authenticity of his call but loyally moving with him in the same direction he was moving. At a certain point and with a huge, graced effort of will, she must have caught up with him to stand by his side and make a free gift of him to God. It is my guess that in the generosity of this moment, Cornelia caught fire from Pierce. For a while they advanced together toward a common goal, but Cornelia's vocation had become her own reality and it began to carry its own compulsions. She took off, so to speak, on that ascent to God which carried her up and out of Pierce's field of experience. Pierce could relish being followed and shadowed by Cornelia, but to be overshadowed and outdistanced by her was intolerable. In the end his light faltered and sputtered out pathetically.

From playing a supporting role in Pierce's story, Cornelia was swiftly transformed into the principal of the drama. In liberation terms, her life and destiny were no longer to be conditioned and determined by human conventions. She was released from the indignity of a second-hand destiny by freely meeting the God who spoke to her through Pierce's life. It was God's word to her through Pierce, not his word to Pierce, that the Church in the end upheld and that was spoken to endure.

We have very little data, only hints, by which to chart Cornelia's progress from resistance to joy as she embraced her vocation. That she made such a journey is the key to her mystery. At some point along the way there happened for her the kind of awakening which is both death and resurrection. Something in her leaped up through the barrier of death into abundant life.

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