

*The Life of  
Carmelia Cannelly*





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## Cornelia Connelly, SHCJ (1809-1879)

“I hope always to be able to do something for  
His glory, be it only in not resisting His grace.”

*Cornelia Connelly*

The life of Cornelia Connelly was anything but typical. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on January 15, 1809, Cornelia defined the norms of her time. She became a wife, mother to five children, Catholic nun, and ultimately, the Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, an order of Roman Catholic Sisters.

Cornelia’s spirit of infinite love, compassionate zeal, and steadfast faith continues to influence the work that the Sisters of the Holy Child do today. During this year of celebration marking the 200th Anniversary of Cornelia’s birth, we gather to honor her, as well as to celebrate her legacy and the service that changes the lives of people around the world. Learn more about Cornelia.

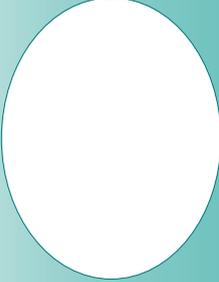


“Since graduating from Rosemont College, I’ve grown to appreciate Cornelia’s life story even more. Her faith and mission were profound, especially in the midst of great personal struggle.”

—Pat Ciarrocchi, Rosemont College Alum '74



Cornelia lived during the 1800s, and as Sr. Radegune Flaxman writes in her book, *A Woman Styled Bold*, “In an age when women were regarded as men’s property, when society and the Church expected them to be unquestioningly obedient and submissive, Cornelia struggled to retain her integrity and to be true to her God. It was a struggle that cost her dearly.” It was, however, through her unshakeable faith in God, that she embraced life and even joy in the midst of much sorrow.



“When I first heard the story of Cornelia Connelly, I wanted to be Cornelia Connelly. I wanted to love God like she did and pray with her. I was intrigued by Cornelia’s legacy!”

—Beryl Singleton Bissell, Holy Child Alum '57



## The Early Years

The youngest of seven children, Cornelia lost her parents by the time she was just 14. In 1831, at the age of 22, she fell in love with an Episcopalian minister, Pierce Connelly, and they were married in Philadelphia. Shortly thereafter, Pierce was assigned to serve as the Pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Natchez, Mississippi and the young couple embarked on an arduous 1,700-mile journey in a coach with open sides and no springs.

By 1835, the couple had been blessed with two children, Mercer and Adeline. Also during this time, Pierce began questioning the legitimacy of the Episcopalian Church, and soon he resigned from being a pastor to examine the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. This was the beginning of much strife for the Connelly family. Soon after, Pierce packed up the family and headed to New Orleans, where they awaited a steamboat journey to Rome, the place where Pierce would eventually be received into the Catholic Church.

“Cornelia's creative and artistic gifts combined with that of drawing out the best in those around her inspire me.”

—Sr. Mary McManus



## Converting to Catholicism

During the Connely's time in New Orleans, and before they left for Rome, Cornelia attended a Catholic Mass and was instantly moved and drawn to Catholicism. She began a series of instructions in the Catholic faith, and before leaving New Orleans, she was received into the Catholic Church. Soon after, the family set sail on a grueling two-month journey to Rome.

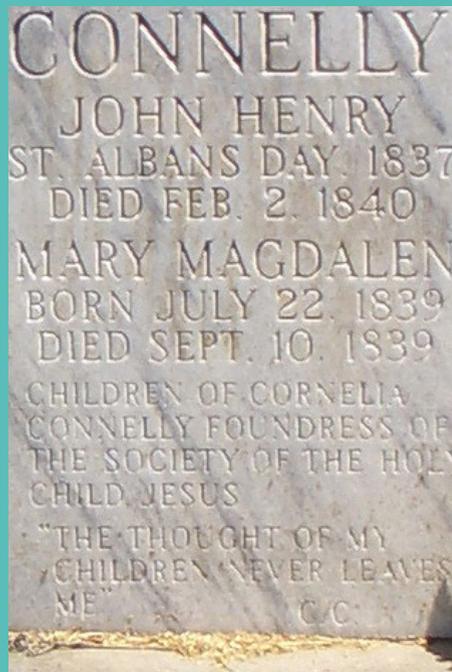
Once in Rome, the Connely's knowledge of Catholicism grew as they attended sermons and lectures and traveled through Europe. While in Vienna, their third child, John Henry was born. Sadly, financial losses forced the family to return to the U.S., where they took up residence in Grand Coteau, Louisiana.

By offering music lessons in the Sacred Heart Convent School, Cornelia provided for the family financially. In the meantime, Cornelia and Pierce continued on their spiritual journeys—taking part in retreats and each having a spiritual director.



“Cornelia had an inner peace that enabled her to accept and deal with many difficulties in her life. I pray frequently for inner peace like hers. We are all unique, marvelous, and talented creations of God and we learn to do things in our own way.”

—Sr. Immaculata DiBlasi

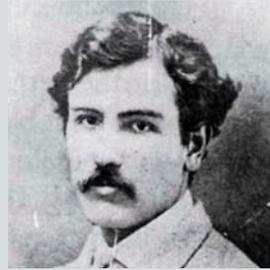


## Agonizing Losses

In July 1839, Cornelia gave birth to the couple's fourth child, Mary Magdalene. However, just two months later, in September, Cornelia fell ill and the baby died. Five months later, in February 1840, Pierce and Cornelia's third child, John Henry, was knocked into a vat of boiling sugar by a Newfoundland dog, and was severely burned. He was just two years old. Cornelia held him in her arms for 43 horrific hours, until he died.

By the following October, Cornelia was pregnant with the couple's fifth child. Pierce, however, having just returned home from a spiritual retreat, felt certain of his call to the Catholic priesthood. While walking home from Church, he told Cornelia that he wanted her permission to seek ordination as a Catholic priest.

In spite of the sacrifices she knew this would cause, Cornelia told Pierce, "This is a very grave matter. Think about it deeply and twice over; but if the good God asks the sacrifice, I am prepared to make it and with all my heart." Years later, Cornelia, confiding in a friend, said that the Society of the Holy Child Jesus was founded in that moment of great sorrow, and with a heavy, breaking heart.



“Remember, of yourselves you can do nothing, but in God and for God and with God you can do all things.”

*Cornelia Connelly*

## The Ultimate Sacrifice

A few months later, in 1841, the couple’s fifth child, Frank, was born. Certain of his call to the Catholic priesthood, Pierce returned to Rome. However, he soon discovered that he needed Cornelia’s consent for him to enter the priesthood. So, once again, Pierce had the children and Cornelia undergo the arduous steamboat journey to Rome.

In Rome, Pope Gregory XVI said he would grant the couple a deed of separation, so long as Cornelia made a vow of chastity and agreed to become a Sacred Heart Sister. So Cornelia lived at the Trinita dei Monti in Rome with the couple’s children and shared in the life of the Sacred Heart Sisters. Pierce was ordained later that year, and during the Mass, Cornelia sang in the choir and their daughter, Adeline, received her First Communion.



“I admire how Cornelia did not let the tragedies in her life diminish her spirit. What sticks with me the most are her words: actions not words. I try to live these words everyday and instill this in my students.”

—Catherine Glatts, Holy Child Alum '73



## Meeting the “Wants of the Age”

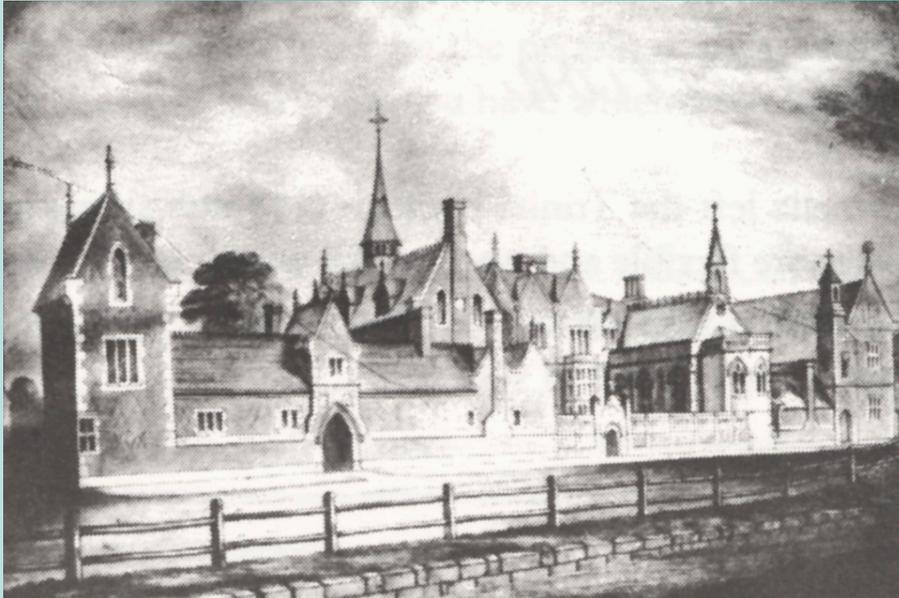
Though Cornelia was living and taking part in the life of the Sacred Heart Sisters, she did not feel that God was calling her to join the Sacred Heart congregation. In a letter she wrote to her brother, Cornelia shared that she was reflecting on how she could best be of service to her God, given her gifts and talents. She articulated her belief as “meeting the wants of the age,” which has become a cornerstone of the Holy Child mission and spirit.

At the Pope’s request, Cornelia was invited to begin a congregation that would educate Catholic girls in England. As Cornelia envisioned a congregation that was responsive to the needs of the time, the words “Society of the Holy Child Jesus” came to her, reflecting her incarnational spirituality. She considered this a gift from God, and ultimately, it was the name that she gave to the congregation she founded.



“The life of Cornelia Connelly is an inspiration to all who know that the path of life is never certain. When we trust our future to God, we can accomplish extraordinary, unimagined, and seemingly impossible goals.”

—Diane Bricker, Holy Child Alum '63



## Transitions & Compromises

Though it is believed that Cornelia intended to begin the Society in the United States of America, her home, the congregation took root in England. At that time, England was a Protestant country and Catholics were not held in high regard. There was not much awareness or concern for the poor, especially regarding education. As Sr. Elizabeth Mary Strub writes in her book, *Yes, Lord, Always Yes*, “...when the Pope added his own urging and moral weight to the proposal, Cornelia recognized the will of God and threw herself wholeheartedly into the project.”

Without her own financial resources, Cornelia accepted the proposal of Bishop Nicholas Wiseman to settle in a vacant convent in his District in Derby, England. On October 13, 1846, the Society officially began, as Cornelia traveled to Derby with three other women, who became Sisters of the Holy Child.

Bishop Wiseman, worried about the scandals that could result from Cornelia having her children with her when she was starting a religious congregation of Sisters, encouraged her to send the children away. Reluctantly, Cornelia sent her children to boarding schools. She thought they would be away for just the first year of her novitiate, a period of intense spiritual training, which all women who become Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus undergo.



“You must not hide the gifts God has given but use them in his service by instructing others and imparting to them the knowledge that will help them to love and serve God and save their souls.”

*Cornelia Connelly*

## The Society's Roots

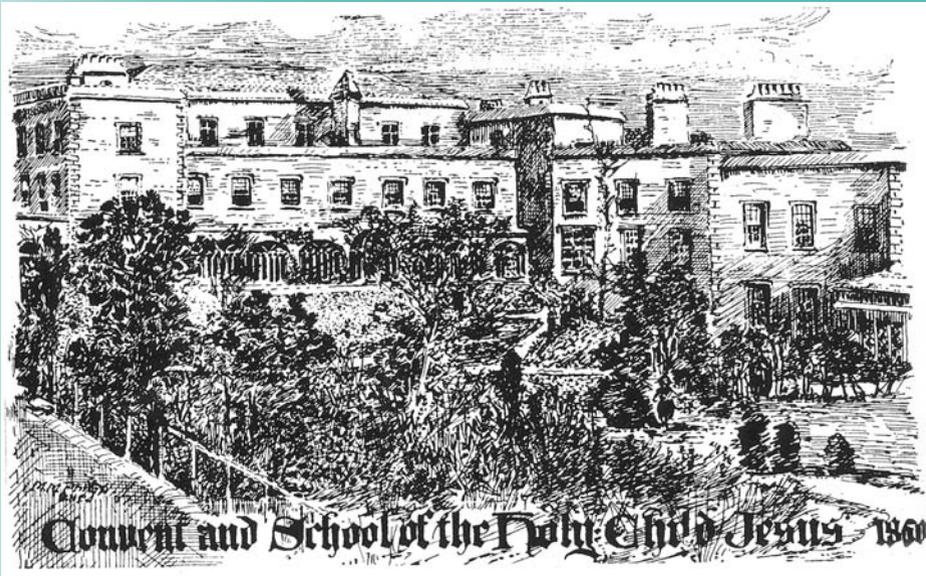
The convent that Cornelia had been given in Derby, England by the Bishop was vast and rat-infested. Derby was in the midst of the industrial revolution and most people worked long hours every day and in very difficult conditions.

Cornelia and the other three Sisters began offering basic education to the girls who worked in the silk mills and factories surrounding the convent. In the spirit of Cornelia's call to “meet the wants of the age,” they also ran a night school for about 100 girls, and taught on Sundays to accommodate the workers' schedules.

In December of 1847, Cornelia officially took vows of poverty and obedience, (she had already taken a vow of chastity when Pierce and she had separated) and Bishop Wiseman installed her as Superior General of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. By that time, Cornelia had welcomed 16 young women into the community.

“Cornelia’s spirit has inspired me in the many works I’ve had throughout my life. I have always been impressed with her broad mindedness and courage.”

—Sr. Louise Frey



## St. Leonards-on-Sea

After just two years in Derby, and with the encouragement of Bishop Wiseman, Cornelia moved the community to St. Leonards-on-Sea in Mayfield, England. Here, the Sisters ran boarding and day schools, as well as beginning a teacher training college. They were also involved in writing books, translating, painting, producing and publishing religious art and literature, giving retreats, and instructing people who were converting to Catholicism.



“Trust the children and never let your confidence in them be easily shaken. Confidence begets confidence. Let them show their true colors and then we shall see the highlights and what needs to be toned down.”

*Cornelia Connelly*

## Testing the Limits

In the 1880s, most girls were not formally educated in schools, but Cornelia had another plan. She reached out to both rich and poor girls and believed in trusting and encouraging each of her students to be themselves. Fun was to be had in Holy Child Schools, but learning was also paramount. Cornelia devised a wide curriculum that included art, music, drama, and logic. She believed the Sisters should look after the students as if they were their own children.

Her philosophy of education was ahead of its time, and not welcomed or appreciated by all. The bishop soon heard “rumors” of what was happening, and wrote to Cornelia: “Inquire prudently, as it is said that the pupils have been taught to waltz and dance the polka as well as to play whist. If you discover this to be true, stop it quietly.” Later, when the bishop learned that the Sisters had been swimming in the sea, he suggested to Cornelia that it would be preferable for them to add salt to their bath water! Cornelia’s determination and diplomatic persistence were two of her best traits.



“God Alone.”

*Cornelia Connelly*

## Struggles & Scandals

By the time Cornelia and her community had moved to St. Leonards-on-Sea, Pierce was jealous of the influence that the bishop had in Cornelia’s life. Personally, Pierce was also frustrated in his ministry as a Catholic priest so he abandoned the priesthood and the Catholic faith. In the hopes that Cornelia would return to him, he took the couple’s children from their boarding schools and denied Cornelia all contact with them. Cornelia, however, stood fast in her resolve.

Pierce persisted, ultimately suing Cornelia for the restitution of his conjugal rights. The case, Connelly vs. Connelly, became quite a scandal, literally making national headlines. In addition, because Cornelia’s educational and spiritual philosophies were unconventional during that time, she quickly came under attack. She was hounded by the press and even denounced in pulpits and lecture halls. In spite of this, Cornelia remained focused on the Society, expanding the educational works and welcoming new members. Through it all, her faith never wavered; it only grew stronger.



“Cornelia’s recognition of the uniqueness of each individual has always inspired me. Like Cornelia, I feel privileged to have the liberty to be myself and be accepted for who I am.”

—Sr. Tina Chikezie



## A Flourishing Community

Less than 10 years after Cornelia and her community of three first began their community in Derby, the Sisters were working among the poorest of the poor in the slums of London, Liverpool, and Preston. In these areas, Cornelia encouraged her Sisters to carry on the Society’s mission, writing, “As you step on through the muddy streets, love God with your feet.”

In 1862, the first Sisters had left for America, and established a school and convent in Towanda, Pennsylvania. By the time Cornelia died in 1879, the Society was flourishing in both England and the United States, and Cornelia had fulfilled her dream of establishing convents in France.

Today, the Sisters of the Holy Child continue Cornelia’s legacy. Serving on four continents including North America, South America, Europe, and Africa, the work of the Sisters is widespread, seeking to help thousands find a better life through education, social work, healthcare, legal work, pastoral care and administration, and spiritual direction.

In addition, in the United States, the Society sponsors 15 schools, including Rosemont College, in Rosemont, Pennsylvania. They have also founded several social service organizations.

Cornelia’s philosophy, while unconventional at the time, is widely praised today for its innovation and vision. We celebrate the anniversary of her birth with the belief that the Sisters of the Holy Child are “meeting the wants of the age” through “actions not words!”