

Merciful Like the Father: Venerable Cornelia Connelly

Cornelia Connelly is a woman who knew suffering and yet managed to live with joy. Born into a wealthy Philadelphia family in 1809, Cornelia Peacock married Pierce Connelly, an Episcopalian clergyman, when she was 22. Shortly after their marriage, they moved to frontier country: Natchez, Mississippi. Pierce was very unhappy at what seemed to be a dead end position and began to question his Episcopalian faith. Before long, he had decided to renounce his priesthood and enter the Catholic Church. But Pierce, always very focused on success and worldly recognition, felt convinced that he needed to become a priest, even though to do so would have required him to separate from his wife and small children forever. Despite his wife's devotion (and misgivings), the family sold their home and belongings so that they could travel to Rome to pursue this dream of Pierce's.



Portrait of Cornelia Connelly at age 22

On their way to Rome, the Connellys spent some time in New Orleans, where Cornelia's attraction to Catholicism was confirmed. She was received into the Church, despite the opposition she knew she would experience, just before the family sailed for Rome. Pierce himself became Catholic in the Eternal City before the family returned to America a few years later, Pierce still a layman but desperate to do whatever it took to be ordained.

Deeply in love with her husband, Cornelia was distraught: "Is it necessary that Pierce sacrifice himself and me too? I love my husband and my darling children. Why must I give them up?" Nor would this be her only suffering during this time. Shortly after they moved to Louisiana, their fourth child, Mary Magdalene, died in infancy. Not long after, their third child, John Henry, was knocked into a vat of boiling sugar. Cornelia held him as he slowly died, 43 hours of agony. But her suffering had only begun.

Pierce had resolved to become a priest and asked Cornelia to agree to a separation and a life of perpetual celibacy. Mourning the loss of her marriage, Cornelia agreed to give all to God. Though she several times asked him to reconsider for the sake of their family, Pierce was blind in his insistence that

he could not be happy if he weren't ordained. So Cornelia moved to England, at the prompting of the Holy Father, to found the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. In order to do so, her bishop required that she put her two younger children, ages 10 and 5, in boarding school.¹ In anguish, she obeyed, and made vows as a religious sister within the year, finding peace amid all her troubles.



Mother Cornelia, wearing her inexplicable (but constant) smile. But Pierce was not at peace. He was becoming more and more unstable, eventually demanding to see Cornelia despite restrictions against it. Cornelia refused to see him. When he couldn't influence her with persuasion, he chose to punish her by abducting her children and poisoning them against her and the Catholic Church.

Enraged by her resistance, Pierce brought a lawsuit against his wife demanding his conjugal rights, despite having relinquished them years before. He renounced his Catholic priesthood and his faith and declared that he was attempting to rescue her from the Church. The English press naturally had a field day with this court case, particularly when Pierce won. Mercifully, Cornelia was granted an appeal and never made to return to the husband who had forced her to leave him and then attempted to force her to break her vows as a religious. Her reputation ruined by allegations of improprieties with the bishop, her heart broken, her children stolen from her, Cornelia returned to life as a Sister.

Pierce ended his life an Episcopalian priest in Florence, bitter and cruel to his death in his attacks on the Catholic Church. Merty, their oldest, died at age 20; Ady returned to the faith after the death of her father; Frank died as angry and anti-Catholic as his father.

And what of Cornelia? Despite constant attacks from within her order² and without,³ Cornelia was a woman of radiant joy. Asked once why she wasn't miserable, with all she had suffered, Cornelia replied with a smile, "Ah, my child, the tears are always running down the back of my nose." Cornelia grieved her suffering deeply but chose still to live in the joy of Christ risen.

From what I can tell, Cornelia wrote very little of the sufferings of her life except to offer them to the Lord and to remind her daughters in religion of the good suffering can do to the soul. "We have all a large share of suffering, and if

we had not, we should never become Christlike as we ought,” she said, speaking volumes about her ability to forgive. Indeed, the joy Cornelia exhibited could only have been possible if she was a woman of great mercy.

I can't think how I would react to the constant attacks Cornelia underwent, but I'm quite sure those who knew me wouldn't describe me as radiant with the love of God. Most of us, I'm sure, would become terribly bitter in such circumstances. But Mother Cornelia was always a beacon of peace and full of smiles. She even viewed smiling as an offering to the Spirit: “Give to the Holy Ghost many smiles and offer each smile as an invocation—a fidelity—a cooperation with grace.” All this amid more suffering than most of us will ever experience.

Cornelia Connelly has become a dear friend of mine in recent months as I offer her witness of interior peace in a difficult marriage to friends who are suffering from difficult marriages themselves. Her ability to cling to the Lord and continue to trust him, even when trusting him seemed to have destroyed her happy life, is a witness to us all. More than anything, perhaps, I'm struck by her willingness to accept the circumstances of her life as a gift from God when I would have called them a curse.

Certainly Cornelia spent her life offering mercy to her husband, but I see in her also a desire, if it's possible, to be merciful to God. Rather than curse, abandon, or resent him, Cornelia chose love. It seems silly to suggest that we ought to be merciful *toward* the Father as well as being merciful *like* the Father. And of course he's done nothing wrong, nothing that could warrant our forgiveness. But many of us still harbor resentment against the Lord for suffering we see as his fault. Perhaps this week we can walk with Venerable Cornelia Connelly and ask her prayers that we might accept God's will—even when it's awful—and love him all the more for it.

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