

Feast of Venerable Cornelia Connelly (April 18) [Leave a comment](#)



Above: Venerable Cornelia Connelly
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VENERABLE CORNELIA PEACOCK CONNELLY (JANUARY 15, 1809-APRIL 18, 1879)

Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus

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I belong all to God.

–Venerable Cornelia Connelly

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The spiritual pilgrimage of the Venerable **Cornelia Connelly** entailed learning to distinguish between the wishes of her husband and the call of God on her life. **Cornelia Peacock**, born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on January 15, 1809, grew up a Presbyterian. In 1831 she married **Pierce Connelly (1804-1883)**, an Episcopal priest. In 1835 the Connellys converted to Roman Catholicism, for Pierce had become convinced that Holy Mother Church was the true church. By 1839 husband and wife were teaching in rural church-operated schools in Louisiana. Soon hardships visited the family. Their fourth child, Mary Magdalene, died at the age of seven weeks in 1840. Shortly thereafter, John Henry, their two-year-old son, died on February 2 (the Feast of the Presentation), of injuries he had suffered after a dog had pushed him into a vat of boiling cane juice. Later in 1840, when Cornelia was pregnant with Adeline, her fifth child, Pierce announced that he had decided to study for the priesthood. This started the process of breaking up the family, for he would have to take a vow of celibacy to become a Roman Catholic priest.

Cornelia eventually accepted her husband's decree as being consistent with the will of God. Certainly God worked through Pierce's decree for the good of many, including Cornelia. (She was better off without him.) In 1843 Pierce was in Rome, studying under the guidance of **Pope Gregory XVI**. Cornelia and the children joined him in the Eternal City and resided at the Sacred Heart Convent on Trinita de Monte. Pierce visited once a week; the marriage was functionally over. Soon the couple separated formally. In 1845 Pierce became a priest and Cornelia took a vow of celibacy. She built a new life in England, where Roman Catholicism, recently emancipated, was reviving and rebuilding. In 1846 she began to work in the field of education of girls and assumed leadership of a new convent school at Derby. The following year she founded and became the superior of the new Society of the Holy Child Jesus. Our saint told the nuns:

As you step through the muddy streets, love God with your feet; and when your hands toil, love Him with your hands; and when you teach the little children, love Him in His little ones.

Pierce had a vindictive aspect to his character. In 1848, when he arrived in England, Cornelia told him to leave. He took three of their children out of the new order's school without Cornelia's permission, posed as the co-founder of the Society, and sued (in an Anglican court) for his conjugal rights. (He was supposed to be a celibate priest, according to his vows.) Eventually the court sided with Cornelia. Then Pierce resigned from the Roman Catholic priesthood, turned against Holy Mother Church, took all but one child (a painter, who remained loyal to his mother) to the United States, and turned them against our saint. Pierce spent the rest of his life defaming Cornelia's character and writing and publishing anti-Roman Catholic tirades.

Cornelia, who suffered emotionally due to the alienation from most of her family and the published attacks of her character, served as the superior of the Society for more than three decades. She oversaw the founding of schools in England, France, and the United States, and promoted the education of young women. Physical suffering (in the form of eczema) marred her final few years. Our saint died, aged 70 years, at St. Leonards-on-Sea, Sussex, on April 18, 1879.

Pope John Paul II declared Cornelia a Venerable in 1992.

The passage of time has rendered its verdict in favor of Cornelia, as opposed to Pierce. She, as a nun, was married to Jesus, certainly a better husband.

KENNETH RANDOLPH TAYLOR

JULY 10, 2017 COMMON ERA

THE FEAST OF JOHANN SCHEFFLER, ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIEST, POET, AND HYMN WRITER

THE FEAST OF GEORG NEUMARK, GERMAN LUTHERAN POET AND HYMN WRITER

THE FEAST OF JOHN HINES, PRESIDING BISHOP OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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O God, whose blessed Son became poor that we through his poverty might be rich:

Deliver us from an inordinate love of this world, that we,

inspired by the devotion of your servant *Venerable Cornelia Connelly*,
may serve you with singleness of heart, and attain to the riches of the age to come;

through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Song of Songs 8:6-7

Psalm 34

Philippians 3:7-15

Luke 12:33-37 or Luke 9:57-62

-Adapted from *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints* (2010), page 722

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