

CORNELIA CONNELLY: A WITNESS TO HEROIC LOVE AND FIDELITY

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Luke tells us in the Acts (1, 8) that after the resurrection our Lord said to his apostles: "You shall be witnesses for me in Jerusalem and in all Judaea and Samaria and even to the very ends of the earth." In his priestly prayer Christ himself said: "I do not pray only for them, but also for those who believe in me through their word" (Jn 17, 20). So I think we may safely assume that when Christ was telling the Twelve to be his witnesses, he was addressing not only them but also Cornelia Connelly and each one of us as members of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. Today Cornelia, through her society, through each one of us, is trying to respond to Christ's call to be his witness "even to the very ends of the earth"--in Italy, Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, England, Ireland, Wales, France, Chile and many parts of the United States. We find that same sense of witness expressed in the opening lines of our Documents: "God has chosen to need men and women in every age to reveal to witness to his love, to extend the reality of the Incarnation."

The keynote of Cornelia's whole life can be found in the words carved above her tomb in Mayfield: "Love knoweth no measure, feareth no labour, maketh sweet all that is bitter, findeth rest in God alone."

We are all familiar with the life of Mother Connelly, but it may be that we have given insufficient time to certain aspects of her life as bearing witness to her heroic love and fidelity. I would like to share with you some of the incidents which give striking evidence of her witness to heroic love.

Heroism has been described as "extreme self-sacrificing courage especially in fulfilling a high purpose or attaining a noble end."

Was it not heroism that led Cornelia to sacrifice her home to marry Pierce, and shortly after their marriage to leave Philadelphia, home and friends to undertake the long, tedious, uncomfortable journey to Natchez to begin life anew amid strangers? And what but heroism could have sustained her in her loneliness when Pierce was away? The letter she wrote to Pierce 22nd September 1835 gives us a very good idea of how much she missed him. She was alone with two small children, Merty not yet three and Adeline barely six months old. Pierce had resigned his rectorship of Trinity Church and had gone to St. Louis to visit Bishop Rosati. On September 1st she had written to her sister, "our future movements are uncertain," and to Pierce:

Dear love my more than life what a baby I am I can cry better than write. Your long and anxiously looked for letter I received about an hour since. O my love I have wished to be a Catholic in my acts of love but I am afraid in truth and spirit have been but a discontented Protestant. . . . Until I hear from or see you again I must rest satisfied with your dear letter and keep it as the good Catholic does his Agnus Dei Oh my love make haste back. It seems a year that you have been gone . . . I have written too much--but not enough yet--my own life forever your devoted love C.C.

(CC 1:1-6)

Not only did she miss Pierce, but she worried about him and defended him against the harsh judgments of others.

His health is considerably injured by his late labours and he is now suffering with a constant pain in his breast--but I trust that rest, care and exercise will in a little time restore him. . . . let our movements be what they may, it is out of the question for Pierce to think of encountering a northern winter. (CC 1:35)

To her sister Adeline who had obviously made harsh judgments about Pierce's fidelity to his religion and even about his sanity, Cornelia replied:

We have received this morning Oct. 17, 1835 7 letters, 4 from Lewis, two from your own dear self & one from mother--There is not the least cause for all the trouble & distress you have suffered--Pierce is not a catholic nor could he be a catholic Priest if he desired it while I live--he has neither publicly [sic] nor privately renounced his faith but you may rest assured that whatever he believes to be his duty by God's help he will do without a reference to his temporal interests one way or another--his mind I thank God is as sound as ever and as capable as ever to support his family That you should suffer mortification on our account dearest Addie has been the cause of much trouble to me but as regards my loved husband our blessed little ones & myself I never was happier in my life. (CC 1:38-42)

We know of Pierce and Cornelia reading and studying together in their search for the truth; of Cornelia's admission into the Church and her reception of her first holy communion before they set sail for Europe in early December of that same year. Let us pause for a moment to consider that European voyage. The year 1835, the month December, the length of the voyage almost two months before reaching Marseilles on 2nd February 1836. Again no material comforts, no modern conveniences which make travelling today so much less of a burden for a mother with two small children. Why did Cornelia consent to all this? Because of her heroic love for her husband, a heroism that was completely self-sacrificing. At this time she could write:

Dearest Addie I thank you a thousand times for all your kind feelings towards my dear husband but how much more would you love him ~~better~~ better /sic/ did you know him better if you did but know him as I do. Oh how often do I think if I only had a heart as full of love and charity I would be too happy--nature has not been so bountiful to me-- but I try and hope to obtain these graces through the means the Almighty has given me light to see and the humility to ask for. (CC 1:48)

One might think that while in Rome Cornelia would have been relieved of all care and anxiety and could devote herself to the complete enjoyment of all that the Eternal City has to offer. Such was not the case.

His Merty's eyes continue as defective as ever the physician of Marseilles ordered a pair of spectacles with a little hole in the centre to be worn an hour every day but I find great difficulty in keeping them on ten minutes at a time--he plays the master as much as ever & Nanette cannot understand a word of English . . . Grille we have parted with having found him more expensive than useful. . . Little Ady is sweeter than ever but she is very delicate & very weak /sic/. . . March 28 /1836/ I have kept this letter in order to get as much in it as possible. Addie is better . . . You may imagine my joy Pierce is satisfied about miracles has made his first abjuration and writes to dear Bishop Otey today whom I trust through the mercy of God may be brought to a knowledge of the truth.

Oh my sisters what is all that this world can give or take away compared to the joy of feeling yourself in the true way. (CC 1:63)

Two months later Pierce was again away and Cornelia found herself alone in unfamiliar surroundings. A letter from Pierce made her aware of his unhappiness apart from her.

Dearest life . . . you try very hard to persuade me you are happy but all the time I now your heart is with me--but this must not be so, give it all to the Church--all, all and then I shall have it to /sic/ for am I not one of its children without a wish that is not connected with it. . . Oh Petty dont think about want or any affliction that it may please the Almighty to punish us with--while we have the kingdom of heaven within us will we not be happy in spite of every earthly want and while we have the faith will we not be able to bear all even unto death. Oh love think not of me--if I still have too much pride I deserve to be punished for it and to suffer in the sight /?/ of our relatives for this I believe is my most tender point . . . but at all events dont give way to depression the Almighty will not forsake you after having done so much for you . . . This is the third letter I have written to you--I should like to know if you received my last as I sent it by Charles--thoughtlessly--I ~~shall~~ /sic/ want to hear a great deal about Paris--I hope you stayed a week or ten days there or more--you see how cheerfully I write to you /the photostat of this letter ends here/.
(CC 1:6a)

Just one year later the Connellys left Rome and travelled to Vienna where another son, John Henry, was born 22nd June 1837. After two months in Vienna they went to Paris and while there realized that their European travels would have to be suddenly cut short. News of the financial situation at home had reached them in Vienna and a shortage of capital made it imperative for them to return home immediately so that Pierce might find some employment.

Again Cornelia whose love for her husband seems to have deepened with the thought of adversity, faced another long sea voyage in the worst season of the year and this time with three

small children. Leaving Le Havre on 23rd October they reached New Orleans sixty-one days later. Back in Natchez Pierce wrote to his brother John about Cornelia:

She is an angel of consolation She is more rejoiced than I can say over a return to our peaceful, quiet homelife, though at the same time she can bravely look ahead to coming--I must not say storms, --but times when we may find ourselves without a home in which to live. (Bisgood, p. 22)

Still another test of her heroic love came when in June 1838 they moved again, this time to Grand Coteau where Pierce had been offered a teaching position by the Jesuits. God further tested his faithful servant when he took to himself their baby girl, little more than six weeks after her birth on 22nd July 1839.

It would seem that her heroic self-sacrificing love for her husband throughout all these years was gradually becoming deeply spiritual, that she was beginning to understand that her love could find its rest in God alone. Her happiness seemed complete as she watched her three children romping and playing in the glorious sunshine. Her own heart thrilled with joy and thanksgiving and she turned irresistibly to God: "O God, if all this happiness is not to Thy greater glory and the good of my soul, take it from me, I make the sacrifice." On 20th January she wrote in her little notebook:

O my God, trim thy vine, cut it to the quick, but in Thy great mercy root it not yet up--My God help me in my great weakness--help me to serve Thee with new fervour. (CC 21:12)

Little did Cornelia then realize how acceptable her prayer was to God, or how it would be answered. The answer came on 2nd February when she held in her arms her youngest, John Henry, the child born in Vienna, and for forty-three hours watched as his life agonizingly ebbed away. (See CC 21:5)

In June of the same year she recorded with special emphasis the novena for the feast of the Sacred Heart and notes: "Memorare. June 26, 1840" (CC 21:9). The date recurs a few pages later after an entry the significance of which we know: "Memorare. St. Edward's Day. 13th October 1840" (CC 21:13). This was the day on which Pierce told her he felt God was calling him to the

priesthood, and explained what it would mean for her.¹ Her reaction gives us a deeper insight into her heroic love for and fidelity to her husband, as well as into her heroic love for God.

This is something very serious: do think about it deeply and repeatedly. But however, if God asks this sacrifice, I am ready to give it to Him and with all my heart. (D 64:18-19)

Her last child, Frank, was born 29th March 1841. Had Cornelia some prophetic intuition nine months before? Are the dates to be remembered linked together as obliteration?

Throughout the ensuing years, both before Pierce's ordination and after his apostasy, Cornelia herself gives occasional glimpses of what the sacrifice cost her. While waiting for Pierce's ordination she confided to her notebook 2nd November 1844:

I had some stray thoughts about the children. I am so glad the good Father de Villefort thinks Frank ought to stay with me until he is eight years old. I think so, too, but I am so afraid of having any reserve with God . . . and how could I ever refuse to the love of love? + + + (CC 21:35)

After Pierce had brought suit for the restitution of conjugal rights she wrote to her sister Addie:

I suppose you know that I know nothing about my dear children. I have several times sent letters to them

¹ See Cornelia's allegation in Connelly against Connelly . . . Case on behalf of the Appellant (D 7:90 and 99): That in the month of October, One thousand eight hundred and forty, whilst resident at Grand Coteau aforesaid, the said Pierce Connelly proposed to his said wife, that henceforth they should live in constant and perfect chastity, abstaining from sexual intercourse with each other, in order to the more fully devoting of themselves to the service of God; and with a special view to his, the said Pierce Connelly's, then declared wish and intention in that case to take holy orders in the Roman Catholic church. That the said Cornelia Augusta Connelly acceded to such her said husband's proposal, and that a verbal agreement to that effect was then entered into between them, and which agreement was ever steadfastly maintained.

& to Pierce which have been returned unopened. But an anonymous letter was sent saying he was advised to take a wife--If it could be without sin by his vows being dissolved I should be very glad, but could he ever be happy again? Do pray for him dear Addie and my poor little ones. (CC 1:57)

No matter how keen her own sufferings, she seems never to have judged Pierce, never let bitterness seep into her own heart. After the publication in 1853 of the pamphlet, Case of the Rev. Pierce Connelly, we find marginal annotations in the copy she received. One reads as follows:

I am persuaded that Mr. C. can never in heart cease to love the Holy Catholic Church, but his love was always more a love of sentiment than of sacrifice-- & therefore less to be trusted His feelings have been wounded & his love turned to hatred for a time --When the opposite party gradually let sink into nothingness /sic/ we may then hope that his eyes will be opened & his heart touched. (D 8:118)

Again we can sense the heroism of her love for her children and at the same time her heroic love for God in the counsel she gave to one who asked her if she ever thought of her children.

The remembrance of my children never leaves me. I would not be without this jewel of the cross. The soul cannot work for God supernaturally till our Lord has shut out /sic/ by sorrow the door to all merely natural enjoyment. (D 63:42)

Looking back over the years, filled as they were with intense suffering and sorrow, she could again confide her thoughts and feelings to her notebook:

Oh God of Gods & light of light & joy of joys fill my poor heart that I too may love Thee with an everlasting love, that we may all be one in Thee & live and breathe for Thee alone. Epiphany 1865.
(CC 27:3)

Whence Her Fortitude?

Well might we ask what was the source of Mother Connelly's heroic strength? Might we not presume that had she herself been asked this question her answer would have been, "Underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut 33, 27).

We do know that her courage was "fed in the pasture of His Divine Love" and that she had recourse to the Blessed Sacrament in all her trials and difficulties. Would it not have been her own experience that prompted her to write thus to one of the sisters?

My comfort is that you have the Blessed Sacrament in the midst of you and ever waiting for you--and in all troubles & anxieties He is your friend and adviser & will help you to bear the cross whenever it may come. (CC 7:37)

And again: "Wherever the Blessed Sacrament is there we have all" (CC 6:66b).

We know from those who lived with her that in her prayer too she was self-forgetful.

In her prayer (as far as we were able to draw our conclusions) our Mother had more of the spirit of thanksgiving and joy than of any other, and the attributes of her God seemed to hold her spellbound. It was all so much more the thought of God, than the thought of self; at least so it struck many of us. It was with her, really "Dieu seul". His honour, His glory, His work, His divine will, His love.
(D 75:565)

In the customary visit to the Chapel after dinner Reverend Mother took no thought of time. We knew she habitually made a Spiritual Communion, and once on her knees she sometimes seemed quite to forget that there was a community waiting for recreation. On these occasions, Mother Mary Ignatia was prevailed upon to distract her, and bring her out. She rose immediately, and came away from where her heart ever dwelt. (D 75: 552)

Another source of her unbounded courage was scripture. In her own spiritual notebooks and in the recollections of those with whom she formed community, we find constant references to scripture. One of her favorite sayings seems to have been: "I live, now not I; but Christ liveth in me" (Gal 2, 20). Quite some time before she founded the SHCJ she noted in her little book:

O God, help me to live, not I but Jesus in me, in his spirit of sacrifice and suffering with only God in view--the reparation of his glory and the salvation of souls--for this end even suffering becomes sweet. 27th Jan. 1843 (CC 21:80)

During her stay at the Trinità in Rome, this same thought must have been uppermost in her mind when she wrote:

Christ then is to live--no longer I--but Jesus; poor; obedient; suffering, each of these includes every virtue and each speaks of Humility--each Charity. C.C. Meditation. 1845. Rome. (CC24:7)

Mother Mary Francis Bellasis also gives evidence that Cornelia pondered deeply on this:

Work and prayer, prayer and work, neither are [sic] as they ought to be, till God and not you work and pray. Let Him reign in your soul and in every movement of your body. "Not I, but Christ liveth in me." (D 75: 559 ff.)

Christ's own admonition, "Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die" (Jn 12:24), seems to have taken deep root in her soul, for Mother Maria Joseph Buckle said that she constantly repeated it, "and it might have been the motto of her life" (D 63:30). From one of Cornelia's little notebooks in which she copied many quotations from both the Old and New Testaments and from several spiritual writers, M. M. F. Bellasis quotes the following:

"The grain of wheat, if it die not, remains alone; but if it die, it will bring forth much fruit." She adds from Fénelon: "O Sauveur! Je vous adore, je vous aime, dans le tombeau. Je m'y renferme avec vous. Je ne suis plus du nombre des vivants! O monde! O hommes! Oubliez-moi, foulez-moi aux pieds, je suis mort, et la vie qui m'est préparée sera cachée avec J.C. en Dieu." Then she says with St.

Paul: "As to myself, I die daily" (1 Cor 15), adding her own words: "I must forget the past if I desire to act in the present." This devotion to our Lord in the tomb was a very favourite one with her. (D 72:128)

A Higher Vocation

We are all familiar with the events of the thirty-three years which elapsed between the time Cornelia Connelly left Rome on 18th April 1846 and her death on 18th April 1879. Space does not permit our describing in detail her heroic love and fidelity in ill health and physical pain, in the poverty and financial embarrassment she endured, in the disapproval she sometimes incurred even from ecclesiastics, in the betrayal of some of her most trusted religious, in the public scandal and defamation of character she suffered in the Connelly v. Connelly case, in family trials, in the ordeal connected with the Rules and Constitutions which she had formulated for her Society. However, it seems essential that we turn our attention to her example as a witness to heroic love and fidelity in her religious vocation.

Each of us has a personal vocation made manifest by God, and it is only in following this personal call wholeheartedly that each is able to honor God and fulfill his or her own vocation in life. To attain the perfection of Christian life and sanctity each of us must persevere faithfully in the performance of the duties of that state in life to which God has called us. Husband and wife, in their vocation to Christian marriage are bound to dedicate their lives to Christian love, to the true Christian and spiritual care of one another and of the children with whom God has blessed their union.

However, we must also remember that we must recognize the sovereignty of God, and that God has the right to call married partners to a different state of life if he so wills. "God's ways are not ours," and God can and does ask sacrifices quite beyond the scope of our ordinary limited conception.

This was true in the case of Cornelia and Pierce Connelly. You may have heard it said that Cornelia was a selfish, hard-hearted woman who walked out on her husband and her children. We know quite definitely that she and Pierce did not walk out of their home with no concern for their obligations to one another and to their children. We know that Pierce Connelly's vocation to the priesthood was subjected to the most scrupulous examination possible. The fact that he did not persevere in that vocation does not in any way invalidate the judgment of

the highly qualified persons who pronounced it sincere. Nor must we forget that the separation of Pierce and Cornelia was not unprecedented.²

We have already noted that Cornelia recognized God's will in this judgment and made her response--"if God asks this sacrifice I am ready to give it to Him, and with all my heart"--but the surrender was not easy: "Is it necessary for Pierce to make this sacrifice and sacrifice me? I love my husband; I love my darling children; why must I give them up?" (Gompertz, p. 36)

In her response we see Cornelia witnessing to an heroic love of God above all things, but also an heroic love for and fidelity to her husband, "the sublimest form of love between married people; the supernatural love that seeks above all else, always, and in everything, the greater spiritual love of the beloved one."³

Later, when Cornelia was asked to make another heroic response of love and fidelity to God as regards her own religious vocation, she again responded with steadfast love to the grace of God. Cornelia knew that Pierce had valid orders. She herself was bound by her vow of chastity and her religious vows of poverty and obedience. She could not, without serious sin, yield to his demands that she return to him. She willed not to be "an obstacle to his return to God and his priestly obligations."

We know that Cornelia "by accepting the mysterious ways of God and uniting her love to His, did not abandon and forget her husband and children; she loved them more and more because her love was constantly guided by the love of God, to whom she entrusted them in an heroic way."⁴

Must we not affirm that the keynote of Mother Connelly's life was love, a love that "knoweth no measure, feareth no labour, maketh sweet all that is bitter, findeth rest in God alone"? Can we come to any conclusion other than that she was a witness to heroic love and fidelity?

² Cf. the separation of Sir John and Lady Warner in the 17th century, and that of Virgil Horace Barber and his wife in the 19th century.

³ Paul Molinari, S.J., "Cornelia Connelly: an Appreciation," Cornelia Connelly Guild Bulletin, No. 6.

⁴ Ibid.

DERBY: THE CRADLE OF THE SOCIETY--Part I

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The Derby to Which Cornelia Came

In the year 1777 Boswell wrote: "I felt a pleasure in walking about Derby . . . There is an immediate sensation of novelty; and one speculates on the way in which life is passed in it."¹

I, too, felt a pleasure in walking about Derby two hundred years after Boswell, though not for the same reason. Externally it is a normal busy town, its streets crowded with shoppers, cars and buses, very much like hundreds of other English boroughs whose growth the Industrial Revolution spurred. But there is a difference. The past is still present in the streets of Derby. Crossing over the Bridge Gate to the town, one can see the spires of six churches which were mentioned by their current names in the Domesday Book (1086). Two are dedicated to Saxon saints, St. Wereburgh and St. Alkmund; the others to St. Peter, St. Michael, All Saints and St. Mary. Five of them, rebuilt in different centuries, still stand on the same sites. The ancient site of St. Mary's is unknown; the present Catholic church was built in 1838 with Augustus Welby Pugin as architect. In a newly built up area of modern flats and houses there is a road that is still called Nuns Street. Here the Benedictine convent of St. Mary in the Meadows was founded by the abbot of Darley in 1160. When Cornelia came to Derby in 1846 she would also have seen street names like Nuns' Green, Nuns' Bridge, and Nuns' Mill.

The original Saxon town was called Northworthig, but the Danes levelled much of it and rebuilt and renamed it Deoraby.² In 1377 the population recorded for the poll tax was 1076 adults. When Boswell walked its streets four hundred years later the figure was only 8563. But by 1846 it had shot up to 37,431 as a result of industrialization.

In medieval times Derby's chief industries were wine, which was imported for the nobles and for the monks of the various religious houses; lead, which was used as a means of exchange; and

¹ George Birkbeck Hill, ed., Boswell's Life of Johnson (New York: Harper, 1891), III, 185.

² Samuel Bagshaw, History, Gazetteer and Directory of Derbyshire (Sheffield, 1846), p. 41.