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A Woman for Our Times: How Marriage and Motherhood Shaped Cornelia Connelly's Religious Life

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A WOMAN FOR OUR TIMES:
HOW MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD SHAPED CORNELIA CONNELLY'S RELIGIOUS LIFE

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Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church experienced an unprecedented increase in the number of women entering religious life. The central location for this significant growth was in France, where no fewer than "four hundred congregations and orders [were] newly founded or re-founded (after Revolutionary abolition in 1792) between 1800 and 1880 within which some 200,000 women became sisters."[1] According to historian Susan O'Brien, many who joined religious life were responding to "the anti-Christian dimension of the [French] Revolution and to the social dynamics of the new post-Revolutionary century."[2] Most of these women religious served in apostolic or active congregations, where they staffed schools, hospitals, and orphanages. O'Brien argued that the "real innovation in these post-revolutionary congregations" was that "for the first time, women religious were not prevented from devising forms of organization and authority which enabled them to operate nationally and internationally."[3] Vesting authority in a single Superior General, who answered directly to Rome, enabled congregations to expand into new dioceses locally and internationally. However, congregations were still accountable to the bishops of their dioceses.

One country that benefited enormously from the growth of apostolic women's congregations was Great Britain. O'Brien noted that "[b]etween 1840 and 1900 Roman Catholic convents were built all over England. Fewer than 20 in 1840, the number rose to more than 500 by 1900."[4] She went on to say that "The pace of growth . . . mirrored the changing status of

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[1] Susan O'Brien, "French Nuns in Nineteenth-Century England," *Past & Present*, no. 154 (February 1997): 142, http://www.jstor.org/stable/651119 (accessed June 13, 2022).

[2] Ibid., 143.

[3] Ibid., 144.

[4] Ibid., 154.

Catholicism" in England.[5] Beginning in the late eighteenth century, a variety of factors caused a renewal of Catholicism in nineteenth-century England. First, a series of Catholic Relief Acts (1778 and 1791) allowed Catholics to own property and practice their religion freely, and the Emancipation Act of 1829 permitted Catholics to hold public office. These laws enabled the Catholic "community" to evolve in Great Britain, eventually becoming a "denomination" or "church." The Church hierarchy was restored in 1850, and Catholic leaders built an infrastructure of "dioceses, seminaries, new parishes, schools, and Catholic Institutions."[6]

Additionally, the country saw a dramatic increase in the number of conversions to Catholicism due to the Oxford movement. A group of Anglican theologians from the University of Oxford, notably John Henry Newman, believed that the "Church of England was an integral part of the Church Catholic that had been instituted by Christ, guided through time by the Holy Spirit, and directed by the apostles."[7] These churchmen believed in restoring the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church to the Anglican faith, but a number of them eventually converted to Catholicism. The Catholic population also increased as the number of Irish immigrants surged in England. The Act of Union in 1801 joined Ireland to the United Kingdom, and "a minority of about 129,000 swelled overnight . . . to about six million, too great a proportion of Britain's 15 million to go unnoticed."[8] After the Union, the Irish population in

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 148.

[7] Peter Benedict Nockles and Steward J. Brown, *The Oxford Movement: Europe and the Wider World 1830-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), I, https://search-ebscohost-com.dbproxy.lasalle.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=458648&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed May 25, 2022).

[8] Radegunde Flaxman, *A Woman Styled Bold: The Life of Cornelia Connelly 1809–1879* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991), 139.

Great Britain continued to grow due to economic upheaval caused by the Great Famine. Many Irish Catholics who moved to industrial cities in England, such as Liverpool, struggled with poverty and isolation.

Some English Catholic leaders began to try to find ways to meet the material and spiritual needs of the growing number of Catholics in their country. Prominent established Catholics, such as John Talbot, known as the Earl of Shrewsbury, and Bishop Nicholas Wiseman, assistant Vicar Apostolic of the Central District (Catholic sections of England similar to dioceses), were concerned about providing support for recent converts. This was especially the case for women, who were at risk of losing their entire livelihoods. Levels of animosity toward Catholics in Protestant-dominant England were so high that women converts in particular could be disowned and lose the protection of their families.

Bishop Wiseman believed that a congregation of women religious could be formed to minister to converts who needed material or spiritual help.[9] Given the large increase of converts to Catholicism in England, the prospect of ministering to them seemed like a priority. In order for this plan to be implemented, however, the question of congregational leadership had to be resolved. As Father James Walsh, S.J., explained in his article, "Why an American Foundress for England in 1846?," there were "as yet no outstanding women amongst the Anglican Converts, while amongst the old Catholics there was 'an almost complete absence of prominent laywomen.'"[10] If the Catholic leaders in England were looking for a suitable woman to administer a community of converts, they needed to look outside the country.

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[9] James Walsh, S.J., "Why an American Foundress for England in 1846?" *The Pylon* 23, no.3 (Winter 1961–62): 4, in the Cornelia Connelly Digital Library Resource, https://corneliaconnellylibrary.org/library-materials/texts/PW61-62/2-6.pdf (accessed May 26, 2022).

[10] Ibid, 5.

As fate would have it, Lord Shrewsbury was close friends with an American couple who had recently entered the Catholic Church: Pierce and Cornelia Connelly. The Connellys were residing in Rome because Pierce, a former Episcopalian priest, had decided to pursue ordination in the Catholic Church. Cornelia was also discerning a call to religious life but needed to find a situation suitable for herself and her children. After Pierce's ordination, Cornelia was prepared to move back to the United States and form a religious congregation there. She knew there was also a need for women religious to serve the growing number of Catholic immigrants in her home country. Her spiritual advisor, Fr. Giovanni Grassi, S.J., "was in communication with Bishop [Benedict] Fenwick of Boston before the end of 1845 about the possibility of Cornelia's making her first foundation in that diocese."[11]

Lord Shrewsbury, however, believed Cornelia was the perfect candidate to form an English congregation, and Wiseman recognized her as eminently qualified to lead a community of female converts. Grassi ultimately convinced her that England would be a better place to begin her ministry than America. Pierce would be nearby as the assistant chaplain at Lord Talbot's estate, and would allow for co-parenting the children. Cornelia wrote to her brother, "After remaining then for nearly a year longer [in Rome] and reflecting over the wants of the day and the means of spiritual Mercy to be exercised my Rev Father Director decided upon my coming to England to form an order."[12] Pope Gregory XVI had also given his verbal sanction to the plan and Cornelia did not want to go against his wishes.[13]

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[11] Ibid.

[12] Cornelia Connelly to Ralph Peacock, September 12, 1846, quoted in Lorna Bowman, "Cornelia Connelly Educator: Her Charisma and its Institutionalization" (Ph.D. diss., Teachers College, Colombia University, 1984), 63, ProQuest One Academic, https://dbproxy.lasalle.edu:443/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/cornelia-connelly-educator-her-charisma/docview/303287034/se-2?accountid=11999 (accessed May 26, 2022).

[13] Flaxman, 106.

Cornelia initially envisioned a congregation devoted to the spiritual works of mercy, though she did not specify which ones; however, before she left Rome she had drafted a rule primarily focused on education. Lorna Bowman observed this shift: "It is not possible to trace the exact processes in Cornelia's thought from her original vision of founding a congregation for 'all spiritual works of mercy' to the choice of education as a means of effecting that service,"[14] and suggested that "perhaps an awareness of her own gifts or training influenced her. . . There was also the expressed need for better educational provision for the Catholic women of England conveyed to her by Lord Shrewsbury."[15] Once Cornelia arrived in England, she soon realized that the need to educate young women far outweighed the need to minister to converts. Walsh remarked on this changing dynamic: "The wants of Catholic England, envisaged by Wiseman and his followers in 1846, was destined to change their shape. The spate of conversions soon became a trickle, and Wiseman's plan for a Congregation of converts, a mere memory."[16] Wiseman recognized that education for Catholic girls and women was at a critical juncture, and he fully supported the purpose of the new congregation, known as the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ).

The Evolution of a Founder

Cornelia Connelly's story is a unique addition to women's religious history in the Catholic Church. She was not a missionary who established a community in the United States, but an American who founded a congregation in Western Europe. She did, in fact, gain her

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[14] Bowman, 68.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Walsh, 6.

experience of running a congregation from the French Society of the Sacred Heart and she brought this knowledge to the burgeoning Catholic community in Great Britain. Most importantly, Cornelia Connelly responded to the need to provide quality education for poor and middle-class girls in Victorian England. She established several educational foundations throughout her lifetime in England, France, and the United States. She is lauded for developing a Catholic educational philosophy to suit the needs of the individual, no matter their class or station in life.[17] Cornelia also opened the first Catholic teacher training school in England, and the Society of the Holy Child Jesus created similar schools in America, such as Rosemont College in Pennsylvania. In the twentieth century, the Society's missions extended to West Africa and South America, and sisters continue to serve in vital ministries to the present day.

Not long after Cornelia Connelly died in 1879, a few sisters began to collect her letters and papers for posterity. Maria Joseph Buckle was the first member of the Society to write a biography of Cornelia, although it remained unpublished. Buckle was a contemporary of Cornelia who also assembled and edited a wide variety of her primary source material, which evolved into an eight-volume work. Her source material became the foundation on which Cornelia's other biographers would base their information. Buckle and Cornelia's pre-Vatican II biographers shaped her image to fit the degree of perfection they perceived necessary for a Reverend Mother Foundress. Their main object was to create a saintly and idealized figure designed to preserve the Society's charism and Cornelia's own status as a revered religious leader. Her biographers, almost all British and members of the Society, minimized aspects of Cornelia's personality that were deemed questionable or distasteful to convent culture or Victorian Society. They highlighted aspects of her personality and behavior, such as humility

[17] See Roseanne McDougall, *Cornelia Connelly's Innovations in Female Education, 1846–1864: Revolutionizing the School Curriculum for Girls* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

and obedience, which were necessary components of a nun's life. The problem with depicting Cornelia in this manner was that it sanitized the more complicated aspects of her life and precluded any attempt at a more authentic interpretation. The motivations of each biographer obscured Cornelia's genuine personality and intentions. For example, the early biographers viewed holiness as a "'higher level,' a separate state of perfection attained through suffering and sacrifice."[18] They often pointed to Cornelia's ability to rise above the frequent trials in her life as a sign of achieving this so-called perfected state. Cornelia, for her part, viewed suffering as a way of becoming closer to God, but not in the sense of elevating her personal holiness.

Although Cornelia's early biographies provided essential information about her life and times, Vatican II called for re-examinations of religious orders' founders, including "their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time."[19] By the 1960s, more volumes of Cornelia's writings had been collected and assembled, which benefited her post-Vatican II biographers. Notably, Elizabeth Mary Strub, SHCJ, was the first interpreter to adopt a more innovative approach in developing significant themes in Cornelia's life. Strub composed the *Informatio*, the biographical portion of the documentation submitted for Cornelia's canonization. The primary requirement for canonization is proof that the candidate demonstrated "heroic virtue" in their lifetime. In line with Vatican II teaching, Strub believed that holiness was not attained by reaching a higher or otherworldly level of perfection. Instead, it should be a continual work-in-progress reflected in ordinary events of the potential saint's life. Strub argued that Cornelia demonstrated consistent growth in holiness through personal and public events in her daily life.

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[18] Judith Lancaster, *Cornelia Connelly and Her Interpreters* (Oxford: Way Books, 2004), 50.

[19] Pope Paul VI, *Perfectae Caritatis: Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life* (October 28, 1965), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html (accessed May 26, 2022).

However, Strub was still bound to follow the formula for the canonization process, so she had to adhere to the prescribed categories for describing a candidate's holiness.

Like Strub, Radegunde Flaxman's biography, *A Woman Styled Bold*, published in 1991, took a different approach by emphasizing the "dynamism and independence" evident in Cornelia's personality.[20] Flaxman's biography is the most comprehensive to date in her presentation of the social, religious, and political climates of antebellum America and Victorian England. The focus is more on Cornelia's public world and less on her interior development. Flaxman, however, fell into similar patterns as the previous biographers, and lauded her strengths while minimizing her faults.

Almost thirty years have passed since a biography of Cornelia has been published, and a new approach is called for to suit the needs of a twenty-first century readership. In this dissertation, I intend to construct a more authentic interpretation of her life more palatable to modern Christian women. Judith Lancaster observed, "[Cornelia's] sense of self and self-representation, disentangled from her living of gender roles and from our own preconceptions of 'the nun,' would be of real interest to women today."[21] My goal is to uncover the more human, realistic Cornelia in line with Elizabeth Strub's definition of finding holiness in everyday life experiences. Even with her imperfections, Cornelia strove to overcome extraordinary difficulties and setbacks to pursue her vocation in life. The objective is to demonstrate that she is a role model for contemporary Catholic women, lay and religious, striving to live a holy life.

Motherhood and Religious Life

[20] Lancaster, 297.

[21] Ibid., 301.

In this dissertation, I examine Cornelia's evolution as a wife and mother and how her experiences shaped her religious life as the founder of a Catholic congregation of nuns. Cornelia was one of a small group of American women who were wives and mothers before entering religious congregations; despite their small numbers, widows and mothers had often played a role in founding religious communities. Joseph Mannard chronicled widows' significant contribution to women's religious life in nineteenth-century America, noting that "Two of the most important new communities of women religious organized in the early 17th century featured widows as co-founders—the Daughters of Charity founded in 1609 by Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, and the Sisters of the Visitation, organized in 1610 by Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal."[22] Mannard explained that these women had more life experience than the "typical convent aspirant" so "they frequently brought with them talents and skills that a religious order could readily put to use."[23] For example, in the founding years of the Georgetown Convent of the Visitation, widows played a significant role in establishing the congregation. In the "first two decades (1799-1819), ten of the 60 women (17 percent) who joined Georgetown were widows. Five of these women assumed leadership positions in the religious community."[24]

A few of the women who embraced religious life in the nineteenth-century United States were also mothers of young children who faced challenging decisions in raising their families. Two women who shared similar circumstances with Cornelia, for instance, were Jerusha Barber, of the Visitation Sisters, and Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, founder of the Sisters of Charity of St.

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[22] Joseph Mannard, "Widows in Convents of the Early Republic: The Archdiocese of Baltimore, 1790-1860," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 26, no.2 (April 2008): 118, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25156669 (May 27, 2022).

[23] Mannard, 120.

[24] Ibid., 123.

Joseph. Jerusha Barber married an Episcopal priest, Virgil Barber, and they had five children. Barber and her husband converted to Catholicism, and Virgil Barber resigned from a prestigious position as principal of the Episcopal Academy in Fairfield, New York. The Barbers moved to New York City, where they became friends with Father Benedict Fenwick, S.J., the apostolic administrator of the Diocese of New York, who later became the President of Georgetown College and the Bishop of the Diocese of Boston. When Fenwick was appointed to Georgetown, he wrote to Virgil Barber and asked him about his plans for the future. Virgil answered that "[w]ere it not for his wife and children he would enter the ministry, feeling a decided call thereto."[25] When Jerusha learned this, she became upset that she could be blocking God's plans for her husband. At first Virgil did not seriously entertain the prospect of becoming a priest and tried to reassure Jerusha that "God did not require such a thing of them and that she must not permit it to distress her."[26] Nevertheless, they both "agonized" over the next several months about what God was calling both of them to do.[27] Eventually, they decided to move to Georgetown, where Virgil would apply to enter the Society of Jesus. At this time the Barbers' children were eight, seven, five, three, and ten months. Jerusha was allowed to enter the Georgetown Visitation Convent with three of her children; her son Samuel entered Georgetown College with his father; the youngest, Josephine, stayed with Fenwick's mother. Jerusha, who became Mother Mary Augustine after joining the Sisters of the Visitation, experienced difficulties during her novitiate and afterward related to her children's care. When she entered the

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[25] Louis DeGoesbriand, *Catholic Memoirs of Vermont and New Hampshire* (Burlington,: Press of R.S. Styles, 1886), 90, Princeton Theological Seminary, Theological Commons, https://commons.ptsem.edu/id/catholicmemoirso00dego (May 26, 2022).

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

convent, she had no idea that the congregation lived in extreme poverty. Apparently, there was a misunderstanding about who would provide for the children who lived with Jerusha:

> The charge was taken with a full expectation of remuneration. I embraced the supposed free bounty as a blessing sent from heaven through the channel of the holy church, considering it to be deliberately conferred upon us by these her chose children. But the mystery is at length solved. Providence has withdrawn the veil, and I behold myself and family feeding on the bread of dependence, necessarily continued because ignorantly and involuntarily commenced.[28]

Jerusha thought that the Georgetown congregation had agreed to support the family, but the nuns believed they would be financially compensated. There also seemed to be some assumption that the congregation would receive support from the Jesuits, since Virgil Barber had joined that order. Even though most of the Georgetown congregation did not resent the children's presence, some in the community still felt they should not be there. Jerusha did all she could to ease the congregation's obligation to her children. As her daughter Josephine recalled,

> We were necessarily poorly clad; and she had told me that many a time she has sat up half the night patching the children's clothes (for she at this time had charge of the school)… and that on cold winter mornings when the girls were going to Mass, she used frequently to take down from the window an old baize curtain to throw about Abey's or Susan's shoulders, they having no shawl or cloak.[29]

Jerusha maintained that the deprivations the children faced "were owing to the poverty of the house, and not to any unkindness on the part of the charitable sisters."[30] She recalled the difficulties in attending to her children and fulfilling her duties as a sister: "Many times, when you four, as well as the other pupils, were quite ill, I had to sit up with you, secretly all night, and resume my usual classes and duties next day."[31] Jerusha struggled with her responsibilities as a

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[28] Ibid., 94–95.

[29] Ibid. Sr. Josephine referred to herself and her siblings interchangeably as "them" and "we."

[30] Ibid., 97.

sister and as a mother. To some extent, both she and her children paid a price for being allowed to stay together.

All five of Jerusha's children entered religious congregations when they were old enough. Whether they went voluntarily is not clear from the writing in Josephine's memoir: "When Bishop Fenwick and my father were in Georgetown, they made arrangements for Mary's reception at the Ursuline Convent, Boston, and Abey's at Quebec, Canada."[32] Their arrival at these convents was in 1826, when Mary was sixteen and Abey was fifteen. Even though they were young, there is no evidence to suggest that any of the siblings regretted their life as women religious. Letters to their mother and each other indicate that they were satisfied with their placements.[33]

Jerusha Barber flourished as a Visitation Sister, even with her children in tow. Mannard noted that she was "[a]n accomplished instructor in the natural sciences who had conducted her own school before embracing the celibate life" and "served Georgetown as Mistress of Pensioners, meaning she had charge of the academy borders."[34] Along with Georgetown's spiritual director, Rev. Joseph de Clorivière, S.J., she "thoroughly revised the academy's curriculum and implemented teacher training classes for novices and younger sisters, moves that launched the public reputation of Georgetown Academy in the 1820s."[35] Lastly, "Barber's pedagogical and organizational skills were so valued by the order that in 1836 Georgetown 'lent' her to the Visitation convent in Kaskaskia, Illinois, when the fledgling colony needed

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., 98.

[33] See DeGoesbriand.

[34] Mannard, 124.

[35] Ibid.

administrative help in their academy. Following that assignment, Barber served as Assistant Superior to the group of five nuns that established a Visitation House in St. Louis."[36] Jerusha managed to keep her children by her side, despite challenging circumstances. As a mother, she excelled in leadership roles in a religious community. Despite their hardships, her children accepted their situation and remained close to their mother. After their father, Virgil, was ordained, he served the Diocese of New England and often went on mission trips to Canada. He stayed in contact with Jerusha and his children through letters and occasional visits, though he offered no financial support.[37]

Cornelia Connelly and Jerusha Barber share much in common with another prominent American Catholic: St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, founder of the Sisters of Charity. All three were converts from the Episcopalian faith to the Catholic Church. All three were married and bore five children each. However, unlike Connelly and Barber, Mother Seton's journey to Catholicism did not occur until after her young husband died of tuberculosis. On the other hand, Cornelia's evolved as part of her husband's decision to study Catholicism and eventually convert. When Cornelia entered religious life, she was under some pressure from her husband to agree to a life of celibacy so he could become a priest.

Like Connelly and Barber, Mother Seton needed to provide a livelihood for her children. Seton's Catholic friends were very generous, and Archbishop John Carroll of Baltimore even offered to assist with her sons' education. When she was invited to open a school in Baltimore, her children came with her, and their well-being was always foremost on her mind. The

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[36] Ibid.

[37] DeGoesbriand.

arrangement worked extremely well as her daughters stayed at the school and her sons attended St. Mary's College.[38]

Seton became somewhat dissatisfied with being a secular teacher and longed to join a religious order so she could focus more on her spiritual life. A widow with five children had few options to join a community, so she began to plan her own congregation. With the help of priests from the Society of St. Sulpice (Sulpicians), a French order, she founded a congregation in Emmitsburg based on the Daughters of Charity in France. For the most part, Mother Seton's biological daughters lived with her in Emmitsburg while her sons attended the boarding school that would become Mount St. Mary's College. Mother Seton was always concerned about her daughters adjusting to the convent environment and she sent them to visit friends when she felt they needed to experience the outside world. For example, when her oldest daughter Anna Maria was going through a period of "teenage angst" and was unhappy at the convent, Mother Seton let her stay with family friends in Baltimore. Surprised to discover she missed her life at the convert, Anna Maria returned to Emmitsburg and became a model citizen. Sadly, she passed away from tuberculosis at the age of seventeen, but before her death she took the vows of the congregation.[39]

Seton often experienced tension between the expectations of motherhood and of leading a congregation. When the Sulpicians wanted to impose the Rule from the French Daughters of Charity on her community and bring French nuns to America, for instance, she feared new restrictions would not allow her the freedom to parent her children as she saw fit. In a letter to

[38] Catherine O'Donnell, *Elizabeth Seton: American Saint* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 216–217, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.dbproxy.lasalle.edu/lib/lasalle-ebooks/reader.action?docID=5497872# (accessed May 27, 2022).

[39] Ibid., 286–287; 308–309.

Archbishop Carroll, she fretted, "How can they allow me the uncontrolled privileges of a Mother to my five darlings? . . . Or how can I in conscience or in accordance with your paternal heart give up so sacred a right?"[40] She knew she would never be able to give up her children and worried that the French nuns would not understand how she could be both Mother Superior and mother to her biological children. However, the situation eased when the French sisters were unable to travel to America; the congregation did not adopt the French Rule during Seton's life.

Although Seton was able to keep her children close by, the circumstances were still difficult. She often depended on the kindness of friends for money and opportunities for the children. Since her sons were not particularly ambitious or inclined to the priesthood, as she had hoped, she enlisted friends to help them obtain positions as merchant's clerks; they were not suited to those jobs either and eventually joined the Navy. Her three daughters, on the other hand, were inclined to follow in their mother's footsteps, though two of them died young of complications from tuberculosis. Catherine lived the longest and became a Sister of Mercy in New York. It is not clear why Catherine did not choose the Sisters of Charity, but Bishop John Hughes "had a sister who was a Mercy, and he asked Catherine to consider them."[41]

Cornelia's experience of marriage and motherhood was similar to Jerusha Barber's and Mother Seton's, except for two important points. The first is the estrangement and separation that is a part of the story of Pierce and Cornelia Connelly's relationship. When Cornelia became one of three women to begin a new congregation and relocate to Derby, England, she did not know what the future would bring. In a short time, the schools they opened were flourishing, and the congregation was establishing missions throughout England. While Cornelia experienced success

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[40] Ibid., 297.

[41] Ibid., 428.

with the congregation, Pierce was unhappy that the couple were separated; he also thought he should have more control over her life and the congregation. This led to increasingly erratic behavior, which included removing the children from school and suing Cornelia for the restitution of conjugal rights. As painful as this was for Cornelia, she held her ground and did not submit to Pierce's demands. The court initially ruled in favor of Pierce, but Cornelia was allowed to appeal. Eventually the case was dropped due to Pierce's lack of funds, but Cornelia would not see her children again until they were adults. When Cornelia assented to releasing Pierce from his marriage vows, she never thought that this sacrifice would mean removal from her children's lives. Cornelia reluctantly accepted separation from them, believing this to be God's will manifested through the church, but she always viewed herself as their mother. Although the congregation flourished under her direction, she lived with the sorrow of being separated from her children.

The second important distinction is Cornelia formed a congregation as an expatriate in England. If she had returned to America after Pierce's ordination, she would have been closer to her family, and also a part of a more supportive Catholic community. After Pierce was ordained, Cornelia's spiritual advisor was in contact with Bishop Fenwick of Boston, who had helped Jerusha Barber join the Visitation Convent at Georgetown. Bishop Fenwick was so supportive of Barber that his mother even cared for her youngest child until she was old enough to live at the convent.[42] Had Cornelia gone to Boston, she likely would have found a more receptive environment and an equally open field for ministering to converts and Irish immigrants.

When Cornelia arrived in England, however, she found herself in a country with a vastly different attitude toward Roman Catholicism. Even though there was anti-Catholicism in the

[42] DeGoesbriand, 92.

United States, it was nowhere near the level that it was in England. To be a Catholic nun in England was difficult enough, but to be a nun who was previously married *and* had children was shocking. She had planned all along to keep her two youngest children with her, but Bishop Wiseman refused to allow them to stay with her due to the threat of scandal. A formerly married American woman in charge of a religious congregation was already suspect in England; the Bishop did not want to risk any threat to the newly established congregation. So Cornelia had no choice but to send her youngest children to boarding school.

Cornelia and Pierce did have a small circle of established Catholic friends in England who continued to support Cornelia through her estrangement with Pierce and subsequent court case. Even though the court case ended in Cornelia's favor, her reputation was so maligned in the British press that she could never quite overcome public perception of her as an unfit wife and mother during her lifetime. Cornelia had hoped that she could return to the United States with her children at some point, but after her younger children were taken to Europe by Pierce, she did not want to move further away from them. Also, the rapid expansion of the congregation, and her struggled to get its Rule approved it Rome, may have made her reluctant to leave.

Chapter Structure

Chapters 1 and 2 primarily focus on Cornelia's early life, her relationship with Pierce, and the events surrounding her entrance into religious life. Cornelia's early biographers painted a rosy picture of her upbringing as the adored youngest of seven children in a tight-knit family. Questions surround the stability of her early life, however, as both her parents passed away when she was young. After her mother died when she was fourteen, Cornelia moved in with her half-sister, Isabella, and her husband, Austin Montgomery. Cornelia became an accomplished young

woman in the Montgomerys' privileged household. Isabella's brother-in-law, James Montgomery, was a priest in the Episcopalian Church, and Cornelia's faith life was nourished as she participated in worship at St. Stephen's Church in Philadelphia.

As Cornelia grew into a young lady in her sister's household, she met the young Episcopalian clergyman Pierce Connelly. Despite Isabella's disapproval, which will be discussed later in more detail, Cornelia married Pierce at age twenty-two and traveled with him to a ministry assignment in Natchez, Mississippi. Letters that survived from the early part of their marriage showed the happiness of the young couple as they settled in Natchez. One of the more troubling aspects of the Connellys' life in the south was their acceptance of the slave culture. They relied on the labor of enslaved people in their household and sold two of the people they owned before embarking on a trip to Europe. The role slavery played in the family's economic status is a part of Cornelia's legacy that will be addressed in this chapter.

A segment of Chapter 1 focuses on the challenges Pierce faced as the only Episcopal clergyman in mission territory and its effect on his mental health. Pierce grew unhappy with Protestant churches' attacks on Catholicism, which led him to further study the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Rather abruptly, he resigned his position as rector of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church and decided his family should travel to Rome to learn more about Catholicism. Through these challenges, Cornelia never wavered in her support of Pierce. She began to study Catholicism with Pierce and converted before him in anticipation of their journey to Europe.

As Pierce made connections with the Catholic hierarchy and nobility in Rome, Cornelia developed a greater understanding of her faith, particularly by attending the sermons of Gioachinno Ventura di Raulica, whose preaching on the Epiphany inspired Cornelia's devotion to the Holy Child. During this trip, Pierce began thinking about becoming a Catholic priest, but

he was persuaded by members of the hierarchy and friends to remain a layman. The Connellys were forced to return to the United States due to the financial crisis of 1837. After a brief stint in banking, Pierce accepted a teaching position at the Jesuit-run St. Charles College in Grand Coteau, Louisiana. Cornelia earned money giving music lessons for the Sisters of the Sacred Heart at their nearby school. These two religious communities had a profound impact on Cornelia's faith formation and shaped the direction of her future religious life. It was also at Grand Coteau where Cornelia experienced heartbreak due to the death of her young son in a tragic accident, and again only months later when Pierce declared his intention to become a Catholic priest. Through these trials, Cornelia discovered the strength of her faith, which opened the door to her discernment of a religious vocation.

Chapter 2 begins with Pierce's decision to travel to England and apply to the Society of Jesus, a Catholic religious order for men, which would enable him to become a priest. With her young family to care for, Cornelia moved into a small cottage where she was mentored by the sisters of the Society of the Sacred Heart, as she continued to discern if she also had a vocation to religious life. After the Jesuits in England rejected his application, Pierce traveled to Rome to petition the Vatican to be ordained in the Diocese of Rome. He was not allowed to move forward without Cornelia's permission, so he returned to America to accompany his wife and children back to Rome. Cornelia once again uprooted her home to help Pierce pursue his calling.

Although Cornelia was anguished at the prospect of marital separation from Pierce, she did not want to prevent his vocation if it was legitimate. In addition, she was more certain that she was also called to religious life, and that she and Pierce could pursue a double vocation. After Cornelia and Pierce signed their deed of separation, Pierce began his studies for the priesthood, Cornelia moved into the Society of the Sacred Heart convent in Rome. Although

Cornelia had prepared for religious life with the Society in Grand Coteau, she was dissatisfied with the congregation in Rome. After Pierce's ordination, Cornelia decided not to join the Society when she received an opportunity to form a religious congregation in England. She moved to Derby, England, and established a convent and schools in the name of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

Cornelia believed that she and Pierce had a joint calling and believed they would support each other in their respective vocations. However, when Cornelia entered her novitiate in England, Pierce was not allowed to see her. He began to struggle with the separation between himself and Cornelia and the fact that he had no authority over her or the congregation. Eventually, this led to jealousy and paranoia, which culminated in his filing a legal suit to restore Cornelia as his wife. According to British law, the canonical separation that Pierce and Cornelia agreed to had no validity in their court system. Thus, the husband was allowed to petition for the restitution of conjugal rights.

As the case against her opened in court, Cornelia resolved that she would not return to her former life. She had packed a bag and if necessary, she would flee the convent. Pierce won the initial ruling, but after Cornelia appealed the case, he did not have the money to contest it. To demonstrate the complexity of their relationship, years later Cornelia actually paid his outstanding court fees. However, the damage was done, and he was determined to keep the children away from Cornelia permanently. As a woman in the nineteenth century, she had little recourse to pursue obtaining custody of her children.

One of the criticisms of Cornelia, leveled at her principally in her lifetime, was that she abandoned her children to enter religious life. As the court case between Pierce and Cornelia became public, Cornelia was vilified for not “returning” to her husband and children. But as I

discuss in Chapter 3, the situation was much more complicated than this judgment against her. Cornelia had always been a loving and concerned parent throughout her children's lives, and this did not change as they grew older. Pierce first traveled with their son Mercer to England because their friend Lord Talbot offered to pay for Mercer's education. When Cornelia returned to Rome and then England to become a nun, she maintained a close correspondence with Mercer. Much of Cornelia's correspondence to Mercer still exists, although letters from him do not. In Cornelia's letters, we see a mother concerned with his struggles in boarding school, but she often appeared unsympathetic and harshly criticized him for his lack of initiative. Although Cornelia gave Mercer spiritual advice about how to persevere in his relationship with God, she lacked understanding of his situation at boarding school.

Mercer returned to the United States after school, but he never reestablished a relationship with Cornelia. In the years surrounding the court case, Pierce had turned the children against Cornelia, and Mercer did not communicate with his mother. Tragically he died of yellow fever in New Orleans when he was twenty years old. A similar situation occurred with Frank, who was so young when he was separated from his mother that he could not connect with her later in life. In the few times Frank visited Cornelia at the convent, he strongly resented her life as a nun. Only Ady reconnected with her mother and returned to her Catholic faith toward the end of her life.

In Chapter 3, I also examine perspectives on “abandonment” in the Catholic context—leaving children and family to pursue a religious calling. The Catholic Church has portrayed “abandonment” as a heroic sacrifice necessary for the person's salvation and the salvation of others. I discuss the case of St. Marie de la Incarnation as an example of a mother who left her young son to enter religious life. Even though she is plagued by anguish and guilt, she believed

she could not go against God's divine will. Despite initially railing against her choice, Marie's son grew up to become a priest, and he believed that his mother's vocation inspired his own.

Unfortunately, there was no happy ending for the Connelly children. If one examines Cornelia's choice of religious life from the perspective of her children, then her "abandonment" of them cannot be couched in such glowing terms. Their views on their mother were not impartial, as their father's resentment influenced them. They would not have seen her becoming a nun as a divine calling. Even when Cornelia realized that her children might turn permanently against her, she remained firm in her choice not to leave the religious congregation. She never perceived herself as giving up her children, but she also realized her circumstances were limited, and she did not want to undermine the work she established. Although she was not able to be physically present to her children, Cornelia was able to extend her motherhood to the sisters in her congregation, the focus of which is discussed in Chapter 4.

Cornelia's experience of living with the Society of the Sacred Heart made her a natural candidate to found a new religious congregation. When Cornelia and two other women arrived at Derby, she took on most of the hard work of setting up the convent. Cornelia made every effort to care for the sisters' physical well-being and comfort, even to the point of being the Society's infirmarian. Her letters demonstrated that she was always concerned about their health, as well as their spiritual growth. Cornelia's maternal care of her sisters was not uncommon in women's religious orders, especially in those who managed schools. In "Maternity of Spirit," Joseph Mannard writes that, in the nineteenth century, nuns who ran schools focused on the more maternal aspects of their vocation to care for their charges. They needed to demonstrate to

parents of prospective students that they could emulate the virtues of a mother while educating their children.[43]

In apostolic women's religious orders, maternal care is actualized by a commitment to care for members of society, whether it be the poor, orphans, or students. Cornelia not only had to look out for the sisters' well-being, but she also had to teach them to be mothers in spirit as well. For Cornelia, the most important aspect of her mentorship was fostering the sisters' faith development, so they could be models of faith to the students they taught. Cornelia mentored the sisters' spirituality in various ways, but especially through the framework of the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises. In her years at Grand Coteau, Cornelia attended retreats based on the Spiritual Exercises, and she was directed in Jesuit Spirituality by Reverend Nicolas Point, S.J. Cornelia helped the sisters develop Christ's spiritual attributes, particularly through his identity as the Holy Child. She directed the sisters to focus on the "humble and hidden" nature of Christ as the means to which they would actualize the charism of their congregation.

As the principal authority figure in the congregation, Cornelia took her role of supervising the different aspects of the sisters' lives seriously. The sisters, in general, were appreciative of Cornelia's caring oversight and accepted her authority as their "Reverend Mother." However, there were times when this blend of motherly concern and authority led to misunderstanding and even hard feelings, as recounted in the second half of Chapter 4. Cornelia was never able to get the Society's Constitutions approved by the Vatican, and it was years before the bishop in charge of their district allowed the congregation to hold chapter meetings and vote on leadership. The Society was founded in 1846 and the first general chapter meeting

[43] Joseph G. Mannard, "Maternity . . . of the Spirit: Nuns and Domesticity in Antebellum America," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 5, no. 3/4 (Summer-Fall 1986): 319, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25153767 (accessed May 27, 2002).

was in 1874. This situation distressed Cornelia, especially when she encountered opposition from some of the sisters on the approval of the Constitutions. For the Vatican to approve the Constitutions, Cornelia had to change some of the content, which the sisters believed was not aligned with the spirit of the congregation. After revising the Constitutions, Cornelia was weary and did not take the time to explain the situation and the changes to the sisters. She thought her authority in directing them to approve the Constitution would be enough; she was surprised at the amount of pushback she received. Cornelia believed her "devoted children" would accept the changes unquestionably, which was a serious error in judgement. She was wounded by the amount of dissension and failed to manage the situation effectively, retreating into silence and suffering. This was a significant setback in the attempt to have the Constitutions approved; after Cornelia's death, they would be formally ratified.

The resentment toward Cornelia over the Constitutions eventually eased, and she was generally supported as Mother Superior. However, because of the growth of the congregation, and limitations on her health, it was challenging to maintain her motherly connection with the sisters. But her communications to individual members, as shown in Chapter 4, demonstrated that she always tried to provide guidance to them.

Cornelia's experience with motherhood led her to become a Mother Superior who cultivated supportive relationships with her spiritual daughters. Her unique situation as a biological mother first enabled her to acquire skills that would help her manage a flourishing religious order. Despite heartache in her personal life, she genuinely cared for the members of the Society as if they were her children. As her letters to her son Mercer attest, she was not the perfect mother, but she tried to give him the advice she thought would help him endure boarding

school. When Pierce took the children away, Cornelia's life as a mother did not end but took on new aspects of growth in her vocation to lead the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

In the Conclusion, I discuss how Cornelia's story inspires women who have experienced marital difficulties, separation and divorce, and also the loss of a child or children. Through courage and reliance on her faith, Cornelia demonstrated how to overcome the most traumatic of circumstances. Not only did she overcome these trials, she achieved a significant accomplishment by founding a women's religious congregation as an American expatriate in England. Her vision of focusing on the "wants of the age" has contributed extensively to the history of women religious in Europe, the United States and Africa. The Society of the Holy Child Jesus continues to promote Cornelia's vision in their contemporary ministries.

Chapter 1

Daughter of Philadelphia

Although Cornelia Connelly founded a Catholic religious congregation in England, she was born in post-revolutionary Philadelphia, a bustling port city and the center of a new nation. She entered the world on January 15, 1809, at a house "on the north-west corner of 8th and Filbert," in the wealthy and "fashionable" section of the city. The house was numbered "1, 3, and 5," substantial enough to hold a large family, of which Cornelia was the youngest of seven children born to Ralph and Mary Peacock. Mary had been married previously to a prosperous sugar planter in Jamaica, John Bowen, and had two children who were Cornelia's step-siblings, Isabella and John.

Cornelia's biographers mentioned her reticence in discussing her childhood, but they all state that she was "happy and secure" and that she grew up "in a happy family in comfortable circumstances."[1] They attested she was "gifted with talents and beauty"; lovely and fair-spirited; the joy and often consolation of the household.[2] However, in almost the same breath they noted that "Of her parents and her early life very little has come down to us . . . Of her childhood little is related."[3] Judith Lancaster mentioned how problematic the biographers' assertions about Cornelia's childhood are: "These accounts all have a whiff of hagiography about them. Like princesses in fairytales, female saints are stereotypically happy and good and beautiful and wealthy. The language that all the biographers use is suspiciously synthetic."[4] The scarcity of

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[1] Flaxman, 8.

[2] Judith Lancaster, *Cornelia Connelly and Her Interpreters* (Oxford: Way Books, 2004), 219.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

facts that we have about Cornelia's early life casts doubt on the glossy portrait her biographers painted.

Cornelia's father, Ralph Peacock, had emigrated from Yorkshire, England in his late twenties. Flaxman noted that "Although he is variously listed as 'merchant', 'import merchant grocer', 'distiller', it would seem that he was also caught up in the property boom of the day and was chiefly a speculator in land and houses." While it is true that at the time of Cornelia's birth he may have been at the height of his fortunes, "In so short a period as 1800-14 he moved house or business or both nine times, a mobility which characterized a fast-growing city but does not necessarily prove the prosperity of the individual."[5] He owned a farm in Mount Holly, New Jersey, which Cornelia enjoyed visiting.

When Cornelia's father died in 1818 at age fifty, his properties had to be sold to pay off his considerable debt. Fortunately, Cornelia's mother had enough inheritance from her first marriage to maintain a comfortable existence for her children. At some point, the family moved to a "three-storied house in the fashionable Arch Street area," where they continued to live until a "severe and lingering illness" caused Mary Peacock's untimely death in 1823.[6] Cornelia was just fourteen years old. In her short lifetime, Cornelia dealt with the death of two parents, and the breakdown of her immediate family unit after her mother's death. The one constant in Cornelia's life was the love and devotion she shared with her brothers and sisters. The Peacock siblings were especially close, and Cornelia's adoration of them is reflected in her letters. Later, Cornelia's niece remarked, "Aunt Mary told us there was never an unpleasant word spoken in the

[5] Flaxman, 9.

[6] Ibid., 11.

family," which indicated the level of affection shared by the Peacocks.[7] Cornelia's older siblings adored her and made sure her quality of care and education would not be compromised.

Episcopalian Influence

The death of Cornelia's mother when she was fourteen meant a change in the family's living arrangements. She moved to the household of her half-sister, Isabella, and her husband, Austin Montgomery. Although no record exists of Cornelia's formal education, it is believed she received a liberal education from tutors in the Montgomery's home. "No expense was spared in developing Cornelia's talents, we are told. She was highly educated at home by Professors and Tutors . . . conversed in several languages . . . was an artist and musician.'"[8] In this loving and supportive atmosphere, Cornelia became an accomplished and attractive young woman. Although she was raised in a Presbyterian household by her parents, Cornelia attended St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, where Isabella's brother-in-law James Montgomery was the Rector. Cornelia's participation in the Episcopalian Church established the framework for her religious devotion.

The Reverend James Montgomery became the pastor of the newly erected St. Stephen's Church in 1823, the same year Cornelia moved in with Austin and Isabella Montgomery. He was a disciple of Bishop John Henry Hobart's "High Church" movement, which closely resembled the Catholic Church's beliefs in many ways. Episcopal clergy associated with the High Church movement "held firm to the essential faith and worship of the primitive (early Christian)

[7] Ibid.

[8] Flaxman, 12.

Church."[9] They believed that fundamental holiness derived from apostolic succession, the Church Fathers, and the Sacraments. The Episcopal clergy felt it was essential to maintain the Catholic Church's tradition on these teachings.

John Henry Hobart's leadership of the "High Church" movement shaped the direction of the Episcopal Church in the early nineteenth century. Hobart was born in Philadelphia on September 14, 1775, and became a divinity student at Princeton University. In June 1798, he was ordained in the Protestant Episcopal Church, and served in parishes outside of Philadelphia. In 1800 he became the assistant rector at Trinity Church in New York, and later was named assistant bishop of the diocese of New York. He became head bishop of the diocese and rector of Trinity in 1816, and held these roles until his death in 1830.[10] Notably, he was a spiritual companion to Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, who credited him with helping her rediscover the Christian faith. Historian Catherine O'Donnell recounted Seton's connection to him:

> Throughout her life, Elizabeth's desire to feel God's presence and her experience of institutional religion had existed independently. Listening to Hobart, she felt for the first time that these two elements of religious life could and should be united. Hobart's sermons combined a reverence for church structures with the promise of divine immanence, and intellectual confidence with a sorrowful awareness of sin. . . . Hobart's Episcopalianism was offered as a singular vessel of God's mercy.[11]

Although Hobart was dismayed that Seton gravitated toward and eventually converted to Catholicism, he reconciled himself to her role as the foundress of the Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg. Even though Cornelia Connelly was not directly connected to John Henry Hobart,

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[9] Esther DeWaal, "John Henry Hobart and the Early Oxford Movement," *Anglican Theological Review* 65, no. 3 (July 1983): 1.

[10] Mary Kathleen Flanagan, S.C., "The Influence of John Henry Hobart on the Life of Elizabeth Ann Seton" (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1978), 78–85, In ProQuest One Academic, https://dbproxy.lasalle.edu:443/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/influence-john-henry-hobart-on-life-elizabeth-ann/docview/302897541/se-2?accountid=11999 (accessed May 28, 2022).

[11] O'Donnell, 98.

her religious formation under the direction of Rev. James Montgomery took a similar path to Seton's. Caritas McCarthy, SHCJ, details Montgomery's impact on his congregation:

> To his flock James Montgomery was, above all, a teacher of the Word—of the Holy Gospels. And the great message of the Word was the tidings of Redemption and the Christian call to union with Christ in His Redemption act. The Episcopalian liturgy was the means *par excellence* through which the grace of the Word flowed to men; the apostolate—the spreading of the Gospel—was the great outpouring of the Word through the universal Christian vocation.[12]

To his parishioners, Montgomery preached the primary mission of the Christian Church fervently: "And he said unto them, go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature [Mark 16:15]."[13] Cornelia's spirituality developed through her understanding of Christian mission demonstrated in the Gospels: that one is called to not only spread the "good news" but internalize and imitate Christ's life.

A respiratory ailment weakened Montgomery in his forties, which ultimately proved fatal. Church records show that Montgomery baptized many of Cornelia's nieces and nephews, but she was not baptized into the Episcopal Church until 1831, nine months before she married Pierce Connelly. It is unclear if her decision to be baptized was influenced by her relationship with Pierce. The time she spent worshipping at St. Stephen's church, however, proved fruitful. Her participation in the Episcopal Church prepared her for the next stage of life in the southern missionary outpost of Natchez, Mississippi.

Courtship with Pierce

[12] Caritas McCarthy, "Introducing the Reverend James Montgomery," *The Pylon* 27, no. 2 (Autumn 1965):5 in Cornelia Connelly Digital Library Resource, https://corneliaconnellylibrary.org/search-results-details.php?id=2328 (accessed May 28, 2022).

[13] Ibid.

In her later years, Adeline Duval Mack, Cornelia's niece, reminisced about Cornelia's relationship with Pierce Connelly: “He was an assistant clergyman in one of the Episcopal Churches—was very handsome, *fascinating* [my emphasis]—a number of the young ladies, friends of Cornelia Peacock, were vying with each other for the attentions of the young minister.”[14] Why was Pierce Connelly so fascinating? He was the son of a cabinet maker who rose from “obscure beginnings” to become one of Philadelphia's elite tradesmen. Pierce attended the University of Pennsylvania, and received a Master's degree in 1824. At the University, “the strong Episcopalian influence won the allegiance of Pierce,” as many of the instructors and students were of that denomination.[15] He became a ministerial candidate at the Episcopal Convention of 1825. As was the custom in the early Episcopal Church, he received training for ordination from Philadelphia Bishop William White, and on October 11, 1828, he was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church at St. James, Kingsessing, now within the boundaries of Philadelphia.

Cornelia most likely met Pierce sometime between 1828 and 1830, when they moved through the same social circles. Cornelia's sister Isabella disapproved of their relationship and refused to allow Pierce in her house. On the surface, it seemed that Isabella objected to her sister marrying a poor clergyman who was a tradesman's son. She believed Cornelia should marry a gentleman of a higher class distinction. However, Cornelia’s biographer Radegunde Flaxman indicates that there might have been more to Isabella’s disapproval: “Hindsight suggests that Isabella saw something she did not quite like in Pierce and feared to commit her younger sister to

[14] Caritas McCarthy, *The Spirituality of Cornelia Connelly: In God, For God, With God.* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1986), 30.

[15] Ibid., 32.

him. Or given her [Isabella's] religious indifference, she underestimated a basic cause of Cornelia's love, his ardent belief in the church he served."[16]

Married Life in Natchez

Despite Isabella's opposition to the relationship, Cornelia married Pierce in a small ceremony at her sister Adeline Duval's house in December 1831. A few months before the marriage, Pierce accepted an offer to serve as rector of Trinity Church in Natchez, Mississippi. Shortly after the wedding, Cornelia and Pierce traveled by steamboat down the Mississippi River to their first home as a married couple. Flaxman describes the topography and the initial social setting the Connellys encountered:

> Natchez sat high on a bluff of the east bank, a lighthouse overlooking the river curve where the ferry crossed to Louisiana. Wharves and taverns crowded under the bluff and boats stretched for a mile along the shore. Above, Natchez-on-the-Hill stood like a signpost between plantations behind and river below. Perched above the great north-south highway which the river had become, when the Connellys came it was an important cotton port, prosperous and smart.[17]

Because Natchez was vital to the cotton industry's growth, it soon became an affluent center dominated by cotton planters and merchants. About forty families "whose men were prominent in agricultural, professional, and commercial vocations" formed a "close-knit aristocratic clique" known as the "Natchez Nabobs."[18] Into this exclusive circle, the Connellys received an "entrée," likely through Pierce's brother Harry, a prosperous cotton mill owner whose trade often took him to ports on the Mississippi River. The "Nabobs" were the primary "clientele" Pierce would

[16] Flaxman, 14.

[17] Ibid., 17.

[18] D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 136.

minister to during his rectorship at Trinity Parish. Pierce and Cornelia settled in a little house, called Whitecottage, located near the town center and accessible for his parishioners.

One aspect of the Connellys' adjustment to living in the South was their acceptance of the slave culture. Even though slavery had been abolished in Pennsylvania in 1780, Cornelia may have gained some familiarity with it from her mother, who was previously married to a wealthy sugar planter in Jamaica. Pierce and Cornelia not only owned enslaved people during their time in the South, but they were "enthusiastic investors in sugar plantations."[19] When the Connelly's first child was born, they were gifted two enslaved women by Dr. William Newton Mercer: Phoebe Grayson and Sarah (Sally) Goff. The Connellys also owned "Phoebe's grandchildren: George, Mary, and James Henry, and two additional people outside of this family unit, Jenny and Abraham."[20] Later, Pierce sold Sally and her children to the Jesuit Community at St. Charles in Grand Coteau, and Phoebe's ownership was also transferred to the Jesuits. The Connellys also benefited financially from selling two of their slaves before their initial trip to Rome in December 1835.[21] Cornelia's sister Mary, who was staying with the Connelly's, recorded the transaction in a letter to her brother Lewis: "His man Abraham, for whom he gave $750 a year ago, he now expects to get $1,500. For Jenny who cost him about $150, he is offered $800.

[19] Catherine Addington, "The Life of Catholic Foundress Cornelia Connelly Was Ruled by Men. Was Her Obedience to Them Holy?" *America: The Jesuit Review* (October 26, 2017), https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/10/26/life-catholic-foundress-cornelia-connelly-was-ruled-men-was-her-obedience-them (accessed May 28, 2022).

[20] "College Commission Examines Cornelia Connelly's Ties to Slavery," *Rosemont Magazine*, (Spring 2020), https://issuu.com/rocomagazine/docs/spring_2020_magazine_/s/10662472 (accessed May 28, 2022).

[21] Flaxman, 34.

Phoebe & Sally, the latter presented to little Mercer by Dr. Mercer, he will keep—each worth $1000."[22]

To read about the Connellys' transacting and profiting from the ownership of human beings is deeply troubling. During their time in the South, Pierce and Cornelia acquiesced to the lifestyle of owning enslaved people and never explicitly condemned slavery. In fact, even before he converted to Catholicism, Pierce viewed the Church's hierarchical structure 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 conquered."[23] Rumors of slave rebellions were constant, and Pierce believed that catechizing enslaved people would not only fulfill their spiritual needs but "control" them better by bringing them into the fold. Cornelia, for her part, never discussed the ethics of slave ownership, even in her later years. For her, it seemed the institution of slavery was just a part of life, a means to financial stability, and she never questioned it. The issue of the Connellys' slave ownership is difficult to reconcile with Cornelia's legacy as the founder of a religious congregation and a candidate for sainthood in the Catholic Church. In recent years, Rosemont College has established a commission to study Cornelia's connections to slavery and were able to meet two of the descendants of the Connellys' slaves.[24]

The Minister's Wife

[22] Mary Peacock to Lewis Duval, October 13, 1835, *Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus,* Documentation Volume 2, 51–56, Archives of the Holy Child Jesus, Rosemont, Pennsylvania (hereafter cited as ASHCJ).

[23] Addington, "The Life…."

[24] "College Commission…."

In the early years of their marriage, Pierce and Cornelia demonstrated a deep devotion to each other, as their letters attest. When Pierce was away, Cornelia pined, "Oh my love, haste back. It seems a year that you have been gone." Pierce referred to Cornelia as his "Nelie," and felt "low spirited" when they were apart.[25] They were not afraid to express their feelings of attachment in written communication. They welcomed their first child, Mercer (Merty) in December 1832, and a daughter named Adeline (Ady) in 1835. "Cornelia assumed with ease and grace that role of helpmate for which the 19th century had a particularly esteemed pattern."[26]

The description of Cornelia as a devoted helpmate matches the characterization of U.S. women's domestic roles in the nineteenth century. Wives were responsible for cultivating a domestic respite or sanctuary for their husbands after a long day at work. Historian Nancy Cott described the home environment: "where man … seeks a refuge from the vexations and embarrassments of business, an enchanting repose from exertion, a relaxation from care by the interchange of affection: where some of his finest sympathies, tastes, and moral and religious feelings are formed and nourished."[27] Women protected and promoted moral order in their homes: "A wife, she consoles him in grief, animates him with hope in despair, restrains him in prosperity, . . . and rewards his toil with the undivided homage of a grateful heart."[28] Cornelia provided the consolation and stability that Pierce needed, but he struggled with feelings of inadequacy and depression.

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[25] D. G. Paz, *The Priesthoods and Apostasies of Pierce Connelly: A Study of Victorian Conversion and Anti-Catholicism* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1986), 38–39.

[26] McCarthy, *Spirituality*, 36.

[27] Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 64.

[28] Ibid., 165.

Pierce, who was “volatile” and “given to extremes of moods and reactions to events,” relied heavily on Cornelia's assurance and praise. When he was upset about criticism he received from his mother, for instance, Cornelia counseled, “if she can be the mother of such a mind as yours, I think we can indulge strong hopes for Mercer [their son].”[29] She soothed his concerns about parishioners' attitudes toward him: "[Dr. Mercer] told Major C. that though he had always had a high opinion of you, that it was still higher now.”[30] No one took the duties of a wife, especially a minister’s wife, more seriously than Cornelia. She genuinely believed that she had as much of a “grave responsibility” as Pierce for those he “‘received … at these sacred rails;’ those whom he taught, to whom he preached, who gave him confidence.”[31] In an essay published in the November 1843 issue of *The Ladies’ Repository*, George Waterman Jr., discussed the high expectations for the minister’s wife:

> It is a remark no less trite but true, that a minister’s wife may increase her husband’s usefulness tenfold, or she may destroy it altogether. The true cause of this is to be found in her influence in the social and domestic circle. By a consistent, prudent course of action—the offspring of a devoted piety—she may second all his public labors. She is as really and truly looked up to for an example of all that is good as her companion.[32]

The minister’s wife was expected to emulate her husband’s piety and excel at social graces. Cornelia's natural charm and concern for parishioner’s well-being endeared her to the Natchez community.

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[29] Cornelia Connelly to Pierce Connelly, September 22, 1835, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

[30] Ibid.

[31] McCarthy, *Spirituality*, 36.

[32] George Waterman Jr., “Ministers’ Wives,” in *The Ladies’ Repository: A Monthly Periodical Devoted to Literature, Arts, and Religion* 3, no. 11 (November 1843): 348, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moajrnl/acg2248.1-03.011/354 (accessed May 28, 2002).

Pierce's Challenges

To say that circumstances were difficult for Pierce during his rectorship at Trinity Parish is an understatement. The Protestant Episcopal Church arrived late in Mississippi; the first parish was not founded until 1820. When the Diocese of Mississippi was erected six years later, there were only four parishes in existence, all in the Natchez region. As a result of this situation, Pierce had very few clerical colleagues to discuss important aspects of managing and maintaining his parish community. Connelly biographer D.G. Paz observed, "Of the four other priests in the Diocese, two left in 1832 and two in 1833. Pierce was alone during what proved to be the critical years of 1834 and 1835."[33] Those years were significant because Pierce contemplated, and ultimately decided, to convert to Catholicism during this time. Pierce also had no local episcopal superior with whom he could discuss his conversion. The diocese did not have a bishop until 1850, and the only supervision priests received was through cursory visitations from bishops of neighboring dioceses. Paz described Pierce's isolated position: "So Pierce was on his own, without the apostolic, pastoral, and collegial supports that priests elsewhere relied upon in times of crisis."[34]

In addition to the isolation he was experiencing, most aspects of Peirce's ministry in Natchez were "extraordinarily demanding."[35] Although he had a central church through which he preached and administered sacraments, Pierce's parishioners were located primarily on remote plantations. Bishop James Otey, upon his visit to the Diocese of Mississippi in 1835, described the challenge: "With but one clergy man (the Rev. Mr. Connelly) in active employment within

[33] Paz, 31.

[34] Ibid., 32.

[35] Flaxman, 19.

the bounds of a large diocese it cannot be expected that the results of his labours, confined as these are to Natchez and its vicinity, will be more than to keep alive some feeling of interest in the church beyond the limits of his own parish."[36] Bishop Otey believed that Pierce was effectively managing the Diocese outside the scope of Trinity Parish and its vicinity.

However, when Otey first arrived in Natchez, he found Pierce "confined to his room by severe indisposition, whether brought on by exhaustion or by the religious anxieties to which Cornelia later referred, we cannot know."[37] Pierce struggled to deal with the responsibilities of ministering to parishioners who were widely scattered through the area and often lived on remote plantations, which were difficult to reach. After Pierce recovered, he and Otey visited some Holy Trinity parishioners, and the Bishop's report describes their experience: "They had to brave weather that was 'disagreeably cold and inclement.' They received hospitality in isolated plantation homes after long, hard riding. On occasion swamp made roads impassable, and the bishop wrote that 'few will be found ready to encounter the fatigues and dangers of exposure to a southern climate.'"[38] In his report, the bishop praised Pierce's initiative: "The success of Mr. Connelly in gathering a large congregation under circumstances of *extraordinary depression* [my emphasis] lays the ground of reasonable calculation to suppose that labours equally faithful will in other places be crown with similar results."[39]

Cornelia excelled in bolstering Pierce's spirits despite the hardships of his ministry. A letter she wrote to Pierce demonstrated the reassurance she gave him. As Pierce contemplated conversion, she tried to lift his spirits: "Dearest do not distress yourself about the alienation of

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 20.

[39] Ibid.

any of your family—if you should rise they will be ready enough to bow down to you—some specimen already—if you do not you have that within which they can neither give nor take."[40] Additionally, the letter revealed Cornelia's willingness to assist Pierce with his ministry, especially his correspondence. She references showing a letter to Dr. Mercer, one of Pierce's loyal friends, as a matter of some urgency: "It was in consequence of this request, dearest that I thought proper to shew the letter to the Dr. If I did wrong you must never allow me to open your letters again, but I think & hope love that you will say it is all right."[41] Cornelia's tone conveys a sense of independence that she is comfortable enough to intervene without Pierce's permission, although she back peddles a bit. Cornelia did her best to fit the mold of the minister's wife, as described by George Waterman:

> As he retires from her presence to his study and his closet, her influence is seen in strengthened faith and encouraged hopes. . . . This secret influence necessarily accompanies him into the pulpit, and consequently exerts a tremendous power in increasing or diminishing the salutary influence of his public labors. And the same silent and secret, but no less real power accompanies him in the performance of the more private duties of the ministerial office.[42]

Even though the minister's wife was supposed to play a more "behind-the-scenes" role in terms of moral support, this does not diminish the help she could provide her husband in all aspects of the office.

In addition to Pierce's struggles with his arduous ministerial duties, he began to resent the anti-Catholic sentiment growing in the nation. In nineteenth-century America, immigrants arrived from Catholic European countries, providing cheap labor for an increasingly industrial

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[40] Cornelia Connelly to Pierce Connelly, September 22, 1835, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Waterman, Jr., 348.

economy. Nativists feared unwanted change to their established institutions, with Protestant churches leading the charge. Protestant periodicals and pamphlets "preached the need to protect the United States from papal power."[43] "There was an alliance, they said, between the invading immigrants and the Catholic Church, its purpose was to destroy the American republic and establish popery and despotism."[44]

As an Episcopal priest, Pierce was considered a "Hobartian Churchman" or "high churchman," who followed beliefs and practices similar to those of the Catholic Church. He believed that "the Church exercised divine authority in faith, worship, and discipline, and that its authority rested on apostolic succession. He asserted his priestly commission to preach, absolve and reconcile sinners. He stressed the centrality of the Eucharist in the Church's life."[45] As a high churchman, Pierce was increasingly dismayed by anti-Catholic articles in Protestant periodicals, and refused to distribute anti-Catholic propaganda pamphlets. He admitted that

> [I] had been in an agreeable and cultivated social circle, but I had been in *solitude* as to political, philosophical and theological associations. The men of my own profession whom I had left in the northern cities, and those near me in the south, I well knew differed from me fundamentally on many points on civil as well as ecclesiastical polity, and I required some other encouragement than that of my own mind to enable me to trust my reasonings and to believe in the justness of them.[46]

As the only priest in the diocese of Mississippi, Pierce had no colleagues to discuss ideas with and his elite circle of planter friends were Episcopalian. There is no evidence that he and Cornelia were involved in the Catholic community until after their conversion. However, the attacks on the Church moved Pierce into a "'laborious study of the controversy,' a 'course of

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[43] Flaxman, 22.

[44] Ibid., 21.

[45] Paz, 77.

[46] Ibid., 72.

reading' he wrote, 'which the miserable fanaticism drove me into.'"[47] He felt strongly that a church steeped in the spirit of Christianity should not be denigrating the reputation of another.

The Road to Conversion

As Pierce struggled with the anti-Catholic tenor of the Protestant Episcopal Church, he developed a friendship with the Catholic French explorer and intellectual Josef Nicolas Nicollet. Nicollet was commissioned to survey the Mississippi River basin by the American government, and he met Pierce through their mutual friend Major Henry Chotard, a plantation owner in Natchez. After experiencing collegial isolation for so long, Pierce and Nicollet spent hours discussing religious and philosophical ideas. Nicollet "pointed out clearly the unworthiness of such conduct [attacks on the Catholic Church] which no decent man could approve and which a sincerely religious mind would never hesitate to condemn … a religion which made use of such means to sustain itself and to attack the Catholic Religion could not be animated by the Spirit of God, could not be his work."[48] As Nicollet returned to exploring the country, Pierce continued to experience his ministry's strain plus the burdens of his spiritual crisis. When Bishop Otey conducted his pastoral visit, he remarked, "I have seen him weep like a child in recounting the sufferings of his spirit from this cause" and Pierce later reflected, "the Bishop must well remember how sincerely but vainly I combated the melancholy with which my own experience and my own convictions often overwhelm me."[49] Pierce's growing disillusionment with Protestantism led him to resign his rectorship of Trinity Church in 1835. Nicollet recalled

[47] Ibid.

[48] Flaxman, 23.

[49] Ibid., 24.

Pierce's intention to become Catholic: "It is done, he has raised his standard in the Holy Cause before leaving his flock. We are very much moved and yet happy."[50]

Family and friends expressed surprise and criticized Pierce's resignation. Cornelia, however, supported her husband's decision unreservedly. Some speculation exists about why Pierce resigned his position in the Episcopal Church so suddenly. In March 1835, he was passed over for a bishopric in a proposed southwestern diocese that would incorporate the states of Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. Even though the plans for this diocese were not realized, Flaxman suggested that this disappointment may have contributed to his inner turmoil. Whatever the motivation for Pierce's breaking with the Episcopal Church, Cornelia supported her husband regardless of criticism he received. "Like Pierce, Cornelia [could not] see the 'unity of the faith in the bond of peace' in the divided denominations of the Protestant religion. . . . Unlike Pierce, it [was] not structures and authority but the preaching of Christ crucified that drew her."[51] For Cornelia, the "seeking of Christ in his church is sovereign in life," and she admired her husband all the more for seeking the same. Cornelia pronounced that she was "ready at once to submit to whatever my loved husband believes to be the path of duty."[52] Her decision reflected the societal customs of the day. Cornelia was not a submissive person; she was, in fact, strong-willed and "clear-headed." But she knew that a wife had few rights and that the husband had the final say in all things. Cornelia was as angered by the Nativist attacks on Catholics, however, as her husband.

[50] Ibid., 27.

[51] Ibid., 33.

[52] Ibid.

Once Pierce resigned his rectorship, he traveled to St. Louis to meet Catholic Bishop Joseph Rosati. Rosati was impressed by Pierce's "'purity of intention, his rectitude, his candour in telling me his difficulties' and could not restrain his own 'tears on seeing this generous man' who had sacrificed so much for conscience's sake, 'ready to leave his country and go out to an uncertain future in a strange land.'"[53] Rosati's comments referred to Pierce's decision to resign his rectorship and travel to Rome to pursue conversion to the Catholic Church.

The textual evidence for why Pierce wanted to go to Rome is scarce. D.G. Paz, the author of *The Priesthoods and Apostasies of Pierce Connelly*, commented that Pierce desired to go to Rome "where he could study the Roman Catholic faith at its source. (He had some doubts about contemporary miracles, which could be settled only there)."[54] It is unclear why Pierce's doubts could only be resolved in Rome, but it may have to do with the Catholic Church's precarious situation in the United States at the time. The church was plagued by a lack of critical resources, such as seminaries, and needed to build membership and stability, especially in the southern states. The situation of the Catholic Church in Mississippi was similar to the story of the founding of the Episcopal diocese. When the Catholic Diocese of Natchez was established in 1837, only two priests were serving in Mississippi. By 1860, there were still only eighteen priests in the entire state. Paz noted, "The Congregation in Natchez was the largest in the state, but was so poor and disorganized that it had been forced to let its church building to a firm of linen-drapers. The Roman Catholic community's needs before 1837 were served only by infrequent and irregular visits of priests from New Orleans and Mobile."[55]

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[53] Ibid., 31.

[54] Paz, 82.

[55] Ibid., 68.

When Catholic bishops or priests were assigned to parishes in the South, their efforts were hampered by a considerable lack of funding. Historian Randall Miller explained, "They subsisted on small allowances from bishops, gifts from relatives, and in the case of missionaries, meager subsidies from their host societies in Europe. Catholic clergy in the rural south barely had enough support for the coarsest clothes and food. They became beggars, lived frugally, and often despaired of survival."[56] Unfortunately, when Pierce and Cornelia were living in Natchez, there was no Bishop or organized Catholic community to whom Pierce could turn during his conversion crisis. Although Joseph Nicollet visited Natchez several times to survey the Mississippi River, he was not a permanent fixture in the community. When Nicollet advised Pierce to visit Bishop Rosati in St. Louis, Pierce did not hesitate, despite having to leave Cornelia and the children at home.

It is unclear to what extent Cornelia was privy to Pierce's inner thoughts and turmoil. If his comment that he had not "consulted on the step I now take with any human being whatever" was true, then he did not discuss with her the gravity of his thoughts. Cornelia wrote to her sister that she was very concerned about him: "His health is considerably injured by his late labours and he is now suffering with a constant pain in his breast, but I trust in God, that rest, care and exercise will in a little time restore him."[57]

Pierce's Mindset

Pierce's mental health has been the subject of much discussion among Cornelia's biographers. Some evidence of Pierce's mental instability was based on assertions from his

[56] Randall Miller and Jon Wakelyn, eds. *Catholics in the Old South: Essays on Church and Culture* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), 50.

[57] Flaxman, 28.

contemporaries. Bishop Otey, for instance, observed, "The truth is, that poor Connelly's mind is unbalanced. I was unwilling to believe this as first."[58] Dr. Merrill, a vestryman in Trinity Church, remarked, "Bishop Otey says his mind is unbalanced but I think it was never balanced. I do not think he will stop where he is. His enthusiasm and want of judgement will lead him into other extravagances, and I fear to abandon his family."[59] Given the situation that would arise over Pierce's quest to become a Catholic priest, Dr. Merrill's comment was prescient.

Sarah Brabant, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, wrote an unpublished paper on Cornelia's Natchez and Grand Coteau years. She theorizes that Cornelia was a victim of a "particular type" of domestic abuse because Pierce suffered from bipolar disorder. Brabant compared Cornelia's relationship with Pierce to her own experience of being married to a man with bipolar disorder. Additionally, she submitted textual evidence and a summary of Pierce's actions to her brother, a noted psychiatrist in California, for evaluation. Dr. Enoch Callaway, MD assessed Pierce's behavior:

> We see a pattern that will be repeated throughout his life; that of leaving one profession for another, apparently entering a period of success, then moving into a manic phase which culminates in a depression and another change of profession. One first hand description characterizes him as weak, vain, and (with) a passion to be popular with the rich and proud. This is characteristic of depressives who are often afflicted by an excessive need for signs of approval, only to become wildly and unrealistically enthusiastic and equally unresponsive to the disapproval of others during the manic periods.[60]

Callaway's assessment indicated that Pierce and Cornelia's early life together may not have been as "rosy" as Cornelia's biographers attested, but she "protected her husband not only from

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[58] Ibid., 32.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Sarah Brabant, "Cornelia Connelly, A Reinterpretation of Her Natchez and Grand Coteau Years," Cornelia Connelly Collection, Box 1-05, 15. Archives of The University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

outsiders, [and] even from those in her household, e.g. Mary Peacock."[61] When seen through this lens, Brabant suggested, "many of Cornelia's behaviors become easier to understand."[62] I am hesitant, however, to characterize Pierce's illness as a form of abuse, at least in the early stage of their marriage, because Cornelia so consistently projected a tone of confidence and trust in her letters, and defended him adamantly to family and friends. Also, witnesses to the marriage, particularly Cornelia's sister Mary, who lived with Pierce and Cornelia in Natchez and later in Grand Coteau, never expressed concerns about their relationship or Cornelia's well-being.

Despite Cornelia's love for and support of Pierce, family members were clearly concerned about his state of mind. Addie addressed her sister: "It certainly is, my dear Neely, a source of great mortification to us that the public generally, not only the Episcopal body, should entertain so unfavourable an opinion of Mr. C's judgement, prudence and strength of mind . . . It is the general and, I believe, the freely expressed opinion among the clergy that there is an aberration of mind on the subject of religion."[63] Lewis Duval (Cornelia's brother-in-law) summed up the situation: "I have the greatest confidence in his piety and honour, but the course he has taken is much to be deplored and evinces a want of judgement and prudence, that I am fearful will prove seriously detrimental to their happiness."[64]

If Cornelia was worried about Pierce's behavior, she expressed nothing in her family letters. In fact, she appeared angry at their assessment of him: "How is it that you have so little confidence in my good husband? You seem really to think he has lost his mind. … Refer to my last letter and you will see that I told you he would examine the subject long and carefully before

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[61] Brabant, 3.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Flaxman, 31.

[64] Ibid., 32.

he makes any decision."[65] Cornelia's relatives reacted strongly to Pierce's sudden decision to resign his position, primarily because he did not seem to consider how he would support a family. However, Cornelia's defense of Pierce is unshakeable. Given the deteriorating situation, she may have felt the need to project an appearance of calm and normalcy.

In her analysis of Cornelia's life, Brabant cited intense emotions that can result from caring for a loved one with bipolar disorder or mental illness: "fear, lack of attraction to partner, anger, feeling pressured, guilt, frustration, feeling trapped, sadness, feeling hopeless, and loneliness."[66] Cornelia's letters to her family portrayed some annoyance and anger about their perceptions of Pierce, but she remained positive about the prospect of selling their possessions and moving. While Pierce visited Bishop Rosati in St. Louis, she wrote to Addie, "Our property will probably be sold in five or six weeks. We may possibly go to Europe but everything is at present uncertain. 2 or 3000 dollars spent there will be of great service to his health and will still leave us about 8000 dollars from the sale of our little property, every single investment of which God seems most mercifully to have blessed."[67] Even though the Connellys' situation was uncertain, Cornelia's knowledge of their finances demonstrates her involvement, and even management, of their affairs, especially when Pierce's mind was not on the practical aspects of household management. Cornelia's financial acumen would play a role later in the management of her order.

Roman "Holiday"

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[65] Ibid., 32-33.

[66] Julie A. Fast and John D. Preston, *Loving Someone with Bipolar: Understanding and Helping your Partner*, 2nd ed. (Oakland: CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2012), quoted in Brabant, 19.

[67] Flaxman, 28.

The Connellys sold their house and possessions to finance their trip to Rome. They first travelled to New Orleans, where they attended the consecration of Anthony Blanc, the newly appointed Catholic Bishop of the diocese. Through their connection with Bishop Rosati, Pierce and Cornelia were invited to the consecration mass and found themselves caught up in the liturgy's splendor. At the reception afterward, Pierce was received as "the prodigal son, as a man of courage who had sold all to find the pearl of great price."[68] Cornelia was impressed by the homily at the consecration mass, which was on the "place of accepted suffering in the life of a Christian," a theme near to her heart.[69] Bishop Michael Portier of Mobile, Alabama, preached the sermon as a "French missionary speaking to brother missionaries, and he described a church persecuted by Protestants, and wracked by poverty, lack of manpower, and the terrible yellow fever epidemics which regularly scourged the Valley."[70] But he also described "its glory as the Church of the crucified Christ whose bishops . . . gave in the New World the loving service of the Good Shepherd for His flock."[71] Cornelia's devotion to the crucified Christ nourished her growing commitment to the Catholic Church. She began to take catechetical instruction with Bishop Rosati, and he and Bishop Blanc found her already well-prepared for the reception of the sacraments. Cornelia received her First Communion on December 8, 1836, before her family's departure for Rome. She had reached the point of personal conviction, but according to Rosati, she also "did not want to face the dangers of the sea before she had made profession of the

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[68] Elizabeth Strub, SHCJ, *Yes, Lord, Always Yes*: *A Life of Cornelia Connelly 1809–1879* (San Diego: Casa Cornelia Publications, 2003), 17.

[69] Ibid., 36.

[70] Caritas McCarthy, "The Connellys in the Church of the Mississippi Valley," *The Pylon: Cornelia Connelly Special Issue* 29, no. 3 (1968): 13, in Villanova Digital Library, https://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:237941#?c=&m=&s=&cv=1&xywh=-2586%2C103%2C7686%2C3236 (accessed May 28, 2022).

[71] Ibid.

Catholic Religion." Cornelia received the "full sanction and approval of her husband" but Pierce "did not intend to 'make public profession' because 'he had his reason for waiting.'" He had doubts about miracles and planned further study in Rome. Flaxman noted that "no event in Cornelia's future among many that were momentous would be more pivotal than this. By breaking away from her husband's plans in a matter so intimate to their relationship as religion, this nineteenth-century wife made a kind of quantum leap out of dependence into freedom. Henceforth she is more and more herself, and at the same time more and more free for God."[72]

After an arduous journey, the Connellys arrived safely in Rome, where the Catholic elite warmly welcomed them. In particular, they met the Earl of Shrewsbury, a Catholic convert from England, and Cornelia became close friends with his daughter, Gwendoline Borghese. While Pierce was making contacts with Catholic officials, Cornelia focused on improving her artistic sensibilities. "She is taking music lessons. She and Pierce have begun Italian, and she is trying to improve her French conversation with a daily exercise."[73] However, Pierce's desire to become a Catholic priest soon overshadowed the delights of Rome.

Before the Connelly's departed America, Cornelia did not seem too concerned with Pierce's inquiries about being ordained. She expressed this confidence in a letter to Addie, saying, "Pierce is not a Catholic nor could he be a Catholic priest if he desired it while I lived."[74] Rosati may have told Pierce that only in rare cases could a married man be ordained with his wife still alive. Cornelia seemed certain that this possibility would never occur, or she did not convey her misgivings to others. But once they arrived in Rome, Pierce met with various prelates

[72] Flaxman, 37.

[73] Ibid., 44.

[74] Ibid., 32.

to discuss the possibility of becoming ordained in the Catholic Church. He was received by Cardinal Giacomo Fransoni, Cardinal Prefect for the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, and Cardinal Carlo Odescalchi, the Pope's Vicar General. Odescalchi appeared to advise Pierce not to pursue ordination. Pierce sent a letter to Bishop Rosati dated March 2, 1836, confirming Odescalchi's advice:

> It is with sincere pleasure that I communicate to you that the Cardinal Vicar thinks my prospects of usefulness in embracing the Catholic faith will be greater as a married man than as a priest & he wisely argues that the example of my conversion will be kept in sight longer and more frequently remembered than if I were to take my place among the clergy and thus retire more completely from the world.[75]

At first, Pierce seemed resigned to accept the advice of the Vicar General and remain a layman. On March 16, however, "he petitioned not only to be admitted to the church and confirmed, but also to be considered for holy orders." It is noteworthy that "in those two weeks he moved from the mood of contentment and pious acceptance that characterized his letter to Rosati into decisive contrary action."[76] We do not know what caused this quick reversal. In between his meeting with Odescalchi and his reception into the Catholic Church on March 28, he had an audience with Pope Gregory XVI.

Before he was elected Pope, Gregory (Bartolomeo Alberto Cappellari) had been Prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith, and as a result, had a sincere interest in the "missionary fields" of the church, especially the United States. "He encouraged religious vocations, and often received converts personally. . . . Those who had prepared the way for Pierce's audience could count on Gregory's interest in an American convert clergyman who

[75] Ibid., 45.

[76] Ibid.

wanted to be ordained."[77] Indeed, while the other prelates encouraged Pierce to remain a layman, Gregory preferred to leave the possibility of ordination open. He believed Pierce's desire to be ordained should not be rejected outright, but time would tell whether he remained "steadfast to his holy purpose."[78] This was a serious blow for Cornelia, because the Pope did not deny Pierce's desire for ordination outright; instead he took a "wait and see approach." This decision planted seeds of real anxiety for the first time in Cornelia's mind. Pierce could only become a priest through a permanent, canonical separation between himself and Cornelia. New York Cardinal John McCloskey remembered Cornelia confiding in him when he was a young priest studying in Rome: "Father McCloskey, is it necessary for Pierce Connelly to make this sacrifice and sacrifice me? I love my husband and my darling children. Why must I give them up? I love my religion and why cannot we remain happy, as the Earl of Shrewsbury's family?"[79] This glimpse of Cornelia's suffering was rare though, as she continued to present a blissful state in her letters to her family: "You may imagine my joy . . . Pierce has made his abjuration . . . Oh my sisters, what is all that this world can give or take away compared with the joy of feeling yourself in the true way."[80] She deeply rejoiced that Pierce had converted to Catholicism, but she could not confide to her family her uneasiness about the future state of her family.

Inspired by the Holy Child

Despite her anxiety about Pierce's desire for ordination, Cornelia's faith continued to develop during this time. She experienced a religious event that would "deepen her

[77] Ibid., 47.

[78] Ibid., 48.

[79] Ibid., 45.

[80] Ibid., 49.

understanding of the church and the mystery of the Incarnation."[81] In January 1837, a weeklong celebration of the Epiphany was held at the Church of San Carlo on the Corso. Here Cornelia would have been introduced to the preaching of Gioachinno Ventura di Raulica, a Theatine Superior General who was an established theologian by the time the Connellys visited Rome. John Marmion described Ventura as the "leading Roman homilist, preaching Quaresima [during Lent] three successive years at St. Peters', and he was the chief collaborator of St. Vincent Pallotti in creating the fame of the Ottavario dell'Epifania [the Octave of the Epiphany] from 1837."[82] The Connellys and their new circle of Catholic friends would not have missed this event, especially since the church was only a ten-minute walk from their apartment.

Ventura's sermons were published in a three-volume series titled *La Bellezze della Fede,* translated in English as *The Wonders of Faith*. Cornelia was presented the first volume as a gift from Princess Dora of the Borghese family. Ventura's sermons on the Incarnation and the Epiphany inspired Cornelia's devotion to the Holy Child. He explained that Christ "*manifests* himself first of all not only as true man, but as man-child, as poor, humble and suffering like the least of men to establish with men a permanent alliance, a perfect communion of equality of love."[83] Cornelia's focus on Christ as a "man-child" is critically important to the spiritual foundation of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. In the "humble, hidden life" of Christ's infancy and childhood one finds the innermost dwelling of the presence of God. In the mystery

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[81] Ibid., 59.

[82] John P. Marmion, "Cornelia Connelly's Work in Education, 1848-1879" (Ph.D. diss., The Victorian University of Manchester, 1984), 37, ProQuest One Academic, https://dbproxy.lasalle.edu:443/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/cornelia-connellys-work-education-1848-1879/docview/303347620/se-2?accountid=11999 (accessed May 28, 2022).

[83] Ursula Blake, "Cornelia and Gioacchino Ventura: A Look at the Background Reading Cornelia Used in Building Up Her Spiritual Teaching," *Source* 3 (1972): 38, in Cornelia Connelly Digital Library Resource, https://corneliaconnellylibrary.org/library-materials/texts/Source3/36-44.pdf (accessed May 28, 2022).

of Christ's Incarnation Cornelia not only found the ultimate model of humility, but the source of God's love and mercy.

Ventura emphasized that Christ's Incarnation was not just a redemptive mission, but a mark of God's infinite love and mercy. He wrote, "To carry out a reform of this magnitude, a renewal which involved the depth of man's being, God himself had to come in search of his creature across the immense chasm which sin had caused between heaven and earth, between God and man; but he needed to come in the guise of his greatest mercy and most tender love."[84] The Incarnation, for Ventura, was an expression of the God's great love for humanity: "And so we come to the mystery of boundless mercy, of unbelievable condescension, and of the most tender love which the Son of God fulfilled by becoming man, by being born as man, by manifesting himself to men in the very substance of humanity."[85] For Ventura, the Lord shows his great magnanimity by taking on human form, to experience the suffering of human nature.

For Cornelia, the mysteries of the Incarnation and Epiphany became the vehicles through which one is to emulate Christ in His humility. She echoed Ventura in the abridged version of the SHCJ Constitutions: "In the humble and hidden life of the Holy Child Jesus we find mysteries of the most sublime teaching. Here it is that God manifests to us in the most wonderful manner the treasures of His mercy and of His boundless love."[86] Ventura's articulation of the great mystery of Christ as "man-child" inspired Cornelia's central theme in the Constitutions. Christ's hidden life on earth was to reveal the humble path by which the sisters emulate him in

[84] Ibid., 40.

[85] Ibid., 41.

[86] McCarthy, *The Spirituality*, 114a.

poverty, chastity, and obedience. Through the constant contemplation and practice of Christian virtue, they are able to actualize the boundless love made manifest in the Holy Child Jesus.

Caritas McCarthy observed that "in the kenosis of his Incarnation," Cornelia found "the grace of growth—'step by step' in that eternal life begun here in time through baptism which has been radically accepted in commitment to the evangelical counsels."[87] Cornelia saw the mystery of the Incarnation as a "dynamic" process through which we "ought all to begin life again with the most sweet and holy and loving child Jesus—a humbled God."[88] Later writings of Cornelia reflect this process of growth: "may you really so learn of the Holy Child Jesus, my dear children, growing as He grew, in stature and grace; and when you grow up may you so love and follow the Man Jesus that you may be of the number of those 'little ones' whom the most Blessed Lord will bring into His everlasting kingdom."[89] Ventura's influence on Cornelia deepened her understanding of the hidden, humble nature of the Holy Child. Cornelia realized that the characteristics manifested by the Christ child revealed the path to greater interior union with God. She would return to the United States with a greater devotion to the mysteries of the Incarnate Lord.

The Connellys returned home in 1837 when a financial crisis hit the United States, forcing Pierce to take a position as a bank teller in New Orleans. He had been advised by the hierarchy in Rome not to pursue Holy Orders (for the time being), so he was left with few employment options. However, a new Jesuit college opened in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, and Bishop Blanc recommended Pierce for a teaching position. Cornelia would teach music for the

[87] Ibid., 110.

[88] Ibid., 108.

[89] Ibid., 110.

Religious of the Sacred Heart at their nearby school. The Connellys moved once again to new mission territory in the semi-tropical environment of Grand Coteau.

Grand Coteau: Revelation amid Heartbreak

In examining Cornelia's Grand Coteau years, Sarah Brabant explains that her purpose was not to show how tragic events shaped Cornelia, but rather to demonstrate how she "survive[d] the unsurvivable [sic], and to live a life that was both heroic in its own sense and valuable to others who have experienced or are presently experiencing similar circumstances in their lives."[90] The example Cornelia set for others managing troubled circumstances underscores a modern interpretation of Cornelia's holiness, one not necessarily based on her religious life. She becomes a model of strength and grace for women dealing with tragic events. Cornelia's biographers agreed that Grand Coteau was a critical formation period in Cornelia's spiritual life, but Brabant suggested other influences that strengthened Cornelia's character as well. In addition to developing a lifelong spirituality, the "presence of strong female role models [Sisters of the Sacred Heart] and her experience of economic self-sufficiency" shaped whom she would become in later years.[91]

While they were living in New Orleans, Reverend Nicholas Point, the Rector of the newly established St. Charles Jesuit College in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, offered Pierce a teaching position. It would be a significant change for the Connellys—a new life devoted to the educational apostolate marked by poverty and hardship. Pierce recalled, "He [Rev. Point] very frankly represented their present poverty & the debts that would protract it, and that it could only

[90] Brabant, 3.

[91] Ibid.

be the labour of my blessed little wife that would for some time bring in any revenue."[92] The Connellys would receive room and board for Pierce's position, but Cornelia's music instruction at the nearby Sacred Heart School would be their primary source of income. Cornelia became the main financial support of her family during their Grand Coteau years. Pierce returned to Europe in 1842, so Cornelia earned an income and took care of the children alone during this time.

Even though Pierce praised his "blessed little" or "dear little" wife effusively throughout his letters, the language used indicates, perhaps subconsciously, that he did not perceive Cornelia as his equal. He saw her as a beloved wife and mother, but did not consider her feelings when making major decisions that would impact them both. Flaxman observes that Cornelia's views "are hidden behind her husband's reiterated 'we', 'my holy little wife', 'my dear wife and I'."[93] When Pierce decided to return to Rome and pursue the priesthood again, the status of his wife and children seem secondary.

In Grand Coteau, the Connellys lived in much different circumstances than they had previously. When they first arrived, they lived in a primitive setting until their promised residence was ready. Pierce reported, "Here we are then with the three children, the little French governess [Mlle Mignard] & two faithful slaves whom we reserved for ourselves, living in what they call our Chateau of Malmaison, being a cabin about 10 feet high & forty long divided into three compartments."[94] The Connellys' slaves, Phoebe and Sally, returned to the family after being loaned to the Mercers while they were in Rome. Eventually, the Connellys moved to a house dubbed Gracemere, and even with the hardships of a sparse environment, they lived

[92] Flaxman, 64.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid., 66.

contentedly for a while. "Pierce and Cornelia were merry, full of fun with their children and deeply serious about their spiritual lives. … They prayed with the children, read spiritual books, discussed [Thomas à Kempis'] *The Imitation of Christ* and brought any family visitors into a rhythm of live which took these spiritual means for granted."[95]

Pierce appeared to find contentment in Grand Coteau, writing, "We and our small children have found in the prairie solitude, sanctity, and the greatest happiness."[96] It was not long, however, before the cycle of unhappiness appeared again. Pierce was not satisfied with the quality of education the college provided, and he sent letters full of unsolicited "destructive criticism" to the Superior General in Rome, Father Jan Roothan. A small excerpt of Roothan's response survives: "If I were to accept literally all you say and all the implications of your words, then I would have to reply, 'Would that the Society has never set foot in the States! Everything it has done there is worthless.'" He advised Pierce, "Let us try not to see only the bad side of things."[97] When Pierce attempted to enter the Society of Jesus two years later, he reversed course and wrote a letter of apology to the Superior General. [98]

Female Role Models

Despite Pierce's rumblings about St. Charles, Cornelia found genuine happiness working with the Sisters of the Society of the Sacred Heart. In her article, "The Connellys in the Church of the Mississippi Valley," Caritas McCarthy described the missionary spirit of Grand Coteau: "there was a brotherly union between its struggling bishops and the Religious of the Sacred

[95] Strub, *Positio*, 105.

[96] Flaxman, 69.

[97] J.P. Roothan S.J. to Pierce Connelly, June 24 1839; quoted in Flaxman, 69.

[98] Ibid.

Heart and the Jesuits whom the bishops treasured as the Apostles treasured their first Christian coworkers. It was a Church with much human frailty and suffering, but one which could shape saints."[99] McCarthy compared the courageous spirit of the first missionaries in the Mississippi Valley to the first Christian communities who spread the word of Christ with determination and zeal. St. Madeleine Sophie Barat, the founder of the Society of the Sacred Heart in France, gave St. Rose Philippine Duchesne permission to establish a mission in the United States. Under Duchesne's direction, Mother Eugenie Audé and Sr. Mary Layton founded the Academy of Sacred Heart at Grand Coteau in 1821.[100] Mother Eugene Audé became the first religious superior of the Academy in 1821, and Mother Xavier Murphy took over as superior in 1825. "This trio, and others who suffered, prayed, and worked at Grand Coteau, had been formed by Mother Barat, and had given it the latter's ardent love of Our Lord and of the Church, the love of a contemplative in action."[101]

Mother Xavier Murphy was responsible for making the Academy the "powerhouse of love, prayer, and apostolicity which Cornelia was to know."[102] Until the founding of St. Charles College in 1837, the sisters sometimes went for weeks or months without daily mass due to the scarcity of mission priests. This deprivation of the Eucharist heightened the sisters' appreciation for mass, an atmosphere that benefited Cornelia's spirituality. Cornelia noted the convent's "'bright and happy community' . . . 'the beautiful French cantiques' they sang and the 'joyous

[99] McCarthy, "The Connellys," 8.

[100] Schools of the Sacred Heart, "History," https://sshcoteau.org/other/admissions/history/ (accessed May 1, 2022).

[101] McCarthy, "The Connellys," 15.

[102] Ibid.

walks and recreations in the garden and forest.'" Cornelia would remember the year 1839 as "one of the happiest years of her life."[103]

The Sisters of the Sacred Heart were models of self-sufficiency in an impoverished American Catholic Church. Karen Kennelly described American sisters' economic initiatives:

> [The sisters] found ways to support themselves and their works without the endowments their European Sisters relied upon. The means of self-support they used at one time or another are at once a startling reminder of their poverty and ingenuity: selling patent medicines (French Poor Clare's); sewing and selling (for a penny apiece) shot bags during the Mexican-American War (Sisters of St. Joseph); taking in sewing; giving piano lessons; writing, printing, and binding books; working in stores and factories; begging.[104]

The Sisters of the Sacred Heart primarily earned money through their educational endeavors; they established boarding and day schools for young women. In teaching piano lessons for their students, Cornelia was both a contributor to the sisters' economic subsistence and a beneficiary of their generosity. The value of the nun's self-sufficiency was not lost on Cornelia. She was at the convent for several hours every day and "found herself caught up in the concerns of the nuns, gradually learning what were the patterns and springs of their existence."[105] Cornelia did not just internalize the religious zeal of the sisters, but admired their fortitude in sustaining a religious community. The friendships she made at the convent bolstered her spirit in times of trial, and they continued to support her when Pierce left for Europe a second time.

The sisters also participated in the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, and Cornelia was allowed to participate in a retreat focused on the exercises in December 1839. Another

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[103] Flaxman, 69.

[104] Karen Kennelly, "Women as Church in a New Land," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 8, no. 4 (Bicentennial Symposium: Historians and Bishops in Dialogue, 1989):67-68, https://www-jstor-org.dbproxy.lasalle.edu/stable/25153902?pq-origsite=summon&seq=4#metadata_info_tab_contents (accessed May 28, 2022).

[105] Flaxman, 68.

participant noted Cornelia's attendance: "During this time of grace, each day [Rev. Point] gave four instructions, including a conference, heard our confessions and directed us. Two of our married alumnae and our mistress of music, Mrs. Connelly, followed the exercises of the first days with much fervor and great joy of soul."[106] As a laywoman, Cornelia could not participate in the exercises beyond the first few days, but Rev. Nicolas Point gave her a spiritual journal on Christmas Day, 1839. In her first entry she promised never to pass a year without "making a retreat again . . . to follow the exercises as best I can."[107]

Elizabeth Strub describes the transformational process of the Spiritual Exercises, which were developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola after his conversion to Catholicism in the sixteenth century as "the knowledge of Christ as King which leads to imitation and discipleship; it is discipleship which leads to identification with and participation in the sending and laboring and dying and rising of the eternal king made flesh to do battle with Satan and wrest from him what had been under his power and command—all to the greater glory of God."[108] The spiritual exercises lead the retreatant through contemplating the mysteries of Christ so that he or she elects to participate in advancing the Kingdom of God on earth. Each mystery "is to be understood as unfolding as a particular application of the universal plan of salvation decreed by the Trinity. . . . Presiding over each mystery is the entire Trinity loving the exercitant and all humankind through this beloved agent and emissary and willing their salvation and identification with the cause of this king in their midst."[109] Through Scriptural contemplation, the participant

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[106] Ibid., 17.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Elizabeth Strub, *Ignatius, the Spiritual Exercises, and Cornelia: A Retreat by All Means* (San Diego, CA: Casa Cornelia Publications, 1996), 19.

[109] Ibid., 20.

identifies each mystery as a particular aspect of the Trinity's redemptive nature. The retreatant "extends the contemplative penetration to the height, depth and breadth of the mystery at hand and so comes to a new way of seeing and companioning God at work in all things."[110] The spiritual exercises enable the retreatant to encounter the mysteries of Christ in the fullness of their revelation. In a quote attributed to Rev. Point, for instance, he expands on the human nature of Christ: "The spirit of Jesus! See it at the crib, spirit of humility, of dependence. The Word divine . . . its grandeur, its wisdom, all its perfections are hidden under the veils of littleness and of infancy! . . . It is only in meditation at the feet of Jesus, near the Sacrament of Love, near His crib, that pure truth shines on spirits and makes them see all the beauty of humility, of dependence and of other virtues."[111]

As a mother, Cornelia was drawn to Point's emphasis on the humility of the Holy Child. She recognized that holiness could be achieved by emulating the virtues of Christ in her lived experiences as wife and mother:

> It is noteworthy that Cornelia's holiness was given a definitive shape while she was living a married life. By degrees her context would shift, she would make religious vows and her life's devotion would center more heavily in the Incarnate Word, the Holy Child. But her love for God which was ignited at Grand Coteau would continue to express itself in all the same characteristically active ways."[112]

Cornelia's experiences at Grand Coteau formed the definitive character of her holiness, which would continue to grow through successive stages of her life.

Identification with Christ

[110] Ibid.

[111] Ibid., 18.

[112] Lancaster, 185.

Strub argued that Cornelia's "particular, specific holiness was shaped by her experiences at Grand Coteau around the time of the death of her son, John Henry."[113] In the month following her first encounter with the spiritual exercises, Cornelia experienced a tragedy that changed the trajectory of her spiritual life. In February 1840, Cornelia and Pierce's two-year-old son John Henry died in a horrific scalding accident when he fell into a vat of boiling sugar. For Cornelia, this was a "moment of profound identification with our Lady of Sorrows as she focused her heart solely on the sufferings of her child, and through him, on the sufferings of Jesus. At this time, Christ's humanity became a palpable reality to her. It was epitomized in the symbol of his heart, wounded and burning with love, which became a familiar object of her prayer."[114] In an intensely spiritual realization, Cornelia identified the suffering of John Henry with the Passion of Christ. "In her small son Cornelia saw Jesus the man lying in his mother's arms. As Cornelia held and comforted him she entered into Mary's pain and loss, for Mary held her son just like that when he was a child . . . . John Henry's forty-three-hour agony was Jesus' passion brought home to her and Mary's compassion to be shared."[115]

Through the tragic death of her son, Cornelia also received the grace of suffering with Christ. In her notebook, Cornelia wrote that John Henry "was taken into the temple of the Lord" on the feast of the Presentation (February 2). John Henry's death brought Cornelia's meditative focus from the Passion of Christ to the offering up of the child. Elizabeth Strub suggested that "there is a note of conscious offering on Cornelia's part—a bringing the child-victim to the Father as Mary carried Jesus in the Temple in obedience to the divine law."[116] Her son's death

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[113] Ibid.

[114] Strub, *Positio,* 178.

[115] Ibid., 110.

[116] Ibid.

marked a pivotal turn in Cornelia's spirituality because he "became a sign that Jesus' passion would always lead her back to the Child. . . . In him she saw Jesus, the suffering Child of the Father. In Jesus she saw everyone, and especially the poor, as her own child in need."[117] Cornelia's spiritual affiliation with the suffering Christ child became a cornerstone in her faith foundation. Further reading and meditation on the mystery of the Incarnation would deepen her focus on serving Christ by educating children in need.

Through John Henry's death, Cornelia realized she was joined to Christ's suffering in the Paschal Mystery. Strub reflected: "Always after this episode suffering would be embraced by Cornelia as unitive and therefore as mysteriously joyful. . . . In that union of love with Christ's suffering, Cornelia knew joy. Staying with the suffering was a way of staying with the suffering Christ until he blessed her with union."[118] And in Cornelia's mind and heart, the suffering Christ would always be manifested through the Incarnation. By contemplating on the "humble, hidden childhood" of Christ, she would be united to God in his love and mercy.

Pierce's Decision

There is little textual evidence of Pierce's reaction to their son's death (and the death of their daughter Mary Magdalen the year before, shortly after her birth). In one excerpt, he attributed his feelings about their deaths to his development as a Roman Catholic: "helped no doubt by the blessedness of sorrow at the loss of children turned to angels, I have spent never to be forgotten years in learning more and more the immense revenues of love and consolation,

[117] Ibid., 112.

[118] Ibid., 188.

God has placed at the disposal of his Holy Church."[119] Paz suggests "perhaps Pierce was too preoccupied with his own frustrations," because it was not long after John Henry's death when he renewed his efforts to become a Roman Catholic priest.

From the early stages of Pierce's conversion to Catholicism, he admitted that although he had broken his commitment to the Episcopal Church, he intended to remain a priest: "wherever my future may lead me . . . . the world of business cannot be my place of refuge. The intention of my vows I never, never can forget. By my own desire, by my own consent, I was forever separated from all pursuits and occupations inconsistent with the sacred character of an ecclesiastic: and the sincere purpose of my heart, and of my heart, and of my act, I have no wish, no thought to change."[120] Tellingly, Pierce never mentioned his commitment to his marriage vows and barely considered them an obstacle to his pursuit of the priesthood.

At Grand Coteau, Pierce tried to follow the Catholic hierarchy's recommendations that he remain married, but he became discontented once again. He complained to the Earl of Shrewsbury that his domesticity did not compare to the "Royal Road" Jesus walked: "God forgive us! for here in our wilderness and solitude we have still so much to enjoy & so little to do and suffer that it seems but little like travelling the Royal Road Our Master walked in."[121] If anything, this quote demonstrates how detached Pierce was from family life, because he had "little to do" in household duties, and he did not feel the loss of his children qualified as suffering for the "Royal Road."

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[119] Report of an Address delivered by the Rev. Pierce Connelly; with a preface, and dedicated to his Grace the Duke of Manchester, Chairman of the Reverend Pierce Connelly's Committee (London, 1853), 66, quoted in Paz, 97.

[120] Pierce Connelly, "Letter and Farewell Sermon," 43-44, quoted in Paz, 101.

[121] Flaxman, 77.

From Pierce's first petition to be ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1836, Cornelia knew that separation might be in their future. Pierce had decided he wanted to enter the Society of Jesus since he had become closely connected with the order while teaching at St. Charles' College. In December 1839, Pierce attended a Jesuit retreat, and soon after Cornelia wrote an anguished prayer in her notebook: "O my God, trim Thy vine, cut it up to the quick, but in Thy great mercy root it not yet up. My God help me in my great weakness, help me to serve Thee with new fervor."[122] Interestingly, Cornelia did not see fault in Pierce's desire to become a priest, but rather she saw weakness in herself, bemoaning that she lacked the strength to permit Pierce's ordination. Cornelia recalled that on October 13, 1840, the Feast of St. Edward the Confessor, Pierce officially told her it was his "'declared wish and intention . . . . to take orders in the Roman Catholic Church' and they should therefore 'live in constant and perfect charity, abstaining from sexual intercourse with each other in order to more fully devote themselves in the service of God'."[123] Though devastated, Cornelia remembered that her response to Pierce at the time was measured: "This is a very grave matter, think about it deeply, and twice over; but if the good God asks the sacrifice, I am prepared to make it & with all my heart."[124] Cornelia warned Pierce that this action would be irreversible.

It is hard to imagine the strain Cornelia must have experienced, even from the time of Pierce's first inquiry in 1836. Pierce claimed he did not want to separate from Cornelia, but his actions and words conveyed a different intent. His love for Cornelia could not dispel his inner discontent and his lack of perceived fulfillment. How psychologically distressful must it have

[122] Ibid., 72.

[123] Ibid., 77–78.

[124] Ibid.

been for Cornelia to know that her husband did not find fulfillment in their relationship and that he needed to seek others' attention and affirmation? In the Catholic Church, a religious vocation has always been considered a “higher calling” than marriage, and the nobler sacrifice. Cornelia understood Pierce’s desire to become a priest, but she wanted to be sure it was truly God’s will.

Cornelia was pregnant with their fifth child when Pierce revealed his intention to pursue ordination; Frank Connelly was born on March 29, 1841. During this time, Cornelia was faced with an untenable situation. She was trying to accept Pierce's wishes if this was God's will, while putting on a brave face and steadfastly carrying out the duties of wife and mother. As the prospect of Pierce's ordination became imminent, Cornelia began to contemplate if she, too, was called to religious life. For Pierce to be ordained, canon law required Cornelia to consent to a deed of separation and remain celibate for the rest of her life. As will be discussed further in Chapter 2, it was commonly understood that she would enter a convent. Cornelia was still not certain this was her future calling, and an excerpt from her spiritual notebook reflected her mental struggle: “O my good Jesus I *do* give myself all to Thee to suffer and die on the cross, poor as Thou wert poor, abandoned as Thou wert abandoned by all but thee O Mary.”[125] She was determined to conform to God's will but was plagued by doubts. For example, if Pierce's health broke down under his ministerial duties in Natchez, could he withstand extensive Jesuit training and a resumption of pastoral duties? Despite her misgivings, Cornelia participated in a retreat to help with her indecision, and at the end of the retreat she wrote in her notebook: “Examined Vocation. Decided.”[126] It seems such a terse entry for a monumental decision, but one which expressed the finality of the situation.

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[125] Flaxman, 80.

[126] Ibid.

At the time, Pierce was determined to enter the Jesuits and communicated his intentions to the Superior General. His friend the Earl of Shrewsbury offered to pay for Mercer's education while Pierce pursued application to the Society of Jesus in England. It is not clear why Pierce was determined to pursue ordination in England, except that he had eminent Catholic friends there. If the Pope granted approval, it would have been possible for him to enter the Jesuit novitiate at Georgetown, thus keeping the Connelly family together in the United States. However, the American Jesuit missions were poor, and Shrewsbury's financial backing promised elite educations for the children. There is no record of Cornelia protesting Mercer's education in England, but Bishop Blanc of New Orleans disapproved, citing the age of nine as being too young to be removed from his mother and "all that was familiar."[127]

Nevertheless, as Pierce's travel plans were finalized, the Connelly family was uprooted for the second time. Household items were sold or auctioned, and the Connelly's two devoted female slaves, Phoebe and Sally and Sally's children, were transferred to the Jesuits. Pierce and Mercer left Grand Coteau on May 5, 1842, and stayed in Philadelphia for three weeks before sailing for England. Cornelia and baby Frank remained in Grand Coteau and stayed at the nearby Bishop's Cottage. Ady (Adeline) would board at the convent school. While Pierce sought application to the Jesuits in England, Cornelia's life at Bishop's Cottage was quiet and simple; she continued to teach music lessons at the Sacred Heart convent and devote her free time to her children. As it became more certain that permanent separation from her husband was inevitable, the prospects for her family remaining together were unclear. But if Pierce was ordained and Cornelia entered religious life, she was determined to keep her children "as much under my eyes as if I had not left the world."[128]

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[127] Ibid., 82.
[128] Ibid., 80.

Chapter 2

An Unexpected Calling

Pierce determined that joining the Society of Jesus would be the best path to fulfilling his vocation. He had been immersed in the Jesuit mission and spirituality while teaching at their College in Grand Coteau, and had also attended several retreats while working at the college. Although Pierce could have entered the Jesuit novitiate at Georgetown College, he desired to return to England, where he saw an opportunity for an ex-Episcopalian priest to bring converts into the Catholic Church. When Pierce and Mercer arrived in England in July 1842, Pierce immediately sought to establish communication with the Jesuit Provincial Superior, Father Randall Lythgoe. In a letter to Lythgoe, he expressed his eagerness to enter the Order, and besieged the Superior with questions as to the logistics of the arrangement: "Is it necessary that both [He and Cornelia] should begin their noviceship together? Can the little boy [Frank] remain near his mother during her noviceship? . . . If it is necessary that the mother should remain for some time longer with the child, would music lessons make a provision for them at a convent?"[1] Lythgoe's measured response dashed Pierce's immediate hopes; he advised Pierce that

> [I]t would be wiser to return to America for two years to provide for the children rather than attempt it in Europe. *After that* he could begin studies in a Jesuit house for one or two years. *Then* his little son could be received at Hodder [Jesuit school for little boys]. *Then* Pierce and Cornelia would be free to follow their own vocations to religious life.[2]

Lythgoe would not allow Pierce to enter the novitiate until Cornelia's situation was settled, and he reasonably asked Pierce to wait a few years until Frank was a little older. This seemed like a prudent decision for all parties involved. At first Pierce accepted Lythgoe's explanation, but it

[1] Pierce Connelly to Rev. Randall Lythgoe, S.J., July 17, 1842, quoted in Paz, 108.

[2] Flaxman, 84.

was not long before he changed his mind, and decided to press his case in Rome. At this point, Lord Shrewsbury implored him to be rational: "What do you want? To break the laws common and Divine? To give up your lovely wife and children? No such sacrifice is demanded of you. You are mad! By ambition the Angels fell! Stop at once, and be a good Catholic husband and father."[3] Shrewsbury's remonstrance only deflected Pierce temporarily, as he took a traveling tutorship with the oldest son of Lord Berkeley of Spetchley Park. Pierce and his charge traveled through Europe and arrived in Rome in June 1843, where he discovered he could not proceed further with his petition unless Cornelia gave her permission for him to be ordained in person. Without other options, Pierce returned to the United States so he could bring Cornelia and the children to England.

The Humble Life

While Pierce was in Europe, Cornelia matured in her spiritual development, in particular her profound understanding of Jesus as revealed in the Holy Child. As discussed in Chapter 1, Cornelia was greatly moved by the sermons of Gioachinno Ventura in Rome on the Infancy Narratives. As time went on, she began to recognize the spirituality of the Holy Child unfolding through events in her life:

> As she experienced the Paschal Mystery—'crucifixion of heart'—within the context of marriage, child-bearing, child-rearing, she grasped the wonderful condescension of the God who had lived his Paschal Mystery with his Mother and Joseph in Bethlehem and the long self-effacing years in Nazareth; she committed herself to the way of life God had revealed through his human childhood, through his 'ordinary' human life.[4]

[3] Ibid.

[4] McCarthy, *The Spirituality*, 58

Cornelia saw a parallel between her time of "waiting" in Grand Coteau, and Christ's hidden years before his public ministry. She realized the value of her vocation as a wife and mother, as revealed through the members of the Holy Family. She strove to practice the virtues Christ exemplified in His manifestation as the Holy Child. Cornelia's retreat director, Rev. Nicolas Point, directed her to the Crib as a particular aspect of Christ's Spirituality that must be studied:

> "The spirit of Jesus! see it at the crib, spirit of humility, of dependence. The Word Divine . . . its grandeur, its wisdom, all its perfections are hidden under the veils of littleness and infancy! . . . It is only in meditation at the feet of Jesus, near the Sacrament of love, near His crib, that pure truth shines on spirits and makes them see all the beauty of humility, of dependence and of other virtues."[5]

Cornelia would later capture the spirit of this instruction in her *Directions for Novice Mistresses*: "So ought all to begin life again with the most sweet holy and loving Child Jesus—a humbled God walking with him step by step, in the simplicity of the Child, in humility & poverty . . . that they may finally be united to our crucified Lord and thus look forward to a glorious eternity.[6]

During this time Cornelia continued to give music lessons for the students at the school run by the Society of the Sacred Heart in Louisiana. Mother Maria Cutts, the Superior at Grand Coteau, "introduced Cornelia to the inner discipline of religious life … and encouraged her through what was a time of struggle."[7] Cornelia was concerned about providing a stable environment for her children in Pierce's absence, but she was also dealing with internal struggles on the question of whether she was called to religious life. Mother Cutts gave Cornelia a notebook to record spiritual reflections and petitions, her daily schedule, and a list of devotions. Flaxman remarks, "The earnestness with which she strove to respond is evident in the notebook.

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[5] McCarthy, "The Connellys," 18.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Flaxman, 85.

This is where the '*Practice*' becomes visible. Page after page records whether she had done each day what she undertook; notes and carefully copied extracts; in one place, advice to herself about keeping her rule."[8] Whatever the future would hold for Cornelia, she was determined to "'give P[ierce], self, children, all' into the care of the Mother of God."[9]

A letter from Cornelia to Lord Shrewsbury detailed her involvement with the Society. She thanked him and his wife profusely for their generosity to Pierce and Mercer, and then provided details about the Congregation:

> My good husband will have told you about our pretty Convent and the College and perhaps had interested you and dear Lady Shrewsbury in the <u>little</u> Order of S.H. of Jesus. There are in this house about twenty Nuns and for several years past upward of a hundred children in the boarding school. This year they will not have so many on account of the great distress in the money affairs. They have also a school for orphans.[10]

Cornelia was comfortable being an "unofficial" member of the Society, and it is clear she was knowledgeable about the operation of the school, especially with regard to financial affairs. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Cornelia participated in a retreat to determine her future path, which is demonstrated by a sentence in her notebook: "Examined Vocation. Decided."[11] It seems such an absolute decision, but in reality that was far from the case. She was determined not to enter a community unless her children could stay with her, or until they became old enough to attend boarding school. Even though Pierce wished to be ordained as soon as possible, Cornelia would not commit to any circumstances which would separate her from the children.

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[8] Ibid., 86.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Cornelia Connelly to Lord Shrewsbury, Vigil of St. Theresa 1842, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.02, ASHCJ.

[11] Flaxman, 80.

From the beginning, Cornelia understood that she and Pierce were joined in a double vocation, a promise they would undertake together for their future life. When Pierce first approached Cornelia about becoming an ordained Catholic priest, he informed her that she would also have to enter religious life. The religious communities that she was surrounded by at Grand Coteau most likely did not possess intricate knowledge of canon law related to these types of situations. As explained by Flaxman, Cornelia only had one option presented to her:

> The niceties of canon law had not reached Cornelia at Grand Coteau, where in a community of celibates it was apparently assumed she had to become a nun. In such a milieu one might say that she breathed it in as the only possibility. Attracted, though not at first for herself, and then pressed by her husband, she eventually gave herself not only to the idea of separation from his bed and their home together, which canon law did demand, but also to the prospect of a life of religious obedience, which it did not.[12]

Cornelia never knew that she was not required to become a nun. From the time Pierce first thought about becoming a priest, Cornelia labored under the misapprehension that she too would be required to enter religious life. Cornelia's biographers saw this as a critical but providential misunderstanding, because it led her to discern an authentic call to religious life. But from Cornelia's perspective, she did not have much of a choice, and she had to prepare for the eventuality of taking vows in a religious congregation. This implication is that Cornelia's vocation to religious life may not have been as immediate and certain as her biographers suggested. A further study of the years leading up to her founding the Society of the Holy Child Jesus reveal a Cornelia uncertain about her future calling.

Return to Europe

[12] Ibid., 96–97.

Despite becoming accustomed to life in Grand Coteau, Cornelia left everything again when Pierce asked her to return to Rome with him. Once there, Pierce and Cornelia had an audience with Pope Gregory XVI, whom they met with on their previous trip to Europe. Ady and Frank attended the audience with their parents, and despite the solemn purpose of the meeting, "it was a merry and informal occasion."[13] At the meeting, the Pope confirmed that Cornelia was willing to grant Pierce permission to pursue ordination and consent to a vow of chastity for herself. The meeting proved successful for Pierce, as the Pope granted his petition on March 16, 1844.

Pierce's petition also contained a request for Cornelia enter the Society of the Sacred Heart immediately and make a solemn vow of chastity. Since Cornelia had been learning about religious life from the Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, it was presumed she would enter that congregation. There is no documented reason why Pierce made this request; he simply wanted to be ordained as soon as possible. Even if the Pope had consented to Pierce's request, it is not likely the Sisters of the Sacred Heart would have been able to fully accept Cornelia without the official preparation of a novitiate. The Pope wisely ignored this condition and "made no reference to [Cornelia] becoming religious and left her free of any vow until her husband was ready to receive the subdiaconate."[14] The result was that Cornelia was not bound to take any action until her husband was ready to be ordained; at the same time, Pierce could not take orders until she made her vow of chastity. Because it would take a year, at minimum, for Pierce to prepare for ordination, Cornelia would have the time to reflect further. She had just arrived in Rome and was not ready to make a decision about entering the Society.

[13] Ibid., 92.

[14] Ibid., 93.

The formal process was moving quickly, and about two weeks later the "Promoter Fiscale" came to their apartment for the signing of the Deed of Separation on April 1, 1844. The Promoter's essential task was to interrogate the couple to "ascertain their mutual determination 'di vivere in perpetuo nello stato di perfetta castita'" As terms of the separation, Pierce and Cornelia would be required "To live forever in the state of perfect chastity." "Both gave their 'full consent': Cornelia to Pierce 'to live forever in perfect chastity' (in the Society of Jesus) and become a priest; and Pierce to Cornelia 'to live forever in chastity' (in the Society of the Sacred Heart)."[15] Flaxman noted that "the intention that both had at this juncture to become religious was not essential to the legality of the separation because the papal rescript ignored it."[16] In other words, the Pope's revision worked in Cornelia's favor because it did not require her to enter a religious congregation. Cornelia was unaware of terms of the rescript at the time, but at a crucial juncture she would learn about it.

Final Decisions

A little over a week after Cornelia and Pierce signed the Deed of Separation, Cornelia arrived at the Convent of the Society of the Sacred Heart in Rome, ready to begin her journey as a "quasi-postulant." She would still be a free person canonically, but would participate in convent life as far her position would allow. "She 'placed herself under obedience in all ordinary matters,' followed the convent horarium, joined the community religious exercises, and accepted the restriction of enclosure.'"[17] Cornelia found the restraint of enclosure the most difficult aspect

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 94.

[17] Ibid.

of convent life: “when the gate of the Convent shut upon her . . . she felt the loneliness & the seclusion & the enclosure as a great weight upon her spirits.”[18] Cornelia loved working for the Sisters at Grand Coteau, but when she entered the Society's Convent in Rome, she found a marked contrast between the two places. As a married “employee” of the Sisters, Cornelia walked back and forth to the convent in Grand Coteau on a daily basis. She was not held to the strict requirements that the sisters were to uphold. In addition, the enclosure rules in the U.S. were not as severe as in the European foundations. Mother Rose Philippine Duschesne, who established the American foundation of the Society of the Sacred Heart, explained that “as to enclosure, there is not a wall within a thousand miles of here; and wooden fences keep out animals, but not men. Our enclosure consists in remaining at home.”[19] Because of the vastly different circumstances American religious congregations experienced from their European motherhouses, they often had a difficult time maintaining traditional rules and customs.

When Madeline Sophie Barat founded the Society of the Sacred Heart in the early nineteenth century, she envisioned an apostolic Congregation dedicated to educating young women. Barat sought a more moderate approach to full Papal enclosure, which required nuns to live fully cloistered, separated from the outside world. In recognizing the demands of an educational apostolate, she saw the “need for a certain mobility for the religious as they moved around the houses of the Society, either in France or elsewhere.”[20] When Cornelia stayed with the Society in Grand Coteau, the idea of enclosure was even less practical, as the Sisters attended to the harsh realities of surviving in Louisiana mission territory. “Thrown into the rude life of the

[18] Ibid.

[19] McGuinness, Margaret M. *Called to Serve: A History of Nuns in America* (New York University Press, 2013), 50, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.dbproxy.lasalle.edu/lib/lasalle-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1126726 (accessed June 2, 2022).

[20] Phil Kilroy, *Madeleine Sophie Barat 1779-1865: A Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 170.

frontier, these cultured women with unflinching courage put their hands to the roughest toil. Food was scarce, fuel insufficient, and beds a luxury." Despite "cold and hunger, ingratitude and opposition, misunderstanding and calumny," the Society of the Sacred Heart flourished in the United States."[21]

However, the Society of the Sacred Heart still adopted a cloistered approach to the sisters' private lives, with restrictions on visitors and trips outside the congregation's houses. In fact, Mother Barat "never sought to have cloister removed, that was not part of her thinking. Rather, she wished it to be modified in the view of the work of education."[22] But in Rome, where Cornelia was staying, tensions arose regarding the differences between the French and Italian interpretations of cloister. In Italy, cloister was interpreted more strictly, and Cornelia suffered the full effect of the limitation on her mobility. Cornelia thought "there [were] elements in this cloistered congregation which [were] alien to her spirit and which posed questions about future access to her children."[23] Her children were still living with her but she was not sure they would be able to stay once she took her final vows. A quote from a letter to her sister demonstrates Cornelia's relief that she did not promise to enter the Society of the Sacred Heart in Rome: "I bless our dear Lord again and again that I have been prevented so wonderfully from taking any promise or any obligation upon me with respect to this <u>french</u> order for it is not the one for our country. Our own dear country women must be led to a perfect life by meekness and sweetness and not by fear."[24] In this excerpt, Cornelia is thankful that she had not been obligated previously

[21] Mary Christina, S.U.S.C., Review of *The Society of the Sacred Heart in North America*, by Louise Callan, *The Catholic Historical Review* 24, no. 3 (October 1938): 363–364, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25013731 (accessed May 28, 2022).

[22] Kilroy, 171.

[23] Strub, *Positio*, 11.

to commit to this congregation, although she defended the goodness of the nuns. She appeared to be criticizing the leadership of the congregation in Rome, stating that it is better to cultivate an atmosphere of holiness through love rather than fear. Cornelia did not experience the same spirit in Rome as she did in Grand Coteau, and she became disheartened about the prospect of entering the Society. The critique she made of the Society of the Sacred Heart will later inform the development of her own congregation.

Even though Cornelia decided against joining the Society of the Sacred Heart, she still believed she had a vocation to religious life. In the months leading up to Pierce's ordination, however, a situation developed which led her to reconsider this course of action. On May 1, 1844, Pierce received minor orders, prompting Pope Gregory XVI to send an enormous fish to the celebration at the Trinità, indicating the Church's "big catch." Soon after this event, Pierce decided he no longer wished to enter the Society of Jesus. There are a few reasons why Pierce may have changed his mind. The first was that the Jesuit General, Jan Roothan, informed Pierce that he was spending too much time at the Trinità with Cornelia. It is unclear if Roothan informed Pierce that he could no longer accept him in the Society or if Pierce made the decision on his own. In addition, Pierce may have decided the rigors of Jesuit obedience were not for him; since ordination was his principal goal, he discarded his ambition to join the congregation. He realized he did not need to become a Jesuit to be ordained a priest of the diocese of Rome. Another possible factor was that Pierce received an attractive offer from Bishop Thomas Walsh in England to be the assistant chaplain stationed at the Earl of Shrewsbury's residence, Alton Towers. This setting was Pierce's ideal venue for ministry because he dreamed of bringing more

[24] Cornelia Connelly to Adeline Peacock Duval, November 12, 1845, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

converts into the Church, and it allowed him to work with the influential friends who supported him.

Pierce's about-face on the Jesuits was a blow to Cornelia, because she believed he was reneging on a crucial part of their journey together. As previously mentioned, Cornelia viewed their decision to enter religious life as a joint venture. "What they had embarked on was 'our proposition' not just his; a matter that demanded mutual, selfless trust."[25] Her promise to join the Society of the Sacred Heart was based on his commitment to join the Jesuits. When he changed his mind, Cornelia was plunged into a period of confusion and even despair. She questioned whether she made the right decision by complying with Pierce's wish to become ordained. Before his final ordination to the priesthood, she offered him a chance to return to married life: "She . . . warned him of the difficulties and trials of the state into which he was about to enter . . . represented to him the nature of the obligations to which he was about to bind himself irrevocably, and offered to release him from all such difficulties and trials by returning to their previous mode of life."[26] Cornelia and Pierce's future was at a critical juncture. Pierce's meeting with the Jesuit Superior led Cornelia to doubt he would be able to commit to a religious vocation. Cornelia always projected a united front when speaking about their two vocations. In a letter to her brother-in-law George, she asserted, "I do not know what any of the family will say about Pierce and me since we have let them know *our decision to devote ourselves* to God in religious life but though we would wish them to be quite easy upon any such affairs as concern us in this one particular circumstance."[27] Cornelia strongly viewed their vocations as a joint venture, but Roothan's warning may have caused her to rethink Pierce's commitment.

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[25] Flaxman, 99.

[26] Ibid.

Even though vows of chastity would separate Pierce and Cornelia, they believed they could still maintain a supportive relationship and communicate with and see each other as they saw fit. Pope Gregory XVI, sympathetic to their cause, made allowances for them when he approved Pierce's petition. Although Cornelia was living under enclosure restrictions at the Trinità, Pierce visited her and the children at least once a week, and he and Cornelia exchanged letters regularly. Roothan's request that Pierce see less of Cornelia raised questions about Pierce's ability to be without Cornelia so frequently. If Pierce was unwilling to obey Roothan's directive, how would he be able to cope with future demands of obedience?

Despite Cornelia's doubts, Pierce did not waiver on his original intention to be ordained a priest. As Pierce was making final preparations to be ordained, Cornelia became anxious about her impending vow of chastity. She was not yet aware that her vow did not depend on her joining a religious congregation. In June 1845, she received clarification that her primary responsibility was to her children and she was under no strict obligation to enter a religious community. Cornelia was relieved that she would not be forced into a situation that was not suitable for her or her children.

Her anxiety somewhat alleviated, Cornelia made her vow of chastity on June 18, 1845, "with the full knowledge and approbation of her husband" as his signature attested. Shortly after Cornelia's vow, Pierce was ordained a deacon, and on July 6, he was ordained a priest of the Catholic Church, "after only fourteen months of study."[28] Pierce celebrated his first mass at the Trinità, during which Ady received her First Communion from her father. A student at the Propaganda Fide remarked about Cornelia's countenance, "I have seen so much in the American

[27] Cornelia Connelly to George Connelly, July 16, 1844, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ. Emphasis added.

[28] Ibid., 102.

papers about Mrs. Connelly pining away upon Monte Pincio, that I was almost surprised to see her so joyful. Indeed I never saw any person more so: I am sure it was the happiest day of her life."[29] After having misgivings about Pierce's vocation only a few months before, perhaps Cornelia was relieved that years of uncertainty were over, and that they could all move forward at this new stage in their life. Cornelia now had to determine her future direction with regard to joining a religious congregation. As noted previously, she had told her sister that the Society of the Sacred Heart was not right for her, but she "had no doubts about [her] vocation to a religious life."[30] When Cornelia informed the Superior at the Trinità that she was not joining the Society, she was allowed to remain there until she had more clarity about her future. She spent almost a year reflecting and praying to determine her next course of action. The new Confessor and Spiritual Director at the Trinità, Father Giovanni Grassi, S.J., helped Cornelia formulate her ideas about possibly creating a new order based on the spiritual works of mercy.

Grassi had experience in establishing religious communities. He had helped his niece, Teresa Verzeri, found a congregation called the Daughters of the Sacred Heart in 1831. Verzeri wanted a life "unrestricted by enclosure" and believed the Daughters "were called to bring the spiritual works of mercy … to girls and young women of their time."[31] Teresa's Daughters dedicated themselves to a variety of apostolic services, including "education of middleclass troubled girls; homes for orphans who were at risk, abandoned and even led astray; public schools, christian doctrine, retreats, holiday recreations and assistance to the infirm."[32] Grassi

[29] Ibid.

[30] Cornelia Connelly to Adeline Duval Peacock, November 12, 1845, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

[31] Flaxman, 104.

advised Cornelia to develop an outline of a Rule similar to the Daughters, and "Pierce became redactor for his wife, translating and editing what she with Grassi's guidance selected from a variety sources."[33] Pierce's involvement in developing the Rule for Cornelia's congregation would delay the approval by Rome for decades, because he would later submit his own copy for approval. Cornelia noted that even though it was "actually drawn up by Mr. Connelly," she had "no idea of accepting anything" that had not been inspected by Grassi.[34] In subsequent years, Cornelia adamantly denied Pierce's involvement in the development of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, but she did state that Pierce "worked upon the foundation I gave him." Pierce's contribution to the writing of the Rule and its implications will be discussed later in this chapter.

Foundation in England

Cornelia had hoped to return to the United States to found her new order. Grassi supported this idea and had communicated with Bishop Benedict Fenwick of Boston about accepting the Congregation into his diocese. However, another plan was being developed by her old friend, the Earl of Shrewsbury, and Bishop Nicolas Wiseman, who was the assistant Vicar Apostolic of the Central District, one of the eight geographical and administrative districts of the Roman Catholic Church in England. Both men were concerned about the state of Catholicism in England, and they knew of Cornelia's previous experience in education.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Catholic Church experienced a "second spring" or revival in England. Cardinal John Henry Newman became the most recognizable proponent of

[32] Libro dei Doveri, vol. III, 368, quoted in "Teresa Eustochio Verzeri" (1801-1852), https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20010610_verzeri_en.html (accessed May 28, 2022).

[33] Flaxman, 105.

[34] Ibid.

the Oxford Movement, which centered on a renewal of Catholic thought and practice. In addition, Irish immigrants flooded English cities and towns due to the Potato Famine, increasing the Catholic population. As a result, there was a critical shortage of quality schools for Catholic children, particularly poor and middle-class girls. Wiseman viewed the education of middle-class girls as vitally important to sustaining the Catholic population in England. He explained his reason in a letter to Cornelia:

> The middle classes till now almost neglected in England, form the mass and staple of our society … have to provide us with our priesthood, our confraternities, and our working religious. To train the future mothers of this class is to sanctify entire families and sow the seeds of piety in whole congregations: it is to make friends for the poor of Jesus Christ, nurses for the sick and dying, catechists for the little ones, most useful auxiliaries in every good work.[35]

Bishop, later Cardinal, Nicholas Wiseman was one of the chief architects of the Catholic Church's restoration in England in the nineteenth century. He viewed the middle class as fertile ground for recruiting priests and religious, and he envisioned the education of middle-class girls as crucial for developing good Catholic mothers and consecrated women. Although Wiseman's purpose for female education seems chauvinistic in our society, he echoed the Victorian notion that women belonged in the home as caretakers of their husbands and wives. He viewed Cornelia as the ideal person to take up the challenge of providing quality education for Catholic young women in England.

Shrewsbury and Wiseman convinced the Prefect of the Catholic Congregation for the Propagation of Faith, Cardinal Giacomo Fransoni, of their plan's practicality. When Cornelia learned about this new venture, she was initially adverse to the idea. But many influential friends, including her husband, persuaded her to found the congregation in England. Pope Gregory XVI also viewed the plan in a favorable light. When Cornelia learned that Pope Gregory

[35] Marmion, 389.

XVI gave his "verbal sanction" to the new community, she did not want to go against his wishes. Later in her life, Cornelia wrote, "The Society of the Holy Child Jesus is not my work. I have only followed the inspirations of God in obedience to *His* not *my* will."[36] Despite her disappointment over not returning to the United States, Cornelia believed she was following the will of God by establishing the congregation in England.

On April 18, 1846, Cornelia left the Trinità with Ady and Frank and spent most of the summer at the Convent of the Assumption in Paris. In mid-August, Cornelia arrived at the home of Pierce's formal pupil, Robert Berkeley of Spetchley Park, where she would await direction from the house chaplain, Henry Mahon, S.J., as to where she would establish the Order. Bishop Wiseman, as Cornelia's sponsor, located a large, unused convent attached to St. Mary's Parish in Derby as a potential site. Cornelia had reservations about the Society being able to afford and run a convent of this size, but Wiseman promised he would take care of all finances.

One of Cornelia's first companions was Emily Bowles, who collaborated with her in establishing the Congregation. A writer and convert, she was friends with many influential Catholics, including John Henry Newman. Bowles heard about Cornelia's plans through Newman and Wiseman, and decided to join her. Cornelia wrote to her brother Ralph about her collaboration with Bowles and Wiseman:

> Since coming I have united myself with a very distinguished writer of the day Miss Emily Bowles to put our work into operation. The great & good Dr Wiseman whose learned and interesting works you may have seen has entered warmly into our designs and we have nearly concluded upon accepting the beautiful building at Derby—which has been offered to us by the Parish Priest and his Lordship.[37]

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[36] Flaxman, 108.

[37] Cornelia Connelly to Ralph Peacock, September 12, 1845, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

From Cornelia's letter it is evident that Emily Bowles was involved in the process of the foundation from the beginning, even before other members of the future Society moved into the convent at Derby. Unlike Cornelia, Bowles was well-connected among Catholics in England and, according to Judith Lancaster, "from the beginning, she was his [Wiseman's] choice" in joining Cornelia to establish the first house of the Society.[38] However, because Cornelia had already worked extensively on the Rule, and "had the verbal sanction of His Holiness Gregory XVI, 1846, and the Protection of Cardinal Fransoni," Wiseman perhaps had to defer to their choice of leader.[39] Flaxman explains that

> [Emily] had no experience of religious life and although Wiseman persuaded her to join Mrs Connelly, … it was Cornelia with whom he settled affairs and whom he installed as superior-general. And he did not, as in the case of Cornelia, privilege Emily by allowing her to be professed after only one year as a novice, instead of two.[40]

Even though Wiseman's actions indicated Cornelia was the leader of the congregation, Emily was her trusted "first coadjutor and friend…She took charge in the Derby Poor School; at St Leonard's, when the Highest school began to develop, she was its headmistress—and at Cornelia's suggestion wrote a children's *School History of England*; she helped to re-edit the Rule and probably assisted with the education of the sisters as teachers."[41] Bowles's leadership position in the community may have led her to believe she held more power than she actually possessed. Mother Maria Buckle recalled that there might have been a power struggle between Cornelia and Emily over the vision of the Society: "We have to record in truth that from the first

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[38] Lancaster, 119.

[39] Flaxman, 106.

[40] Ibid., 222.

[41] Ibid., 208.

she [Bowles] did not agree with Mother Connelly's plans and it was evident that sooner or later there would be a separation."[42] The crisis over this issue will be discussed in a later chapter.

With the initial details ironed out, Cornelia and three companions moved into the convent at Derby on October 13, 1846, six years to the day Pierce informed her that he planned to pursue ordination. The convent's location in a largely impoverished, industrial town, stood in stark contrast to Cornelia's relatively privileged life. According to a pupil, the convent was "among 'slums and narrow dirty streets . . . a sluggish, unhealthy backwater ran on the opposite side of the road the full length of our buildings . . . the sewers of the town emptied themselves at the end of the Convent Garden'."[43] One of the first sisters to arrive with Cornelia, Aloysia Walker, recalled the details of their arrival: "except for 'the Parlour & some bedsteads with beds & pillows' the Convent was 'quite empty'. A leg of mutton was in the oven and potatoes and carrots on the fire but 'no knives or forks, plates or anything else in the place' and they had to borrow from the priest's sister before they could eat."[44] Some of the early members of the congregation, who came from more genteel backgrounds, experienced real poverty for the first time as they adjusted to the new state of living their vows required.

In the documents Cornelia composed for the governance of the Society for the Holy Child Jesus, she articulated her vision for the spirituality of the order:

> [A]s the Society of the Holy Child Jesus is spiritually founded on the virtues of poverty, suffering and obedience, which our most blessed Redeemer came down from heaven to practice in the grotto of Bethlehem, and thence through his whole life to Calvary, so ought all to begin life again with the most sweet and holy and loving Child Jesus—a humbled God—walking with him step by step in the ways

[42] Ibid., 120.

[43] Ibid., 115.

[44] Ibid.

> of the child, in humility and poverty, so that they may finally be united to our crucified Lord and then look forward to a glorious eternity.[45]

The sisters were to practice the virtues of poverty and obedience as Christ experienced them in His Incarnation. "Beginning life again" through the power of the Incarnate Jesus indicated a renewal process through which the sisters were to develop their spirituality. In the mid-twentieth century, Caritas McCarthy, SHCJ, a leading scholar on Cornelia's spirituality, explained that "besides the grace of identification with 'our most Blessed Redeemer' in the kenosis of his Incarnation, Cornelia finds for Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus the grace of growth 'step by step' in that eternal life begun here in time through baptism which has been radically accepted in commitment to the evangelical counsels."[46] According to McCarthy, Cornelia believed that emulating Christ in His humanity meant participating in the divine life here on earth. By accepting and following the virtues of poverty and obedience, Cornelia's sisters grew in the holiness needed to participate in the eternal life Christ initiated in this world.

Cornelia's vision of spiritual growth acknowledged the need for the continued practice of Christian virtues. Her methodology of rooting faith development within the holy mysteries of Christ's life enabled the believer to move from the early stages to the "universalizing stage," where the love of Christ is the ultimate end. In the "hidden, humble life" of the infancy and childhood of Christ, Cornelia directed the sisters to find "our Divine Master, our Model, and our Spouse; and from the living wells of His perfect humility, His divine charity, and His absolute obedience, we are to receive the Spirit of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus."[47] By exhorting the sisters to "contemplate Christ in the lowliness of His humanity," Cornelia identified a constant

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[45] McCarthy, *The Spirituality*, 109.

[46] Ibid., 110.

[47] Ibid., 114a.

"wellspring" which enabled them to "employ every effort to bring others to taste and to embrace the sweet yoke which He offers them, labouring with all our strength to increase the love, the devotion for, and imitation of the interior and exterior virtues of the hidden life of the most sweet Jesus."[48] Meditating on this constant source of nourishment—the virtues and actions of the Holy Child—inspired the sisters to bring Christ's love and mercy to others, especially their students.

The sisters commenced teaching in the poor school, and they also established a night school where girls who worked during the day could receive, as Mother Connelly noted, "almost as much time …as a half day of school."[49] Cornelia knew that her main pupils would be middle-class girls and young women, but she viewed her new congregation, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, as serving "females of all classes of society." In her Rule, she outlined the three types of schools where the sisters would serve: "the highest schools"; "middle and training schools"; and "charity day-schools and industrial orphanages."[50] Because the Irish Potato Famine led to such an influx of Irish-Catholic immigrants in England, the most pressing need was to provide education and social services to this impoverished population. The sisters would often begin missions in new territories by teaching in the local Catholic poor school. These schools were founded and managed by the Catholic Poor School Committee, but lack of resources and teaching training made staffing and maintaining the schools difficult.

By 1847, Cornelia had also opened a boarding school, and the students enrolled were joined by "day scholars of the better class."[51] England's rigid social system made the mixing of

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[48] Ibid.

[49] Marmion, 91.

[50] McCarthy, *The Spirituality*, 115a.

[51] Marmion, 92.

classes virtually impossible, so the sisters would often have to establish several types of schools in one mission community. It was common practice, both in the United States and Europe, for religious congregations to separate students by class, primarily to attract families who could pay tuition. Nuns who operated schools accommodated upper class families because they often desperately needed the funds the students could provide. Cornelia's educational foundation at Derby so impressed the hierarchy and the Catholic Poor School Committee that they proposed establishing a teacher training school at the Derby convent. Financial issues, however, caused the sisters to move their convent to St. Leonard's by the Sea, where they quickly reestablished the boarding school and poor school. The Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ) soon began receiving invitations to establish schools in various cities in England.

Pierce's Deterioration

While the enrollment at the Derby schools was rapidly growing—Cornelia mentioned in a letter to Lord Shrewsbury that on Sundays they taught and led two hundred girls to mass—Pierce was increasingly discontented with the enforced separation between himself and Cornelia.[52] When Cornelia first arrived in England, Bishops Walsh and Wiseman, the Central District's coadjutors (co-administrators) where Alton Towers and the Derby Convent were located (they were about twenty miles apart) asked Pierce to refrain from visiting her. As many issues pertaining to the settlement of the congregation were still pending, Pierce acquiesced to their request. Cornelia initially seemed more dismayed than Pierce: "And do you really mean to say that you cannot meet me in the way, even in the presence of all the world? All as God wills,

[52] Documents presented by the Historical Commission, Mayfield Archives, vol. 10, 31, quoted in Marmion, 91.

and when he wills, but I think this is going too far, and if I see the good bishop I will tell him so very respectfully."[53] Cornelia was surprised that she and Pierce could not even meet when she first arrived in England.

Shades of Pierce's impatience with this arrangement are revealed in a letter he wrote to his brother on January 1, 1847. There had been a clothing ceremony at the new convent in Derby in December, and the founding group of future sisters received their novice habits. Pierce had not been invited, but the tone of his letter was generally positive: "The Bishop, Dr. Wiseman, clothed them … what a consolation to have her in the same country! Though I have not yet been once to see her, it is so different in a Protestant country that I have thought it best. In Rome of course every week or ten days I saw her. I said High Mass and Low Mass in the chapel very often [at the Trinità]."[54] Pierce's letter reflected the difference of atmosphere between Protestant majority England, and Catholic Rome, where they were supported by Gregory XVI. The pope, who had made allowances for the Connellys in Rome, passed away on June 1, 1846. When they relocated to England, the Catholic hierarchy was fearful of the scandal any meetings between the two might cause. In the bishops' view, Cornelia's obedience was no longer owed to her husband because they were canonically separated. As part of a new religious order, Cornelia would now have to defer to the bishops in her jurisdiction. As Bishop Wiseman became increasingly involved in the fledgling order's governance, Pierce's resentment grew stronger.

In January 1847, Pierce requested that his friend from Rome, Father Samuel Asperti, be appointed chaplain at Derby, and Cornelia agreed to this arrangement. It would take several months for Asperti to be installed in the convent however, and Pierce was impatient to visit

[53] Flaxman, 110.

[54] Ibid., 126.

Cornelia. On March 4, he unexpectedly arrived at the convent with the senior chaplain at Alton Towers, Dr. Henry Winter. Cornelia had no idea Pierce would be part of the visit, and she angrily admonished him. Pierce responded with "a very violent letter," in which he protested his treatment at the convent. Cornelia's response to him provided a glimpse into the complexity of her feelings:

> I have been looking and hoping for a letter from you this morning: your letter has just come, and makes me cry so that I can scarcely see what I write. Forget your visit to Derby. I never told you, that I assumed that excitement to hide nature, as I must do sometimes. No! You have not the violent temptation that I have in thinking of the little Bethlehem room [at Gracemere], nor have you perhaps gone through the struggles of a woman's heart. No! You never have.

Cornelia upbraided Pierce for not realizing the effect their separation had on her; she had to mask her desire to see him with anger upon his arrival at the convent, to hide her true feelings. Pierce also began to accuse Bishop Wiseman of interfering in their ability to parent their children (supposedly because they were not allowed to meet). He pressed Wiseman to allow Cornelia to make her formal vows in April 1847, only four months after she began her novitiate. Pierce hoped that this would allow him more access to Cornelia, but Wiseman denied this request based on the short amount of time that had transpired. By November of that year, Pierce reversed course and protested formally against her taking vows in any religious congregation. Flaxman notes that "more probably he wanted her not to make a vow of obedience because it would put the seal on Wiseman's authority over her and the foundation."[55] Bishop Wiseman responded with his assessment of the situation:

> Mr C had given his full consent to Mrs C's taking vows (I have it in his writing) and when he took orders, he knew that to be an inevitable consequence. He had by this lost all power to protest against what he had himself accepted as a condition for his own ordination . . . In addition to this Mr C signed at Rome, a deed of separation which made Mrs C *completely independent* of him & in fact, as far as the Church permits, severed them completely. He has no rights as a husband

[55] Flaxman, 128.

> whatever before the Church, yet he assumed all authority over Mrs C as though they were merely living separated in the world by consent.[56]

Wiseman emphatically denied that Pierce had any authority whatsoever to prevent Cornelia from taking vows. Pierce must have understood the Deed of Separation's legality, but ultimately he could not accept it. And because Cornelia was not there to assuage his suspicions and resentment, Pierce continued on a course of action that caused irrevocable harm to Cornelia and her relationship with her children.

Despite Pierce's protestations, on December 21, 1847, Cornelia was allowed to take her vows of poverty and obedience—she had already taken the vow of chastity—and Wiseman "solemnly installed her as superior general of the little Society. … It constituted Cornelia 'effectively, juridically and (from her side) irrevocably as mother of a new religious family in the Church', and until the day of her death she was 'morally bound to fend for it, keep it in being, to nurture its growth.'"[57] However, this did not mean she was a constitutionally elected superior; that did not occur until the first General Chapter in 1874. The primary reason for the delay was the difficulty in getting Constitutions approved for the congregation. Much of this difficulty had to do with Pierce's interference in the early months of 1848.

Pierce was jealous and resentful of Bishop Wiseman's authority over Cornelia and the congregation. After Cornelia took her vows in December, Pierce attempted a different strategy to gain access to her and to the community. In January 1848, he pulled all the children out of their respective schools and took them to Rome. While there, he submitted his version of the 1846 Rule to the Propaganda Fide. At this point, Cornelia was amending the Constitutions for the Society, but she had not sent them to Rome yet. Pierce, in the meantime, presented his Rule with

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[56] Ibid., 125.

[57] Ibid., 117.

the hope that it would be approved and he would be acknowledged as the founder of the congregation. Fortunately, Cardinal Fransoni of the Propaganda Fide alerted Bishop Wiseman to Pierce's action, and Cornelia adamantly rejected his version:

> My vows were made on the Rule now in my hand, which had the approval of Your Eminence and that of Dr. Wiseman. Any change or addition, which may have been made by Mr. Connelly, I can have nothing to do with. We have all the approval which is necessary for us at the present time and we would prefer to practise it under our Bishop & to give it the proof of our experience before anything more is done to it.[58]

Pierce left Rome thinking his Rule would be considered for approval, but it was only filed away at the Propaganda. The effect was deleterious because whenever Cornelia tried to present her own Constitutions for approval, the presence of Pierce's draft compromised her efforts. Elizabeth Strub, went so far as to say that the Propaganda "mistakenly consider[ed] him founder until he died."[59] Even though Pierce's immediate efforts proved unsuccessful, he caused instability in the Society for years to come.

When Pierce returned to England in June, he immediately requested permission to visit Cornelia. He did not wait for a response and arrived unannounced at the convent. Dr. Asperti, the Convent's chaplain, opposed the visit without Wiseman's permission. Cornelia acquiesced to Asperti's directive, but she "'told the nuns afterwards' that the refusal was contrary to the 'wishes and request' which she made known to the chaplain. She feared the effect of opposition on her husband, she said."[60] Even though Cornelia believed there was good reason to allow the visit, she may have been compelled by the wishes of Asperti and Wiseman to deny it. When Pierce learned of the refusal, he "'threw himself in a passion of tears' on the parlour sofa and laid

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[58] Ibid., 133.

[59] Strub, *Positio*, 16.

[60] Flaxman, 135.

there for six hours. Asperti remained with him throughout, offering sympathy but [was] unyielding."[61] Cornelia stayed in her room during the drama, and Pierce eventually left. Cornelia's and Asperti's decision in this circumstance, given Pierce's overwrought state, may have shown a lack of appropriate judgment. They could have made an exception based on his distraught condition. Given her status as the congregation's leader, Cornelia was well within her rights to see him, even if the convent chaplain was against it. But she was also hurt that he took the children to Rome and tried to submit an alternative Rule for the congregation. Her anger over Pierce's actions in the past several months fostered a resentment which made her reluctant to see him. Pierce left the Convent deeply humiliated and resolved to get his wife back, even if it meant initiating legal proceedings against the Church. If Cornelia had met with Pierce, it may have mitigated his anger and jealousy, and prevented his further drastic action of removing the children permanently from her care. But given the state of Pierce's mind, it may not have resolved the situation. If anything, this episode demonstrated Pierce's extreme emotional instability, which would worsen due to his limited access to Cornelia.

Pierce's hostility toward Bishop Wiseman only increased after his unsuccessful visit to the convent. He viewed Cornelia as an innocent victim in the bishop's machinations to keep Pierce and Cornelia separated. To further complicate the issue, Cornelia and Wiseman could not maintain the convent's financial responsibilities at Derby; the landlord became hostile to Cornelia when the congregation could not pay its bills. By this time, Wiseman had taken a new post as Vicar Apostolic in the London district, and he found a new possible location for the Society at St. Leonards-by-the-Sea on the Sussex coast, in southeast England. In December

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[61] Ibid.

1848, responding to the Derby landlord's threat to either pay or leave, Cornelia moved the congregation to the new location.

Pierce became enraged that Cornelia was back in Bishop Wiseman's jurisdiction. He composed an impassioned letter to Bishop William Ullathorne, the new coadjutor of the central district: "I am a man, a husband & a father before I am a priest, & my first duties cannot be abandoned. Faith, fidelity, honour I will never forsake, nor will I forsake the wife I vowed to protect for life, the mother of my children, to those who would make her abandon them."[62] He accused Wiseman and Asperti of causing Cornelia's "moral disintegration": "With Dr Wiseman for her Bishop & Dr Asperti for her Confessor, the principles with which I left that saintly person & gave her up, meaning it for God, have been, I will not say corrupted, but rooted up."[63] Pierce pleaded with Ullathorne not to let the congregation come under Wiseman's control: "I hear that she is about leaving your lordship's jurisdiction to come again under that of Dr Wiseman. My object in writing is to beg your lordship to prevent this if possible, for the sake of the scandal otherwise inevitable." He finally threatened legal action: "If the laws of justice & honour cannot be at once enforced by the authorities of the Church, I am determined to apply to those of the country. I have my Dear Lord deliberately counted the cost, & with God's help, will go on & finish."[64] Ullathorne responded that since the Society moved to another district, he no longer had authority over it. Pierce needed to address his concerns with Wiseman, but he refused, saying that he "cannot consent to hold any intercourse with Dr. Wiseman, the matter will have to go to the laws of the country."[65] Soon after his communication with Ullathorne, he contacted Henry

[62] Flaxman, 138.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid., 139.

Drummond, MP (Member of Parliament), an anti-Catholic who offered Pierce hospitality at his home, Albury Park. Pierce left Alton Towers and moved into a cottage on Drummond's land, bringing Ady and Frank with him.

Legal Action

Drummond's lawyers advised Pierce that he had little recourse but to sue for the restitution of conjugal rights. Women were still considered property of the husband, and "the wronged married woman had little hope in law on which to ground a petition for separation, but the married man, wronged or not, stood well."[66] If the husband's rights were restored in court, then the wife could be returned to him by force, or a judicial separation would follow, in which case he would lose his wife but "retain her property along with custody of the children *and* whatever they might inherit."[67] Pierce was willing to forget the suit if Cornelia left Wiseman's jurisdiction and returned to him at Albury Park. The Connellys' long-time friends, the Shrewsburys, who were greatly humiliated by Pierce's actions, recommended that she at least leave Wiseman's district for a while to avoid any escalation of the conflict. But Cornelia was determined to stand firm against Pierce:

> [A] flight . . . would be an acknowledgement of some cause for flight which would be contrary to the truth. . . . I think only of the consequences of such to our convent, a question of twenty persons who are engaged with me in the establishment of this Order. You see at once that this would be an unfaithful and cowardly step on my part which would be destructive to the convent and in every sense giving Mr Connelly the advantage over us. He would then have gained his point . . . his sole object would be to force me to begin a new congregation under his guidance.[68]

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[66] Ibid., 146.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

Cornelia knew that Pierce's objective was not necessarily to force Cornelia back to her married state, but to obtain authority over the Society or her activity in any future religious order.

In late January 1849, Cornelia received a summons to appear in the Court of Arches, the ecclesiastical court where matrimonial cases were heard. Cornelia was anxious at the prospect of having to appear in court, but Bishop Wiseman advised her that at this stage she didn't have to be present, as the lawyers for both sides handled the case. Pierce's initial statement, which was designated a "Libel" in legal parlance, was made on February 17th by his lawyer. Cornelia's team did not challenge the Libel but instead presented an "Allegation," which consisted of "an autobiographical account of events in legal language."[69] The judge requested that the statement be revised to included documentary evidence, so the Allegation had to be withdrawn and then resubmitted. Interestingly, the judge challenged Cornelia's statement, but Pierce's lawyer did not. If either side were to contest the other, then witnesses would have to be called and cross-examined under oath. If the statements on either side proved false, then they could be prosecuted for perjury. "In *Connelly v. Connelly* neither side saw fit to challenge the other … As it was, the case never came to a full trial, and since at this stage in a matrimonial suit there was no jury, everything depended on the decision of the judge."[70]

Cornelia's Allegation was resubmitted in June 1849, but it was not until November that its admission was debated in court. The judge decided not to accept Cornelia's Allegation, which left her in a weak position. On March 23, 1850, a full year after the Libel was accepted, the judge ruled in Pierce's favor. Simply put, even though Pierce and Cornelia signed a canonical deed of

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[69] Ibid., 148.

[70] Ibid., 147.

separation, Roman law was not binding in an English court. The judgment in part read: "The Court must not look to the law of Rome, nor to the law of the United States of America, but to the law of England for the rights, obligations, and duties which proceeded from the relation of husband and wife."[71] The fact that Cornelia had taken religious vows made no difference in a setting where English law took precedence. Cornelia's lawyers immediately appealed to the Privy Council to prevent her being incarcerated or returned to Pierce. Cornelia was upset over the decision but still confident that things would work out in her favor:

> We have God & the truth on our side, therefore we need fear nothing. I am ready for anything that God wills. Do you not see that Mr. C. has determined to break up our Order and ruin and upset the whole? He declared he would do this and he probably hopes that I may go to another Convent to begin afresh under him! I should not be at all surprised that his threats of Apostatizing are only to gain this point.[72]

Fifteen months passed before the case was heard by the Privy Council. During the interim, religious hostility against the Catholic Church in England reached a fevered pitch.

In the interim, Bishop Wiseman was named Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster (the highest Catholic Church position in England), and the Pope restored the Catholic hierarchy in England in the autumn of 1850. Large-scale protests ensued and anti-Catholic sentiment worsened. Pierce's case against Cornelia had become known through the press, and Wiseman and Cornelia became targets of the public's animosity. Effigies of Cornelia and Wiseman were burned on Guy Fawkes' Day and protestors demonstrated outside the convent walls of "Wiseman's Nuns." Cornelia kept clothes under her bed in case she had to escape an attempted kidnapping by Pierce sympathizers.[73]

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[71] Ibid., 149.

[72] Ibid., 144.

[73] Ibid., 149–150.

The case of *Connelly v. Connelly* finally opened on June 27, 1851. Strub notes in the *Informatio* that "although no definitive verdict [was] pronounced, the judgment of the Court of Arches against Cornelia [was] suspended. The Privy Council [gave] her the advantage by instructing the Court of Arches to try the case again admitting her Allegation and assigning all court costs to Pierce."[74] The Privy Council returned the case to the Court of Arches by ruling that the Court had to allow Cornelia's original Allegation, which was denied in the first suit. What was more advantageous to Cornelia was that Pierce had to pay all the court costs, which resulted in his not being able to retry the case. Cornelia was victorious in this sense because the case collapsed, even though it was not officially settled until 1858.

Having completely apostatized from the Catholic Church by this point, Pierce published a series of pamphlets in the 1850s in an attempt to earn money to proceed with his litigation. He continuously pressed his case by whatever means were available to him and where he could curry public opinion.[75] The result was that the case remained in the spotlight for years to come and the court of public opinion in England remained against Cornelia, even after her death. Cornelia's reputation would be cemented as an unfit wife and mother, and as will be discussed in the next chapter, her relationships with her children would be permanently damaged.

[74] Strub, *Positio*, 23.
[75] See Paz, ch. 6, "An AntiCatholic Interlude."

Chapter 3

For the Glory of God

After *Connelly vs. Connelly*, the estrangement between Cornelia and her children was at its most critical point. As the general public viewed Cornelia as an unfit wife and mother who abandoned her family to enter religious life, so too did her children. But as I will demonstrate in this chapter, Cornelia possessed the qualities of a loving and concerned parent, even after she was separated first from Mercer and then from her remaining children. I will show how the dimensions of her motherhood evolved, from the happy beginnings of family life in Natchez and Grand Coteau, to her desperate attempts at reconciliation with her children in later years.

The "Doting" Mother

At age twenty-three, Cornelia gave birth to her first child, Mercer (Merty), on December 17, 1832, a few weeks before Pierce bought their first home, Whitecottage, in Natchez, Mississippi. Mercer was named after the Connellys' close friend, Dr. Newton Mercer of Laurel Hill plantation. Cornelia and Pierce settled into their new roles as minister and wife, and a few years later their second child, Adeline (Ady), was born in 1835. A letter from this time period showed Cornelia's careful attentiveness to the children. When Pierce visited Bishop Joseph Rosati in Saint Louis, she sent him a detailed account of the children, who had been ill:

> She [Ady] had scarcely recovered before dear little Mercer was taken with fever which continued nearly a week—I did not send for the Doctor until I had administered the second dose of calomel. . . . He has not eaten anything for a week until today when he took some bread and milk—He looked very well for the last two or three days & I trust that his health, ultimately, will be benefitted by it.[1]

[1] Cornelia Connelly to Pierce Connelly, September 22, 1835, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

Cornelia's concern for her children's well-being was always evident in her writings, and their health was her first priority. Later, when Cornelia arrived in England, she worried about her son Frank's illness and rushed to his side:

> I have just got a note from Mrs. Berkeley telling us that Frank has taken a bad cold and she was so uneasy that she sent for her medical man who says he is doing very well but we must be off at six tomorrow and trust in our good God that we shall find him well. We are too late for the rail train or we should set off at once . . . . I am indeed more afraid of the Doctor than of the sickness as he is not homeopathic and I dread his taking calomel.[2]

In addition to concerns about health, Cornelia's letters boasted of her children's accomplishments: "Our little Ady has grown so much that you would scarcely know her I think. She speaks Italian quite as well as French and her English is not neglected, On St. Peter's day (dear Papa's feast) she played a little duet on the piano with me and sang some pretty little verses."[3] Cornelia was also pleased with Mercer's initial progress at school: "I have not told you yet what a sweet letter we had from Merty the other day, he had been rewarded and advanced in the school—the little darling says he 'had lately felt a burning love within' and speaks with so much feeling that [it] is delightful for us to think of."[4] Cornelia's children were a source of blessings for her and signified a contented home life. While she worried about her children at times, she never seemed to be overwhelmed by the duties of motherhood. She often reveled in the joy her children brought her. Pierce recounted the jolly atmosphere during one holiday season: "Their Mama lends an arm to the medley and sends all dancing, or rather stamping,

[2] Cornelia Connelly to Adeline Peacock Duval, September 28, 1843, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

[3] Correspondence between Cornelia Connelly and George Peacock, July 16, 1844, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

[4] Ibid.

round and round the piano til some youngster screams for assistance."[5] The family spent quality time together in the evening, playing games and praying before bedtime.

Cornelia experienced two major sorrows in the early years of her motherhood. The first was the death of the Connellys' infant daughter, Mary Magdalene, in July 1839. Both Cornelia and the baby became ill shortly after the birth, and the baby died several weeks later. Unfortunately, no communication from Cornelia exists about this tragedy. She did not begin journaling until Rev. Nicolas Point gave her a notebook at her first retreat in December, 1839. Only two months later, she suffered the death of two-year-old John Henry in a horrific scalding accident. Cornelia described the event in her journal: "Fell a victim on Friday, suffered 43 hours and was taken 'into the temple of the Lord' on the Purification.'"[6] Even though Cornelia's journal entry was brief, the reference to John Henry's death on February 2nd, the feast of Christ's presentation in the Temple, was profound.

Trials of Separation: Mercer Connelly

Not long after John Henry's death, Cornelia received another blow when Pierce disclosed his intention to pursue ordination to the Roman Catholic priesthood. While she worried about the state of her marriage, she was more troubled about her children's future. She knew that if Pierce became a priest, she would have to remain celibate for the rest of her life. If she became a nun, however, the status of her children would remain unclear. As discussed in Chapter 2, however, she did not know there was no ultimatum in Canon Law that a wife had to join a religious congregation in these circumstances. Pierce intended to return to Europe, particularly England,

[5] Flaxman, 71.

[6] Strub, *Positio,* 109.

hoping to enter the Society of Jesus. The Connellys' friend, the Earl of Shrewsbury, offered to provide for Mercer's education at Oscott College in Birmingham, England. Although Cornelia did not protest publicly Mercer's education in England, others disapproved. Bishop Anthony Blanc of New Orleans, who had become Cornelia's friend, felt that Mercer was too young to be removed from his mother. If she felt the same way as the Bishop, she remained quiet about it as she allowed Pierce to take Mercer to England.

In the antebellum "cult of domesticity" in America, children "were invited to linger as long as possible in the feminine sphere of the home," so that they absorbed the maximum amount of values and virtues their mothers provided them.[7] In the new era of domestic responsibility for women, mothers were expected to cultivate honorable and virtuous sons who would become leaders in the burgeoning American democracy. Mary Ryan cites the example of Lydia Sigourney's "Filial Virtues of Washington" to demonstrate the father of our country's bond with his mother: "From childhood, he repaid her care with the deepest affection and yielded his will to hers without a murmur."[8] As an adolescent, Washington dreamed of the adventure of a sailor's life but gave in to his mother's "gentle protestations." Ryan observed, "If American boys aspired to the stature of the father of their country they need only comply with the loving regulations of their mothers."[9]

Even though this tight bond between mother and child, especially mother and son, characterized a loving and nurturing domestic sphere, it created a "tangle of contradictions" when the son left the family home. Ryan explains, "When the sons grew up, after all, they would

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[7] Mary Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother: American Writings About Domesticity, 1830–1860* (New York: The Haworth Press, 1982), 58.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

inhabit a public sphere which was deemed the antithesis of the feminized household. . . . The elaborate process of tying the maternal knot created unanticipated problems for boys of America as they journey outward from a placid, protective, domestic world toward adulthood in the swiftly modernizing and rapidly moving society."[10] Sons struggled with the transition from the warm and nurturing environment of the nest to an industrialized society's materialistic worldview.

Children leaving home too soon, particularly those sent to boarding school, like Mercer Connelly, were in danger of struggling with this abrupt transition. Schooling for upper-class boys, or for those who had a sponsor, as in Mercer's case, "offered moral and mental education over perhaps seven years, and during that period strictly limited, sometimes even discouraged, holidays at home and visiting by parents."[11] Flaxman theorizes that this approach was harmful for both child and mother: "what was largely missing in their milieu was the notion of parental responsibility and the educational significance of the family for the proper maturing of a child And disregarded was the crisis which mothers had to face when their children, especially their sons, were 'lost' to them as so early an age."[12] Since parents were sending their sons to boarding school at a young age, the responsibility for the sons' upbringing was transferred to the school. The son's lost the benefit of being nurtured in the family environment. If Cornelia had reservations about Mercer attending boarding school in England, perhaps she suppressed them because she believed it was a better opportunity for his advancement. She knew that the Jesuits could educate him at Grand Coteau, though they were poor. The Earl of Shrewsbury, however,

[10] Ibid., 59.

[11] Flaxman, 92.

[12] Ibid.

would provide financial security even if it meant risking his mental and emotional well-being. In reality, Cornelia may have had little say in Mercer's education if Pierce were firmly set on his move to England. Men still had the final say concerning important family decisions, and women had little recourse. Pierce and Mercer left Grand Coteau for good on May 5, 1842, with a layover in Philadelphia before sailing to England. They arrived in England in July 1842; Mercer was enrolled at Oscott College, and Pierce accepted a tutorship with the son of Lord Berkeley of Spetchley Park.

According to Flaxman, Mercer was a "victim of his father's egotism." He had a pleasant childhood for the first nine years of his life before his father uprooted him for an English boarding school education. He attended Oscott College for about a year (and was doing well) before Pierce decided to move him to the Jesuit-run Stoneyhurst College. As with St. Charles College in Grand Coteau, Pierce again found fault with the way Oscott was run. Bishop Walsh requested that Pierce "refrain Dear Sir, in the future from speaking unkindly of Oscott College till you have a better opportunity of examining into the truth of the ill-natured reports you may have heard against it."[13] But the damage was done, and Mercer's education was once again interrupted. Most important, Mercer saw neither parent between the fall of 1842 and 1846, except for a brief visit with Cornelia in the summer of 1843. Flaxman notes that "[his parents] were not in the country and he had to cope with the insecurities of a very odd background, a dependent who had neither home nor family standing, nor money behind or prospects ahead, among boys who took all that for granted; a boy whose parents never visited and who were, of all things, a priest and a nun."[14] Mercer continued to attend boarding school until Pierce took the

[13] Flaxman, 88.

[14] Ibid., 155.

children away from Cornelia. When Mercer transferred from Oscott to Stoneyhurst, "his grade for application was 'excellent'. By the time he left, he was nearly bottom of his class."[15]

When Cornelia arrived in England in 1843, she could only visit Mercer briefly before leaving for Rome to grant Pierce permission to begin his ordination studies. The family unit, except Mercer, would live in Rome until 1846, when Cornelia returned to England to found the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. During this time, Mercer had no family living in England, and he was isolated at boarding school. Cornelia did her best to bolster Mercer's spirits by sending him gifts: "My Dear Merty, I have hoped to hear that you got your box of cakes and pies in time to make merry on Xmas Day. I sent it three days before on purpose to make sure of it for that day."[16] But the strain of separation from his parents, especially Cornelia, was too much for Mercer, and ultimately clouded his judgment of her. It was an understandable judgement, nonetheless, because he felt abandoned.

Cornelia and Mercer corresponded frequently while he attended boarding school in England, although only the letters from Cornelia survived. Her letters revealed much about Mercer's situation and experience of living at school. Cornelia's letters were full of encouragement for her son, and she took significant interest in his schoolwork: "You must write to me at once & let me know where you are in the school and how you have begun your studies . . . . I hope you are very cheerful & happy & will try to enjoy your studies as you would do I am quite sure if you would put your heart upon them as Henry [Berkeley] does."[17] Cornelia's

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Cornelia Connelly to Mercer Connelly, 1846, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

[17] Cornelia Connelly to Mercer Connelly, Aug/Sept., 1846, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

biographers point out her lack of understanding of Mercer's situation as the American son of a Catholic priest and future nun in a British boarding school.

Cornelia's letters indicate that Mercer revealed his unhappiness to her, and she counseled him to focus his mind on God:

> It makes me so happy to know that you can laugh when you want to cry & so put off getting angry. You will see how much trouble this will keep you out of & how good humoured you will grow, and you will soon love everybody and make everybody love you. And then it is so very sweet to be always in the presence of God internally & externally; driving away very quickly all naughty or deceitful thoughts before they have taken possession of our mind.[18]

Cornelia tried to bolster Mercer's spirits and at the same time impart something of a religious education to him, but he continued to struggle with the travails of boarding school. She attempted to improve Mercer's moodiness and advised him on how to control his unhappiness or anger toward other students:

> Try my dear boy to laugh at yourself as if it was another person. You would very likely have laughed if the same thing had happened to another so why not laugh at yourself. Try another time to laugh when you are disposed to grow angry. I was quite sure the castles were blowing up in your imagination to make you waste and worse than waste your time, this is the way the Devil hopes to make you useless and good for nothing. Put him down and shew your anger to him & not to your school fellows.[19]

The letters suggested Mercer experienced teasing from his school mates, and Cornelia did not hesitate to get involved:

> How much I like Henry B. he seems so frank and open. I asked him what there was between you & he assured me there was nothing at all—so you see my dear Boy it is your own imagination & not his—you will profit by this my dear Merty I hope & get over all such useless thoughts, rather I should say <u>dangerous</u> thoughts

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 24.

> since it is quite impossible for you ever to do your duty and be in the love of God, and of your neighbour while you give way to them.[20]

In this excerpt, it appeared Cornelia asked Henry B if there were any "bad blood" between him and Mercer. If Henry B. was bullying Mercer; would Cornelia's interference help or harm the situation?

Cornelia attempted to be an active parent in Mercer's life, despite the distance between them. She encouraged his religious formation by appealing to his duty to God and neighbor, hoping it would have an impact on him. She persistently warned him to concentrate on his studies and reprimanded him for building "castles in the air," alluding to his overactive imagination. Although most of her letters contained gentle chidings, sometimes she admonished him harshly: "The truth is dear Merty as I told you, while Henry Berkeley & the other good boys are labouring hard at the foundations of their buildings like persons of good sense you are building your castles in the air that will never be realised in any other way than to bring you upon a few more ferules before the end of the week."[21] Cornelia's criticism of Mercer, and her "praise" of the good boys, raises the question of how well she really knew her own son Cornelia fretted over what she perceived as his lack of initiative, and in one letter, she bemoaned his future:

> Oh Merty how you will grieve over the education you have wasted—five years time and expense, purely wasted! … Your letter gives me no hope. What is to become of you? Even our little girls who have been with us three months (coming to us quite ignorant) write at the end of that time better than you do. You know that you will have to depend upon your own efforts for an honourable livelihood and that what we have will neither go to you nor to Frank but to Ady.[22]

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[20] Cornelia Connelly to Mercer Connelly, 1846, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

In the last line of this text, one sees why she might be so hard on Mercer. He and his brother, Frank, would have to support themselves, so it was critically important that they received a good education. She worried that Mercer would not earn a respectable living if he did not apply himself in school.

One might suggest Cornelia's criticism of her son demonstrates her limitations as a parent. Cornelia's unsympathetic tone, for instance, calls into question her parenting style and depicts her in a negative fashion. Even with making allowances for different parenting methods in the nineteenth century, Cornelia's letters seem insensitive. She does not seem to take into account factors that may be causing his struggles, such as adapting to a boarding school environment. Sarah Brabant suggested that a reason for her severity may be because Cornelia was afraid that Mercer had inherited Pierce's temperament, and she wanted to prevent him from having the same mental health issues. In Cornelia's own way, she was trying to protect him. Brabant notes, "Seen through [this] lens, these cease to be the words of an uncaring mother and become the plea of a loving mother desperately afraid that her child is following in the footsteps of his father."[23] If one considers Cornelia's fear of Mercer taking after Pierce, this rationale makes sense. Furthermore, from the perspective of nineteenth century motherhood, her criticism may have been justified if she was trying to convey the gravity of his situation. She was a concerned mother worried about his future, albeit a flawed one. But we do not want to excuse Cornelia either, because it shows that even candidates for sainthood have limitations. Cornelia's lack of delicacy may have been the wrong approach with Mercer, because in the end it did not endear her to him. In examining Cornelia's letters from a twenty-first century approach, advocates of modern parenting may say that she was too critical, when in fact she may have just

[23] Brabant, 13.

been overprotective. Evaluating her parenthood from different socio-historical lenses demonstrates how complicated it is to accurately portray the situation.

During this time, Cornelia had assumed the role of Mother Superior of a new religious congregation, and her advice to Mercer may have been more fitting for her novices or postulants: "I wish you would keep to your meditation every morning my dear boy were it only for ten minutes. If you really do try hard to get these ten minutes to use the three powers of your soul on any divine truth you would find how nicely things would go on—what nourishment and strength you would receive."[24] It appears that Cornelia may have focused more on being Mercer's spiritual director than his mother. She blamed Mercer's troubles on his lack of spiritual focus: "And this is the reason why you get on so badly because you do not take the proper means to learn how to use the three powers of your soul."[25]Again, as Mercer tended toward depression, Cornelia encouraged him to form a total reliance on God:

> Don't forget your promise to hold up your head and when you find it moping down raise it up quickly like a little bird that is going to sing & say in your heart, My God I love Thee—He who fears Thee my God knows no other fear—O my God help me to know Thee, to love Thee & to serve Thee—may God bless you my dear Boy and give you the noble ambition of becoming a saint—aim at an everlasting glory & you will not be disappointed.[26]

While it is clear that Cornelia loved her son and was concerned about his spiritual well-being, her disconnection with him plagued her understanding of Mercer's life at boarding school, one that ultimately undermined her relationship with him.

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[24] Cornelia Connelly to Mercer Connelly, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

Repercussions

As discussed in Chapter 2, the relationship between Cornelia and Pierce deteriorated after she became a nun. The situation got worse when Pierce removed the children from their schools in England and took them away from their mother. Mercer continued to write to Cornelia through Pierce, "but the letters were not forwarded, and Cornelia's letters to her son were returned."[27] After Pierce turned against Cornelia, he not only kept Mercer's letters from Cornelia and vice versa, but he tried to turn Mercer against his mother. Mother Maria Buckle, Cornelia's contemporary and first biographer, noted:

> Pierce writes to Merty that he was pleased with the letter he had written to his poor mother but that he thought it best not to send it. His own letter to his son is in terms too gross to be repeated here. He talks as if he were out of his right mind and says he will pray for Mother Connelly 'as one given up to the devil' … He thanks God for being delivered from that 'cursed Church of Rome'. In the same letter he talks of the devotion of Ady and Frank to himself.[28]

Buckle was clearly disgusted at Pierce's attempt to defile Cornelia's reputation in the eyes of his son. Unfortunately this tactic worked, as Mercer would be permanently estranged from Cornelia for the rest of his life.

When Mercer was eighteen, he was sent to America to live with his "kind Uncle George" (Pierce's brother) in New Orleans. There is no record of Mercer's wishes with regard to the move or his future profession. His years at boarding school had left him, "ill-prepared for life in his own very different country or for any work or profession."[29] Distraught over the estrangement with her son, Cornelia contacted Bishop Blanc of New Orleans, imploring him to use his

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Maria Joseph Buckle, SHCJ, "Materials Collected for a Life of Cornelia Connelly," unpublished typescript, completed 1886, quoted in Flaxman, 189–190.

[29] Flaxman, 156.

influence on Pierce, but most especially on Mercer: "My dear Lord I must not dwell on this deep sorrow for I am without power of any remedy and can only distress others by my tears. … Might you not exercise it [his influence] on Mr. Connelly through his brother & my son, and be yourself a father to the poor child while he remains in New Orleans?"[30] Bishop Blanc visited Mercer, who hoped to be established by his Uncle John [Connelly] in a "Texas farming venture." Blanc sent distressing news to Cornelia that Mercer's "prejudices shall ever be in favour of his father, and rather adverse to you, that is, he will range rather on his father's side, whom he considered *victimized* (by the Church)."[31]

Mercer's estrangement from Cornelia continued to be a source of sorrow to her, and she was shocked by his death at age twenty of yellow fever. She received the news on October 13, 1853, the same date Pierce had asked her thirteen years earlier to allow his ordination. The emotion she felt was recorded by Buckle: "This . . . blow was felt most profoundly by his poor Mother—For a few days she seemed quite overpowered with affliction and unable to do anything but to pray to God in secret. This affliction was the more terrible as he had apostasized together with his unhappy Father. Mother Connelly never has the satisfaction of hearing anything consoling of his last moments."[32] Just as terrible for Cornelia as the news of Mercer's death was his separation from the Catholic Church, and Cornelia feared for the state of his soul. She wrote to Bishop Thomas Grant, her superior in England, "Of your charity remember his soul in the hope of God's mercy."[33] Years later, Cornelia wrote to her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Murphy

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[30] Ibid, 191.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Maria Joseph Buckle, SHCJ, "Materials Collected for a Life of Cornelia Connelly," in Villanova Digital Library, https://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:334656#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-4275%2C-250%2C11830%2C4993 (accessed May 28, 2022).

[33] Flaxman, 196.

Bowen, conveying her feelings about Mercer: "Nothing would induce me to advise you to send [your sons] to England for their education. The English boys are rough fighting boys & glory in combativeness, in Colleges … I always regretted having sent dear Mercer to an English College & would never have consented to sending Frank."[34]

Adeline (Ady Connelly)

The Connellys' daughter, Ady, lived with her parents for about seven years before Pierce's decision separated the family. When Pierce and Mercer left for England, Ady boarded at the Sisters of the Sacred Heart School in Grand Coteau. This arrangement worked well because Cornelia still taught music at the school and could see Ady on a daily basis. There were times, however, when Cornelia could not be with Ady, and she offered this up as a sacrifice for spiritual benefit. Cornelia biographer Catherine Gompertz described an example:

> It happened one day that the child developed an infectious disease and was hurriedly isolated by the nuns. Her mother, who was teaching in the school, could not be with her. The next morning Mrs. Connelly refrained, in a spirit of mortification, from making inquiries. Everybody thought that someone else had surely told her how the child was, and consequently she went through the whole day without information. This little incident she afterwards related herself to help another, and encourage her to bear the torment of anxiety.[35]

Although Cornelia viewed staying away from her sick child as an opportunity for spiritual mortification, Ady probably needed her mother's comforting assurance. There was no rule preventing Cornelia from asking after her daughter, or visiting her, but apparently she did not.

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[34] Cornelia Connelly to Elizabeth Murphy Bowen, in *The Writings of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly*, 58 Volumes, Archives of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Oxford, Vol. 1, 86–87, quoted in in Lancaster, 273.

[35] Gompertz, 48.

When Cornelia traveled with Ady and Frank to Rome, she lived with the children in a "large comfortable house, cool & quiet" on the Sisters of the Sacred Heart's convent grounds. Ady attended school with the Sisters while little Frank received tutoring from Cornelia or Powell, their English nurse. Cornelia mentioned Frank's early education in a letter to her sister: "Our dear little Frank" was doing spelling and Bible story and repetition with her and found it very hard "to keep still."[36] Pierce visited his family about once a week and the children sang and recited verses for him.

Cornelia never intended to be separated from her children; at the very least, she expected that they would be enrolled in schools close to her. Pierce promised that he would never make any decisions about them without her input. When Pope Gregory XVI met with the Connelly family to obtain Cornelia's permission for Pierce's ordination, "It [was] unlikely that her answer was a monosyllable. She was a straightforward woman, devoted to her family, at the turning point of her life and theirs, and unlikely to leave the vital unsaid. It may well have been that she told Pope Gregory she believed the children should remain with her whilst they were young."[37] Even as Cornelia prepared to leave Rome for her order's foundation in England, she still thought of the family as a unit, writing, "We shall not leave Paris until August and then we go to Mrs. Berkeley's until I decide under Father Mahone's direction upon my future movements … I trust that we may all see our dear country again but when God only knows and I do not think it will be likely to happen before Merty's education is finished."[38] Cornelia anticipated a return to the United States at some point with all her children.

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[36] Lancaster, 235.

[37] Flaxman, 93.

[38] Cornelia Connelly to John Connelly, July 19, 1846, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

Once the family arrived in England, Bishop Nicholas Wiseman informed Cornelia that Ady and Frank could not stay with her during her novitiate. This may have surprised Cornelia because she knew the stories of Jerusha Barber and Elizabeth Seton, who were discussed previously in the introduction. Flaxman observes that "there [was] a strong likelihood that Cornelia arrived in England knowing no reason why Ady and Frank should not remain with her from the beginning."[39] However, Cornelia acquiesced to the Bishop's order without challenging it. In Protestant-dominated England, the Bishop was afraid that a nun who was also a mother might cause a scandal in an "atmosphere of barely concealed hostility." There was intense dislike, "even loathing," of the Roman Catholic Church. But under pressure from the Catholic hierarchy to begin her congregation, Cornelia did not feel she could go against Bishop's decision. Also, with the prospect of managing the Derby Convent and the poor school almost immediately upon arrival, Cornelia might have realized she could not give her children the attention they needed. So Ady was sent to the convent school at New Hall in Essex, apparently chosen by Pierce and another clergy advisor. Sending Ady to boarding school was "an affliction" for Cornelia, but one she believed she had to accept, although reluctantly.

Cornelia was also dismayed at the prospect of sending Frank, who was just five years old, away. She had intended to keep him at Derby, but the other sisters, particularly Emily Bowles, were worried about the order's reputation and did not want to endanger the new congregation. One can see Cornelia's confusion and worry, particularly regarding Emily's feelings, in a letter to Pierce:

> I have waited until now, hoping, if you came in an early train you might drive up to the door, to see and kiss little Franky, without getting out, and I have hesitated whether I should go to the train or not: but Emily is so very fearful of a word being said. . . . I think I have made up my mind to leave the decision about Frank to you and the father. Emily is much too anxious *not* to have him, but I think

[39] Flaxman, 113.

> myself, if he could be with a motherly schoolmistress and little boys that would be better.[40]

Cornelia was pressured by the Bishop and her fellow sisters, who were fearful of the prospective scandal the presence of Cornelia's children might cause to the order and to Catholicism in England. Cornelia's note to Pierce showed her anxiety that the slightest contact between him, herself, and the children might be misconstrued in a hostile environment.

Cornelia's relationship with Ady practically ceased to exist after she founded the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. Cornelia only saw her daughter once more after she was sent to a convent boarding school in 1846. She was prevented from returning to Cornelia by Pierce, who took her to Europe with Mercer. There she was left alone for about fifteen months at another convent school in Nice before she returned to England with her father. Pierce then lived with Ady and Frank in Albury cottage on the grounds of one of Pierce's principal supporters, Lord Drummond.

Cornelia's letters to her daughter were kept from her and returned unopened by Pierce, and many years passed before they met again. For the rest of her life, Ady was her father's companion, reliant on him for financial support. Pierce may have had a small income from American investments, but he regularly begged for money from his relatives in the United States. When Ady, at age twenty-five, visited Pierce's brother George in Philadelphia, George wrote to Pierce his impression of her:

> I have come to see Adie & I confess I am greatly disappointed. At the age of 25 instead of a dignified lady like woman with some knowledge of the world I find a gentle affectionate ignorant child with no practical knowledge & if suddenly left alone in the world not so capable of taking care of herself. . . . I consider you have utterly sacrificed her to your own selfish enjoyment of her company. I consider it absolutely necessary she should have the society of a sensible practical woman.[41]

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[40] Ibid.

[41] Flaxman, 157.

In the same letter, George continued to admonish Pierce: "Ady on her arrival had not decent or sufficient clothing. The money I sent her was for this purpose & any other application of it til this neglect is remedied is wrong, to use no stronger term."[42] Clearly Ady suffered from the want of a mother's care, and neglect on the part of her father, and George freely criticized his brother for failing to raise her properly. There were no letters or records preserved to hear or understand Ady's side of the story. We do not know, for example, of her experience being raised by Pierce, or if she felt abandoned by her mother. Fortunately, Ady was supported by Cornelia's half-sister Isabella, who left her a sizable inheritance in her will.

Toward the end of Cornelia's life, she and Ady began to correspond again. In a letter dated 1875, Cornelia wrote, "It was a comfort to me to see your hand writing again after so long a silence. Of course you have many objects of interest to take up your time and attention, and I must not complain."[43] (It is not clear if this was their first correspondence since 1846, or if there had been earlier communication.) Cornelia continued, using the language of a Mother Superior: "I know you do not like prosy letters and the 'sermonizing' too is distasteful and you know darling the tenour of my life would naturally lead me to the latter and in this sense you will not always think I mean more personally than I intend for your pleasure." In the rest of the letter, Cornelia inquired about Frank, and hoped they could come for a visit to England soon. Toward the end she couldn't resist some motherly advice: "I wonder you do not go [to America] and both Frank and yourself marry—you will never settle where you are and you will very soon be too old. What a pity it is to lose and waste life without any object for the future either in this world or

[42] Ibid.

[43] Cornelia Connelly to Adie Connelly, Shrove Tuesday 1875, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

in the next. Now I must not sermonize!"[44] Again, one might be dismayed by Cornelia's tone. She was critical of Ady and Frank despite being separated from them for a long time. Because of the gulf between them, she desperately worried about their status in life, especially their rejection of the Catholic faith. She wanted to see them "settled down," and away from their father, if possible. Ultimately she was the most concerned about their abjuration from the Catholic Church, and her focus on this perhaps made the children feel it was more important than her love for them. Ady and Frank's belief that Cornelia chose the Catholic Church over them caused a rift that was never completely healed.

Cornelia was relieved to have a visit from Ady in 1877, which she noted in a letter to her sister: "Yes … I did quite enjoy dear Ady's visit and feel very much more happy about her being in good faith at heart and really deceived into error."[45] After Pierce's death, Ady was reconciled to the Catholic Church, and she "devoted herself to works of charity—she would die peacefully [in 1900], holding her mother's crucifix."[46]

Frank (Pierce Francis) Connelly

Cornelia's relationship (or lack thereof) with her youngest son, Frank, arguably brought her the most heartache. Even before he was born, he was destined to have an atypical upbringing because Pierce asked Cornelia for a separation while she was pregnant. He had no ordinary family life, as Cornelia raised him on convent grounds after his first year. At age five, he began attending a school for little boys at Hampstead. Frank had little time to establish any kind of

[44] Ibid.

[45] Flaxman, 344.

[46] Ibid.

enduring bond with his mother. After a few years, Pierce removed him to Albury Cottage, where he lived until about age eleven. He was enrolled at Marlborough College—a boarding school founded in 1843 to educate the sons of clergy—and spent his teenage years in this strictly Protestant environment. Strong devotion to and sympathy for his father's situation caused him to become a fervent anti-Catholic. This may have been a natural consequence of the lack of a relationship between Frank and his mother. Flaxman remarks on this bond between father and son: "The separation threw him [Frank] much sooner than it did the other two into the orbit of the father alone whose magnetism he evidently enjoyed without being overwhelmed by it. . . . He seems to have been more robust than his brother and sister and was able, encouraged by his father, to carve a place for himself in the sun."[47] When the case of *Connelly vs. Connelly* was officially dismissed in 1858, Pierce moved with Ady and Frank to Brussels for several years (without telling Cornelia where they lived), and then sometime after 1860 they moved to Florence, Italy. D.G. Paz, Pierce's biographer, noted that "Pierce came to Florence because his son Frank had a talent for art. After anatomical and artistic studies at Duesseldorf and at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris, Frank moved to Florence and, in 1861, became a student of the eminent American sculptor, Hiram Powers."[48] Frank "began to be noticed, and to receive commissions. . . . He went on to make a name for himself, and occupies a minor place in the history of American art."[49]

Although Frank experienced success in his professional life, his antipathy toward his mother was permanent, and a source of constant pain for Cornelia. No letters survive between

[47] Ibid., 157.

[48] Paz, 188.

[49] Ibid., 189.

Frank and his mother, although she did try to contact him through Pierce. When he reached adulthood, Frank visited Cornelia a few times, but it only seemed to exacerbate her grief. Frank stayed with his mother for eight days in 1867, and Cornelia biographer Mary Bellasis recalled their farewell: "They sat together in a railway compartment … talking for half an hour. When the time came to say goodbye the sister who was with her, sitting quietly in a corner of the carriage, saw that a 'pool of tears' had collected in Cornelia's lap."[50] In another well-chronicled visit by Frank in 1872, he lashed out at Cornelia for the (perceived) lack of affection she showed him. Even though Cornelia tried to preserve their relationship, it appeared that Frank struggled with the emotional distance between himself and his mother. An eyewitness recounted, "He was talking very angrily to Reverend Mother. She heard him say, 'Mother, you love those [sisters] more than you do me.' 'O Frank, Frank, I do not.' He came down, kicking his bag down the stairs in front of him. His Mother said (in such a sad and pleading voice, Sister said), 'Oh Frank, come back, *come back*' but he did not, he went away.'"[51] It was during this time that a "young sister found her weeping at her desk," and Cornelia told the sister, "None of you know what it is to be a Mother."[52] The lack of a relationship with her children was for Cornelia, a constant "cross without alleviation," a continual sorrow throughout her religious life.

The Question of Abandonment

In light of the antipathy and resentment displayed by Cornelia's children, the question remained: could Cornelia have tried to recover them, or found a way to negotiate with Pierce for

[50] Ibid., 264.

[51] Ibid., 316.

[52] Strub, *Positio*, 144.

their sake? Cornelia's biographers were united in their disgust over Pierce's actions, and they commiserated with her on the children's removal from her life. However, most of her biographers (who were religious themselves) saw this as the ultimate test of her vows. An example of this view is demonstrated in the following quote:

> Pierce's traitorous removal of the children [was] a searing moment of truth for the mother: he would do even this to gain his end. The temptation to temporize with God's claims must have hung over her …. She thus fortified herself against the desperate longing to give up everything for the sake of the children—which Pierce had probably counted on.[53]

It is important to note that the separation between Cornelia and her children was never meant to be permanent, no matter if the other sisters felt uneasy by the children's presence. Upon her arrival at the Derby Convent in 1846, she was required to send the children away to complete her novitiate year. Cornelia took her vows on December 21, 1847, and she looked forward to the return of Ady and Frank, and Mercer's visit for the holidays. But not long after taking final vows, the chaplain at the convent disclosed that he received a letter from Pierce in France, "in which he tells me that he has the children with him, without giving any indication of where he is going etc. and orders me to forbid the Mother General, in his name, to communicate in any way with the children, and does not wish to let her know the place to which he is taking them."[54] Legally, there was nothing Cornelia could do about the situation. In nineteenth-century parlance:

> The only 'person' in the marriage was the husband, and his wife and children were viewed as his property. With that as her legal status the wronged married woman had little hope in law on which to ground a petition. . . . He would generally retain her property along with custody of the children and whatever they might inherit … Had Cornelia challenged … she risked a decree which would bar her irretrievably from the children.[55]

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[53] Flaxman, 130–131.

[54] Ibid., 129.

[55] Ibid., 146–147.

Pierce counted on Cornelia leaving the Society for the sake of her children. Given that Cornelia had acquiesced to whatever Pierce wanted in the past, including their separation, he expected her to capitulate. But she did nothing of the kind. In her notebook, she resolved:

> In union with my crucified Lord and by His most precious blood, in adoration, satisfaction, thanksgiving and petition, I Cornelia, vow to have no future intercourse with my children and their father beyond what is for the Greater Glory of God and His manifest will, known through my director and in case of doubt on his part, through my extraordinary [confessor]. Gloria Patri. Jan. 21 1848. St. Mary's Convent, Derby.[56]

Cornelia wrote this vow privately, so it was not legally binding in terms of Church law. One speculates as to why she made this declaration. Perhaps she felt that she could not trust her emotions, and so wanted to place the situation in the hands of a higher authority. But in making this vow she conceded power to her Bishop and Confessor. Perhaps she tried to steel herself from giving into Pierce's demands, so she placed an intentional barrier between herself and her children. Flaxman noted, "She thus fortified herself against the desperate longing to give up everything for the sake of the children—which Pierce had probably counted on. But a natural stubbornness helped Cornelia to stand firm. Her husband, one suspects, had not reckoned with this streak in his 'saintly little wife.'"[57]

For the members of her congregation, Cornelia's "standing firm" and not giving into Pierce was the mark of her saintly heroism. Ultimately, she put her religious life and her role as Mother Superior above her physical motherhood. It became a matter of placing God's will above her own will. She often prayed, "Oh Eternal Will, live and reign in my will and over my will now and forever."[58] But could Cornelia be certain of God's will in this situation? Was it His will

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[56] Ibid., 130.

[57] Flaxman, 131.

[58] Ibid.

that Cornelia's children suffer the loss of their mother? In the Catholic Church, a woman's choice to become a vowed religious was traditionally viewed as superior to married life with children. It was preferred, and often deemed necessary, that a woman must choose the path of celibacy if she were to be totally devoted to God. Historian Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg explains,

> Beginning with the Old and New Testaments, and followed by the Church Fathers and monastic writers, we have been provided with a wide spectrum of frequently ambivalent and contradictory opinions and beliefs regarding motherhood. . . . [I]t was regarded as a "sacred calling," beneficial and empowering for women; at the same time, in comparison to virginity, it was seen as a definite compromise, and as such it was physically and spiritually harmful. It was viewed as an unnecessary encumbrance or frustration which thwarted women's dedication to a life of spiritual perfection.[59]

In the Gospels, Jesus advocated leaving all family members to follow him completely. Author Mary Dunn argued, "Jesus's own articulate subordination of the biological family to the exigencies of Christian discipleship provided the foundation for the enduring exclusion of motherhood from the center of the Christian tradition."[60] Jesus's proclamations to "hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters … [and] be [His] disciple" and "I have come to set a man against his father, and daughter against mother" demonstrated the primacy of the spiritual over the biological.[61] For mothers, the care of their children rooted them to the physical world, which made it more difficult to practice "single-hearted" devotion to their faith. Dunn describes the antipathy toward motherhood by Christian leadership:

> In the eyes of early (and later) Christian theologians, it was mothers—more than others—who were loaded down by the weight of the world. Mothers, more than others, were distracted by the 'wailing of [their] infant[s]' and the 'brats … crawling upon [their] breast[s] and soiling [their] neck[s] with nastiness.' If the

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[59] Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Golden Wombs: Motherhood and Sanctity," in *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1000* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 211-212.

[60] Mary Dunn, *The Cruelest of All Mothers: Marie de l'Incarnation, Motherhood, and the Christian Tradition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 80.

[61] Luke 14: 25-27, quoted in Dunn.

> task of [Christian discipleship] demanded an undivided heart, there was no more vulnerable group than mothers—whose affections for their children were regularly and roundly condemned as incompatible with Christian devotion.[62]

Anything related to the body's physical nature was viewed as inferior to the primacy of the soul. The agony of childbirth was the result of original sin—that had also led to Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden. The body was susceptible to the evils associated with sexual reproduction, so Christian followers had to renounce all activities "of the flesh" to purify their souls for salvation. Virginity became the highest ideal that a woman could attain, and virginal martyrs were revered and worshipped for their purity. As a result, "[m]others were the antithesis of virgins—sexual (as opposed to chaste), sinful (as opposed to stainless), controlled by (as opposed to in control of) their bodies)."[63] This virginal ideal coupled with the patriarchal control of the early church left mothers on the margins of Christian discipleship. Motherhood, quite simply, was seen as a more difficult path to total sanctification.

By the medieval period, the reputation of motherhood slightly improved within the context of Christian tradition. Dunn explained, "As suggested by the growth of the cults of the Virgin Mary and her mother, Anne, the rise of affective piety, and the increase in the number of saints who were married with children, motherhood—if not a means—was at the very least not an absolute bar to sanctity within the context of the medieval Church."[64] The Church acknowledged female role models whose motherhood did not impede their sanctity. While inroads were made to frame motherhood in a positive light, it was still secondary to the total "self-giving" of entering religious life.

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[62] Jerome, "Against Helvidius," quoted in Dunn, 85.

[63] Dunn, 86.

[64] Ibid., 90.

Motherhood continued to be subordinate to the "higher calling" of religious life and was not viewed as an equally important vocation in the eyes of the church until relatively recently. Choosing the religious life was considered the ultimate sacrifice for a woman, because she was "giving up" her natural duties of being a wife and mother. The church had little precedent for women who entered religious life while they still had young children. If it did occur, it happened infrequently and was also connected to the death of a spouse. In the hagiography of these women's stories (and from the viewpoint of the women themselves), the "abandonment" of their children was necessary for their spiritual fulfillment and for the greater glory of God. It was the only way for women to be "single-hearted" in their pursuit of God's will.

"The Cruelest of Mothers"?

The story of St. Marie de l'Incarnation, foundress of the first Ursuline Convent in Canada, called attention to the "abandonment" issue as related to mothers and their children. A comparison can be drawn between Marie's experience and Cornelia's in how they perceived responding to the will of God. Before she entered religious life, Marie de L'Incarnation was married, and at age nineteen she gave birth to a son, Claude. Her husband died shortly after Claude's birth, and Marie, devoutly religious, began to entertain the prospect of becoming a nun. By the time Claude was eleven, she had made the decision to enter the Ursuline order. Claude, who was left in the care of friends, became despondent, and ran away from home. After he was found, Marie recalled, "He did not dare to reveal his affliction to me, but I saw tears fall from his eyes which made me know that he was feeling in his soul. He made me feel such a great compassion that it seemed to me that my soul was being torn from me."[65] She recovered quickly

[65] Marie de l'Incarnation, *Relation de 1633*, 276-277, quoted in Dunn, 5.

from this emotional moment, and proclaimed, "But God was dearer to me than all that. Leaving him therefore in [H]is hands, I bid adieu to him joyfully. Then, receiving the benediction of my confessor, I threw myself at the feet of the reverend mother who received me freely for the love of Our Lord."[66] Claude was relegated to secondary status, but in the end, he saw her journey as providential, because it also led him to the religious life.

Initially, Marie felt guilt and anguish at the separation from her son. She remembered feeling so upset that "it seemed to me that I was being split in half; nevertheless I did not let it show."[67] Despite her successful "career" as an Ursuline, she had trouble absolving herself of guilt in abandoning Claude. Marie corresponded regularly with him, where she alternately begged his forgiveness and defended her decision to leave him. She wrote in 1647 that she "consider[ed] myself an infinity of times the cruelest of mothers" and that she had been "the cause of [his] having suffered much affliction."[68] But she also justified her abandonment in terms of it being providential for him:

> For if I abandoned you in your childhood, moved by his grace, without leaving you with any support other than his totally pure providence, he took you into his paternal protection and richly provided for you, giving you the honor of calling you to his service at a time preordained by his eternal counsel … You have therefore won much in losing me, and my abandonment has been useful to you.[69]

Marie believed leaving her son to God's protection benefited him in the long run. She assuaged her guilt with the thought that her abandonment led Claude to the religious life.

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Marie de l'Incarnation, *Relation de 1654,* 275, quoted in Dunn, 31.

[68] Marie de 'Incarnation, "Letter CIX", in Dom Guy-Marie Oury, *Dom Claude Martin: Le Fils de Marie de 'Incarnation* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe, France: Solesmes, 1983), 316, quoted in Dunn, 31.

[69] Marie de 'Incarnation, "Letter CLV," quoted in Dunn, 37.

Above all, Marie attributed the necessity of abandoning Claude to obeying God's divine will. Dunn writes, "the abandonment was not, as the witnessing public may have suspected, an injury inflicted by an indifferent mother on her *unloved* son, but the result of the imposition of divine will on a resistant mother and her *beloved* son—the double victims of a sacrifice of biblical proportions."[70] In Marie's own words, she simply had no choice but to submit to God's will. There were few options for mothers to devote themselves to radical discipleship completely. Dunn wrote that Marie was "overcome by the will of God who was 'unmoved by the tender feelings' she had for her son"; Marie "had to yield to the force of divine love and suffer this blow of division."[71] It is interesting that she portrays God as being "unmoved" by her maternal feelings, which conflicts with the image of God as a merciful and loving Father. In a way, she recused herself from the abandonment by placing the decision in God's hands. She was the obedient servant complying with the Master's demands.

Separation, not Sacrifice

There is no evidence that Cornelia was familiar with St. Marie de l'Incarnation's story. However, she characterized the "abandonment" of her children in similar terms. As her faith evolved, Cornelia always proclaimed that she would follow God's will in every circumstance. She assented to releasing Pierce from his marriage vows, but she never thought the sacrifice would mean removal from her children's lives. Cornelia reluctantly accepted separation from them if this was God's will manifested through church officials, but she always viewed herself as their mother.

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[70] Dunn, 41.

[71] Ibid.

All of Cornelia's biographers record her love for her children, and her sorrow when she was separated from them. In a letter to her brother she wrote that "my dear children were as much under my eyes as if I had not left the world till their father broke his word and his promises and stole them away from me in a moment of excitement and unjust anger, may God forgive him."[72] She separated reluctantly from her children when she founded the congregation in Derby, and one of the sisters recalled the event: "Never shall I forget the struggle of that separation. It was, I think, one of the greatest sacrifices she had to make."[73] But did Cornelia herself view the removal of her children as a "sacrifice" for the greater glory of God? Flaxman maintains that "Although later Cornelia refers to having 'given up' her husband for the work of God, she never spoke of having given up her children. On the contrary, when in regard to them fearful injustice and suffering overtook her, she maintained the opposite, passionately."[74]

In letters to her siblings, however, Cornelia agonized over the loss of her children. To her sister, Adeline Duval, she remarked, "I suppose you know that I know nothing about my dear children. I have several times sent letters to them and to Pierce which have been returned unopened."[75] And in another letter to her brother Ralph, "I have nothing to tell you about my own darling children except that Pierce has taken them to Brussels without bringing them to see me or even letting me know of their departure—May God forgive him! Poor darlings! I little thought of their having to suffer in this way, which I can do nothing to help them except by

[72] Cornelia Connelly to John Bowen, March 30, 1854, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

[73] *Documentation*, Vol. 10:33, quoted in Lancaster, 273.

[74] Flaxman, 92.

[75] Cornelia Connelly to Adeline Duval, September 15, 1851, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

prayer."[76] Cornelia felt that Pierce used the children as bait. As Bishop Wiseman noted, "In one letter he [Pierce] tells Mrs C that he had carried off the children as the only way to get hold of her through them."[77] But she was unwilling to be taken advantage of or compromise the foundation of her congregation. She admonished Pierce in the sternest manner: "I have already told you I would see you when you bring back to my care my little girl, and I will never see you till then; unless God manifests his holy will through the command of the bishop."[78] When this quote was used against her in a propaganda pamphlet trying to sensationalize the trial, *The Case of the Rev. Pierce Connelly*, Cornelia noted on her own copy, "Yes, this was my will because he had broken his promise."[79] Even though Pierce was wrong to take the children away from Cornelia, she still had to make a decision. Would she concede to his demands, or stay committed to her Congregation?

Cornelia's biographers emphasized that the removal of Cornelia's children was a sacrifice necessary for her sanctification. Paul Molinari, S.J., former postulator or presenter of the cause for Cornelia's canonization, suggested that "God in His infinite wisdom and goodness was asking her to make a most painful sacrifice, the sacrifice of her children whom she dearly loved."[80] He continued, "In the light of faith it is further not difficult to see that this sacrifice of what is dearest to one's heart is, at the same time, not only a secure means of personal

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[76] Cornelia Connelly to Ralph Peacock, November 18, 1858, ibid.

[77] *Documentation*, Vol., 6:14, quoted in Lancaster, 270.

[78] Cornelia Connelly to Pierce Connelly, December 1849, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ.

[79] *The Writings of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly*, Vol. 43:35, quoted in Lancaster, 270.

[80] Paul Molinari, S.J., "Commitment to Love: A Reply to Cornelia Connelly's Critics," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (October 1963): 28, quoted in Lancaster, 228.

sanctification, but also an unimaginable source of apostolic fertility."[81] As Cornelia's postulator, Molinari believed the tragic circumstances of Cornelia's life impacted her vocation and ministry. From the church's perspective, her sacrifice was necessary for one who "entered upon a higher state of perfection."[82] Even though all are called to holiness, the vocation to priesthood and religious life takes precedence over the lay state. For Cornelia's early biographers, most of whom were Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, Cornelia's physical motherhood had to be separated from her spiritual motherhood, and any emotion or action related to her children had to be resisted.

Cornelia's biographer Mary Catherine Gompertz, for example, described this as a duality of "natural" versus "spiritual," and the temptation to the "natural" must always be overcome. However, Cornelia still wanted to have a close relationship with her children, and she was often conflicted by her feelings. Gompertz analyzed Cornelia's predicament as a "violent conflict," writing,

> The natural and spiritual claims upon her met in violent conflict, and she saw how impossible it was to serve two masters. The temptation to recover her children at any cost pursued her, and with it came the inspiration to new heroism. She dared not trust her own heart lest in its overmastering love for them might prove a traitor to her solemn obligations.[83]

For Gompertz, Cornelia's "mastering" her feelings was a heroic act necessary for the preservation of her vows and the good of the congregation. The sisters needed a Mother Superior who would inspire them to new levels of sacrifice and devotion and Cornelia's story fit the mold. The suppression of her feelings was necessary for the sake of her religious vocation: "Nerving her soul as usual by meditation on the Passion and on the Mother of Sorrows, she made

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[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Gompertz, 155.

[a] vow [to be directed by the convent chaplain in the matter] and forced her heart to be at peace."[84] When tempted to be overcome by the loss of her children, Cornelia redoubled her efforts to place them and herself in the hands of God. Gompertz and other early biographers' description of Cornelia's supreme act of sacrifice built her reputation as a heroic foundress worthy of canonization.

Even though Cornelia's early biographers defended her against criticisms that she abandoned her children, the reality is that she had little contact with them after a certain point. "Mercer lived with her until he was nine; Adeline until she was seven (followed by another four years in Sacred Heart boarding schools where her mother was also present on the premises); and Frank until he was five. Afterwards her influence over the children was severely restricted."[85] We have seen how she tried parenting Mercer while he was at boarding school, even though her guidance seems misdirected and unsympathetic. Even Gompertz acknowledged the effect it had on him: "To Merty's sensitive, brooding disposition this strain would have been great and might have brought on an almost morbid depression. In any case he seems at this time to have been angry and sick at heart, and to have resented his mother's inexperience of the ways of British schoolboys."[86] Mercer's resentment only increased after he left school, when he returned to America and was inclined to take his Father's side.

Although Cornelia never wanted to lose her children, she was not willing to compromise on what she deemed was God's will for her—founding a religious congregation. Following this path made her appear to some as a mother who "abandoned" her children. The reality was that she had few options in a very complicated and even desperate situation. The "heroism" in

[84] Ibid.

[85] Lancaster, 229.
[86] Ibid., 232.

Cornelia's life was not that she "sacrificed" her children for the higher calling of religious life, but that she endured a tragic situation in being separated and estranged from them. Nonetheless, this separation was her choice: to put her congregation first as she discerned the will of God. Her biographers separated her life into two distinct parts, but her biological motherhood never ended. Instead, it took on a new dimension as she became a mother to her congregation, and the children she and her sisters served.

Chapter 4

Many Ways of Mothering

In *Cornelia Connelly and Her Interpreters,* Judith Lancaster explained that the "traditional presentations" of Cornelia Connelly's life have been broken into two distinct parts: the first half as a wife and mother, and the second as the Founder and Superior of a religious order. This compartmentalizing of Cornelia's life implied that she "had a series of vocations and that she left one behind as she embraced the next."[1] This created the effect that there were two distinct spheres in Cornelia's life. But Lancaster maintained, however, that "for all that she experienced a painful dislocation in the loss of her husband and children, it may nevertheless be that she continued to develop as a mother (if not as a wife) during the period of her leadership of the Society."[2] In this chapter, I will examine the many ways Cornelia was a mother to the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus.

Lancaster posited that there were two myths concerning Cornelia's motherhood. The first was the "anti-Cornelia myth," in which Cornelia was accused of being an "unnatural" mother who abandoned her husband and children. This myth gained traction during and after her court case with Pierce due to the unflattering publicity she received and the anti-Catholic sentiment of the British population. The stigma remained with her because she did not leave the convent and return to her husband and children, Cornelia's relationship with her children was nonexistent for many years, but Chapter three of this dissertation demonstrated that Cornelia, although she was largely unsuccessful, tried to parent from a distance. While her children may have been separated

[1] Lancaster, 269.

[2] Ibid.

from her, but she was always their mother. Cornelia did not give up the role of motherhood when she entered religious life.

Proponents of the "pro-Cornelian myth" asserted that she "drew on and developed all that she had learned in the first half of her life to deepen and enrich the charism of her congregation. As founder, she continued to reflect on what mothering involved, and to articulate and model for the Society a style of mothering that called others to growth rather than confining them to endless childhood."[3] Lancaster proposed that "any examination of Cornelia's living out of the role of spiritual and founding mother must examine the extent to which she integrated her earlier experiences into her changed circumstances."[4] This chapter expands the position that Cornelia integrated her prior experiences of motherhood into the relationships she developed with her fellow sisters. From the beginning of the Society, she not only mentored them as new women religious, but she also tended to their physical well-being. As shown in her correspondence, for instance, she made sure the sisters' health was always a priority. In addition, as the Society's charism evolved, Cornelia mentored the sisters spiritually through retreats, her Epiphany letters, and other writings. In general, she was much-loved, and most of the members of the congregation supported her in this role for the rest of her life. However, there were times when tensions rose due to the deference she believed was owed to her as Mother Superior. In one example chronicled in this chapter, Cornelia's misreading of the sisters' feelings when she tried to push through the Constitutions' approval nearly split the Society. The situations where Cornelia struggled to understand or misinterpret the views or actions of the sisters were reflective of the problems she encountered with her biological children. Even though these difficulties

[3] Ibid., 277.

[4] Ibid.

increased Cornelia's heartache, she was successful in mentoring the members of the Society in ways that helped them become effective teachers and leaders.

"Mother to All"

In his article, "*Maternity . . . of the Spirit*: Nuns and Domesticity in Antebellum America," Joseph Mannard posited that women in religious life were called to emulate the virtues of motherhood. In his analysis of convent life in the early nineteenth century, he argued that "even virgins who entered the convent embraced a maternity of sort."[5] Mannard chronicled the writings of nineteenth-century essayist Charles Sainte Foi, who explained how a nun is perceived as embracing maternity: "If to follow a higher vocation, she renounces the joys which the maternity derived from the flesh and blood imparts, it is to consecrate herself to the functions of a more holy and sublime maternity, which is entirely of the spirit in its nature and its end."[6] The "maternity of the spirit" derived from the nun's status as a spiritual "bride of Christ" and from her works of "teaching, nursing, orphan care, and moral reform."[7] Sainte Foi attributed the physical characteristics of motherhood to nuns as he continued: "She becomes the spouse of Jesus Christ in order to become, through mercy and charity, the mother of the little children whom she feeds with the milk of the doctrine of life, or of the sick and infirm whom she surrounds with her care."[8] This sentimental portrait of the "maternity of the spirit" ascribed the gender roles primarily associated with motherhood to women in religious life.

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[5] Mannard, "*Maternity . . . of the Spirit*," 316.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 317.

Even nuns who chose the contemplative or cloistered life practiced spiritual motherhood: "They do not on this account forfeit the glorious privilege of maternity, for it is in their heart ever glowing with charity that are formed those germs of salvation and life, which the breath of the spirit carries into languishing or withered souls, and which are afterwards fertilized by the action of divine grace."[9] By cultivating an interior relationship with Christ, women in religious life emulated the qualities of motherhood, principally through charitable activity. In serving others through charity, nuns manifested both a "maternity of spirit" by bringing others closer to God, and also a physical maternity through the work they do, such as caring for the sick. Mary epitomized the Catholic ideal of a "two-fold maternity, that of the spirit and that of the flesh." In her person, Mary united the two states of virginity and maternity. If a woman chose to become a nun, she could share in the function of maternity in emulation of the Virgin Mary.

Women in religious life who demonstrated "maternity of the spirit" did so by prescribing to the gender norms of motherhood in the nineteenth century. One way that "women religious testified explicitly to their practice of maternity of the spirit" was by "the language used in their school prospecti printed annually in the Catholic Almanac. Nuns assured parents and guardians of their complementary role to the mother in the nursery."[10] An announcement for the Ursuline academy in New Orleans, for instance, read:

> The object kept in view . . . is the adorning of their pupils' minds with knowledge and the forming of their hearts to virtue. The young ladies are accustomed to habits of virtue, cleanliness, and polite manners. They are never suffered to go beyond the reach of a watchful but maternal superintendence, whose vigilance secures the preservation of morals and the willing observation of the rules.[11]

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 319.

[11] Ibid.

Nuns not only protected their charges' physical well-being, but also promoted the cultivation of virtue and moral education. In an ironic twist, Catholic schools run by women religious often attracted Protestant families to form upstanding young women for the new nation. A statement from the Sisters of Mercy of Charleston pledged that "the strictest attention is paid to the health, comfort, manners, and literary improvement of the pupils. The discipline or government, though firm and uniform, is mild and parental. The sick are attended with maternal tenderness."[12] Women religious who were educators also had to become surrogate mothers to their pupils. In the rare cases of Mother Superiors who were biological mothers, such as St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, they had the responsibility of caring for their literal children and spiritual children.[13]

Cornelia had similar expectations for herself and her sisters when it came to demonstrating the qualities of motherhood. She described that "In the government of her subjects, a Superior should resemble a Mother, that is, she should be filled with the spirit of charity, compassion and solicitude for those whom God has confided to her care as so many Spiritual children. A Superior must be Mother to all, and a Mother of mildness and of strength at the same time."[14] Cornelia believed the sisters' motherhood should be spiritually oriented; it must derive from the cultivation of virtues such as humility and charity. She explained, "When a Superior gives an order or imposes a charge, she should do it sweetly and kindly, more in the form of a request than a command; for acting in this maternal spirit, she produces a sensible impression on the minds of her subjects, and renders their obedience easy and unconstrained."[15] Cornelia encouraged a gentle type of motherhood in the hopes it would facilitate willing

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[12] Ibid.

[13] O'Donnell, 289.

[14] *The Writings of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly*, quoted in Lancaster, 286.

[15] *The Writings*, CC 55:48, quoted in Lancaster, 287.

cooperation. In one of her oft-quoted requests of the sisters, she stated that "I would also wish you to learn how to interchange severity and firmness with mildness and mercy, so as not to allow yourselves to be turned from what has been determined upon to be acceptable to God."[16] Cornelia spoke from her experience of living at the Society of the Sacred Heart convent in Rome, where she encountered an atmosphere that she felt was contrary to the spirit of the Society Her experience, which was discussed in Chapter 2, caused her not to join that congregation. As a result, in the founding of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Cornelia emphasized the practice of meekness and mercy in interactions with fellow sisters and students.

A Motherly Presence

From the earliest days at the convent in Derby, Cornelia was responsible for providing physical and spiritual sustenance to the sisters who joined the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. As mentioned in Chapter 2, when the sisters arrived at Derby, they found a very primitive setting with little food and almost no furniture. Sister Aloysia Walker, one of the first members of the congregation, recalled how Cornelia took charge of the situation:

> Though the convent was empty we began order & regularity as if the house was full of people . . . You can imagine how hard our dear mother had to work the first weeks in order to make the place comfortable and dry . . . in the distribution of offices which was done very soon [she] names herself Infirmarian, an office she fulfilled for a long time, and the care she showed each one of us was so like a mother . . . . She thought of so many things we felt confiding and safe as little children.[17]

This quote indicated that Sister Aloysia viewed herself as subordinate to Cornelia in the early days of the congregation. Having had the experience of running a household, Cornelia was able

[16] Ibid.

[17] McCarthy, *The Spirituality*, 100.

to make the convent a suitable living environment for the sisters. Clearly, she saw herself in a leadership role, but did this mean her relationship with the sisters was parent to child? The language of parent/child is evident as Sister Aloysia regarded Cornelia as mother and the other sisters as children. She candidly expressed her fondness for Cornelia as the Society's mother figure taking care of her flock. She also was impressed by the amount of work Cornelia undertook: "You felt she was with our Lord all the time she was at work . . . I say work! for she did all kinds . . . . She had to do all for we were such children . . . . Our dear mother was always so encouraging."[18] Again, Sister Aloysia praised Cornelia as the responsible parent, but why did she see herself and the others as children? The women who joined Cornelia had no previous experience with religious life and had little knowledge of running a convent. Cornelia learned a great deal from the sisters of the Society of the Sacred Heart, but there was an additional layer of affection for her as a mother figure.

Sister Aloysia's letters showed that Cornelia was attentive to the sisters' needs, whether they be physical, mental, or spiritual. Cornelia's missives to the sisters are replete with advice. First, she was always concerned with their health:

> Dear Mother Catherine [Tracey]
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> I have not had a line from you yet, but I trust you are not suffering still from your bilious sickness. If you take lemonade you ought not to take it when the milk is still undigested nor take milk immediately after the lemonade. I hope you are not taking the latter still, as it is lowering & you need nourishing. I shall hope you are as much improved by the change of air as I am myself & that you may return quite well.[19]

[18] Ibid., 99.

[19] Cornelia Connelly to Mother Catherine Tracy, July or August 1873, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.08, ASHCJ.

She continued to monitor Mother Catherine's health through several letters, advising her on her digestive ailment and even her menstrual cycle: "I am so thankful to our Good God that you are getting well & the monthly epoch is all right. I hope you kept your bed the first day, and that you will do so throughout the winter as this is the best safety."[20] The fact that all the sisters in the congregation had the title Mother gives an interesting perspective to Cornelia's correspondence with the sisters. On one hand, the sisters may have felt free to be candid about their health situations, or they were comfortable enough confiding in their Superior, who had acted as Infirmarian. On the other hand, they still had to obey Cornelia as Mother Superior, which limited their freedom to a certain extent. The majority of the sisters viewed Cornelia not just as a motherly figure but a friend to whom they could confide. Most importantly, she was their spiritual mentor, which was perhaps her greatest legacy to the Society.

Spiritual Motherhood

Perhaps the most important type of motherhood Cornelia imparted to her congregation was spiritual. Sister Aloysia recalled how Cornelia guided them in prayer during the early days of the community: "I often think of those days when we would go to the community room when our work was done and sit with Reverend Mother to sew: every now and then she would repeat short acts of faith, hope and charity or some other little prayer . . . loud enough for us to hear and follow in spirit . . . you felt she was with our Lord all the time."[21] Cornelia was "endeavoring to create [a kind of spiritual community] by her role modeling. The juridical element was minimal,

[20] Cornelia Connelly to Mother Catherine Tracy, October 20, 1873, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.08, ASHCJ.

[21] McCarthy, *Spirituality*, 101.

and the relationships of sister-to-sister, teacher-student, mother-daughter clearly prevailed, while Cornelia carried out the full responsibilities of a superior."[22]

One of her most important roles as Mother Superior was to cultivate the spirituality of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. As a mother, Cornelia was drawn to the humility of the Holy Child. Elizabeth Strub explains that Cornelia's holiness emerged in her experience as wife and mother:

> It is noteworthy that Cornelia's holiness was given a definitive shape while she was living a married life. By degrees her context would shift, she would make religious vows and her life's devotion would center more heavily in the Incarnate Word, the Holy Child. But her love for God which was ignited at Grand Coteau would continue to express itself in all the same characteristically active ways.[23]

Strub became the first to argue that Cornelia achieved the fullness of her spirituality at Grand Coteau through a period of intense suffering that united her to the crucified Christ. Cornelia attended retreats where her spiritual mentor Rev. Nicholas Point led her through some of the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises. It was through participation in these exercises that her future spirituality would form:

> In her retreats [Cornelia] had contemplated often and lovingly the Eternal King who asked his followers to "be willing to labor with me, that by following me in suffering, he may follow me in glory." She had reflected that "love ought to manifest itself in deeds, rather than words, that love consists in a mutual sharing of goods."[24]

Cornelia developed the spirituality of the SHCJ based on her experience with the Spiritual Exercises. St. Ignatius's aim in designing the Exercises was to lead the retreatant through the same transformational process that he experienced. Strub described the process as "the

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[22] Ibid., 102.

[23] Lancaster, 185.

[24] Ibid.

knowledge of Christ as King which leads to imitation and discipleship; it is discipleship which leads to identification with and participation in the sending and laboring and dying and rising of the eternal king made flesh to do battle with Satan and wrest from him what had been under his power and command—all to the greater glory of God."[25] The Spiritual Exercises lead the retreatant through a process of contemplating the events of Christ's life so that he or she elects to participate in advancing the Kingdom of God on Earth. Through Scriptural contemplation, the participant will see each event as a particular aspect of the redemptive nature of the Trinity. In this way, the retreatant "extends the contemplative penetration to the height, depth and breadth of the mystery at hand and so comes to a new way of seeing and companioning God at work in all things."[26] The Spiritual Exercises enable the retreatant to encounter Christ's Incarnation in the fullness of its revelation. A quote attributed to Reverend Point expands on the human nature of Christ: "The spirit of Jesus! See it at the crib, spirit of humility, of dependence. The Word divine … its grandeur, its wisdom, all its perfections are hidden under the veils of littleness and of infancy! . . . It is only in meditation at the feet of Jesus, near the Sacrament of Love, near His crib, that pure truth shines on spirits and makes them see all the beauty of humility, of dependence and of other virtues."[27] Cornelia, in attending the Spiritual Exercises led by Reverend Point, internalized the connection between Christ's humility and his infancy. Cornelia not only practiced the Exercises herself, but they also became part of the sisters' spiritual direction.

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[25] Strub, *Ignatius,* 19.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 18.

From her contemplation of Christ as "Master, Model, Spouse," Cornelia was able to model the qualities of spiritual parenthood herself. One of her modes of spiritual mentorship were the Epiphany letters she sent out on a yearly basis as the members of the congregation renewed their vows. In her first Epiphany letter, she offers compelling advice on how they should conduct themselves: "Certainly, I most ardently desire to see you closely united to God in prayer and in all your actions, that the example of each and every virtue may assist and encourage the other and above all I would wish to see you excel in the perfection of Charity and true Humility."[28] Cornelia's focus on the specific humility of the Incarnation provided direction for advancement in the spiritual life.

For Cornelia, the "humble and hidden" life of the Christ Child is the center point for the congregation's spirituality. By meditating on the lowliness of Christ's humanity, she wrote, we "attain the knowledge of our own nothingness and misery."[29] By keeping our minds focused on the characteristics of the Christ Child, the scales fall from our eyes, and we see the sinful inclinations that have held us back. In realizing our nothingness, we experience a complete dependence on the boundless mercy and love of the Lord.

By contemplating the Incarnate Lord, the sisters of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus fulfill their unique vocation, the "single end" to which all acts should be directed. The single end is the "glory of God found in their own and their neighbor's perfection, that is, assimilation to the likeness of the redeeming Christ."[30] Virginia Wallwork, S.H.C.J., articulated that "Cornelia understood the Holy Child not only as teaching us, but as a way of life, in the living of which we

[28] Ibid., 104.

[29] McCarthy, *Spirituality*, 114a.

[30] Ibid., 113.

would come to know God and to manifest him." Specifically, the Society's Constitutions invited the sisters to participate in "the self-emptying of the Son in the mission which he joyfully accepts from the Father."[31] Wallwork explained, "It is above all our united task—i.e., the Society as one community must reflect to the world the vision of the first years of the incarnate life of Christ with an adult comprehension that this self-emptying, even humanwise, is part and parcel of a life lived for the Passion and Glory."[32] She reflected that "the first years of the incarnate life of Christ" is a key aspect of the congregation's spirituality, and it requires a specified type of self-emptying, modeled on Christ's humility. Teresa Okure, S.H.C.J., explained that for Jesus, this self-emptying "meant laying aside in some mysterious way his divinity so that he could create room for or put on our humanity, and ultimately incorporate all of us."[33] Christ laid aside his divinity so that he could draw us, through his humanity, to the Father. Okure further elaborated that "as Christ's self-emptying was aimed at enriching us in every way and raising us to the status of child in his own intimate relationship with his Father, so should the vows by which we share in the self-emptying lead us to enrich others concretely in our own life situations."[34] For Cornelia, the key to practicing this total giving of self, this profound humility, was to follow the evangelical counsels as the particular path of imitating Christ in the "humble, hidden life." In the abridged version of her preface to the Constitutions, Cornelia wrote of receiving the spirit of the Holy Child Jesus from the "living wells of His perfect humility, His divine charity, and his

[31] The Society of the Holy Child Jesus Constitutions, no. 21, quoted in Teresa Okure, SHCJ, "Extending the Reality of the Incarnation: A Theological Reflection," *Source* 27 (1993), 31, https://corneliaconnellylibrary.org/library-materials/texts/Source27/26-34.pdf (accessed May 28, 2022).

[32] Virginia Wallwork, SHCJ, "Some Theological Reflections on the Title: 'Society of the Holy Child Jesus,'" *Source* 3 (1972), 49, https://corneliaconnellylibrary.org/library-materials/texts/Source3/46-55.pdf (May 28, 2022).

[33] Okure, 31.

[34] Ibid., 31.

absolute obedience."[35] The members of the Society were to "labour and to die with Him" in the constant practice of these virtues.

For Cornelia, the evangelical counsels provided the inspiration and direction to unite with the Child Jesus in contemplation and practice. In one of her Epiphany letters, she advised, "May these blessed Counsels be *fixed* in your hearts, so that you may day by day understand them more and more brightly, and love them more intensely, and practice them more diligently."[36] She continually linked the practice of the counsels to the suffering and hidden life of Jesus, and encouraged the sisters to remain unwavering:

> [I]f you have faith, you will learn the value of a suffering and hidden life, and it is to this life you are especially called by the very name you bear. Be then, *like* the Holy Child Jesus in your thoughts, in your words and in your actions, cherishing diligence and fidelity in what is called little by daily occurrence—and be persuaded that nothing is little with God if it is in the practice of Virtue.[37]

For Cornelia, the spirit of the Society is best epitomized by the practice of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Okure described the purpose of the vows:

> Our vow of poverty opens our heart to recognize and accept the goodness of creation. It further moves us concretely to seek ways by which we can share with others the things which are intimately ours. . . . Our vow of obedience invites us to engage in the sustained search for and doing God's will. . . . Our vow of chastity opens us to the riches of God's love, of a God who is love (1 Jn. 4:16), and whose son knows how to love without reserve and without recall (Jn. 13:1; 15:13).[38]

Cornelia urged her sisters to practice the evangelical counsels through the model of a humbled Lord. By modeling these counsels herself, and by encouraging the sisters to practice them, she cultivated a unique spiritual motherhood. Cornelia taught the sisters that meditating on the

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[35] McCarthy, *The Spirituality*, 114a.

[36] Ibid., 126.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Okure, 31.

virtues and actions of the Holy Child would inspire them to bring Christ's love and mercy to others, especially their students.

Motherhood in Education

Elizabeth Strub observed that "Cornelia wanted her Society and its schools to exemplify the characteristics of spiritual childhood."[39] Humility, charity, joy, and simplicity were the essential marks of the Society, coming from the Holy Child because "In him there was nothing that did not point to God. His one guiding star was his Father and his will. Between Child and Father no shadow intervened. All that he said, thought and did was in perfect correspondence with the mind of God."[40] Cornelia's heart was fixed on the Holy Child because he reveals the virtues necessary for union with the Father. Jesus says in Matthew 18:3 that "unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of Heaven." Cornelia understood that this Gospel mandate was central to advancement in the spiritual life. It could only be realized by imitating the Incarnate Lord in His humility, and by fostering the spirituality of the Holy Child in others.

John Marmion wrote that Cornelia's "devotion to the Holy Child was the basis in the Society for Christian optimism, and for attitudes to the pupils" in her schools.[41] In her *Book of Studies* she advised, "The Mistresses shall at all times strive to gain the hearts of their pupils to the love and imitation of the Holy Child Jesus by the practice of humility, sweetness, gentleness and love."[42] Cornelia empowered her Sisters to cultivate a true maternal affection for the

[39] Ibid., 193.

[40] Ibid., 194.

[41] Marmion, 369.

[42] Ibid., 368.

children they taught. In the *Book of Studies*, Cornelia emphasized that "mistresses 'must regard [their pupils] as the children of God … and they should cherish a truly maternal love for them.'" And in another section, she wrote, "they shall watch over them as mothers."[43] All sisters who took final vows were addressed as Mother, which emphasized this important aspect of caring for their students.

Teachers were given the task of instilling virtues into their pupils, but they were also motivated to serve Christ in the form of the child. Marmion notes that the vision of Christ as the Holy Child "provided a deep motive for the respect for the individual which characterized the teaching of the Society HCJ, and also for the policy of working to develop the talents of each person rather than of implementing some abstract curriculum."[44] A part of Cornelia's philosophy was that teachers were to find the talents of each child, even if some were "hidden." Students were free to grow in their abilities, and as "examples of students' work has shown there was no question of restriction; her philosophy was that all things were possible."[45]

Cornelia's educational philosophy reflected the dynamism in which the pupils were to grow with the Holy Child Jesus as their model. "Pupils were to start with the Child Jesus and to grow with him into a fullness of human life which had its finality in God."[46] Part of her introduction to the *Book of Studies* reflects the step-by-step process written in the original Preface to her Rule: "In training and teaching children it is absolutely necessary to walk step by step, to teach line by line, to practice virtue little by little, in act after act, and only by such acts of virtue as are suited to the age and stage of moral and intellectual development of those we are

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[43] *The Writings of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly*, quoted in Lancaster, 285.

[44] Ibid., 367.

[45] Ibid., 368.

[46] Strub, *Positio*, 189.

guiding." Students' educational development should be grounded in the growth dynamism found in the "humble, hidden life" of Christ.

Spiritual Mentorship

The feast of the Epiphany became important for the Society because Cornelia requested that all the sisters renew their vows on or around this day. Mother Buckle noted that "[Cornelia's] own idea of the devotion we ought to have to the Infant Savior was expressed by the feast she chose for our great solemnity—the Epiphany—not His Birth but His manifestation—was most suitable to the teaching vocation of the Sisters."[47] The Society members were to emulate the manner in which Christ came into the world, in poverty and humility. The hidden life of the humble Christ child remained a constant theme in Cornelia's Epiphany letters, which she wrote to her sisters every year from 1852 until her death. In her 1857 letter, she refers to the vows as bringing "the strength of a hidden life in God, and it is in this obscurity from all human view that the divine light shines."[48] What constituted the "hiddenness" for Cornelia was not in the society's status as cloistered or active, but in "Jesus' relationship and interior life with his Father." As Strub explained, "It was this life which Cornelia imitated and wanted her Society to imitate. Holy Child sisters were to be 'hidden with Christ in God' so that they too could say 'I live not now I, but Christ lives in me'."[49] Cornelia

> saw that Jesus' infancy, even more than his adulthood, was the appropriate analogy for his hiddenness because the child conceals the full potential of the human person. Those who wanted to find him in the secret of his being would have to go to the place where his divinity was most hidden: his infancy. There in

[47] Ibid., 123.

[48] Strub, *Positio*, 183.

[49] Ibid., 182.

> his school they would learn how to replicate his way of being, choosing obscurity and humble labor rather than notoriety and a 'great name in the world.'

Cornelia's letters offer her sisters the guidance of living according to the evangelical counsels; the members of the Society will also experience the blessings and strength from their merciful and loving Savior. She offered a glimpse of her divine union with God so that her sisters would be inspired to live virtuously. Cornelia also wrote the Preface to an updated translation of *Walking with God, Dwellers in the Recreation House of the Lord*, a guide to the contemplative life by French Jesuit Père Rigoleuc, S.J. Cornelia spoke of her experience of developing an interior relationship with God, and revealed what the sisters could achieve if they followed Rigoleuc's teachings. Cornelia hoped that the new translation would help those who "aim at that life which delights in God, and in which our dear Jesus takes his 'delight.'"[50] She expounded on Rigoleuc's description of religion as a "*house of recreation* for God our Lord in the midst of the earth" and therefore a place of prayer where God can bring "His beloved friends and to them discovers His secrets."[51]

In addition, she showed how leading a contemplative life can help one "attain the kingdom of peace within, where the soul's whisperings are answered by the King Himself, giving abundantly that jubilee of heart which had not been bargained for in this life of accepted suffering."[52] Cornelia explained how a life of "accepted suffering" could be transformed into joy, the "jubilee of heart." One must "'at the time' of pain or wounded feelings make acts of 'burning love' over and over until God turned the pain of the injury into the pain of love giving abundant

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[50] Père Rigoleuc, S.J. *Walking with God, or Dwellers in the Recreation House of the Lord* (London: Thomas Richardson and Son, 1859), 3.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., 4.

'jubilee of heart.'" Pain was transformed into joy through union with the suffering Christ. As Strub noted, "[s]taying with the suffering was a way of staying with the suffering Christ until he blessed her union."[53] Cornelia's "jubilee of heart" was the joy she experienced when she accepted the sufferings in her life. The greatest joy came through suffering in union with Christ, through specific trials in His childhood and His crucifixion. Suffering for Cornelia was a way of manifesting the Creator's great love of humankind. "It created a likeness, an identity between herself and Christ. It was the point at which union with God was most true and most total because self-interest was least involved. Cornelia saw all suffering as belonging to the suffering Christ; the more he suffered, the dearer to her he became…. The more she suffered, the closer she was to the one she loved."[54] For Cornelia, "Suffering was the agent by which she was to be conformed to the image of Christ: 'united in suffering, sacrifice and prayer—to become with Him on the Cross—no longer I—but Jesus Crucified.'"[55] Ultimately, Cornelia's greatest source of suffering came from her estrangement with her children and conflicts with her "spiritual daughters" in the congregation.

Motherhood and Authority

When the Society of the Holy Child Jesus was first founded, the early members were quite willing to cede power and responsibility to Cornelia because of her previous experience with religious life when she was with the Society of the Sacred Heart. As noted, they viewed her as a warm and caring mother figure, and members of the small congregation were intimately

[53] Strub, *Positio*, 146.

[54] Ibid., 144.

[55] Ibid., 145.

connected. But Judith Lancaster observed that as the "Society grew larger, the homely intimacy and easy relationships could no longer be sustained, and some at least in the Society viewed Superiors as remote, even alien. Cornelia's response seems to have been to reinforce the motherly aspect of authority."[56] In "a book of Notes for Superiors," Cornelia reflected:

> In the Old Book of the Sacred Heart Devotions there was a prayer containing the words 'Have mercy Oh Lord on our Superiors and enemies.' The form has been changed . . . but there is still a tendency among people to class Superiors as enemies—How do we regard our Superiors? We ought to look upon them as our Mothers and treat them with honour and reverence, and also with tenderness and affection.[57]

Of course, Cornelia assumed that everyone loved their mother! Cornelia expected a level of deference that was due to the superior, and she also believed the superior should be treated with the affection of a mother.

It would take a much larger study to see if mother superiors from different congregations viewed themselves in a motherhood role. Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, for example, before founding the Daughters of Charity, remarked, "I shall be the Mother of many daughters."[58] Mothers Connelly and Seton shared the bond that they had been married with children before founding religious congregations. Their experience may have influenced their perspectives on the role of motherhood in religious congregations. One can also ascertain the nature of relationships between mother superiors and congregation members from the perspective of the latter. For example, a future Daughter of Charity wrote to Mother Seton: "Revd mother inexpressible was my joy when I heard that I was to have the happiness of becoming one of your

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[56] Lancaster, 286.

[57] *The Writings of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly*, quoted in Lancaster 287.

[58] O'Donnell, 229.

children."[59] Like Sister Aloysia's writings demonstrated earlier in this chapter, mother/child language indicated confidence in the mother superior's ability to care for the sisters as their own children. Mother/child language also showed the affection displayed from mother to "daughter" and vice versa.

In her letters, Cornelia frequently addressed students, potential congregants, sisters and superiors as "My Dear Child."[60] Within the congregation, Holy Child Sisters were called "Sister" after professing their religious vows, but they were not called "Mother" until they made their perpetual profession.[61] "Reverend Mother" and "Mother" were terms that she learned from the Society of the Sacred Heart, and she decided to keep them in her own congregation. In many instances when she used the title "Mother" ("My dear Mother Ignatia," for example) she still ended the letters with "Ever my dear child" and "Your own loving mother in JC."[62] Cornelia wished to cultivate and maintain personal relationships with her sisters, but her mother/daughter language still implied a level of authority, and she sometimes struggled to find a happy medium between these two domains. Some in the Congregation chaffed at Cornelia's brand of motherly authority, as demonstrated in a letter one sister wrote to Bishop Danell on February 25 1874, "Dear Revd Father . . . it is a relief to open my heart to someone & you are our only refuge on earth, as our Mth General has become a Stepmother to some of us."[63] The negative connotation

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[59] Ibid., 248.

[60] Cornelia Connelly to Mother Xavier Atkinson, August 31, 1876, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.06, ASHCJ.

[61] Roseanne McDougall, SHCJ and Emily Siegel, "The Life of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus in the United States, 1862 to Present: An Ecclesial Perspective," *American Catholic Studies* 132, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 98.

[62] Cornelia Connelly to Mother Ignatia Chadaway, January 3, 1878, Cornelia Connelly Writings, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.06, ASHCJ.

[63] *Documentation Presented by the Historical Commission for the Beatification and Canonisation of the Servant of God, Cornelia Connelly, Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus*, 87 volumes, Archives of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Oxford, D 54:79, quoted in Lancaster, 286.

of stepmother in this quote indicated that Cornelia's maternal brand of authority was not accepted universally by the congregation members.

Cornelia emphasized the qualities of maternal authority, but she also created a congregation where she trusted the members with shared "decision making," and "delegate[ed] a good deal of real responsibility."[64] When other convents and schools were established around England, Cornelia would appoint Superiors to oversee them. These Superiors were often "inexperienced" and "commonly in their early twenties."[65] When these sisters were put in charge of local chapters of the congregations, they also became "Mother Superiors." Cornelia often "[left] quite significant decisions to them. … [They] were to decide what was best locally."[66] Cornelia once instructed a Superior: "No, I had no intention of writing myself. You must do all those local matters from the Convent."[67]

This substantial increase in responsibility sometimes caused miscommunication between Cornelia and the other Superiors. The gravest situation occurred between Mother Cornelia and Emily Bowles over a property dispute in Liverpool. As discussed in Chapter 2, Emily was one of the earliest sisters to join Cornelia in forming the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, and had held leadership positions in the Derby Poor School and the Highest School at St. Leonard's. When the Society took over the Catholic poor schools in Liverpool in March 1852, she sent four sisters with Emily as the Superior. The regional poor schools were founded by the Catholic Poor School Committee, but lack of resources and qualified teachers made the schools difficult to maintain; as a result, the Committee was often grateful when a religious community offered to staff and

[64] Lancaster, 282.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

[67] *The Writings of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly*, quoted in Lancaster, 282-283.

run the school. As the schools in Liverpool flourished, Emily was approached by the government inspector of the Catholic poor schools about opening a teacher training college. Cornelia agreed as long as the Poor School Committee and the government funded the initiative. Emily and Cornelia begin to search for properties to house the teacher training school.

When a woman joined a religious congregation in the nineteenth century, it was customary for her to bring a dowry. Emily did not have a dowry when she entered the SHCJ, but she did gift the Society £1300. In March 1853, Cornelia was in Rome when Emily bought Rupert House, a residence for the teacher training school. She contracted to pay £6,600 without consulting Cornelia. Strub explains, "Although Emily had permission to use her personal fortune for this purpose, Cornelia had impressed upon her that she must never incur a personal debt which would exceed the mortgage value of a property."[68] Emily also borrowed £1,300 from her brother Sam to make the first payment on the house, securing the loan with money she had previously given to the Society. Basically, Emily bought a house on behalf of the Society without Cornelia's permission, and with borrowed money that was backed by a donation she had already given the Society.

Cornelia was "dismayed" that Emily would take this action without her permission. To make matters worse, when the bill for the remaining £5000 fell due, Emily sent Cornelia the bill, thinking it was the SHCJ's responsibility. "Mother Connelly regarded it not as the Society's but Emily's personal responsibility, and believed, which Emily later denied, that she had made this plain."[69] Emily still hoped the Catholic Poor Schools Committee would provide a grant for the teacher training college. In the meantime, Emily's brother John borrowed £5000 from a bank on

[68] Strub, *Positio*, 30.

[69] Flaxman, 210

Emily's behalf, again without asking or consulting Cornelia. When Cornelia received the receipt of payment, she "return[ed] it to Emily without a word, implying that the transaction is a private one between brother and sister for which she accepts no responsibility. Emily construe[d] silence as consent to Society responsibility."[70] In December 1854, when Cornelia visited the Liverpool school, she was surprised to learn that Emily had begun renovating Rupert House with the money that was supposed to back the first £1300 loan. Cornelia removed Emily from the office of Superior, and conveyed her disappointment in a letter to Bishop Grant: "I expressed strongly my total disapprobation of the purchase and refused taking any share in the responsibility. I deemed the speculation dishonest and sinful although I have ever been ready to palliate the intention which instigated it."[71] Unfortunately, the Poor School Committee revoked the grant they were going to award the Society because they believed another congregation had a better plan for the training school, and Cornelia had to decide what to do with the "unwanted, large property." "The debt of £1300 . . . she acknowledged because she had permitted the borrowing and the sisters had signed the note. . . . But she never admitted responsibility for the debt of £5000 owed to John. . . . When the brothers press[ed] her she gave up all claim on the house and told John Bowles he could foreclose on the mortgage."[72] Emily soon "was dispensed from her vow of obedience and left the Society." She left voluntarily in November 1856 to try to recoup the financial loss on behalf of her brothers.

The situation dragged on for several years, with John Bowles threatening a lawsuit, but the Solicitor employed by the Society felt that "evidence was lacking and the suit was very likely

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[70] Strub, *Positio*, 31.

[71] Flaxman, 211.

[72] Ibid.

to be granted."[73] Cornelia was adamant that the Society should not be held accountable for the money:

> The only view I take of the subject is this: Miss Bowles *acted privately* and independently of our Community. *Not* as a Religious, but as a secular. Not acknowledging any superior authority, not referring her Brother to any Authority. The loan of 5000 pounds was an *unprincipled* act on the part of Miss Bowles, and on the part of her Brother an effect of the weakness of human affection. Does justice demand that our Community should be responsible for the unknown deeds of another? Surely not, my Lord, for where there is no power there can be responsibility.[74]

Ultimately, Cornelia was upset with Emily for borrowing large sums of money and placing the Society under significant financial obligation without Cornelia's permission. However, the issue was also about Emily's perception of her own authority within the congregation than the financial loss. Flaxman notes, "Emily had given her trustee William Buckle the impression that she was co-foundress of the Society. He speaks of her as having been at one time 'joint head which she was always so considered.'"[75] If Cornelia had invested considerable authority in her local Superiors, did Emily consider herself justified in borrowing money on behalf of the Congregation? Also, there seemed to be a lack of explicit communication between Cornelia and Emily, which perhaps could have prevented Emily from borrowing the additional £5000 and causing additional strain. Eventually the situation was settled out of court because the bishop was afraid of public scandal.

Not much evidence exists to promote "any such pretension on Emily's part" to the role of Co-Superior of the Congregation.[76] As noted in Chapter 2, Bishop Wiseman gave Cornelia the

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[73] Ibid., 212.

[74] Ibid., 214.

[75] Ibid., 221.

[76] Ibid.

responsibility of running the congregation by installing her as Superior General. But did Cornelia demonstrate a lack of insight in reading the situation with Emily, which can also be traced to her experiences of motherhood with her own children? Cornelia's communications to her children frequently showed a lack of understanding of her children's situations, particularly in Mercer's case. Is this lack of insight a fault which carried over from her parenting experience to her role as Mother Superior? And more importantly, did she learn from these experiences? In reflecting on Cornelia's letters to Mercer, she often criticized him from a distance, when she could not have known the realities of his situation at boarding school. As Cornelia's history with the Society shows, she similarly struggled with understanding the sisters in her care.

The Society's Constitutions

One of Cornelia's major challenges as Superior was getting the Society's constitutions approved by the Congregation for the Propaganda of Faith, the Vatican's administrative body with oversight of religious congregations. Gaining approval for the constitutions would authorize the Society as an official religious order in the Catholic Church. The process could sometimes take years, and often involved a lengthy revision process. For Cornelia, "To obtain approbation was a primary responsibility and probably the greatest burden of her religious life."[77] Her first formal attempt occurred in 1854 when she delivered the constitutions to Rome, accompanied by two sisters. There, Cornelia waited while a consultant appointed by the Propagation of Faith reviewed the constitutions and recommend changes or revisions needed before approval could be granted. However, "At the Propaganda Fide [Cornelia's] Constitutions [were] given to an elderly Carmelite consultant who misguidedly puts Cornelia's text and Pierce's spurious text from the

[77] Flaxman, 294.

file together and [dealt] with them as two versions of a single rule."[78] The consultant never met with Cornelia; instead the Propaganda Fide sent a letter to Bishop Grant stating that Bishop Wiseman "[was] the one to make revisions in the constitutions to accord with the comments of the consultor."[79] The main issue with the constitutions, according to the Propaganda, was that "not enough provision had been made for the intervention of ecclesiastical authority,"[80] failing to include provisions for obedience that were required by the Bishop. Cornelia was unaware that she needed to "[spell] out episcopal rights and powers in the community."[81]

The constitutions were sent back to Bishop Grant, but he did not share the comments of the consultor with Cornelia at the time. Bishop Wiseman, who had "neither the time nor the interest to undertake this work,"[82] left it to Grant to communicate the changes needed in the constitutions to the Society members. Bishop Grant, believing the constitutions were Wiseman's responsibility, did nothing. Unfortunately Cornelia and the congregation were caught in the crosshairs of the bishops' miscommunication and were left in limbo as a result. After hearing nothing more about the constitutions for several months, Cornelia told Grant that it was "best to leave them in God's hands and do nothing more for the time being."[83] Cornelia was compelled to wait for communication from the hierarchy on the status of the constitutions.

There was no reason preventing the constitutions from moving forward other than inaction on the part of the players involved. Cornelia was dependent on the bishops to

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[78] Strub, *Positio*, 29.

[79] Ibid., 30.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Flaxman, 204.

[82] Strub, *Positio*, 30.

[83] Ibid.

communicate the revisions needed and as long as they were not of primary importance to the hierarchy, she had to wait. In the meantime, she continued to grow the congregation, opening schools around England and starting a U. S. foundation in Towanda, Pennsylvania. In 1864, without knowledge of the previous consultor's comments, Cornelia sent another version of the constitutions to Rome, with some revisions about adding "provinces, a provincial, and a general chapter."[84] Inexplicably, however, when the convent chaplain delivered them to the English College at the Propaganda, they were left there unopened for five years.[85] In the meantime, Bishop Grant finally showed Cornelia the consultor's comments on the 1854 Constitutions, and encouraged her to prepare them for approval again. Cornelia slowly worked on the revisions for the next few years, but realized she needed assistance if the Constitutions were ever going to be approved. In 1869, Bishop Thomas Grant of Southwark advised Cornelia to return to Rome and work on the constitutions with the Society's appointed consultor, Father Anselmo Knapen, OFM. "Under Anselmo Knapen's supervision, Cornelia undertook a much more extensive revision of the Constitutions than she, or anyone else, had anticipated."[86] This caused much consternation among the sisters and threatened a rupture within the congregation.

When Cornelia was first developing the rule, "what was vital to [her] was not a rule's juridical and governmental elements, but the spiritual and apostolic, that is, what would aid the sisters in their relationship with God and each other, in the field of ministry."[87] She was not familiar with the finer points of developing the Constitutions that Rome required, but "gradually

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[84] Ibid., 50–51.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Lancaster, 122.

[87] Flaxman, 294.

through hard work and painful vicissitude she learned her lesson."[88] When she returned to Rome in 1869, Cornelia was surprised to learn that the revision would take months to alter because she believed the third version was nearly complete.

The extensive revision came as a surprise to the SHCJ, who from the beginning were only familiar with the first part of the constitutions:

> In 1850 Wiseman approved the first evolution of Cornelia's initial sketch. What he approved was in two parts, both drawn extensively from the Jesuit Constitutions. The second was largely on government and used only by the superiors. To the sisters in general 'our Rule' meant Part One alone, to which in 1853 when first about to ask Rome for approbation Cornelia added an introduction on the spirit and mission of the Society. To this … the sisters were devoted and by 1861 each had her own copy.[89]

The sisters primarily focused on part one for the spirit and mission of the congregation. Part two, which had to do with governance, remained largely unknown to the general body of the community. When Cornelia was in Rome she thought that "since the *superiors* were already acquainted with the English text of what she had with her, approbation would be given by Rome with no further delay."[90] But according to the rules governing the approbation, all the sisters would have to sign it.

The members of the congregation were not prepared for the changes Father Knapen made. He allowed Cornelia to keep the first chapter as is,

> but he put the Jesuit Summary, Common Rules, and Rules of Modesty, texts to which the SHCJ had given much meaning, at the very end of the book under the heading 'Common Rules'. He required . . . that the full structure of government be spelled out for all the sisters to see and approve, something they were not used to seeing in their previous truncated Constitutions.[91]

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[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid., 295.

[90] Ibid.

[91] McCarthy, *The Spirituality*, 182.

The biggest change was that "real distinctions [were] to be made between House and Choir Sisters, allowing only annual vows for the former, prohibiting them from voting, and requiring separate recreation."[92] Historically, when women joined religious orders, they were either assigned to be a house (lay) sister or a choir sister. This system was primarily based on the women's income and education when she entered the convent; house sisters, who were often from lower class families, were often assigned the physical tasks of convent life, such as cooking and washing. They were often not seen as full members of the congregation. Choir sisters, on the other hand, paid dowries to enter, and retained "higher" positions in the congregations, and were trained as teachers or more professional roles. The separation between house and choir sisters created a caste system of sorts in women's religious congregations, and distinguished who would be educated and who would be relegated to menial labor.[93] In the formation of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, however, there was no formal designation between these two roles, but there were sisters whose main tasks were household management and others who were teachers or administrators. Under the new constitutions, house sisters would only be allowed to make annual (instead of perpetual) vows, they would be prohibited from voting, and they would have separate recreation periods.[94] As all the sisters participated fully in the life of the congregation, they were upset by these potential changes. Caritas McCarthy remarked that "for many years there was little distinction of rank in the Society [and] Sisters were deeply hurt by the changes for which

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[92] Ibid.

[93] For more information on the distinction between lay and choir sisters, see Brian Titley's "Convent Class Struggle: Lay Sisters and Choir Sisters in America," *Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 32, no. 1 (Spring / printemps 2020), https://doi.org/10.32316/hse-rhe.v32i1.4731 (accessed May 28, 2022).

[94] McCarthy, *The Spirituality*, 182.

they held Cornelia responsible."[95] Most of them had no idea that she was required to add these changes based on the revisions made by Father Knapen.

After Cornelia returned from Rome, she was sent by a doctor to France to recuperate from physical illness—which would later be identified as chronic nephritis, or "referred by her as rheumatic gout"—and exhaustion.[96] McCarthy noted that "It was from there she *sent* the revised Constitutions with the Prefect of the Propaganda's accompanying letter, to all the SHCJ communities, requesting the signatures. Weary, ill and aging . . . Cornelia had lost perspective on the problems her sisters had regarding the Constitutions and her authority."[97] Some of the sisters resented the way Cornelia handled this situation, especially since she had not educated the community on the changes. Mother Mary Francis Bellasis wrote that from the sisters' perspective, they "were unexpectedly called upon to hear, . . . that they were to accept changes in the Rule—that Rule which had become their mainstay, and for which they had been trained by their mother to make any sacrifice, and to remain faithful to death."[98] As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Cornelia's expectations of motherly affection and reverence may have caused her to believe that blind obedience was due from her "children" regarding the constitutions. She overestimated the implicit trust that she thought the sisters had placed in her. Bellasis reflected on Cornelia's mindset: "Reverend Mother was much distressed by the dissatisfaction which [the Constitutions] caused almost universally among the Sisters. She had not calculated on the effect it would produce . . . There is no doubt but that Reverend Mother Foundress made,

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[95] Ibid.

[96] Strub, *Positio*, 95

[97] Ibid., 183.

[98] Ibid.

unconsciously, a very great mistake in transacting this important business through different local Superiors."[99] Had Cornelia delivered the revised Constitutions personally to each house, she could have explained the reasoning for the changes. But her mindset could have been affected by her poor health. The SHCJ strongly disapproved of the changes made to the constitutions. Caritas McCarthy remarked, "Truly, 'she had not calculated on the effect' she would produce by asking the three SHCJ communities in Preston to send their signatures of consent to the revised constitutions."[100] Three or four of the Preston sisters signed the Constitutions but secretly sent notice of their opposition to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò, Prefect of Propaganda Fide. Cornelia found out about the protests in time to "prevent her from sending the signatures of those who had represented their difficulties to Rome. She was deeply wounded by what she regarded as the perfidy of the false signatures."[101]

Mother Maria Buckle "concluded the root of the problem was a failure of judgement on Cornelia's part, a failure which she proceeded to compound. She had presumed that the Society would accept the revised constitutions in simple and unquestioning obedience; faced with a totally different response, she failed to manage the dissent in any effective way, retreating into silence and the acceptance of suffering."[102] As a mother superior with unchallenged authority for many years, Cornelia did not recognize that the sisters may have had different viewpoints. Cornelia gave the congregation members a certain measure of freedom when it came to governance and management of the houses, but, in the end, she expected them to follow her unquestionably. This was not intentional, but an effect of trying to conform to the hierarchy's

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid., 183.

[101] Ibid., 184.

[102] Lancaster, 123.

requirements for the congregation. Mother Buckle commented, "The effect of this last and perhaps the heaviest cross was as far as we could perceive most sad in [Cornelia's] regard as it tended to estrange her from so many of those who had in former years been her most devoted children."[103] When Cornelia recognized the extent of the opposition over the revised constitutions, the damage had been done. The drama over the revision of the constitutions continued through the early 1870s and they were not approved until 1893, fourteen years after Cornelia's death.

A parallel can be drawn between Cornelia's biological children and spiritual children: Cornelia loved and cared for her children and the sisters, but her misunderstanding of them sometimes caused rifts that were irreparable. The estrangements were never caused by intentional malice, but rather by a lack of perceptiveness in reading a situation, whether it be her own son's struggles at boarding school or her congregation's feelings about the constitutions. The situations in which she found herself were largely caused by the actions of Pierce or the hierarchy, and her own judgement may have been impacted by the strain of the control she was under. In Mercer's situation, Cornelia was forced to parent from a distance due to decisions made by Pierce. Her ability to be physically present to her biological children was removed, and she faced unprecedented challenges in trying to continue her relationships with them. When Cornelia formed her religious congregation, she brought the vocation of motherhood to the sisters. In the congregation, she certainly looked after their physical well-being, but she primarily served as their spiritual mother. She was responsible for their faith development within the community and forming them as teachers for the children they served. Cornelia expected a

[103] *Documentation Presented by the Historical Commission for the Beatification and Canonisation of the Servant of God, Cornelia Connelly, Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus*, 87 volumes, Archives of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, D67: 54, quoted in Lancaster, 124.

certain deference to her authority, but as she discovered with the constitutions' crisis, she was not infallible. After the crisis with the Constitutions, the Society continued to experience dissension and challenges to Cornelia's leadership from the Blackpool and Preston Houses. Despite these difficulties, the Society's first general chapter was held from August 17 to September 4, 1874. Cornelia was elected superior general on the first ballot for a term that would last for three years.

One of the greatest trials Cornelia experienced during this time was that Bishop James Danell, who succeeded Bishop Grant as the bishop of Southwark, tried to impose his own version of the constitutions on the congregation. Danell had been involved in investigating the complaints over revised constitutions and he decided the best solution would be to create his own. Danell's constitutions were almost universally disliked, and the sisters' objections eventually prevented them from being accepted by the Propaganda Fide. They were in effect, however, for the remainder of Cornelia's life, as they were re-imposed with some modifications at the general chapter of 1877.

Cornelia was also reelected Superior General of the congregation in 1877 for another three-year term. Despite the trials of governance with Bishop Danell and the imposed rule, she oversaw continued growth in the United States, as well as opened new houses in France. However, her health continued to fail and she became increasingly weaker. By March 1879, her condition deteriorated rapidly, and on April 18, 1879, she passed away at the age of seventy. Pierce passed away in Florence in 1883, and by 1887, the Society's Constitutions were approved with most of Cornelia's original text restored.

Conclusion

Cornelia Connelly's Legacy

On October 17, 2021, members and supporters of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus gathered at the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia for the closing mass of the 175th anniversary of the Society's founding. Most Reverend Nelson Perez, Archbishop of Philadelphia, dedicated a new Holy Child Shrine and Memorial to Venerable Cornelia Connelly.[1] The Society hopes that the new shrine at the Cathedral will raise awareness of Cornelia's story and increase the likelihood that she will be canonized. As of this writing, Cornelia needs a miracle attributed to her to move the cause forward. The Society believes the new shrine will bring visibility to her story, which will encourage the public to offer their petitions for her intercession.

Cornelia Connelly's cause for sainthood was officially introduced in 1953, seventy-four years after her death in 1879. Evaluating a potential candidate for canonization can take many years, from opening the diocesan investigation to officially presenting the documentation to the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints at the Vatican. In Cornelia's case, the *Positio* was submitted to the Vatican in 1988. It was analyzed by six historical consultants, who "praised the *Positio* highly for the 'accomplished way in which the story of Cornelia Connelly unfolds against the background of the 19th century in which she lived.'"[2] Once the historical consultants approved the *Positio,* it was submitted to a commission of nine theologians who examined it for evidence of Cornelia's heroic virtue. The commission unanimously praised Cornelia and the

[1] Editorial, "Cathedral Establishes Holy Child Shrine and Memorial to Venerable Cornelia Connelly," *Actions: Magazine of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus/American Province,* Winter 2022, 8.

[2] Carlotta Bartone, S.J., "The Road to Canonization: The Cause for Cornelia Connelly," *Actions*: *Magazine of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus/American Province,* Spring 2019, 4.

Positio, with one expert saying that "Even if not a martyr in the technical sense she could still be a most effective Patroness of those who suffer from emotional blackmail."[3] In 1992, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints "recommended to Pope John Paul II that he proclaim the heroic virtue of Cornelia as a Servant of God."[4] She was then declared Venerable.

For Cornelia to be beatified, there needs to be evidence that a miracle occurred due to her intervention. One miracle is required for beatification and one for canonization, but the Pope could dispense with one or both if he found legitimate grounds to do so. In recent years, the Society has increased its efforts to promote Cornelia's cause more widely, including appointing Dr. Waldery Hilgeman as Postulator of Cornelia's cause in Rome. Dr. Hilgeman is also the Postulator of another notable American candidate for sainthood, Dorothy Day. One challenge of promoting Cornelia's story is articulating its relevance to contemporary society. The Society has stated that "Cornelia offers inspiration to . . . those with difficult marriages and who suffered the death of children."[5] Cornelia's story gives hope to women struggling in difficult marriage and divorce situations. She was a relatable human being who overcame significant adversity in her life. Her life is not just heroic in its own sense, but valuable to women dealing with similar circumstances. Her legacy is not just what she has overcome, but what she has achieved through the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

Standing Her Ground

[3] Ibid., 5.

[4] Ibid.

[5] "Cathedral Establishes."

Connelly's legacy as an independent and confident wife and mother, who evolved into a leader of a religious congregation, has meaning for contemporary society and modern Catholicism. Although her story is marred by tragedy, Cornelia remained resilient in the face of adversity, despite being controlled by Pierce and the church hierarchy. Cornelia developed self-confidence from an early age. She was born into a new republic at a time of extraordinary growth and opportunity for her city, Philadelphia, and the United States. As a child, she experienced the warmth of a loving family, but also the tragedies of losing her parents at a young age. Her beloved younger siblings were divided between relatives, and she was fortunate to be taken in by her older step-sister Isabella and her husband, Austin Montgomery. The Montgomerys provided tutoring, music, and language lessons for Cornelia, and she became an accomplished young woman in their prosperous household. The education she received enabled her to thrive as a teacher and later as a leader developing curriculum for the congregation's schools.

Cornelia's transformation into a confident and independent young woman became important to her future life as a wife, mother, and congregation leader. When Cornelia met Pierce, her sister Isabella was against the match for reasons previously discussed in this dissertation. Cornelia, however, did not let this dissuade her from marrying him. Despite the events that would unfold with Pierce, Cornelia was confident in her decision to marry him. The episode demonstrated that Cornelia could be strong-willed in matters that were important to her and it was clear she had no qualms about marrying the young Episcopal priest, Pierce Connelly.

Cornelia was excited to begin married life with Pierce at his newly assigned parish in Natchez, Mississippi. They were much respected as a ministerial couple in this antebellum community. When Pierce struggled with different aspects of his ministry, he depended on Cornelia for emotional support. Of the two, Cornelia was psychologically stronger and could

withstand hardship better than Pierce. Cornelia loved Pierce deeply and loyally supported his decisions, even if they were questionable. She agreed with and defended him when he quit his rectorship, even when most of their extended family did not think it was a sound decision. She consistently defended him when he gave up his job and took their family to Europe: "How is it that you have so little confidence in my good husband? You seem really to think he has lost his mind. . . . Refer to my last letter and you will see that I told you he would examine the subject long and carefully before he makes any decision."[6] Cornelia was always Pierce's chief supporter until his later actions caused their estrangement. She never complained when he uprooted the family to go to Rome, even when she had to travel by sea when pregnant, and gave birth to their third child in Europe. She was deeply grieved and anguished at the prospect of separating from him when he wanted to be ordained a Catholic priest.

Pierce and Cornelia presumed that after he was ordained and she became a nun, they could still be involved in each other's lives, especially concerning their children. In Rome, Pierce was allowed to visit Cornelia and the children at the Trinità convent, and the Pope himself encouraged the family's togetherness. If they had stayed in Rome, or perhaps all returned to America, the situation may have been different. But while Cornelia was staying at the Sacred Heart Convent in Rome, she realized that congregation was not right for her. Ultimately she did not feel the environment was conducive to raising children. As Flaxman put it, "when the gate of the Convent shut upon her . . . she felt the loneliness & the seclusion & the enclosure as a great weight upon her spirits."[7] Despite pressure from Pierce to become a nun even before he was ordained, she refused and continued to wait for the right situation to present itself.

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[6] Flaxman, 32–33.

[7] Flaxman, 145.

Interestingly, one of the crucial areas where Cornelia followed the directives of others was the decision of where to begin her religious congregation. Cornelia was preparing to return to the United States, and her spiritual advisor had been in contact with Bishop Benedict Fenwick of Boston, who was enthusiastic about her founding a Congregation in his diocese. In the meantime, the Earl of Shrewsbury and Bishop Nicholas Wiseman had presented their plan to found a congregation in England to Cardinal Giacomo Fransoni, Prefect of the Catholic Congregation for the Propagation of Faith. They all believed Cornelia was the right person to found a new English congregation. Pierce also received permission to work outside the Diocese of Rome and took an assignment as assistant rector at Alton Towers, Lord Shrewsbury's estate. Cornelia was initially averse to going to England, but since the Propagation of Faith and the Pope himself favored the plan, she felt it was God's will working through them. She always maintained that "The Society of the Holy Child Jesus is not my work. I have only followed the inspirations of God in obedience to *His* not *my* will."[8] Cornelia believed she owed the Church her obedience above her preference to return to her home country. To the Society it was a heroic decision; if she had returned to the United States with her younger children, it could have saved her (and them) from much suffering. The children could have possibly stayed with Cornelia, or they could have lived with family members.

But the situation in England was a different story. Cornelia was not allowed to keep the children with her during her novitiate, nor could Pierce visit her. She did expect to resume contact with her family when she took permanent vows, but Pierce had already become estranged by that time and his behavior had grown suspect. When Pierce initiated a suit against Cornelia for restoration of his conjugal rights, she was placed in an unimaginable situation, one

[8] Ibid., 108.

where she could be forced back into marriage with him after taking vows in a religious congregation. Those familiar with Cornelia's story have viewed her as a victim of tragic circumstances where Pierce is concerned. They see him as controlling Cornelia by taking the children away. It is true that Pierce's actions caused her lifelong suffering. In reality, though, Cornelia opposed him as best as her circumstances would allow. When he initially removed the children from their schools in England, she refused to see him until they were returned. She refused to acquiesce to his treatment of them as a bargaining tool: "I have already told you I would see you when you bring back to my care my little girl, and I will never see you till then; unless God manifests his holy will through the command of the bishop."[9] Cornelia refused to be intimidated by Pierce's legal action, even though she was deeply humiliated by it, and the scandal damaged her reputation. She believed Pierce's main intention was not necessarily to regain control of her, but to gain control of the congregation. If she capitulated, Pierce would force her to form a new congregation under his control: "Do you not see that Mr. C. has determined to break up our Order and ruin and upset the whole? He declared he would do this and he probably hopes that I may go to another Convent to begin afresh under him!"[10] Cornelia's real fear was not the prospect of returning to Pierce, but of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus breaking up and/or possibly coming under his control. Her standing up to him was a heroic action to protect the young congregation.

Despite the heartbreak in her personal life, Cornelia established a viable religious congregation that has served girls, women, and vulnerable populations in the world to this current day. She accomplished a great deal even though she functioned under the tight control of

[9] Cornelia Connelly to Pierce Connelly, December 1849, *Cornelia Connelly Writings*, Shelf 11, Vols. 1-20, #101.01, ASHCJ, Rosemont, Pennsylvania.

[10] Flaxman, 144.

the British Catholic hierarchy, who often resented her personality and methods. Judith Lancaster points out that

> After 1852 … she never again enjoined the support of a significant male figure—and dependence on such a figure was a prerequisite for female social respectability. She was estranged from her husband, and none of her clerical superiors willingly assumed this masculine role in her regard. No bishop or priest chose to associate himself directly with her congregation, or to support her unreservedly.[11]

To the British bishops, Cornelia was always an unconventional figure—an American, previously married nun whose husband was an "apostate priest, who … involved her in a widely reported and sexually charged lawsuit."[12] Even though Cornelia successfully appealed the court's decision, the bishops remained wary of being tainted by association. In addition, they did not warm to her personality. Lancaster argued that "Cornelia could not fit the mould of the virginal, submissive, acquiescent women religious. She was far from being 'meek, subservient, other worldly . . . lacking character and drive . . . ineffectual and subordinate,' as 'nineteenth-century women religious were stereotypically presumed to be.'"[13] Women in religious congregations were supposed to be cloistered and silent—always demure and compliant with the bishops' decisions. Never the shy and retiring type, Cornelia often bewildered the Bishops to whom she answered. Lancaster astutely observes that Cornelia "seem[ed] caught between her own need, as leader of her congregation, to make practical day-to-day decisions, and her desire to conform to a pattern of obedience."[14] Cornelia never overtly defied the hierarchy, but she was not afraid to

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[11] Lancaster, 256.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Susan Mumm, *Stolen Daughters, Virgin Mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1999), ix, quoted in Lancaster, 258

[14] Ibid., 260.

challenge their authority if she felt it was counter to the management of the congregation. One of her impassioned responses to Bishop Grant revealed this dimension of her personality:

> I took your letter received by the three o'clock post after having read it twice myself, and read it to Our Lady of Sorrows asking her in her own sweet meekness to listen to it—and the interior answer I got was "burn the letter and tell the Bishop to forget what he wrote and to come and tell you what more you can do that you have done."—I have burnt it my Lord and now will you come down and tell me what more I can do than I have done?[15]

Cornelia was not afraid to confront one of her superiors when she thought it was necessary. However, she found it difficult to balance doing what was best for the congregation with obedience to the Bishops. Nevertheless, since the Society's inception in 1846, the congregation has been actively reflecting and responding to Cornelia's call that they "meet the wants of the day (through) the means of Spiritual mercy."[16] In the congregation's early years, this primarily took the form of education, as the Society opened schools and convents throughout England. In Cornelia's lifetime, she developed a "solid education" for women and girls, which would become the cornerstone of schools established in the United States and West Africa.[17]

The Legacy of Cornelia Connelly in the United States

In this dissertation, I have discussed Cornelia's personal story to demonstrate how she overcame great adversity to become a founder of a religious congregation. The accomplishments she achieved are also a part of her legacy. Cornelia was particularly proud of her Society's foundation in her "own country." She had envisioned starting the Society of the Holy Child Jesus

[15] Ibid., 268.

[16] Cornelia Connelly to Ralph Peacock, September 12, 1846, quoted in Bowman, 63.

[17] For a thorough treatment of this topic, see Roseanne McDougall, SHCJ, *Cornelia Connelly's Innovations in Female Education, 1846-1864: Revolutionizing the School Curriculum for Girls* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 2008).

in the United States. As recounted in the introduction, this was not to be so; however, Pope Gregory XVI gave her hope that she could return to her country of birth one day. He reportedly said, "From England let your efforts in the cause of education spread to America."[18] Cornelia finally received an opportunity through her friendship with Louisa Catherine Osborne (née Caton), who was the granddaughter of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, a prominent Catholic founding father. As the Duchess of Leeds, Louisa granted Cornelia "nearly two thousand acres, most of it in Lycoming County, Pennsylvania, . . . and a five-acre lot in Towanda, 'suitable for a convent.'" The mission to the United States commenced on August 2, 1862, when six sisters of the Holy Child Jesus sailed to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. When the sisters arrived in Towanda, however, they found that the Duchess and Cornelia had been misled about the condition of the property: "[the convent] stood before them, 'a small wooden building falling into decay'. The path from gate to door 'was overrun with weeds several feet high'. Inside 'paint was covered with dirt', paper 'hung in festoons from the walls', 'rats and spiders had enjoyed themselves for many a year.' The promised five-acre lot on which the building stood was half that size: the rest was road."[19] Even though they were disappointed with the property, the sisters decided to brave the circumstances. They were also informed that there were "1,000 Catholic families" in the vicinity, but they barely had twenty-five children when their Academy opened. Still they decided to stay, enduring a harsh winter and extreme poverty. Cornelia never knew how dire their situation was until January 1864, when a sister who had recently arrived at Towanda died of consumption.

[18] James Walsh, SJ, "A Missionary Society," *The Pylon* 24, no.3 (Winter 1962-63):34, in Cornelia Connelly Digital Library Resource, https://corneliaconnellylibrary.org/search-results-details.php?id=2436 (accessed June 2, 2022).

[19] Flaxman, 260.

Bishop James Wood of Philadelphia supported the Society's mission to the United States and wanted the sisters to open a convent in the city. A year after the sisters arrived in Towanda, he requested more sisters to establish a community on Spring Garden Street in Philadelphia, at Assumption Parish. When Cornelia learned of the debacle at Towanda, she said it could be closed when another property was found for a boarding school and novitiate. Fr. C. S. Carter, who as Bishop Wood's assistant, acted on behalf of the sisters, purchased "Sharon House" for them for these purposes. Soon the Society's convents and schools in Philadelphia were flourishing, and when Cornelia visited the country in 1867, she acquired a new property on Chestnut Street, which would become St. Leonard's School.

An American Congregation

In the early 1880s, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus established its first mission outside the Philadelphia region in Avoca, Minnesota. Bishop John Ireland, who became the first Archbishop of St. Paul, had previously purchased 52,000 acres of land in southwestern Minnesota to establish a Catholic Colonization Bureau. He invited Mother Mary Walburga White, Vicaress of the Society in the United States, to send sisters to "found a boarding academy for the children of the scattered landowners."[20] Mother Walburga and five sisters set out on their "thousand mile" expedition on May 21, 1883, enduring an "erratic" train journey which included being "deposited on a cattle platform in Kasota at 3 a.m. to await an uncertain change of trains."[21] The locals welcomed the sisters in true "Western style. Cannons boomed and the

[20] Mother Mary Campion, SHCJ, "My Own Dear County. Part II. Western Expansion." *The Pylon* 25, no.1 (Spring 1962): 5, in Cornelia Connelly Digital Library Resource, https://corneliaconnellylibrary.org/library-materials/Document_894019d73e728a8462423e627aac1f83.pdf (accessed June 2, 2022).

[21] Ibid.

church bells rang."[22] With the people's generosity, the sisters learned how to make bread and cereal from corn and plant a potato crop. They ran the local parochial school and opened a private boarding school at the convent to sustain themselves, but they did not have many students. After enduring their first harsh winter, they realized they could not survive another year without "more pupils and a steadier source of income."[23]

Bishop Ireland recognized that the settlers were too scattered to build any kind of steady enrollment at the Society's schools. He decided that the solution would be to bring Native American girls to the school. By the late nineteenth century, the United States government had forced most Native Americans onto reservations and attempted to assimilate them into American society as much as possible. Many religious congregations who sent missionaries to the Midwest sought to deliver the Catholic faith to the Native American communities. Bishop Ireland signed a contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to bring fifty girls from the government reservations to the Society's school in Avoca. The girls, who were of the Sioux, Crow and Chippewas tribes, "would be instructed in the rudiments of English and be taught the customs of civilized life as well as the truths and practices of the Catholic religion."[24]

We now understand that this approach was devastating to the existence of Native American heritage and culture and it is viewed less as education and more as suppression of a race of people. At that time, however, the sisters agreed to educate the girls and the school

[22] Dorothy Cropper, SHCJ, "Avoca: An Indian Mission," *Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Issue II: The Significance of Place* (1998), 56, in Villanova Digital Library, https://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:239975#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-3561%2C0%2C10539%2C4783 (accessed June 2, 2022)

[23] Ibid.

[24] Campion, 6.

proved successful. Despite the unfamiliar hardships of living in the Midwest, the sisters enjoyed working with their pupils. One sister recorded,

> We are all well, and have plenty to do…Rev. Mother St. Anthony has charge of clothing for 57 children. Mother Mary Aloysius is prefect, and if you could see her training these children to do homework, it would amuse you, and Sister Hilda, 'our cultivator-in-chief of the potato field' dug up 700 bushels of potatoes with the help of the children.[25]

When "the Director of the Indian Bureau came to inspect the Indian School, [he] was amazed to learn that the girls had not only learned English, but were becoming proficient in many skills."[26] Many of the girls became Catholic, receiving their First Communion and Confirmation. After their education with the sisters, some returned to their reservations and "assisted the priests with liturgies and singing," while others "married local settlers and raised large Catholic families."[27] The sisters were particularly proud of the girls who joined a religious congregation that formed in 1891 as the "Indian Congregation of the Order of St. Benedict," later renamed as the Congregation of the American Sisters. Some Avoca students even took the "religious names of the sisters who so lovingly taught them."[28] There is no mention of whether the Native American students attempted to join the SHCJ, or if they would have been allowed. Despite the sisters' and even their pupils' recorded positive experiences, the context of the forced Americanization of the Native American people created a complex situation. Native Americans had little choice but to comply with government orders, even if it meant sending their children away to remote schools. Catholic sisters, whose main object was to catechize, often "accepted symbols of Indian Catholicity, learned and used Native languages, came as guests to gatherings designed by Indian

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[25] Cropper, 57.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

communities, and intensely embraced duties as teachers and surrogate parents for Native children."[29]

Even though the sisters' mission was successful in this regard, the Society decided to close it after six years because there were so few students who could attend their schools. Dorothy Cropper, SHCJ, who researched the Western Missions of the SHCJ, stated that "the location was too isolated and on the wrong side of the advancing railroad settlements."[30] When the mission closed in 1889, the three remaining sisters were sent to their foundation in Cheyenne, Wyoming. In addition to their foundations in Avoca and Cheyenne, the sisters also established foundations in Waseca, Minnesota, and Lincoln, Nebraska. Some of these foundations were short-lived as the sisters encountered impoverished farmers who could not afford to send their children to school. They were needed to help on the farm, and those who could attend often paid in kind, which meant the sisters often had to struggle for survival. However, the sisters persevered and served the people of these areas with ingenuity and hard work. In Lincoln, Nebraska, the sisters were noted as being the "forerunners of Catholicism and the pioneers of Catholic education for girls in the state of Nebraska."[31] The sisters' service to some of the smaller Midwestern towns is not as well-known as it is in some of the more prominent dioceses, but it was no less important in the Annals of the Society.

Continuing Cornelia's Mission

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[29] Anne M. Butler, *Across God's Frontiers: Catholic Sisters in the American West*, 1850–1920 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 242–243, https://search-ebscohost-com.dbproxy.lasalle.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=464091&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed June 11, 2022).

[30] Ibid.

[31] Campion, 7.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the increase in women entering religious orders became intimately connected to the expansion of the Catholic parochial school system. Historian Kathleen Sprows Cummings noted, "In 1840, when there were fewer than 200 Catholic Schools in the United States, there were approximately 900 sisters in the country, disbursed among 15 orders. Sixty years later, with the commitment complete, the American population of nuns had multiplied to 46,583 sisters among the 170 congregations. Of these, the vast majority were teaching."[32]

Earlier in the nineteenth century, the question of whether Catholic children should be educated in public schools began to emerge and was increasingly debated. Antipathy and discrimination against Catholic children became a factor in the movement toward opening more Catholic schools, as well as the trend toward secularization in public schools. The Catholic Church had experienced significant growth due to immigration, but the immigrants didn't have the resources to fund the schools. Bishops were able to open Catholic Schools because they could hire nuns to teach for virtually nothing.

A turning point came at the Third Plenary Council in Baltimore in 1884, when American bishops "decreed that every Catholic parish in the nation should have a school attached within two years. They also mandated that Catholic parents were obliged to send their children to a parish school unless they were attending a private Catholic Academy."[33] But the question arose as to who would manage and staff the schools. Bishop John Ireland of St. Paul Minnesota, the third Roman Catholic Bishop in the United States, in his plea to increase Catholic education,

[32] Kathleen Sprows Cummings, *New Women of the Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 109.

[33] Ibid., 108.

summed up the prevailing thought of the hierarchy with his exclamation, "To the rescue, holy Sisterhoods!"[34]

Catholic hierarchy and priests viewed women religious as an inexpensive, almost unlimited, labor supply to staff parish schools. Parishes were opening schools so quickly that there was a constant shortage of sisters to staff the schools, even with the immense growth of women entering religious orders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Motherhouses were sending young women, sometimes with barely a high school degree, to teach in Catholic elementary schools after a short year of novitiate training. Added to the staffing shortage was the increasing need for Catholic schools to meet state and local standards, which required sisters to undergo more professional formation and education. Representatives from different congregations would create the Sister Formation Conference in the 1950s to address the ongoing needs of the sisters.

Even before the Bishops' mandate of the Third Plenary Council, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus had established a strong foothold in American Catholic education. Throughout the United States, the sisters opened and staffed "parish schools and academies, girls' schools and boys' schools, and elementary and secondary schools."[35] The Society of the Holy Child Jesus played an important role, for instance, in establishing secondary education in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia for young women. At the turn of the twentieth century, there were no high schools yet for Catholic girls in the city. Some of the women's religious congregations decided to create High School Centres at parishes where they served in order for young women to receive a more advanced level of education. The Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus established a Centre at the

[34] Ibid., 109.

[35] Roseanne McDougall SHCJ and Emily Siegel, "The Life of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus in the United States, 1862 to Present: An Ecclesial Perspective," *American Catholic Studies* 132, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 106.

Assumption School, 12th and Spring Garden Streets. They educated young women at the Assumption Center until the first all-girls Catholic High School, John W. Hallahan Catholic Girls' High School, opened in 1912. The sisters were invited to be part of a "Union Faculty" at Hallahan, "composed of members from many religious communities, each with its own sphere of responsibility, its own 'Prefect' and community meeting room."[36] Many sisters were skeptical this arrangement would work, but the collaborations proved successful and would become one of the hallmarks of Philadelphia Catholic secondary school education.

In 1927, a second Catholic high school for girls opened at 45th and Chestnut Streets in which the Society was involved from the beginning—West Philadelphia Catholic Girls' High School. At West Catholic, the sisters headed and staffed the departments of social science and art, and taught religion courses. Sister Veronica Grover noted that "One of the 'gems' for many years was the wonderful art department. Under the tutelage of SHCJ artists such as M M Bernice Stella, Paschal, Thais and Margaret Mary Alacoque, the students produced remarkably professional displays."[37] In the 1970s, the dwindling number of women religious meant an end to the "Union Faculty" lines. Vatican II's call to "read the signs of the times" led many sisters to reassess their work and move into different forms of ministry. Despite this, the SHCJ and other congregations of women's religious continued to serve in secondary schools across the U.S., even if only one or two sisters were on the faculty. Sadly, John W. Hallahan High School closed in 2021 due to low enrollment and financial concerns.

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[36] Veronica Grover, "SHCJ Ministry in the Philadelphia Diocesan High Schools," *Society of the Holy Child Jesus History, Issue III: Ministries Part 1* (1998), 78, in Villanova Digital Library, https://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:240123#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-3563%2C-1%2C10503%2C4768 (accessed June 2, 2022).

[37] Ibid., 80.

Cornelia's Sisters and African Missions

At the same time the sisters were involved in an educational ministry across the United States in the twentieth century, they discovered a need to "meet the wants of the age" on the African continent. The Society of the Holy Child Jesus' story in Africa began with a previously established mission by another order of sisters. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Bishop Joseph Shanahan asked the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny to open a convent and school in Calabar, Nigeria. The sisters left the mission in 1919, but in 1923 an Irish Sister of Charity, Magdalen Walker, took over the school's management. The Sisters of Charity were unwilling to start a foundation there, but Magdalen so desired to work for the missions that she received special permission from the Pope to live outside of her convent and serve in Africa. Sr. Magdalen needed help for the mission to survive, and for that she appealed to her friend Mother Mary Amadeus, superior general of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. Sr. Magdalen had attended the Holy Child boarding school in Mayfield, England, and had become close friends with Mary Atchison, the future Mother Amadeus. The superior general received an official appeal from Monsignor Hinsley, the Apostolic Delegate to British Missions in East and West Africa, and the general council decided to take up the work in 1929. In June 1930, the general chapter approved the mission, and a few months later Mother Amadeus and her assistant, Mother Genevieve, visited St. Joseph's.[38]

Mother Amadeus was very impressed at what Sr. Magdalen had accomplished by the time of her visit: "We are amazed by the children here. For seven years Sister Magdalen has worked here single-handed—absolutely alone. Many of the girls came to her as pagans, utterly

[38] Rose Uche Nwosu, SHCJ, "Nigeria Calling," *Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Issue 1: Beginnings* (1996), 76, in Villanova Digital Library, https://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:239855#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-4344%2C-283%2C12434%2C5644 (accessed June 2, 2022).

untrained. She has 56 boarders, 15 of whom are teachers and a large and flourishing day-school."[39] During her initial visit to Nigeria, Mother Amadeus visited thirty-two stations, known as "bush stations"—smaller "out-stations" where the sisters would serve. The Society would adopt the strategy of building convents and schools at key centers, and then send teachers to the stations.

After the initial evaluation by Mother Amadeus, the three SHCJ sisters who had been preparing for the mission set sail from Liverpool, England with Bishop Joseph Shanahan and arrived on October 18, 1930. Sisters Mary Joachim, Mary Edith, and Laurentia Dalton, arrived and quickly set out to meet the people. The Bishop wanted the sisters to improve women's and girls' education, and "use education as an instrument of conversion." The sisters often told the natives, "we are not a missionary society, but an educational one."[40] However, the education the sisters were to provide was more than just academic. The Bishop instructed them: "Make contact, with women, instruct them on the care of their children and homes, open small Bush schools, use teachers and Catechists as Apostles. Your main task is to form leaders. And to make them good housewives and mothers."[41] The instructions of the Bishop fall in line with the longstanding patriarchal tradition that the goal of women's education was to train wives and mothers to contribute to a moral society. From the beginning the sisters "trained the young teachers, catechised the women . . . using the young trainee teachers as interpreters; they visited women prisoners; they cared for a group of old, destitute women—ex-slaves who had no caring

[39] Ibid., 77.

[40] Anna Ekam, "The Contributions of the Holy Child Sisters to Women's Education in the Cross River State of Nigeria from 1930–1967," (PhD diss., Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1980), 55, in Cornelia Connelly Digital Library Resource, https://corneliaconnellylibrary.org/library-materials/texts/TXT-16.pdf (accessed June 16, 2022).

[41] Ibid.

family at hand; they gradually set up Twinneries for neglected babies, and marriage training centres." The sisters recognized the need for such ministry and instruction, but they saw a greater need for women to advance in secondary schools and training colleges.

In her doctoral dissertation, Anna George Ekam discussed how the sisters revolutionized women's education in Nigeria, writing, "Between 1930 and 1955, the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus opened three training colleges, four secondary schools, five technical institutions, five preliminary training centers, and fifty-five elementary schools for girls in the Cross River State of Nigeria. The schools were run by forty-four sisters and sixty African qualified teachers whom they trained."[42] The key to the transformation of women's education was the establishment of teacher-training colleges, where African girls could advance in their studies and teach in the sisters' elementary and secondary schools. In this way the sisters could expand their educational system in Nigeria, Ghana, and later Chad and Kenya.

Continuing to Read the "Signs of the Times"

In 1846, Cornelia Connelly envisaged a religious congregation that responded to the "wants of the day," by establishing educational opportunities for working and middle class women in England. As the Society of the Holy Child Jesus evolved, they continued to respond to critical concerns in the United States, Africa, and South America. In the early 1960s, women religious were tasked with reevaluating their institutions in light of Vatican II's call for renewal. In his *Decree on The Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life* (October 28, 1965), Pope Paul VI specifically stated this should include "both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our

[42] Ibid., 59.

time. . . . Institutes should promote among their members an adequate knowledge of the social conditions of the times they live in and of the needs of the church."[43] Colleen McDannell assessed the Decree's purpose as follows:

> Women religious were called to discover the original purpose for the founding of their orders. Orders were asked to look hard at the changed conditions of modern society and to consider how they might better integrate their mission with contemporary culture. *Perfectae Caritas* also reinforced the importance of providing appropriate spiritual and professional education to all members of their communities.[44]

Most members of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus enthusiastically resolved to examine the Society's life and mission, beginning with a Special General Chapter divided into two sessions: one at Rosemont College in suburban Philadelphia in 1967, the other at Mayfield in the United Kingdom in 1968. Sisters from the African, American, and European provinces participated. Roseanne McDougall, SHCJ and Emily Siegel discussed the significance of Vatican II: "The invitation to return, in an ongoing manner, to the original sources of Christian life and to the original spirit of the society of the Holy Child Jesus ushered in a rich period of prayer, study, reflection, and action rooted in the foundations of Christianity, and in the history and charism, or spiritual gift, of the Society."[45] Many sisters discerned calls to new forms of ministry, and to this day have "responded to emerging needs of the day as educators in new settings, parish ministers, campus ministers, health care workers, lawyers, social workers, artists, and advocates for social justice, as well as in other forms of service."[46]

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[43] Pope Paul VI, *Perfectae Caritatis*.

[44] Colleen McDannell, *The Spirit of Vatican II: A History of Catholic Reform in America.* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 143.

[45] McDougall and Siegel, 111.

[46] Ibid., 113.

In 1983, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes at the Vatican approved a revision of the Society's Constitutions. Even though the mission was relatively the same, it was rearticulated as, "To rejoice in God's presence and to help people believe that God lives and acts in them and in our world."[47] Nowhere has this actualization of mission become more evident than in the African province, which as of this writing has "122 perpetually professed members, and 62 in the various stages of initial formation."[48] Today, African "province ministries involve mostly teaching children and young adults and overseeing the administration of educational institutions; running women's centers; providing health care in clinics and hospitals; and engaging in pastoral ministries, such as counselling, training spiritual directors, running retreat centers, and contributing to parish life."[49]

One of the sisters of the Society who heeded the message of Vatican II and discerned a call to advocate for social justice was Megan Rice, SHCJ. Born into a prominent Catholic family in New York, her father Frederick was an obstetrician and gynecologist who taught at New York University, and her mother, Madeleine Hooke Rice, published her graduate thesis on American Catholic opinion on the institution of slavery.[50] Sister Megan attended St. Wallburga Academy of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus and immediately after graduation, she followed her older sister Alexandra into the congregation. Sister Megan's early ministry was in education, where she taught in various schools around the country. However, her great desire was to become a

[47] Ibid., 112.

[48] Society of the Holy Child Jesus, "Brief History of the Society," https://www.shcj.org/brief-history-of-the-society/ (accessed April 18, 2022).

[49] Ibid.

[50] Benjamin Ivry, "Remembering Sister Megan Rice: the 'Joan of Arc' of the Anti-Nuclear Movement," *America: The Jesuit Review*, November 3, 2021, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/11/03/sister-megan-rice-peace-activist-241727 (accessed June 2, 2022).

missionary to Africa. In 1962, after graduating with a Master of Science degree from Boston College, she received her assignment to serve in Nigeria. She served for "twenty-three years as a teacher, catechist, pastoral guide, and administrator in impoverished West African communities," until 1986, and then returned again from 1991 to 2003, serving in religious education and pastoral care.

When not ministering in Africa, Sister Megan participated in peace rallies and anti-nuclear activism. She was most passionate about protesting injustice in the military-industrial complex, especially in the development of nuclear weapons. Having earned her Master's degree in cellular biology, "she learned about the effects of nuclear radiation" and was further made aware of radiation's devastating effects from her uncle, who served as the driver for the Archbishop of Nagasaki after World War II. Journalist Benjamin Ivry noted that "she was once called a 'Joan of Arc figure' by the Los Angeles Catholic Worker for her willingness to be arrested dozens of times at anti-nuclear protests, most famously in 2012 when she and associates trespassed at the Y-12 nuclear facility in Oak Ridge, Tennessee."[51] Sister Megan served two years in jail for trespassing at this federal facility. She continued to advocate for social justice until she passed away on October 10, 2021, at the age of ninety-one.

Sister Megan exemplified Cornelia's vision of responding to the wants of the age in her decades of ministry as a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. Her transition from classroom educator to African missionary and peace activist demonstrated the dynamic shift in women's' religious ministry over the twentieth century. In answering Vatican II's call to read the signs of the times, the members of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus have fulfilled Cornelia's legacy in addressing the most critical needs in contemporary society. Just like their foundress,

[51] Ibid.

the Society members have overcome significant obstacles to persevere in their vocations in bringing the work of Christ to others. They continue to read the signs of the times to address critical concerns in today's world.

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