

‘Actions Not Words’ Part 1: Cornelia Connelly and the Early Foundations of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus

Isabel Keating



Figure 1: Sister Isobel Winder, c.2000.

‘Religious life is real, not an escape’.¹

With this phrase, Sister Isobel Winder concluded her reflection upon 59 years of ministry within the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. Sr Isobel was interviewed in 2003 by Sister Christine Carter as part of a study into the lives of 15 women who had entered the SHCJ as lay sisters. Her perspective of religious life could be seen as an echo of the motto of the SHCJ adopted in the 19th century by its foundress Cornelia Connelly:

‘actions not words.’ These three words appear across records in the archives: in letters, house diaries, necrologies and within the crests of Holy

Child school blazers. The SHCJ’s spirit is threaded through its archives.

As the European Province of the SHCJ faces completion, Sister Isobel’s description of religious life is a poignant reminder that orders and institutes of Religious reach this final stage after centuries of working and praying for other people, striving to understand their needs and identifying with their experiences. The lives of men and women religious take many forms and



Figure 2: Felt school blazer badge for the HCJ Convent school Layton Hill, near Blackpool, c.1950.

¹ Sister Isobel Mary Harriet Hannah Winder interviewed by Sister Christine Carter, quoted in Christine Carter, *Journey in Faith: Life Stories of Fifteen Holy Child Sisters in the European Province*, (SHCJ publication, 2004) pp. 42–44.

involve a variety of ministries, but all remain connected with the world and face its realities.

This is the first of two articles on the SHCJ and serves as a guide to its early history that demonstrates what sources in the archives can tell us. A second will describe its development in the aftermath of Cornelia's leadership to reveal how the women of the SHCJ continue to embody the principle of 'actions not words', each sister doing so in her own distinctive way.

Cornelia Connelly: wife, mother, teacher and foundress of the SHCJ

Cornelia Augusta Peacock was born in Philadelphia, USA, on 15th January 1809 to Ralph Peacock and Mary Swope Bowen Peacock, the youngest of their six children. Cornelia was close to her family, as she wrote in later years to her niece 'the older I grow the more intensely I love you all'.² After losing her father aged nine and her mother at 14, Cornelia went to live with her half-sister Isabella Montgomery.

Isabella disapproved of Pierce Connelly, the handsome and fascinating Episcopalian clergyman

Cornelia had fallen in love with. Defying Isabella, Cornelia went to the house of another sister, Adeline Peacock Duval, to marry Pierce in December 1831.

By March 1835, Pierce and Cornelia had a two-year-old son named Mercer, and a baby daughter, Adeline. The young family were living in Natchez, Mississippi where Pierce served as minister to Trinity Church. Pierce was



Figure 3: Cornelia in what is thought to be a wedding portrait, c. 1831.

² Letter from Cornelia Connelly to Mary Bowen, c1870, transcribed in *Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God, Cornelia Connelly, Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus: Writings of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly*, Diocese of Southwark, 1968 [hereafter CC Writings], vol. 1, p.112.

dismayed by Protestant hostility towards Catholics. He and Cornelia became drawn towards Catholicism and Pierce eventually gave up his position.

In December 1835, the Connellys prepared to sail across the Atlantic for Rome. Just before they left, Cornelia was received into the Catholic Church at St. Louis Cathedral, New Orleans, months before her husband made this commitment. When they reached the Eternal City, the Connellys met Cardinals, diplomats and Catholic aristocrats, including Lord and Lady Shrewsbury. Cornelia befriended Princess Gwendoline Borghese, the Shrewsburys' daughter, and accompanied her on visits to the poor.

The Connellys' time in Europe was curtailed by financial difficulties. Returning to America, they settled in Grand Coteau, Louisiana in 1838. Cornelia was a music teacher to pupils of the Sacred Heart Convent while Pierce taught English at St Charles, a new Jesuit College. Their joyful existence raising lively, happy children was shattered by tragic loss. In September 1839 their second daughter, Mary Magdalen, died two months after her birth. Five months later, their two-year-old son, John Henry, was severely burned when he fell into a sugar kettle processing cane syrup. Cornelia held him for 43 hours before he died on 2nd February 1840.

On 13th October that same year, Pierce told Cornelia he still desired to become a Catholic priest and requested that they live together in chastity. In recollections written in 1879, Fr John Francis Abbadie, the priest who served as Cornelia's confessor during this time, recalled Cornelia's reply to Pierce:

"It is an important matter. Think of it twice and with deliberate attention – but if the good God asks the sacrifice, I am ready to make it to Him, and with all my heart".³

Cornelia was pregnant with their last child, Frank.

³ Transcript of 5 Sep 1879 letter by Father John Francis Abbadie copied in 'Materials Collected by Mother Maria Joseph Buckle for a Life of Cornelia Connelly', transcribed in *Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus: Documentation presented by the Historical Commission*, Diocese of Southwark, 1968 [hereafter CC Doc.], vol. 64, p.7.



Figure 4: Spiritual notebook kept by Cornelia Connelly from 1839-1844, p.12-13, *Feast of the Sacred Heart* 1840.

Pierce could only enter the Catholic priesthood once Cornelia consented in person to dissolve their marriage and take a vow of chastity. The family once again came to Rome. Pierce and Cornelia signed a deed of Separation in April 1844. The following year Pierce was ordained.

Although she lived with the Sacred Heart nuns in Rome, Cornelia did not feel called to join their order. She envisioned a new society inspired by the Holy Child. Cornelia was advised by Pope Gregory XVI to begin in England where there was a great need for Catholic girls' education. Bishop (later Cardinal) Nicholas Wiseman encouraged Cornelia to take on a newly built convent, St Mary's in Derby in the autumn of 1846. It was from here that Cornelia and her sisters would travel and expand across Britain, Europe and

the Atlantic to begin their work in London, Preston, Blackpool, Pennsylvania, Toul, Paris and many other places.

Cornelia's Family Sorrows

Pierce grew frustrated serving as an assistant chaplain to Lord Shrewsbury and unhappy without his wife. He removed all three of the children from their schools in January 1848 after Cornelia, advised by her chaplain and bishop, refused to see Pierce. He left his position and later renounced the Catholic faith, writing tracts against it. Cornelia hoped to have her children stay with her once the end of her novitiate permitted it. Pierce ignored Cornelia's offer to meet with him if he would send their daughter Adeline to her. He returned the letters Cornelia sent to their children.

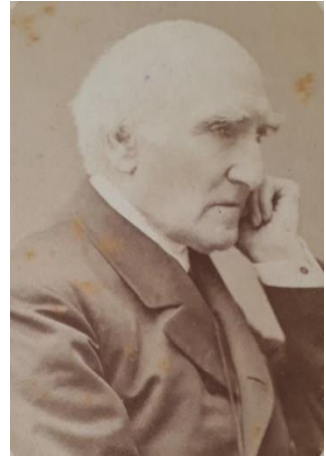


Figure 5: Pierce Connelly in later life, c1870.

In January 1849 Cornelia was summoned to appear before the Court of Arches as Pierce sued her for restitution of conjugal rights. In March 1850, the court found in Pierce's favour and it was only the immediate appeal made to the Privy Council that prevented Cornelia from imprisonment or forcible return to her husband. The case was not concluded until 24th June 1858 when it was finally dismissed by the Judicial Committee of Privy Council on appeal. Pierce was penniless at this point and Cornelia had to cover the legal fees involved in this lengthy case.⁴

Cornelia and Pierce's eldest son Mercer returned to North America but died of yellow fever in 1853. He was 21 years old. After she had learnt of her son's death, Cornelia was reported by the *Society Annals* to have said "I must rouse myself or I shall sink to neglect of duty." To prevent herself from being

⁴ Radegunde Flaxman, *A Woman Styled Bold*, London, 1991, pp. 146 – 153.

overwhelmed with grief, Cornelia asked her sisters at the St Leonards-on-Sea SHCJ Convent to give her Burchett's *Lineal Geometry*. She made herself work through the problems.⁵



Figure 6: Frank and Adeline Connelly, aged 18 and 23, 1859.

Cornelia saw her two surviving children again when they were adults. Adeline returned to the Catholic Faith and gave charity to the sick and the poor of Paris. Frank became a gifted sculptor. Despite his strong opposition to Catholicism, Frank remained close with his sister, and both were friends to the SHCJ.

Cornelia's decisions regarding her children and her life as a woman religious could be seen as neglectful or unfeeling. The rare

glimpses Cornelia's writings and letters give into her state of mind through this terrible separation prove otherwise. Writing to her brother John in 1854, Cornelia challenged his criticism of her actions. She also gave voice to her enduring love for her children and her sense of betrayal by her sometime husband:

Your letter tells me throughout how little you understand my heart and feelings either regarding the sacrifice of the world or the giving up of natural happiness with my darling children, ever dearer to me than my own life. I have long since given up the world (without casting aside the good habits of civilised life) and 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

⁵ 1846-1876 Annals of the SHCJ, edited by Mother Theresa Laprimaudaye, 1904, p.17.

them away from me in a moment of excitement and unjust anger, may God forgive him. [Cornelia's emphasis]⁶

Leadership and Legacy

In May 1869 Cornelia had created a revised 'Rule' for the SHCJ, this being the set of Constitutions for all members of the Society to live by. She sent copies of the Rule out to all members of the SHCJ, but unfortunately, in Preston discontent was growing.

Mother Lucy and other members of the three Preston Communities disputed the revised rule due to concerns over issues such as powers given to bishops over the institute. After the other houses had accepted the revised rule, they debated it with Cornelia and the Motherhouse for 18 months before signing.

Cornelia held the support of most of her sisters and was elected Superior General in 1874. Sadly, she never lived to see the approval of the SHCJ's Rule on 7th August 1887.



Figure 7: Cornelia Connelly in 1874.

Cornelia's strength began to fail in 1878. She fell more gravely ill the following year and died on 18th April 1879 at St Leonards-on-Sea. She was buried at Mayfield, the grounds of the ancient archbishops' palace which Cornelia and her sisters given new life to as a flourishing school and convent.

The Early Foundations of the SHCJ

Derby

⁶ CC Doc, Vol. 9, p.4.



The Society of the Holy Child Jesus was established on 13th October 1846 in St Mary's Convent, Derby. Grand and imposing on the outside, it was cold and

bare within. Cornelia foresaw 'difficulties in beginning in so large a Convent'.⁷ Yet with the help of three other women, she began the work of the SHCJ.

Her companions were Emily Bowles, a fellow convert to whom she had been introduced by Wiseman, a young woman named Veronica and Mary Ann Walker, who later took the name in religion of Sister Aloysia. Born in Birmingham, Sr Aloysia met Cornelia while she and Emily were staying with

Figure 8: painting on ceramic base of St Mary's Convent, Derby, 19th century, OB/0098.

the Sisters of Mercy at St Mary's

Convent, Handsworth. Of those three women accompanying Cornelia on that first day, it was Sr Aloysia alone who would remain within the SHCJ all her life.

⁷ Mother Maria Joseph Buckle's biographical notes, CC Doc., vol. 65, p.14.

Thanks to an account written by Sr Aloysia in 1879, there is a good record of what those the first few days of the SHCJ were like. Sr Aloysia explains how the local priest's sister lent the small, fledging community 'a few things' for their dinner as there were 'no knives or forks or anything else in the place'. The women then went to work, Veronica lighting fires, Cornelia making beds, airing rooms and attending to tradesmen while Sister Aloysia was 'cook refectorian,



portress to the back door, night visitor, caller and general bell ringer'. Money was a chief concern. Aloysia heard Cornelia admit that 'all her means were gone [...] she had spent all in furnishing and supporting the convent.'⁸

The archives contain a list of the convent's furniture and fixtures which itemises both furnishings such as 'large cupboards and drawers (used by Mrs Lockhart first)' and goods

Figure 9: Sr Aloysia Walker, c1850.

supplied including coal, gravel and feathers for bedding. The list is prefaced by a description of the arrangement where 'the Convent, Charity Schools, Priest's House & lodge should be transferred to Bishop Wiseman for a certain sum agreed upon between them'. Notes also are made to denote what sums were contributed by Cornelia and the local priest, Reverend Dr Sing.⁹

Despite promising Cornelia he would 'take the whole Convent and its liabilities on myself', Wiseman did not keep up his mortgage payments to Sing.¹⁰ Angered by this situation, the priest became deeply critical of

⁸ Letter from Sister Aloysia Walker to Mother Maria Joseph Buckle dated 29 Sep 1879, CC Doc. vol. 10, p.33-41.

⁹ 'Derby Convent Furniture & Fixtures', n.d. c.1848, CC Doc. Vol. 10, p.143-147.

¹⁰ Letter from Wiseman to Cornelia Connelly 6 Sep 1846, CC Doc. vol. 10, p.11.

Cornelia's methods and accused the community of 'playing at nuns' in his complaint to Bishop Ullathorne.¹¹

Sing may have had his criticisms, but these young, inexperienced nuns worked hard over the SHCJ's first two years, teaching a crowded poor school of 200 children and running night schools for girls who worked in Derby's factories as well as taking on their first boarding pupils.¹² Sister Aloysia attributes their perseverance to Cornelia's dauntless spirit: 'her beautiful confidence and trust in God grew upon us so that the thought of not succeeding never entered into our minds'.¹³

St Leonards-on-Sea

Wiseman's solution to Cornelia's predicament was a move south to St Leonards-on-Sea in East Sussex. The sisters and two boarding students arrived there in December 1848. At first the society was warmly welcomed by Reverend Mr Jones, the priest who had received buildings for a convent school from a wealthy benefactress, Lady Towneley. However, Jones' feelings towards the community grew cold to the point where he prohibited the sisters from growing food on the site. Cornelia arranged a Novena to be said and Jones was reconciled to the sisters just before his death on 21st February 1850.

¹¹ Letter from Rev. Thomas Sing to Ullathorne dated 6 Nov 1848, CC Doc., vol. 10, p.120(g).

¹² 'Derby Visited by Mother Mary Agnese for Mother Mary Francis Bellasis', 1912, CC. Doc Vol. 10, p.140.

¹³ Letter from Sister Aloysia Walker to Mother Maria Joseph Buckle, dated 29 Sep 1879 CC Doc. Vol 10, p.33-41.

Jones had left the convent to the Society in his will, but a dispute arose over the use of the chapel. This was to plague the SHCJ for years. Prominent figures in St Leonards claimed it was the SHCJ's responsibility to build their chapel for use by the local Catholic population or provide an alternative. A relative of Lady Towneley and the convent's board of trustees forbade the SHCJ from constructing any building that was not strictly for the use of the convent school. Presented with partial information, the Propaganda in Rome intervened by ordering Cornelia to build the church for the St Leonards



Figure 10: A photograph of St Leonards in 1880s

Mission. Cornelia was put in an impossible situation and suffered personal insults, spiteful gossip and attempts to undermine her community and its work. The matter was not fully resolved until, after several representations to Rome, Cardinal Barnabó withdrew his earlier decision and a Papal rescript was issued on 17th November 1864 vindicating the SHCJ.¹⁴

Despite such obstacles and the closure of the St Leonards training college in 1863, the convent and school at St Leonards was maintained by the SHCJ until the school's closure in 1976, 128 years after the SHCJ's arrival there. Generations of sisters and pupils benefitted from its beautiful grounds and

¹⁴ Radegunde Flaxman, *A Woman Styled Bold: The Life of Cornelia Connelly 1809-1879*, London, 1991, pp. 270 – 279.

sea air. It remains a significant place for the SHCJ as the cradle of Holy Child education where its foundation text was developed and published.

The Book of Studies

The educational philosophy of the SHCJ is to be found in *the Book of the Order of Studies in the Schools of the Holy Child Jesus*, or, as it is more often referred to, *the Book of Studies*. Work started in 1855 after Rev. Peter Gallwey SJ gave Cornelia a copy of the *Ratio Studiorum* which Cornelia instructed Mother Maria Joseph Buckle to translate into English. This 1599 text coupled with the advice of a lay teacher, provided a framework for the SHCJ's own method of teaching.¹⁵

Cornelia had a talent for synthesising the material she studied.¹⁶ *The Book of Studies* not only utilised the work of other educational theorists, but also frequently directs the reader to consult them, referring to Trench's work on the study of words and *The Little Manual on Art* by D. Laurent among many others.¹⁷

Cornelia's training methods allowed her to gather the perspectives of SHCJ nuns. Individual teaching sisters would propose a thesis on a topic relating to education and present their findings to Cornelia and their fellow sisters. Another would respond with 'review and criticism' of the presentation. In this way *the Book of Studies* is a distillation of many teaching experiences.¹⁸

Several educational principles presented in *The Book of Studies* challenged values held in late 19th century Britain and would also contest the focus of much educational policy today. In point six of the school rules, pupils are not

¹⁵ Roseanne McDougall, *Cornelia Connelly's Innovations in Female Education, 1846- 1864, Revolutionizing the School Curriculum for Girls*, Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter, 2008, pp. 179-183.

¹⁶ Caritas MacCarthy, *The Spirituality of Cornelia Connelly: in God, for God, with God*, Lewiston and Queenston p.213. MacCarthy lists observations on this skill made by Cornelia's sisters M.M.C. Gompertz and M.M. Joseph and notes 'she created a veritable mosaic not only by selecting well, but by harmonizing with apt juxtaposition of texts, an adapting borrowed texts with her own introductions and conclusions'.

¹⁷ *Book of the Order of Studies in the schools of the Holy Child Jesus*, SHCJ, St Leonards-on-Sea, 1863, p.25, p. 57.

¹⁸ McDougall, pp.181-182.

permitted to 'wound by cutting words, nor bring up superiority of family nor depreciate the family of another'.¹⁹ There are more pages on drawing than any other taught subject and a strong case is made for its relevance:

In our schools we are not to consider Drawing as an extra or superlative Art [...] but, on the contrary, as a Christian Art and one of the most important branches of education, second only to the art of speaking and writing, and in some respects even beyond the languages, as it is in itself a universal Language.²⁰

Beginnings in London

Once the SHCJ had established itself in St Leonards, a group of five sisters came to 14 Gate Street where they taught the children living in the crowded slums of nineteenth century Holborn. The superior was Mother Alphonsa Kay who, although only 22 years of age, stood out for 'the solidity of her judgement and the maturity of her character'.²¹ The sisters taught 232 girls in two rooms 35 by 22 feet, fighting with the din of a nearby forge. By the summer of 1854, the London community took on two further schools.²²

An SHCJ boarding school was set up in London at Nottingham Place in 1875. The school finally settled in 1889 at Cavendish Square. The site included a boarding school, junior school and training college until funding alterations caused the school and college to close in 1970. Inspired by the ethos of the school, parents worked together to set up the Cavendish School at a new site in Camden which continues as a primary school today. The SHCJ sisters lived in numerous London houses, teaching at all levels and working in a range of ministries, until the final London community moved north to Harrogate in 2023.

¹⁹ *Book of the Order of Studies*, 1863, p.11.

²⁰ *Book of the Order of Studies*, 1863, p.53.

²¹ SHCJ Annals 1846 - 1876 (Theophila Laprimaudaye), 1851, Documentation for the Cause vol. 68, p.53, quoted in Maureen Crook, 'The First Mission: Gate Street London', *SHCJ History Is.1 Beginnings*, 1996, p.34.

²² Crook, 1996, p.35

Liverpool

The first foothold of the SHCJ in northwest England was made during March 1852 in Liverpool. The SHCJ's ministry there was curtailed by a crisis yet again concerning property. The superior of this new SHCJ community was Mother Emily Bowles, Cornelia's first companion in religious life. With the encouragement of Scott Nasmyth Stokes, Cornelia and Mother Emily searched for a building in Liverpool where the SHCJ could start a training college in 1853. Unfortunately, the purchase of an initial property approved by Cornelia fell through. While Cornelia had been summoned to Rome, Emily borrowed £1300 and £5000 from two of her brothers to complete the purchase without informing Cornelia. This sum was far beyond the means of the SHCJ to repay and the building proved a bad investment.

The two women – who had shared many trials and triumphs since they first met – were at odds until Emily eventually left the SHCJ in 1856. She made two attempts to rejoin the SHCJ. However, Cornelia evidently saw Emily's actions as an irrevocable breach of trust and refused to discuss the matter with her.²³

Preston

In February 1853, five Holy Child Sisters were sent to Preston to answer the call of the Jesuit fathers to take charge of their school in St Ignatius' Parish. They had been offered the school in 1848 as Emily Bowles states in her anguished letter from St Leonards to her friend John Henry Newman: 'why

²³ 'Volumes 24, 25, and 26 Foundation in Liverpool and Defection of First Companion: Introduction', CC Doc. Vol. 24 p.xviii; letter from Cornelia to Emily Bowles 5 Feb 1863, CC Doc vol 26 p.185; letter from Cornelia to Father Gallwey 13 Apr [1863], CC Doc vol 26, p.186.

did we come here & not go to Preston? [...] Oh! If you knew how Revd Mother has been tried and what it is to see her so tried.’²⁴

The SHCJ went on to manage still more Preston day schools and Sunday



Figure 11: Preston Pupil Teachers with an SHCJ sister c1900.

schools: St Wilfrid's in 1854, St Walburge's in 1857 as well as the English Martyrs' and St Mary's in 1871. On 13th February 1871, Mother Lucy Wooley, Preston's Superior, described the taking on of the English Martyrs' school as a 'brilliant and energetic opening' and 'the

crowning work of the year'.²⁵

SHCJ education in Preston expanded further after the Society purchased number 23 Winckley Square in the Spring of 1875 while renting and later purchasing number 22. This was to become the High School. It started as the premises for the SHCJ's private school for children aged from 3 – 18 and for the pupil teachers. By 1906 the high school and pupil teacher numbers reached 105 and 66 respectively.²⁶

The Holy Child High School was to remain in this historic part of Preston until 1971 when the school was closed. A community continued in Preston into the 21st Century teaching in local schools and contributing in many other ways to the local area.

²⁴ Emily Bowles to John Henry Newman addressed from St Leonards, 10 Aug 1851, CC Doc. Vol.27, p.1.

²⁵ Lucy Woolley to Cornelia Connelly addressed from Preston, 13 Feb 1871. SHCJ Provincialate Archive, CC/box 38/1871/b.

²⁶ SHCJ publication, *Winckley Square Convent School 1875 – 1975*, Preston, 1975, p.7.

Blackpool

In the autumn of 1856, the remaining SHCJ community of Liverpool travelled to Blackpool where a far more auspicious foundation emerged. After staying with the Cookson sisters, the SHCJ nuns rented a house in Queens Square and moved to the larger Raikes Hall on 3rd December 1859.

When still more space was needed from 1865 and all possibilities fell through, Cornelia decided a new property should be built on an area of high ground on the estate of Laton which she accordingly named 'Layton Hill'. The project was overseen by Mother Gertrude Day, who as a girl was educated by the SHCJ in Liverpool and joined the SHCJ aged 16, becoming the Blackpool superior aged just 22. Mother Gertrude was clearly equal to the task: by 2nd

July 1870, the Blackpool community had settled into their new convent and school. These original buildings still stand as part of St Mary's Catholic Academy today. The SHCJ continued to teach at Talbot Road Parish school – renamed



Sacred Heart Parish school in 1951 – and took on St Kentigern's Parish school in 1904. These schools were staffed by SHCJ nuns until the 1970s.

Following the courageous spirit of Cornelia's decision to construct Layton Hill itself, Mother Philomena Mulgrew decided to amalgamate the boarding school and day school in 1929 and made Layton Hill the first direct grant grammar school in the Blackpool locality. During the Second World War, Layton Hill continued to meet the challenges of the times and hosted both the Notre Dame School - who had come to escape the bombing raids on Manchester - as well as

Figure 12: Layton Hill main building exterior c1950.

the student sisters of Cavendish Square Training College.²⁷

The SHCJ managed the school until St Mary's Catholic Academy, a comprehensive school, was formed from St Catherine's, St Thomas', St Joseph's and Layton Hill in 1982. Two SHCJ sisters still reside in Blackpool. Keeping in close contact with St Mary's is just one of their many apostolates in the locality.

North America

The offer of land by the Duchess of Leeds, Louisa Catherine Caton, in Towanda, Pennsylvania in 1862 fulfilled Cornelia's long held desire for a foundation in her home country as well as Pope Gregory XVI's instruction to her 'from England let your efforts in the cause of education reach America'.²⁸ On 2nd August 1862, six courageous nuns sailed from Liverpool to start a foundation in USA. However, they arrived in August 1862 to find the 'mansion' promised by the dishonest land agent, Mr W.C. L. Ward, was dilapidated and that the 5 acres in fact only came to 2 ½. According to a letter sent from Mother Mary Xavier Noble to Cornelia, Ward had sold 'the miserable buildings we are repairing' to the Duchess at an inflated price from land he owned.²⁹

Cornelia did not receive a full account of their hardships until the death of a young novice from consumption in January 1864, when Fr Charles Carter, the Vicar General of the Philadelphia wrote of what the sisters had endured:

Some mornings when they got up, they did not know where their breakfast would come from, and with regard to their bedding they had to use their habits – cloaks, old pieces of carpet &c &c. It is a wonder they did not catch

²⁷ Maureen Crook, 'The Significance of Place: Blackpool', *SHCJ History*, Is. 2 'The Significance of Place', 1998, p. 31

²⁸ 'A member of the Society' [Mother Mary Catherine Gompertz], *The Life of Cornelia Connelly*, p.337

²⁹ M.M. Xavier Noble to Cornelia Connelly, CC Cause Papers: Documentation Presented by the Historical Commission, Vol. 30, p.67.

their death from exposure! And ever since when I put the plain question to the sisters upon the subject, I got a smiling evasive answer.³⁰



Despite suffering such privations, the sisters still managed to establish a boarding school alongside day and night

schools for the local area.

Concerned for the welfare of the sisters, Fr Carter secured a new property at Sharon Hill. He also made the case for a larger SHCJ Community and in response Cornelia sent a further six sisters. This second group gave support those at Towanda and also meant that SHCJ could start teaching at the Assumption Parish in Philadelphia.³¹

Figure 13: The Community of Sharon Hill, 1929.

When SHCJ arrived at Sharon Hill on 16th July

1864, they found that this house was also in a dilapidated state. The sisters had to beg money to furnish the school and once the school started in September, they lived on meagre food rations to ensure the students 'should not want for anything.'³² Nonetheless, Sharon Hill went on to become the

³⁰ Fr Carter to Cornelia Connelly 31 Jan 1864, CC Doc, vol 30., p. 174.

³¹ Marie Tierney, Jeanne Marie Guerin and Catherine Quinn, 'Sharon Hill: a special place' *SHCJ History*, Is. 2 'The Significance of Place', 1998, p.49.

³² Theophila Laprimaudaye (ed.) *SHCJ Annals 1846 – 1876*, pp. 175 -176.

Novitiate and Motherhouse of the American SHCJ. The first American Novice, Mary Hughes, entered in January 1866.³³

As the population of America continued migrate West in the later 19th century, so did the SHCJ. Between 1883 and 1886, the SHCJ set up communities in Avoca and Waseca in Minnesota, in Lincoln Nebraska and in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Most of these foundations were only briefly held, but

an SHCJ community flourished in Cheyenne for 50 years. In 1913, the SHCJ's English (later European) Province sent four SHCJ sisters to Portland and



Figure 14: Students at Rosemont celebrating May Day in 1924.

there are still SHCJ sisters based in Oregon today. Between 1914 and 1962, the American SHCJ opened 25 schools. In 1921, with the encouragement of past pupils, Rosemont College was established, the first SHCJ institution in America to provide liberal arts education for women. As the SHCJ's apostolate expanded after Vatican II, the American Province came to encompass initiatives in Chile and the Dominican Republic.

Like their sisters in European, the American SHCJ also have an aging population. their Province chapter pledged to continue in 'a spirit of courageous hope and joy'. The determination fostered against all odds in 19th

³³ Marie Tierney, Jeanne Marie Guerin and Catherine Quinn, 'Sharon Hill: a special place' *SHCJ History*, Issue II, 1997, p.50.

century Towanda continues through the American sisters, the Network of Schools and SHCJ Associates today.³⁴

Mayfield

The nuns and girls of St Leonards celebrated Whitsun each year with a picnic, but their 1862 outing was a far more consequential event than the party could have first imagined, for this was the first time the SHCJ visited the Old Archbishops' Palace at Mayfield. A sketch made by Cecilia Bellasis, who was a St Leonards school girl at the time, provides an evocative record of that day.

On 17th May the following year, Cornelia Connelly wrote to Bishop Grant, to inform him that the SHCJ had at last found a suitable site at Mayfield which would provide a 'long wished' place of rest.³⁵ The cautious Bishop did not approve. Grant told Cornelia that he thanked St Theophila for 'making it easy for you to withdraw from it'.³⁶ The Duchess of Leeds bristled at Grant's 'interference' and bought the land herself. However, after the Jesuits and the Benedictines turned down the land, it was Grant who suggested she offer Mayfield Old Palace Farm to the SHCJ, and he blessed the grounds in 1863. The Duchess presented Cornelia with a substantial condition to her gift: the ruins must be restored.³⁷

The project was an enormous undertaking, requiring not only funds, but the physical, intellectual, and spiritual labours of architects, builders, solicitors, Cornelia and her sisters, to reclaim the ruins of Mayfield Palace as a bastion of Catholic education. Little could Grant, the Duchess or Cornelia, imagine the connection that would grow between the SHCJ and this historic place. In time

³⁴ 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*, vol.132, No.4, 2021, p.116.

³⁵ Cornelia Connelly to Bishop Grant, 18th Aug 1863, Southwark Diocesan Archives, reproduced in Cornelia Connelly Cause Papers, *Writings of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly*, 1959, vol.13, 'Letters to Ecclesiastics: Bishop Grant 1862 – 1864', p.105.

³⁶ Bishop Grant to Cornelia Connelly, 19th Aug 1863, CC Cause Papers, *Writings*, vol.13, pp. 105.

³⁷ Flaxman 1991, pp. 265 – 269.

Mayfield became the SHCJ's Motherhouse and an illustrious school that has gone from strength to strength. 100 years after Mayfield was first restored, Sister Nesta Fitzgerald Lombard – a trained architect – designed additions and alterations that enabled the school to expand in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. 2024 sees the departure of the last two SHCJ sisters from Mayfield, but the strong bond between the School and the SHCJ Community remains.

Neuilly, France: Cornelia's last Foundation

Despite their initial evacuation in 1870 due to the Franco-Prussian War, Cornelia's ambition for a French SHCJ school was realized in 1871 when the SHCJ School in Toul reopened and Cornelia was to spend several periods of her later years there. In 1876 the school relocated to Grenelle in Paris. In 1877, the SHCJ found a new a house on Boulevard de la Saussaye in a fashionable district outside Paris, Neuilly sur Seine. Cornelia wrote from there on 27th January 1877 that, despite the frustration of the SHCJ's work at Toul, 'the only thing I had determined on was not to leave France'.³⁸

The French sisters who joined the Society as a result of this initial project became a crucial part of the SHCJ's development both within France and across the SHCJ's apostolate. During the Second World War, the SHCJ community in France evacuated their Paris convent with heavy hearts. On 10th July, 1945, Mother Mary Saint Maurice and Mother Marie Odile returned to Paris and immediately began to clean 47 Rue Perronet and arrange repairs after the building was used by men of the American Airforce. By October 1945, the Neuilly Community was officially formed again.

In 1959, the SHCJ took on an inner-city comprehensive school in Créteil just outside Paris where Sister Noël Laureau served as head for 29 years. Although no longer managed by SHCJ nuns, the two former SHCJ schools of Créteil are part of the SHCJ's Network of schools and are regularly visited by the last SHCJ sister based in France.

The SHCJ in 2024

³⁸ Cornelia Connelly to Mother Ignatius Chadaway, 27 Jan 1877, CC Doc, vol. 35, p. 134.

As the CAS has arrived at its 75th anniversary in 2024, Sister Oona Mohan SHCJ celebrated her 80th year as a religious on 21st March, the first SHCJ sister to reach this milestone. Her jubilee party took place at a time of uncertainty in this country and global suffering due to the conflicts in Gaza, Ukraine and throughout the world. Furthermore, like so many orders of women religious in Europe, the European Province of the SHCJ is reaching completion and it is hard to deny the natural sadness experienced when any institute reaches this stage. Yet this occasion was one of pure joy: a celebration of Oona's long life and fruitful ministry in the Society. Surrounded by sisters who had served their fellow human beings in so many different ways, I realised how lucky I was to work in this special place with these remarkable women. The second part of this article will tell some of their stories.