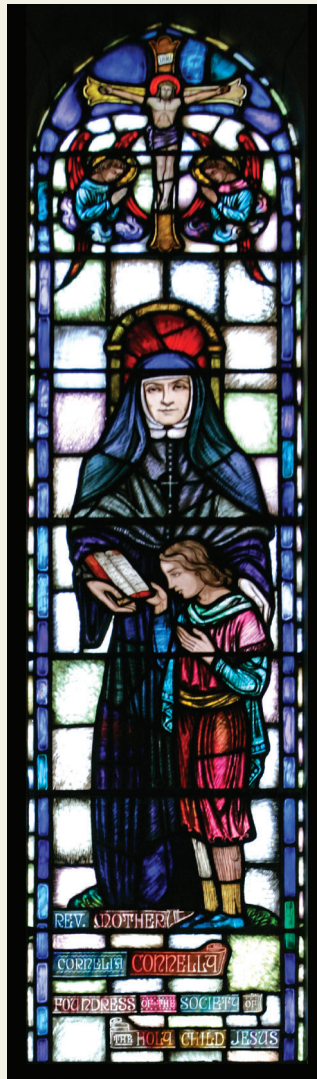


# CORNELIA CONNELLY

FOUNDER, SOCIETY OF THE  
HOLY CHILD JESUS

1809 - 1879



COVER

*Stained Glass Window,  
Rosemont College,  
Rosemont, PA.  
Installed in College Chapel, 1941*

LIFE DOES NOT ALWAYS TURN  
OUT THE WAY WE IMAGINED.

SOMETIMES LIFE EXCEEDS  
OUR EXPECTATIONS,  
LEADING US IN DIRECTIONS  
MORE FULFILLING THAN WE  
COULD EVER HAVE DREAMED.

BUT LIFE CAN ALSO  
TURN US UPSIDE DOWN,  
BETRAYING US IN WAYS THAT  
LEAVE US DISORIENTED,  
REELING AND WARY.

EVEN WHEN OUR DREAMS  
ARE REALIZED, THEY USUALLY  
COME TO PASS ONLY AFTER  
FALSE STARTS, TWISTS AND  
TURNS ALONG THE WAY AND  
LOTS OF HARD WORK.



## CORNELIA CONNELLY

*Founder, Society of the Holy Child Jesus*

1809 - 1879



Society of the Holy Child Jesus  
ACTIONS NOT WORDS

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# FOREWORD

## Who is Cornelia Connelly?

Wife, mother, convert, founder of a religious congregation of sisters, candidate for sainthood – she is all these things. Born within a quarter century of the end of the American War for Independence, she refused to be intimidated by the strictures of the times and places in which she lived. Instead, her educational principles are carried by the members of her congregation from the New World to the Old World to the Third World, where they continue to bear much fruit.

In his book *Making Saints*, Kenneth Woodward, former religion editor of Newsweek magazine, states that “Of all the...causes to reach the Congregation [for the Causes of Saints]...none is more arresting than the case of Mother Cornelia Connelly, founder of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. Certainly it is one of the most delicate and complicated to confront the congregational judges.”

In the present study, Judith A. Talvacchia, Holy Child alumna and member of the Holy Child Associates, has succeeded in presenting Cornelia’s life in the context in which it was lived, thereby fulfilling Woodward’s observation that “...causes by their very nature... reveal the candidate’s unique response to grace by providing a genuinely theological as well as historical interpretation of the subject’s life.”

Two years after the publication of Woodward’s book, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, recognizing the extraordinary “faith, hope, and spirit of charity with which this strong, but humble, sweet, upright, and prudent woman bore [her] difficulties...declared that the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly practiced the theological and cardinal virtues and those connected with them in a heroic manner” thus meriting the title of “Venerable,” the last step before Beatification.

Special thanks to Margaret Vandenberg for her candid, objective critique of the text, and to the communication office of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, for seeing the project through to completion.

Please join the Society of the Holy Child Jesus in praying for the beatification and eventual canonization of Venerable Cornelia Connelly.



*Copy of portrait of Cornelia that she had done  
for her children while she was at the Trinità.*

*However, they never received it.*



# INTRODUCTION

Cornelia Connelly, founder of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, experienced a life that encompassed dreams fulfilled and dreams betrayed, unexpected detours and obstacles and plenty of hard work. Her story is clearly situated in the 19th century world in which she lived, yet some of the challenges she faced – in her family life, as a woman in the Church and in society – resonate with challenges women still face today.

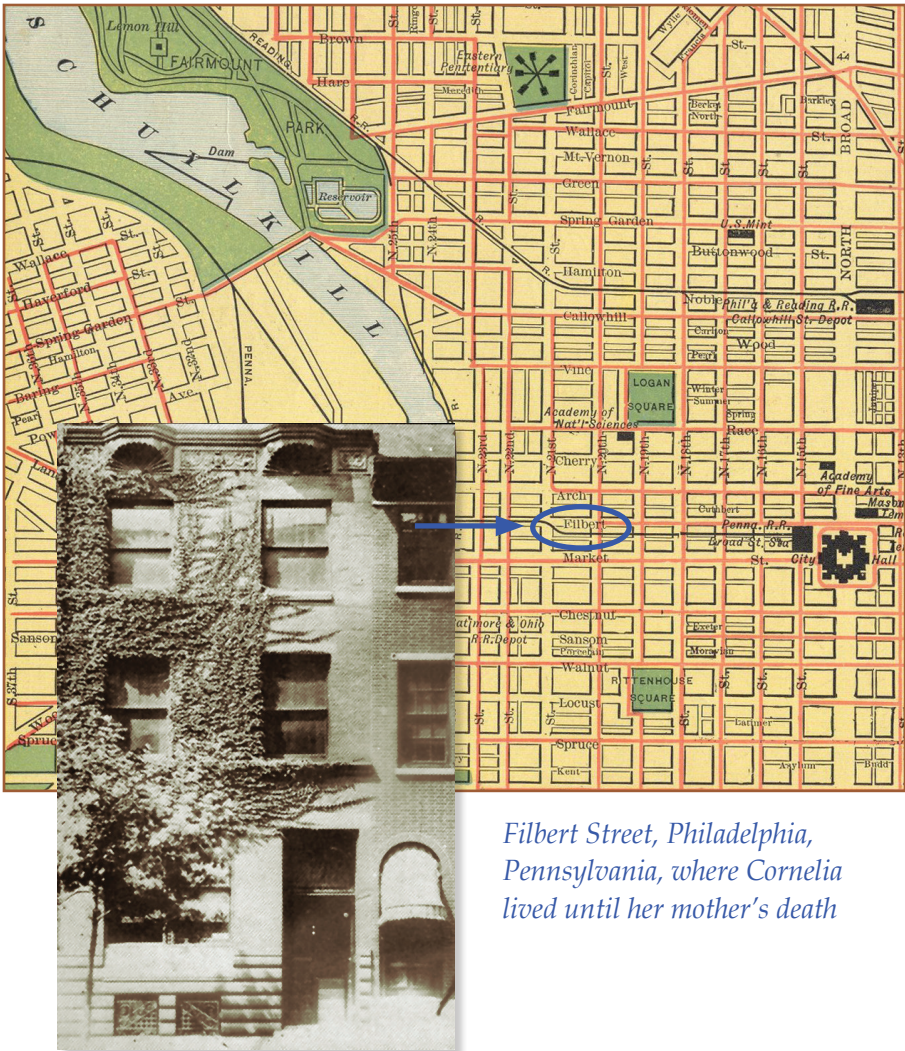
For example, have you or anyone you know experienced any of these life situations:

- *You make a decision that is unpopular or counter-cultural realizing that it will bring lifelong consequences – known and unknown.*
- *You experience the death of someone you love and life is changed forever.*
- *You are living a happy life that is unexpectedly turned upside down, with life-changing consequences.*
- *You are betrayed by someone you love.*
- *A cherished relationship is shattered and never regains its former intimacy.*
- *You are uprooted from home and family and moved to a new and unfamiliar location.*
- *You are viewed as an outsider and experience prejudice because of it.*
- *You have an opportunity to create something new and meaningful. You put your heart and soul into the venture but meet with constant misunderstandings and obstacles.*

All of these experiences and more were part of the life of Cornelia Connelly. Even one such event can leave a person angry, bitter and unable to find peace of mind and heart. Yet, we have met people who somehow emerge from traumatic events stronger, more compassionate and loving. They embrace life with peace and even joy, open to whatever new ventures life offers them. Cornelia was one of these people.

How did she do it? Cornelia's story and legacy demonstrate that the source of her resilience, God, is just as available to us today as it was to her.

Deep faith in God anchored her and gave her confidence to move forward joyfully, knowing that her loving God would guide her every step of the way. She did not need extraordinary visions or austere practices in order to find God. She recognized God's presence and action in the beauty of the created world, in the people around her, in the humble and hidden ordinariness of daily life. Her strong and resilient spirit was forged in response to the love and guidance God offered her in the school of daily life. Her story begins in 19th century America, in the city of Philadelphia.



*Filbert Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where Cornelia lived until her mother's death*

## CORNELIA'S EARLY LIFE

Born in 1809 to a prosperous Philadelphia family, Cornelia Augusta Peacock was the seventh child of Ralph Peacock and Mary Swope Bowen Peacock. She had a half sister and brother, children of her mother's first marriage to John Bowen. As with many women of her time, Cornelia's mother was widowed at a young age. After her marriage to Ralph Peacock, she had a son and two daughters. Before Cornelia was born, a child had died at birth or shortly thereafter. In what we would call today a "blended family," the Peacocks set about creating a new family. Later correspondence among the siblings reveals deep affection for one another and memories of a warm and lively household. Cornelia maintained a lifelong connection with her surviving siblings and their families.

As the daughter of an affluent family, Cornelia was educated most likely at home. She would have been used to material comfort and to the advantages of Philadelphia society. In her later years, she admitted to a childhood temper and general untidiness. Her life led her further and further away from privilege, however, and she responded by growing in maturity and in appreciation of the non-material values that gave meaning to her life.

Her mother's family had been very involved in the American Revolution. Cornelia seems to have absorbed their independent spirit at an early age. She spoke of a childhood adventure at the age of 7 in which she taunted a bull in a neighbor's field until it chased her. She only escaped injury because of the close proximity of a barn and her sister's help in distracting the bull. This story gives the impression of a spontaneous personality who did not stop to consider consequences. Spontaneity and independence were qualities observed in Cornelia for the rest of her life.

Her Presbyterian upbringing conveyed a strong sense of God's presence and the importance of living a moral life. Regular study of the bible would have been part of her religious practice and pursuit of truth and justice, a foundational value. Many of the actions Cornelia took later in life reflected the religious values instilled in her as a child.

At the age of nine, Cornelia's care-free existence came to an abrupt end when her father died. His poor business decisions left the family in debt. In spite

of reduced financial circumstances and the effects of grief, Cornelia's mother was able to maintain close family bonds that allowed Cornelia to flourish. Family security was not to last much longer, however. When Cornelia was 14, her mother died after a long illness. Her siblings scattered and Cornelia was sent to live with her half sister Isabella, who had married some years earlier. Life as she knew it was gone forever.

*St. Stephen's Church,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,  
where Cornelia was  
baptized*



**OLD ST. STEPHEN'S CHURCH • 1823**

## EMERGING INTO WOMANHOOD

Life in the home of Isabella and Austin Montgomery was much more formal and solitary for Cornelia than the bustling atmosphere of the Peacock home. There were no other children in the household, and the routine was geared toward adults. Isabella had married when Cornelia was very young, so Cornelia did not know her as well as her siblings who were closer in age. For a 14-year-old girl grieving the loss of her mother, the companionship of her siblings and the life they had shared, it must have been a lonely time.

We do not know how Cornelia coped emotionally during this transition, but she seems to have decided to make the best of her circumstances. The Montgomerys gave Cornelia access to the considerable resources they had at their disposal – continued education, cultural and social opportunities. Under their tutelage, Cornelia blossomed into an attractive, lively and intelligent young woman.

It was also a time when her religious opportunities expanded. Isabella was an indifferent Presbyterian, but her husband, Austin, was a practicing Episcopalian. Austin's brother, James, was a charismatic priest who was rector of the newly-established St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. Cornelia most likely made his acquaintance through her brother-in-law. The rector's reputation as a holy and effective preacher drew many to his congregation, including Cornelia's sister Adeline. Perhaps Cornelia attended with her sister and family? Participation in an inspirational and active church community would have been welcome support as she coped with the loss of her mother, adjusted to an emotionally restrained home and navigated adolescence. There is no record of the extent to which Cornelia was involved with St. Stephen's. We do know that she was baptized into the Episcopal Church there when she was 22. It was a heartfelt commitment which she said caused her to renew her baptismal promises every day.

There was an unexpected outcome of Cornelia's connection with Rev. Montgomery and the Episcopal Church. It led her into contact with the man who would become her husband. Pierce Connelly was a young Episcopalian clergyman – intense, eloquent and dramatic. In later years, Cornelia's niece described Pierce as “very handsome, fascinating.” Apparently Cornelia found him so, and he was equally fascinated by her. They fell in love and resolved to marry.

For unknown reasons, Cornelia's sister Isabella strongly opposed the marriage. She refused to give her approval or to allow a wedding to take place in her house. At this point, Cornelia's independent spirit asserted itself. She insisted on pursuing her plans and made arrangements for the ceremony to be held at her sister Adeline's residence.

How deeply Cornelia must have felt about Pierce that she defied Isabella, who had sheltered her for eight years and given her many advantages. Was it youthful rebellion, principled conviction, some of both? We don't know. We do know that in her adult life, when Cornelia pursued a decision tenaciously, it was the result of considerable thought, prayer, careful judgment as well as deep love. Whatever her motivation, Cornelia and Pierce were married on December 1, 1831, by Episcopal Bishop William White.

Cornelia was 22 and Pierce 27.

A new and unknown chapter of her life was about to begin.



*Portrait of Cornelia at the time of her wedding*

# NEWLYWEDS

Very soon after their marriage, Pierce was offered a position as rector of Holy Trinity Church in Natchez, Mississippi. The couple made immediate travel plans. After a journey of 15 days and 1700 miles, they arrived at their new home. Natchez was a port city on the banks of the Mississippi River, where a wide variety of people of different races, occupations and economic status passed through or settled. With approximately 3,000 inhabitants, it was a small center of commerce, transportation and culture in the midst of vast slave-owning cotton plantations. For a young woman who had spent her life in a large northern city considered the cultural center of the country, Natchez must have seemed like the end of the known world.

Whatever their misgivings, the Connellys settled into their new life. Within a year, Cornelia gave birth to her first child, Mercer, named after their wealthy Natchez sponsor Dr. Newton Mercer. They lived simply but comfortably. Her beloved sister Mary had come to visit before Merty's birth and became a permanent house guest. No doubt, her companionship and support were invaluable to the young wife and mother, so far from home and all things familiar.

Pierce found a very small congregation awaiting him. He threw himself into the work of providing for their spiritual needs and attracting others to join Holy Trinity. He was soon admired as an eloquent preacher and a zealous pastor. Cornelia took her role as the rector's wife seriously. Their home became a place of hospitality for Church members and non-members alike. The Connellys soon became an integral part of Natchez society. Despite the major transitions this newly married couple had navigated, Mary Peacock described them as "the happiest couple that ever breathed."

*"Whitecottage," home  
of the Connellys in  
Natchez, Mississippi*



## DISCONTENT

In time, the demands of ministry proved wearing for Pierce. His parish territory was vast and transportation primitive. He was the only Episcopalian priest for hundreds of miles and far from the headquarters of his bishop. Beyond that, Pierce had long harbored ambitions to make his mark and rise within the hierarchy of the Episcopal Church. A frontier post was certainly not conducive to advancement. A restless and unstable part of his temperament began to manifest itself. He suffered periods of intense frustration and even depression that affected his health as well as his state of mind. Cornelia was devoted, consoling him and lifting his spirits until he regained a measure of peace. Circumstances were unfolding, however, that would push him to the edge. Once again, Cornelia's life would be turned upside down.

## DOUBTS

In the 1830's, anti-Catholic sentiment was growing as poor Catholic immigrants began populating the young nation in great numbers. They and their Church were seen as threats to the freedom and prosperity of the country, their rituals viewed as foreign.

For Pierce and Cornelia, disapproval of Catholicism would have been an accepted part of their Protestant world view. But Pierce struggled with the sympathy he felt for aspects of Catholicism found in his own high church Episcopalian tradition. He was also troubled by the increasingly violent nature of Protestant attacks on Catholicism – in both word and deed. By the summer of 1834, rhetoric reached fever pitch when a convent outside of Boston was burned down by an organized mob and publications were calling for an anti-Catholic political party. Pierce believed such attacks were unworthy of the Protestant faith. He reasoned that such behavior was not a mark of the true church. Pierce's distress began to boil over.

In late 1833, the Connellys had met a distinguished Frenchman, Joseph Nicholas Nicolle, who happened to be Catholic. Pierce was quite taken by his social status and his personality, calling him "altogether remarkable." He found a kindred spirit in Nicolle and a valued conversation partner. When



they discussed the increase in anti-Catholic propaganda and violence, Pierce heard Nicollet offer opinions similar to his own.

Pierce agonized over his misgivings. He began reading about Catholicism to see if Protestant claims were justified. As he read, he discovered a growing affinity with Catholic teaching and increasing doubts about Protestant claims. As his distress grew he wrote, “My faith in Protestantism is shaken.” Ever faithful, Cornelia joined Pierce in his quest for truth. Together they read literature both for and against Catholicism. A woman of discerning intelligence, Cornelia began forming her own impressions of Catholicism which she was surprised to find were positive.

Even as Pierce was becoming more disillusioned with the Episcopal Church, he pursued yet another ecclesiastical opportunity. Early in 1835, he left for a Church convention in New Orleans, with the vague hope of being selected as bishop of a new diocese being formed. Cornelia was about to give birth to their 2nd child. At a time when childbirth was a risky affair at best, Pierce’s choice to be apart from her was a revealing glimpse of his consuming need for public recognition, which would be a lifelong pursuit.

On March 7, 1835, Adeline “Ady” Connelly was born. For Pierce, the joys and challenges of a growing family competed with his continuing internal struggle over religion. Once his hopes for a bishopric were dashed, Pierce’s questions about the legitimacy of the Episcopal Church seemed to grow to the point where he felt the need to act. The scene was set for change.



*Adeline Connelly,  
daughter of  
Pierce and Cornelia  
Connelly*

*Frank Connelly,  
son of  
Pierce and Cornelia  
Connelly*

# DECISION

By August, Pierce made a dramatic decision to resign his position as rector of Holy Trinity Church and to renounce Episcopal priesthood in order to spend more time investigating the Catholic Church. In doing so, he was abruptly giving up everything he and Cornelia had worked for in the previous four years. With two small children, they would have no home or income. They would face misunderstanding and opposition from family and friends. Despite the consequences, Pierce believed that he was making a heroic decision for the sake of truth. The future, however, would be more uncertain than ever.

Cornelia may not have expected such a drastic course of action until Pierce was convinced that he should become Catholic. Even so, she was fully supportive of him. She wrote to her sister Addie, “I have perfect confidence in the piety, integrity and learning of my dear husband.” She expressed trust in the “kind Providence of God” to see them through to the next step.

Cornelia had been doing her own independent study of Catholicism and was increasingly drawn to the faith. Although we do not know much about her inner struggles during this period, she spoke warmly of the Catholic faith in letters to Addie and confided her own concerns about Protestantism.

It seems that God was leading her in the next steps toward her spiritual destiny.

The fly in the ointment was Pierce’s desire to remain a priest. His friend Nicollet suggested that Pierce consult with Bishop Joseph Rosati, the Catholic Bishop of St. Louis. Pierce left immediately. Again, we don’t know how Cornelia received this news – perhaps with disbelief, with dread? The only clue we have is in a letter to her sister, Addie, written shortly after Pierce’s return



*Cornelia’s sister  
Adeline Peacock Duval*

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in which she says he could not be a Catholic priest even “if he desired it while I live.” This might have been written with a sigh of relief.

Pierce had learned, however, that in rare circumstances, such an outcome might be permitted; but it would require the separation of husband and wife. Cornelia may not have wanted to believe that her husband would ever consider a separation, much less pursue it. They were a loving couple and Cornelia, a devoted wife and mother. Her letters to Pierce during his absence reveal her deep love and need of her husband. She calls him “dear love my more than life” and begs him to return home quickly. Yet, as a dutiful 19th century wife she expressed trust in her husband’s judgment. “I am ready at once to submit to whatever my loved husband believes to be the path of duty.”

In another radical decision, Pierce decided to pull up stakes and travel to Rome to further investigate the Catholic faith and his desire to become a Catholic priest. Whatever her misgivings, Cornelia followed him unreservedly. They sold their home and possessions and booked passage to Rome out of New Orleans.

## THE CONTEXT OF CORNELIA’S DECISIONS

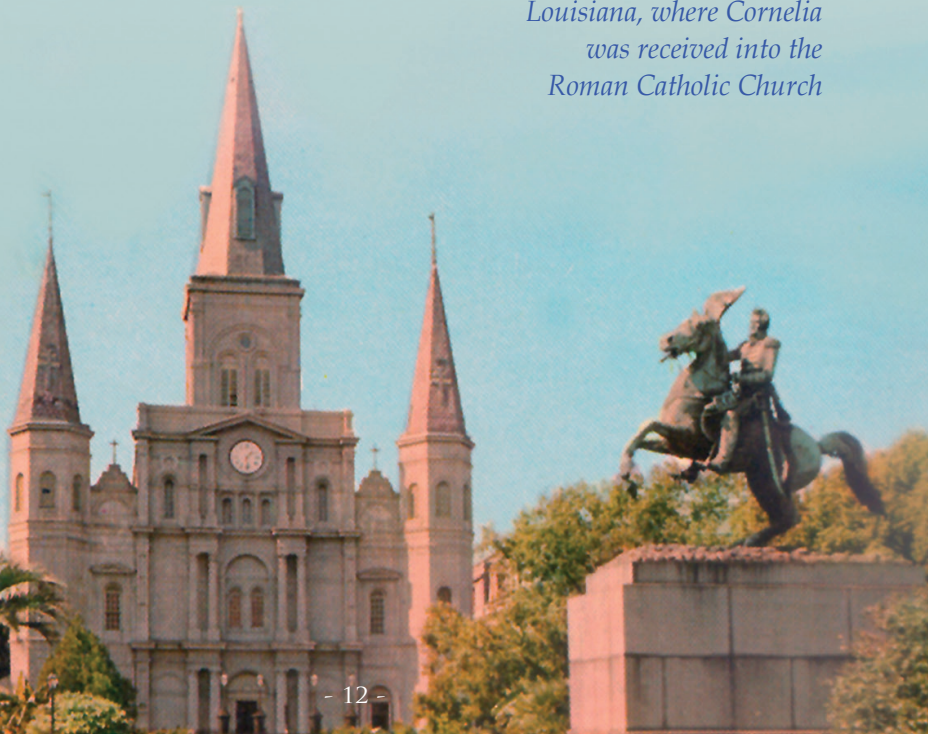
Cornelia’s reaction to Pierce’s decisions may seem strange and even objectionable to our modern sensibilities. It is important to place them in the context of the culture in which she lived. A married woman had no legal rights of her own. Any property or money she brought to the marriage came under the control of her husband. Her husband had exclusive rights to make all decisions for his wife and children. A woman could make decisions within the home, but her husband had the final say. Although Cornelia was intelligent and independent in spirit, she had been schooled in what was expected of her. Always the realist, she knew the limitations that marriage brought and tried to live her life to the fullest within the boundaries of her circumstances.

# CONVERSION

Her time in New Orleans, awaiting the ship for Rome, was the turning point in Cornelia's spiritual life. She was deeply moved when Pierce and she attended a Mass of consecration for a new bishop. For Pierce, the experience was one of acceptance and attention from the Catholic bishops and clergy in attendance. For Cornelia, it brought together all of her reading, conversation, prayer and reflection about the Catholic faith. It was a moment of certainty for her, so profound that there was no turning back, no need for delay.

She made a decision, independent of Pierce, to seek instruction in the Catholic faith and to be received into the Church before leaving for Rome. Pierce did not feel ready to commit himself but gave his approval for her to proceed. On December 8, 1835, Cornelia made her profession of faith in the Roman Catholic Church and received communion for the first time as a Catholic. From that day on, she never wavered from her religious commitment, nor would she allow her commitment to be compromised by anyone, not even Pierce. Something subtle had changed between them. In the coming years, Cornelia would become more and more her own person.

*St. Louis Cathedral, New Orleans,  
Louisiana, where Cornelia  
was received into the  
Roman Catholic Church*



# ROME

After a long and arduous journey, the Connellys arrived in Rome in February, 1836. They were soon introduced to influential members of Catholic clergy and society in Rome, who took the intriguing couple under their wing. Cornelia immersed herself in the religious and cultural Catholicism that inundated Rome, meeting a number of other converts along the way. Pierce investigated his remaining questions about Catholicism and continued to pursue his interest in the Catholic priesthood.

A private audience with Pope Gregory XVI seems to have affirmed Pierce's desire to become a Catholic priest. When Cornelia realized that her husband was serious about ordination, her anguish knew no bounds. "Is it necessary that Pierce sacrifice himself and me too? I love my husband and my darling children. Why must I give them up?"

Pierce was advised to join the Church first and think about ordination at some point in the future. With the immediate threat behind her, Cornelia rejoiced as Pierce was received into the Church on March 27, 1836. They could live their faith together as a family again. Cornelia must have hoped that it would remain that way for the duration.

During the two years they remained in Europe, Pierce cultivated many contacts in the Catholic circles he frequented.

A close friend, Lord Shrewsbury, invited Pierce to England. He hoped Pierce would consider bringing his Episcopalian background and newfound zeal for Catholicism to that country. The Oxford movement, a group of high church



*John Talbot, 16th Earl of Shrewsbury,  
Premier Earl of England, and Connelly  
benefactor*

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Anglicans, eager to reintroduce pre-Reformation practices to their tradition, were seen as ripe for conversion to the Catholic faith. Pierce accepted the invitation with lively interest.

Cornelia used this time of separation to pursue language study, culture and the arts. She continued to deepen her Catholic faith – attending lectures, meeting with a spiritual director and engaging in service to the poor with a friend. This time, the letters between Cornelia and Pierce were filled with sentiments of loneliness on his part. He missed her steady presence – a sign of things to come.

Reunited in Rome, the Connellys threw themselves into the social rhythm of the city. In May, 1837 they began a tour of Northern Europe. While in Vienna, Cornelia gave birth to John Henry, their third child and second son. This rich and fulfilling time was brought to a sudden halt by the financial downturn in America. They returned to Natchez to find their land investments practically worthless, their cash depleted. Their worst fears had come to pass.



*"Gracemere," the Connelly  
home in Grand Coteau,  
Louisiana*

# GRAND COTEAU, LOUISIANA

Despite available work in Natchez and an established circle of friends, Pierce accepted a teaching offer from the Jesuits, who were opening a school for boys in Grand Coteau, Louisiana. Cornelia would have an opportunity to teach music at the girls' school, already established by the Religious of the Sacred Heart. The chance to be part of a new Catholic venture motivated the couple to relocate to this primitive settlement on the western edge of the United States. There, in greatly reduced circumstances, they made their home. After Philadelphia, Rome and even Natchez, Grand Coteau must have seemed even farther than the edge of the known world.

Whatever deprivations they experienced, Cornelia was happy. Pierce described her as “gay as a bird.” He often complained about the remote location and conditions at the school, but he seemed content with family life and joyful at home. Their happiness was marred by the death of a newborn daughter, Mary Magdalene, at 6 weeks of age during the summer of 1839. Still the Connellys were content enough to put down roots by purchasing a small house between the two schools. Pierce had ceased talking about ordination and Cornelia must have felt that the idea was fading into oblivion.

## SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Both Cornelia and Pierce took advantage of their connections with the Jesuits and the Religious of the Sacred Heart to deepen their faith. They prayed regularly at home, met with spiritual directors, and kept spiritual journals. At the end of 1839, each of them was introduced to a retreat in the style of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. The experience was to have a profound effect on them both.

Cornelia referred to the “Christmas retreat” as a time when her “conversion was accomplished.” Although already an observant Catholic, the retreat moved her to internalize her conversion. The commitment to live her new faith, made at the time of her reception into the Church, had now become a part of her deepest being. She belonged entirely to God and God to her. From this time forward, she would live her faith with no reservation, with

every fiber of her being, always listening for God's desires for her, no matter what the cost. She determined to add spiritual and religious practices into her daily life that would help her to draw closer to God.

Pierce's letters from this time indicate that his retreat reawakened discontent with his backwater existence, his desire to do great things in the Church and to pursue the dream of Catholic priesthood. Cornelia's resolution to give her all to God would soon be put to the test. It would begin with an unexpected family tragedy.



*Original tombstone of Mary Magdalen and John Henry at Grand Coteau, Louisiana*



## A TRAGIC ACCIDENT

In February, 1840, two-and-a-half-year-old John Henry was knocked into a vat of boiling sugar by a large dog. With serious burns and no medical care available in the remote outpost, the child had no chance for survival. Cornelia held him for forty-three hours until he died in her arms, on February 2, the feast of the Presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple by his parents. Her distraught grief can only be imagined.

Cornelia turned to faith for solace, trying to find some meaning in a senseless tragedy. She found spiritual significance in the day and date of John Henry's death as seen in her notebook entry: "Fell a victim on Friday – Suffered 43 hours & was taken 'into the temple of the Lord'..." She felt a connection with Mary, who watched her son suffer on a Friday, as did Cornelia. Cornelia's life-long devotion to Mary, the Mother of Sorrows, was likely born of this tragedy. Cornelia was comforted by the coincidence of her son's dying on the feast of the Presentation. It affirmed her strong belief that John Henry was taken into the presence of God, where he would enjoy eternal life and where she would see him again. Faith helped Cornelia to bear her grief and to deepen her trust that God would sustain her, no matter what life brought.

## TURNING POINT

By the fall, Cornelia was pregnant with her fifth child. Pierce, however, was becoming increasingly restless and dissatisfied with his work. He made another retreat, looking for a sense of direction. We have no record of Cornelia's reaction but surely she must have been filled with anxiety. Her marriage and her family were at stake.

On October 13, the feast of St. Edward, Pierce announced his intention to become a Catholic priest. To do so, he needed Cornelia's permission and her agreement to a separation. Their marriage would effectively be over. Cornelia would be required to accept a vow of perpetual chastity. However devastated she may have felt, Cornelia's response is rooted in her ever-deepening faith. She asked her husband to consider his decision very carefully but told him, "if the good God asks the sacrifice, I am prepared to make it & with all my heart." Many years later, she said that the Society of the Holy Child Jesus was founded that day on a breaking heart.



*Trinità dei Monti at top of Spanish steps,  
Rome, Italy*

## TESTING

From this point on, Cornelia and Pierce would move in very different directions. They made an agreement to abstain from sexual intercourse to test their resolve. Pierce began looking into the possibilities open to him for ordination. Each step of the way, he was advised to slow down the process but he pursued his goal single mindedly. Once again, he pulled up stakes, selling the house and leaving Cornelia, their newborn son, Frank, and their daughter Ady to live with the Religious of the Sacred Heart. He took their oldest son, Merty, with him intending to place him in a boarding school in England, which at the time was considered the finest form of education. Pierce's final destination was Rome where he hoped to get official approval to be ordained.

Besides caring for her children and attending to her teaching duties, Cornelia's focus during Pierce's absence was on listening for God's promptings about her future. Although she would not be required to enter religious life, she felt it necessary to reflect on whether this was part of God's desire for her. She continued her spiritual practices and was invited to join the Sisters in their religious exercises to help her in her discernment. Gradually she came to certainty that, if Pierce followed through with his intentions, she would be ready to give herself to God in religious life. Her inner struggles must have been mighty; but once Cornelia was convinced that her course of action was inspired by God, she never wavered.

## ROME ONCE AGAIN

Finally back in Rome, Pierce was told that Cornelia would have to come and give her permission in person. He sent for Cornelia and the children to meet him in Philadelphia where they would sail together to Europe. Again, Cornelia left a measure of security, familiarity and support to follow Pierce into an unknown future. After they had reached Rome in December, 1843, events moved with frightening speed. Pierce made his formal petition for ordination in March, 1844. It was immediately accepted. The Connelys signed an official decree of separation; Pierce began his studies for the Catholic priesthood; Cornelia and the children moved to the Trinità Sacred Heart Convent. Before making her required vow of perpetual chastity in

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1845, Cornelia asked Pierce one last time to consider his decision and the impact on their family. With Pierce firm in his resolve, Cornelia took this fateful step. Pierce was ordained a month later. No matter her inner feelings, Cornelia participated joyfully in the ceremony and sang in the choir. “I have given him to God,” she wrote, “this thought gives me much consolation.”

During the year of Pierce’s seminary studies, Cornelia further tested her vocation to religious life with the Sacred Heart Sisters. The plan was for her to live in a house on the convent grounds with Frank until he was eight, when he would join his brother Merty as a boarder at Stonyhurst, an exclusive Jesuit school in England. Ady was a student at the Sacred Heart School in Rome. Cornelia would follow all the religious exercises of the Sisters and then formally join the Society of the Sacred Heart when Frank left for England. Until then, Pierce would be allowed to visit Cornelia and the children once a week.

## SACRED HEART CONVENT, TRINITÀ DEI MONTI

By the standards of the day, the Connelly children were in enviable circumstances as far as their education was concerned. Cornelia believed that with Pierce’s call to priesthood confirmed by ordination and the children properly provided for, she could pursue her vocation, convinced that she was following God’s plan. However, she found herself increasingly unhappy at the Trinità. She felt lonely and isolated. The cloistered lifestyle felt oppressive and the atmosphere, rigid – so different from what she had experienced in Grand Coteau. She must have been confused, wondering if she had misread God’s promptings in her prayer.

Cornelia became more and more convinced that the Sacred Heart Society was not for her, but she was at a loss as to what else to do. Her commitment to God was clear. “I belong all to God. There is nothing in the world I would not leave to do his holy will and to satisfy him.” God’s will, however, seemed frustratingly elusive.

# SEEDS OF THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS

The way forward came with the help of an American Jesuit, Fr. John Grassi, who became her confessor. He encouraged Cornelia to think broadly about other forms of religious life. Deep prayer, reflection and conversation gradually led her to the vision of a new religious order, free of the restrictions of strict cloister, that would “meet the wants of the age” through direct action with people in need.

Cornelia had been attracted to the mystery of the Incarnation since her conversion. She marveled that God, the Creator of all things, would take on flesh as a helpless child – “a humbled God.” Such “merciful love,” she said, invited compassionate loving action on her part for God’s people. Sitting in the convent garden one day, while young Frank was playing, Cornelia gazed at a statue of Mary holding the child Jesus. In that moment, the name of the new order came to her – Society of the Holy Child Jesus. At the age of 37, the next and most challenging phase of her life was about to begin.

## THE CONTEXT OF DECISIONS MADE IN ROME

It is important to look again at the context in which the Connellys made life-altering decisions for themselves and their family. The effects on the children may seem intolerable to us today. Certainly, their family arrangement was not common and the decisions they had to make were less than straightforward. But within the religious and cultural context of the day, Pierce and Cornelia would have been seen as providing responsibly for their children. Through the generosity of benefactors, the children were given a first rate education, far beyond what the Connellys could have afforded on their own. The youngest, Frank, would live with Cornelia under the care of a governess until he was of school age. Even when all the children were in boarding school, they would be able to visit their mother during vacations. Pierce had abandoned the idea of becoming a Jesuit, for reasons not entirely clear. As a diocesan priest, however, he would have had easy access to the children and the ability to be actively involved in their lives.



*Gregory XVI, 1831-1846*

Expectations in the 19th century Catholic Church influenced them significantly as well. The male, hierarchical structure was accepted without question. Ultimate authority lay with the Pope, who was seen as God's representative on earth. Authority flowed from him to Bishops and priests. It was assumed that the will of God would be made clear through them. If an individual's judgment differed from that of legitimate authority, the individual was considered suspect, especially if a woman. In Cornelia's mind, her husband's vocation had been

confirmed all the way to the Pope. His approval would have reassured her that priesthood was God's will for Pierce; therefore, perpetual chastity and marital separation was God's will for her.

The understanding of holiness in the 19th century also contributed to the decisions both Cornelia and Pierce made. One could be a good Catholic as a lay person and pleasing to God by living a good life. However, total unity and commitment to God – holiness – was possible mainly within priesthood and religious life. It would be more than 100 years before Vatican Council II retrieved the concept of the “universal call to holiness.”

Under the circumstances, both Connellys must have felt that they were acting in their children's best interest while remaining faithful to what they perceived to be the will of God for themselves.

## ON TO ENGLAND

Cornelia's first instinct was to return to America to begin the Society. Responding to requests from English Catholics, Pope Gregory asked her instead to start the foundation in England. She would be far from family and friends, in a culture she knew little about and would face deep suspicion of Catholics on the part of the Protestant majority. Despite her trepidation, she agreed, seeing this as the will of God expressed through the Pope. What prompted the Pope's request?

The Catholic Church in England was coming back into its own after centuries of virtual mission status following the Reformation. Members of the Oxford movement were re-examining abandoned elements of Catholic ritual and doctrine to see if they were compatible with Anglicanism. In the course of their study, a number of them became convinced, as Pierce had, that Roman Catholicism was the most authentic expression of Christianity. The most famous of these converts was the Anglican priest John Henry Newman, who would later become a Roman Catholic Cardinal. He and other converts were anxious to see new religious orders established that would educate Irish Catholic immigrants and new British Catholics. They also saw a need for orders that would welcome recent converts to religious life and attend to their specific spiritual formation needs.

And so Cornelia, who had followed a similar path to the Church, was asked to be part of the reinvigoration of Catholicism in England. Exactly where and how she would launch her enterprise was unclear. However, in the spring of 1846, Cornelia made her way to England with Ady and Frank. Though her future was uncertain, her trust in God was total. Convinced that this was what God wanted, she was completely confident that God would show her the way forward.

Shortly after her arrival, Bishop Nicholas Wiseman, who had known the Connellys in Rome, offered to sponsor Cornelia in her venture. With few resources of her own, Cornelia accepted the offer. Wiseman would loom large in the life of the early Society.

# BEGINNINGS IN DERBY

Wiseman found a vacant convent in the industrial city of Derby for Cornelia and three women who joined her as postulants. He was anxious to have them begin teaching immediately since Derby was flooded with poor Irish Catholic immigrants fleeing the potato famine. Cornelia was immediately faced with numerous challenges. First and foremost, she had no formal training in religious life. Two of the three postulants were recent converts like her. She was expected to be their mentor in religious life while at the same time being a



*Bishop Nicholas Wiseman*

novice herself. The convent turned out to be a huge Gothic building in deplorable condition and with a large debt attached to it. For the first time in her life, Cornelia would live in extreme poverty. The little group was expected to run a day school, a night school and a Sunday school for hundreds of poor girls. Instead of the small, gradual “Bethlehem beginning” Cornelia had envisioned, she was thrown headlong into a chaotic situation that would have tested an experienced religious!

British Catholics, was extremely sensitive to perceptions of the Church by Protestants, and with good reason. The restoration of the British Catholic hierarchy in 1850, for example, led to charges of “papal aggression.” Pierce, who had followed Cornelia to England as chaplain to Lord Shrewsbury, had already been denied the weekly visits he had enjoyed in Rome with Cornelia and the children, for fear of causing scandal. The presence of children in a convent, Wiseman reasoned, could be equally misunderstood.

The most severe test was still to come. Bishop Wiseman, like all

He insisted that Ady be enrolled in a boarding school rather than a day school and Frank, only 5, in a boarding school for young boys. The bishop assured Cornelia that this arrangement would only be for the year of her formal



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novitiate training. Cornelia was devastated but felt she could not refuse, given the precarious position of the Church in England and her dependence on Wiseman for material and ecclesial support. Fully expecting to have the children back with her at the end of the year, she sent them off, but the emotional cost was huge. One of the first postulants, Mary Ann Walker (who became Sister Aloysia) remembered, “It was, I think, one of the greatest sacrifices she had to make.”

## FOUNDATION DAY

Cornelia and her band had left for Derby on October 13, the feast of St. Edward, exactly six years to the day that Pierce had announced his decision to become a Catholic priest. Cornelia must have been struck by the coincidence and the many changes that had occurred in her life since that fateful day.

Even with the conditions that greeted her at the Derby convent, she was ready to have an opening Mass only two days later. In a small room, simply furnished, she and the three postulants assisted at their first Mass as a religious society. October 15, the feast of St. Teresa of Avila, would come to be observed as the formal founding of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

## THE FIRST YEAR

Despite the many challenges, Cornelia enthusiastically went to work. She drew from the deep well of her relationship with God to guide the postulants in the spiritual life. Weekly talks by their Jesuit chaplain taught them the Ignatian way of praying that had been so formative for Cornelia. Using a draft rule of life that she had developed with Pierce and Fr. Grassi in Rome, she set up a daily schedule that provided time for both prayer and apostolic work. The schools run by her small group were soon recognized by the British government for their high quality of education. As word spread, more young women came to join the new religious order. Against all odds, both the Society and their apostolate were taking root.

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Cornelia displayed extraordinary grace, wisdom and practical acumen as she navigated that first year. The Sisters described a woman whose presence radiated joy and a sense of peace. The many privations they endured were made lighter by the spirit of generosity, simplicity and accepted suffering that she modeled. Whatever was necessary to share the merciful love of God was to be lived joyfully in union with Jesus, their model and guide. At the same time, she proved herself to be a capable administrator, realistic and practical in dealing with the many details involved in a new foundation.

Her children must surely have been on her mind. Her older son Merty was having difficulty adjusting to his boarding school. The absence of Ady and Frank would have weighed heavily on her. Sister Aloysia Walker remarked that even with all her worries and responsibilities, “...there was never a cloud of sadness: the generosity of her heart was marked on her countenance. It was at this time that I first knew her and watched her as I would a saint: she was so patient, so gentle, that I wondered how she could be so calm and peaceful under so many annoying and trying circumstances.”

At the end of that year, Bishop Wiseman came to receive Cornelia’s vows and install her as the first Superior General of the Society, now made up of 16 women. An improbable and circuitous journey had led her to this remarkable moment. All of the practical skill, strength of character and spiritual depth that she had developed thus far would be needed to live out her mission.



# CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON

As Cornelia had learned from hard experience, promises made were not always promises kept, no matter how well intentioned. The financial assistance promised by Bishop Wiseman was slow in coming. He had been moved to London and his responsibilities had expanded. He had more difficulty raising funds for the Derby foundation than he anticipated. He did what he could, but Cornelia's own meager resources had to be tapped and were soon depleted.

Cornelia discovered that Wiseman had never legally transferred the property to his name, as he had planned to do. The convent was owned by the parish pastor who expected Cornelia to pay the interest on the mortgage. The paltry income received from the schools could barely support the sisters. Financial disaster was a constant threat.

To make matters worse, the relationship between Cornelia and the pastor, Mr. Sing, became increasingly strained. Cornelia knew little about English culture and even less about the English Catholic Church. Every misunderstanding possible arose between them and went far beyond financial concerns. Sing resented Cornelia's independent American nature, her spontaneity and creativity. He saw her as insufficiently deferential, especially in matters regarding the building. Her innovative teaching methods and her approach to religious life were suspect in his eyes, as were the Roman liturgical rituals that she enjoyed. Everything about her stoked his misgivings. It was becoming clear that the arrangement could not last.



In spite of the successes in Derby, the only solution was for Cornelia and the Society to relocate. Bishop Wiseman found them a property in St. Leonards-on-Sea in the south of England. It would mean beginning again. True to character, once Cornelia believed that this was the will of God,

*St. Leonard's Convent, with trees planted by Cornelia. Windows beside the turret mark the room where Cornelia died*

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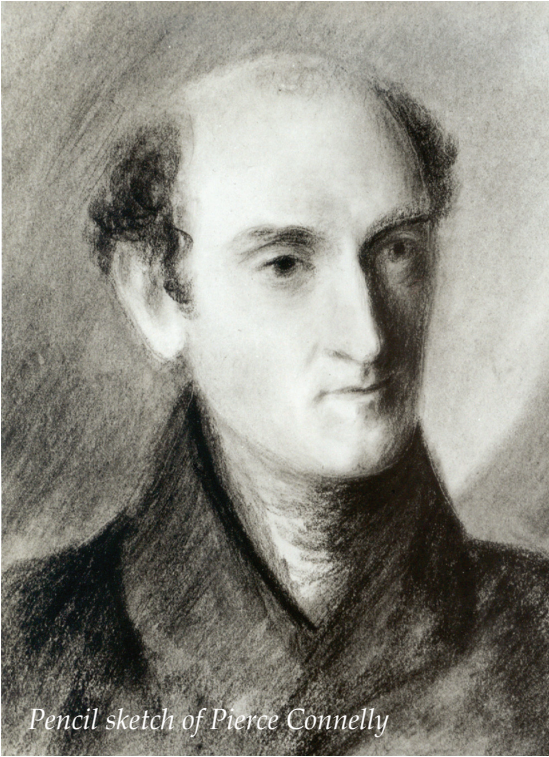
she threw herself into it wholeheartedly. Derby would always have a privileged place in her heart – the place where it all began; but it had also been a place of difficult trial-and-error learning. She would take her hard earned wisdom to St. Leonards where she would spend most of the next 31 years guiding the fledgling Society through the first phase of its development. But as often was the case in Cornelia's life, personal tragedy would intrude, demanding untapped stores of internal strength.

## PIERCE'S UNRAVELING

During Cornelia's first year in Derby, Pierce became restless. He felt that his talents were being wasted at the estate of Lord Shrewsbury. He began looking for a more prestigious ministry. But his discontent ran deeper than that. He could not function without Cornelia's stabilizing influence, but he was forbidden to see her. He resented Bishop Wiseman's legitimate authority and influence over her. He felt unfairly excluded from her life and the affairs of the Society, even though he had given up all claim to her by the decree of separation. His frustration soon reached a boiling point.

Pierce showed up unannounced and without permission at the Derby convent. Cornelia was shocked but was able to mask her emotions. She told him calmly but firmly that he could not visit then or ever without approval. Pierce was crushed by her reaction and wrote her an angry letter the following day.

Cornelia had not seen Pierce since she left Rome. She must have felt every possible emotion when he appeared. She still loved him, but had made the decision to separate herself from him at his request. She was furious at the awkward position in which he had put her, but must also have felt great sadness at seeing his emotional state. Cornelia's reply gives insight into her reaction. His letter had brought her to tears, she told him. After asking him to forget his visit, she confessed her own distress. "You have not the violent temptations that I have, thinking of our home in Gracemere, nor have you perhaps gone through the struggles of a woman's heart. No, you never have."



*Pencil sketch of Pierce Connelly*

From that day onward, Pierce did everything possible to regain influence over Cornelia. As he did so, his emotional state deteriorated further. He tried to visit one more time, but Cornelia refused to see him on the advice of her chaplain. Pierce remained at the convent for six hours that day, raging and crying – he even threw himself on the floor – but Cornelia stood firm by the agreements she had made with him and the Church.

## KIDNAPPED

After Cornelia had made her vows, she assumed she would see the children again as had been promised. At this point, Pierce did the unthinkable. He pulled the children out of school without Cornelia's knowledge or approval. He refused to allow any communication between them and their mother. When Cornelia eventually tried to write, her letters were returned unopened.

There is no record of Cornelia's reaction, but we know that she had none of the options a mother would have today. Legally, a father had full control over his children; their mother had no legal rights at all. She may have been filled with fear as she realized how irrational and unpredictable Pierce was becoming. She probably felt grief, anger and anxiety for the children's wellbeing, as well as complete helplessness to protect them. Perhaps it was to maintain her own emotional sanity that she made a private vow to have no further contact with

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Pierce or the children, unless it was God's will as expressed through Church authority.

This may seem cold through the lens of modern sensibility, but Cornelia was being a realist. She was in the middle of an impossible situation, with no good options. At great personal cost, she had given up everything she held dear in family life to accommodate Pierce's desire for priesthood. Now he was using their children to manipulate her into abandoning what they had both fully agreed to. There is the argument that Cornelia could have returned to Pierce and regained the children. Cornelia never shared whether or not she considered this course of action. Given her reputation for practicality and realism, however, it is fair to assume that she must have considered the idea but abandoned it. She gives a hint of the emotional impact of her decision years later in a spiritual counsel on suffering, "The remembrance of my children never leaves me..." We cannot truly know the motivations of either Cornelia or Pierce at this time. We can only see the fruit of the decisions they made as their lives played out.

## CONNELLY VS. CONNELLY

When Pierce realized that Cornelia would not give in to his manipulations, he renounced his priesthood and his Catholic faith and became rabidly anti-Catholic. He decided to initiate legal proceedings in order "to rescue her from her captors," i.e. the Catholic Church and Bishop Wiseman in particular. Cornelia, who had just moved to St. Leonards with her Sisters, was urged by friends to return to America to avoid the scandal of a court case. Cornelia refused, believing that truth would be on her side. Her place, she felt, was to remain with her Sisters and live out the mission that God had given her in England. She may also have sensed that even distance would not have protected her from Pierce's fanatical quest.

In January 1849, Pierce filed suit in a British court for restoration of conjugal rights. He accused Cornelia of abandoning him and the children. Cornelia presented her own statement, but the court eliminated it from the evidence. In March 1850, the court ruled in favor of Pierce. Cornelia's lawyers appealed,

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but the proceedings would drag on for another fifteen months – months of anxiety and uncertainty for Cornelia. Finally in June 1851, Cornelia's evidence was reinstated, the case was sent back to the original court for review and Pierce was ordered to pay the court costs. Unable to raise enough money, he simply abandoned the case. He eventually took up residence in Florence, Italy, and remained there as Rector of an Episcopal Church until he died in 1883. Cornelia was left to pay the legal debts. After she did so, the case was finally dismissed in 1858.

## AFTERMATH OF THE TRIAL

Cornelia's reputation had been badly damaged. The scandal of the case, magnified by Pierce's lurid allegations of impropriety between Cornelia and Cardinal Wiseman, played right into the prejudices of the British public towards Catholicism. Cornelia was derisively called "Mrs. Wiseman." No matter the truth, Pierce was able to create a perception of Cornelia as a woman without feeling who had abandoned husband and children for her own selfish purposes. So deep was the animosity toward her, so humiliating the scandal, and so pervasive the prejudice against the Church, the Society barely mentioned Cornelia for more than 50 years after her death.

For her part, Cornelia maintained a heroic degree of calm and self-possession during the trial in the face of unjust treatment and public fascination with her personal affairs. Only her closest friends in the Society knew how deeply she suffered. She continued to train Sisters and establish schools with the energy and enthusiasm, joy, and generosity that had come to be expected of her.

What sustained and nourished her spirit during this period? Clearly, her prayer life. The Holy Child Jesus, God's expression of merciful love was her constant companion. She followed him from the crib to the cross and united her sufferings with his. Many times she was observed in the chapel, completely absorbed in prayer. She turned often to Mary, the Mother of Sorrows, for comfort and support. The fruit of her prayer was a deep and abiding peace, which allowed her to access hidden stores of energy and creativity in the midst of the most appalling circumstances. She once confided

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that she had never expected to experience “such jubilee of heart” in a life of “accepted suffering.”

And what of the children? Cornelia never saw Mercer again. After his schooling, he was sent to his uncle in America in the hopes that Pierce’s brother could find work and a new life for his nephew. At the age of 20, Merty died of yellow fever in New Orleans. Cornelia was overwhelmed with grief but again bore her sorrow privately, sustained by her faith and a few close friends.

Adeline became Pierce’s caretaker and companion until he died in 1883. She was a classic example of arrested development. After she had visited Pierce’s brother in Philadelphia in 1860, he wrote a furious letter to Pierce, accusing him of neglecting Ady in every way. She visited her mother in 1877 at the age of 43, having never married. Cornelia was consoled, but the visit could not have been easy. After her father’s death, Ady returned to the Catholic Church with the help of a Holy Child Sister. She was known for her charity and kindness until she died in 1900.

Frank became a well-known painter and sculptor with a reputation as a man of the world. He never married but fathered a daughter who attended the Holy Child School in Neuilly, France. She later married a Borghese, whose family had befriended the Connellys during their time in Rome. Frank saw his mother twice in his adult years. The first visit was warm; the second, acrimonious. The bond between them had been irreparably damaged.

Although he remained Protestant until his death in 1934, he maintained

sporadic contact with the Society whose members he considered his “sisters.”



*Towanda, Pennsylvania,  
first Holy Child Convent  
in the United States*



## “SO OUGHT ALL TO BEGIN AGAIN”

In the midst of her personal trials, Cornelia continued the work of building up the Society and the apostolate with her contagious spirit of creativity and joy. St. Leonards became the home base from which schools were opened and novices were trained and sent out to teach. It was here that traditions were established that would define the Society and the schools in the future. It was from St. Leonards that the first Sisters were sent to America in 1862, fulfilling a dream of Cornelia's to begin a foundation in her “own dear country.” After tremendous hardship in Towanda, PA, the Sisters moved to Philadelphia where the American Province took root. From there, the Society would eventually spread to Africa, Chile, and the Dominican Republic.

Misunderstanding and controversy seemed to follow Cornelia. There were nasty legal battles over the St. Leonards property as well as frequent financial tangles. Her relationship with Emily Bowles, the first to join her, was ruptured by an ill-advised property purchase that Emily made without Cornelia's knowledge. Emily added deceit to poor judgment when she insisted that Cornelia had agreed to the purchase and assumed the debt. So acrimonious was the affair that Emily left the Society and began a systematic effort to discredit Cornelia. Eventually, Cornelia was forced to pay the debt and again suffered great damage to her reputation. Astoundingly, Emily tried twice to rejoin the Society. Cornelia's feelings of betrayal were so strong that she could not even meet with her. She remained gracious, however, by writing a letter to Emily suggesting possible alternatives for her talents.

Priests and bishops came in and out of Cornelia's life – usually gracious and helpful at first but falling out with her over time. Even her long time benefactor Nicholas Wiseman, now a Cardinal, distanced himself from her after she refused to set aside guest quarters for him within the convent walls.

How can the positive impression of Cornelia by so many be reconciled with the hostility she experienced from others, particularly clergy? Relationships are complex and unique, but certain patterns emerge in Cornelia's life. Trouble often brewed as soon as Cornelia asserted herself on behalf of the Society. In many ways, she was ahead of her time. Nineteenth century women were expected to be humble, self effacing and always deferential

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towards the men in their lives. Cornelia was unfailingly kind and respectful but was direct, firm and unyielding when principle was involved. She was in turn called “bold,” “ungovernable” and “that Yankee” by frustrated priests and bishops. Even some of her Sisters considered her high handed and imperious. Cornelia was a natural leader at a time when such a gift was unappreciated in a woman.

Cornelia’s creativity was another source of tension. Her vision of religious life and education for girls went beyond the accepted practices of the day. She was always trying new approaches, often spontaneously, without first consulting with appropriate clergy. She was accused of “playing at being a religious” and of teaching inappropriate subjects like dancing! She championed holistic education long before the word existed. Cornelia maintained her serenity and composure in the face of criticism while remaining a loyal daughter of the Church. She obeyed legitimate authority but persevered with all available resources in realizing the vision she felt God had inspired in her.

## THE SPIRIT OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS

Cornelia’s vision of the Incarnation was central to everything she did. She experienced Jesus as the human embodiment of God; the child who grew to be the man who would live, die and rise in order to save the world. Cornelia believed it took eyes opened by prayer to recognize Jesus as a divine presence.

Cornelia taught both Sisters and students to stay close to Jesus, their “master and guide,” through regular prayer – the same way that Jesus went apart frequently to commune with his Father. There they would learn to recognize God’s presence in the humble and hidden – in the people, places and things they would least expect. She urged them to model themselves on the Holy Child Jesus, growing in the ways that he grew – developing their unique gifts in simplicity, humility, joy and charity (“a love full of action”) – for the sake of their God-given purpose in life. She urged them to pursue

their purpose with zeal and generosity (“actions not words”), but to accept willingly the unavoidable suffering that accompanies commitment.

Cornelia believed that novices and students alike learned better in a nurturing atmosphere that drew out their strengths, rather than in a strict and regimented environment focusing exclusively on weaknesses and failings. Plenty of time to smooth the “rough edges,” she reasoned, after individual gifts were recognized. Cornelia’s vision of spiritual and human growth was summarized in her saying, “Be yourself, but make that self exactly what God wants it to be.” She wanted both her Sisters and students to feel valued

as individuals  
but to be  
challenged  
to grow into  
mature,  
independent  
and holy people.



*Holy Child statue  
formerly found in  
many schools and  
convents in the  
American Province*

## THE RULE

Every religious order develops a rule of life that embodies their way of living the Gospels. Cornelia's draft rule, developed during her time at the Trinità, would be revised as the community's experience indicated the need.

After a trial period, the rule would be submitted to Rome for approval as the official guide for community life and governance. As often happened to Cornelia, what seemed like a straightforward procedure was anything but. When Pierce was trying to regain control over Cornelia, he tried to pass himself off as co-founder of the Society and filed his own version of the rule with the responsible office in Rome. This caused confusion for years, even though Cornelia wrote to set the record straight.

Cornelia had difficulty reconciling her vision of religious life with prevailing customs and Church rules of the time. Over the years, various people intervened to "help" but often distorted key elements of her spiritual and communal principles. Point by point, Cornelia worked to resolve the discrepancies. By 1869, the rule was still provisional. Cornelia's health was deteriorating and she probably felt a sense of urgency to have a formal rule in place before she died.

Cornelia realized that she would have to make some painful choices in order to receive approval. Some of the changes she agreed to seemed foreign to the spirit with which the Sisters had grown accustomed. For example, the Sisters who taught and those who did domestic work lived, prayed and relaxed together as one family. Official rules of religious life at the time, however, required that these two groups of Sisters live more separately. Cornelia reluctantly agreed to the requirement since it was one of the obstacles to gaining approval. The domestic Sisters were deeply hurt by the change, and some believed that Cornelia had been directly responsible for it.

## “THE CABAL”

Timely communication between Cornelia and the various foundations and between the Society and Rome was challenging, given the methods of the day. This caused misunderstandings and feelings of being left out of the process among some of the Sisters. Divisions arose within the Society while Cornelia was abroad, culminating in a near schism over the actions of the Preston community, who publicly cooperated with Cornelia but privately went to the local bishop with their complaints.

There were many circumstances leading up to this dispute, but all came to a head when the community received the revised rule of 1869 with revisions that were unpalatable. Members of the community assumed that the changes were initiated by Cornelia so that she could exert arbitrary control over the Sisters. Their suspicions deepened when letters arrived from Cornelia, urging them to send signatures of approval immediately.

Cornelia had been pressured by Bishop Grant, her advocate in Rome, who feared that his own worsening health left him a small window of opportunity to secure approval of the rule. Against her better judgment, Cornelia yielded to his pressure and in so doing, convinced the Preston Sisters that their suspicions had merit. They submitted their signatures of approval but also sent a letter to Rome requesting a formal investigation.

Shortly after, Cornelia visited Preston but the Sisters said nothing to her about their dissatisfaction.



Cornelia learned of the “cabal,” as she called it, from a Preston Sister who had second thoughts about the way the situation was handled. Cornelia must

*Convent adjoining  
St. Wilfred's School,  
Preston, England*

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have felt blindsided. The situation was slowly and painfully addressed but with much controversy, mixed signals, misunderstanding, ecclesiastical intervention and heartache on all sides. For Cornelia's part, her deepest suffering was "the want of truth." She was especially pained that the Superiors involved had "withheld the truth" from her. Cornelia's relationship with some of the Sisters was severely compromised, even though she tried to reach out to all concerned.

In spite of conflict within the Society and attempts by local bishops to form the Sisters into diocesan congregations, the Society remained intact. The majority of Sisters remained loyal to Cornelia and to her ideals. The rule, however, would not be formally approved until 1893, fourteen years after Cornelia's death. In spite of all the attempts to manipulate and massage it, the final version was based on Cornelia's original rule and preserved her vision and spirit.

**“I HAVE BEGUN THE WORK,  
OTHERS WILL BRING IT  
TO PERFECTION.”**

By 1874, Cornelia was suffering the effects of age, lifelong stress and chronic ill health. She attended to Society business, but was frequently slowed by bouts of illness. Little by little, she transferred day-to-day administration to others, but remained involved in Society affairs until early 1879.

In March, she entered her last illness – probably nephritis – which she bore with patience and grace. On April 18, Easter Friday, 1879, she died at the age of 70, in the company of her Sisters. Their memory of her, moments after her death, was an expression on her face of perfect peace.

# VENERABLE CORNELIA CONNELLY

As in life, Cornelia was a subject of controversy after her death. The scandal surrounding her family life was considered a liability to the Society's growing positive reputation in Victorian England. Society leaders also feared that reminders of Connelly vs. Connelly might stimulate anti-Catholic sentiment, at a time when the Church was still trying to find its place in British Society. In addition, the Society was mindful of maintaining the privacy of Cornelia's surviving family members. There were internal concerns as well. The rule had not yet been approved and memories of "the cabal" were still fresh. The Society leadership believed that reticence about Cornelia would be the prudent course. For 50 years, her name was not mentioned to novices, nor was she discussed publicly. Her letters and journals were sealed away. At one point, biographical manuscripts were nearly destroyed by an overly cautious superior.

In spite of the reticence of the Society, testimonies to Cornelia's holiness were recorded in letters to the Society and among Sisters who shared their memories of her. A number of eye witness accounts of episodes in Cornelia's life were written by Sisters who had been among her early companions and confidants. The most influential of these was from Mother Maria Joseph Buckle who had known Cornelia from 1848 until Cornelia's death and was convinced of her holiness. Prayers and songs composed by Cornelia were used by Sisters and students almost immediately after her death. Petitions for cures through Cornelia's intercession were recorded by 1911. Individual superiors encouraged study of Cornelia's life, so that by 1922, the first biography of Cornelia was published. It was circulated, however, only within the Society.

It was not until the 1930s that the Society looked into initiating the formal process, or "cause," of canonization. The priest who was consulted counseled against it. He believed that testimony to Cornelia's holiness rested on the writings of only one person, Mother Maria Joseph Buckle. Because of that, he saw no chance of success. The Society did not pursue the cause at that time, but did take one important step toward it.

It is a tradition in the Church that the body of a person being considered for sainthood should be moved to an appropriate location for veneration by the

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faithful. At that time, the condition of the body is examined. Bodily preservation has long been seen as a sign of holiness.

In 1935, Cornelia's body was exhumed and examined. Over 100 Sisters, diocesan and civil representatives were present. Two of the Sisters had been with Cornelia when she died. Cornelia's body was indeed seen to be well preserved. Her face was recognizable to those who had known her. She was reburied in a crypt in the Mayfield chapel where her body remains today.

After the Second World War, the Society collected and organized all of the testimony they had about Cornelia's life and holiness. The Cause for her canonization was opened in 1959 in the Diocese of Southwark, England. After an exhaustive process of examination, Cornelia Connelly was declared Venerable by the Church in 1992 – a model of heroic virtue and worthy of veneration and imitation.

A miracle is needed to confirm her holiness and declare her Blessed. If you are convinced of Cornelia's sanctity, pray for her intercession in times of need, that God may work a miracle through her intercession. Join the Society in spreading the story of Cornelia Connelly, a model indeed for our time.

Information about Cornelia Connelly's life, spirituality and apostolate are taken from the *Positio: Canonization Process of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly 1809 –1879*, a three volume document submitted to the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints in 1983. The *Positio* was used by the congregation to examine the claim that Cornelia Connelly lived a life of heroic virtue – a claim that was affirmed when she was declared Venerable in 1992.

**For additional information about Cornelia Connelly and the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, visit [www.shcj.org](http://www.shcj.org).**





CORBELLIA AUGUSTA CONNELLY  
1800 — 1879  
FOUNDERESS OF THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS.  
LOVE KNOWETH NO MEASURE: FEARETH NO LABOUR: MAKETH SWEET ALL THAT IS BITTER.  
FINDETH REST IN GOD ALONE.

PRAYER TO OBTAIN  
THE BEATIFICATION  
OF VENERABLE  
CORNELIA CONNELLY

O God, who chose Cornelia Connelly  
to found the Society of the Holy Child Jesus,  
inspiring her to follow the path  
marked out by your divine son,  
obedient from the crib to the cross,  
let us share her faith, her obedience and her  
unconditional trust in the power of your love.

Grant us the favor we now implore  
through her intercession....  
and be pleased to glorify, even on earth,  
your faithful servant, through the same  
Christ our Lord.

Amen.



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Portrait by Ellen Cooper, 2007



Society of the Holy Child Jesus  
ACTIONS NOT WORDS