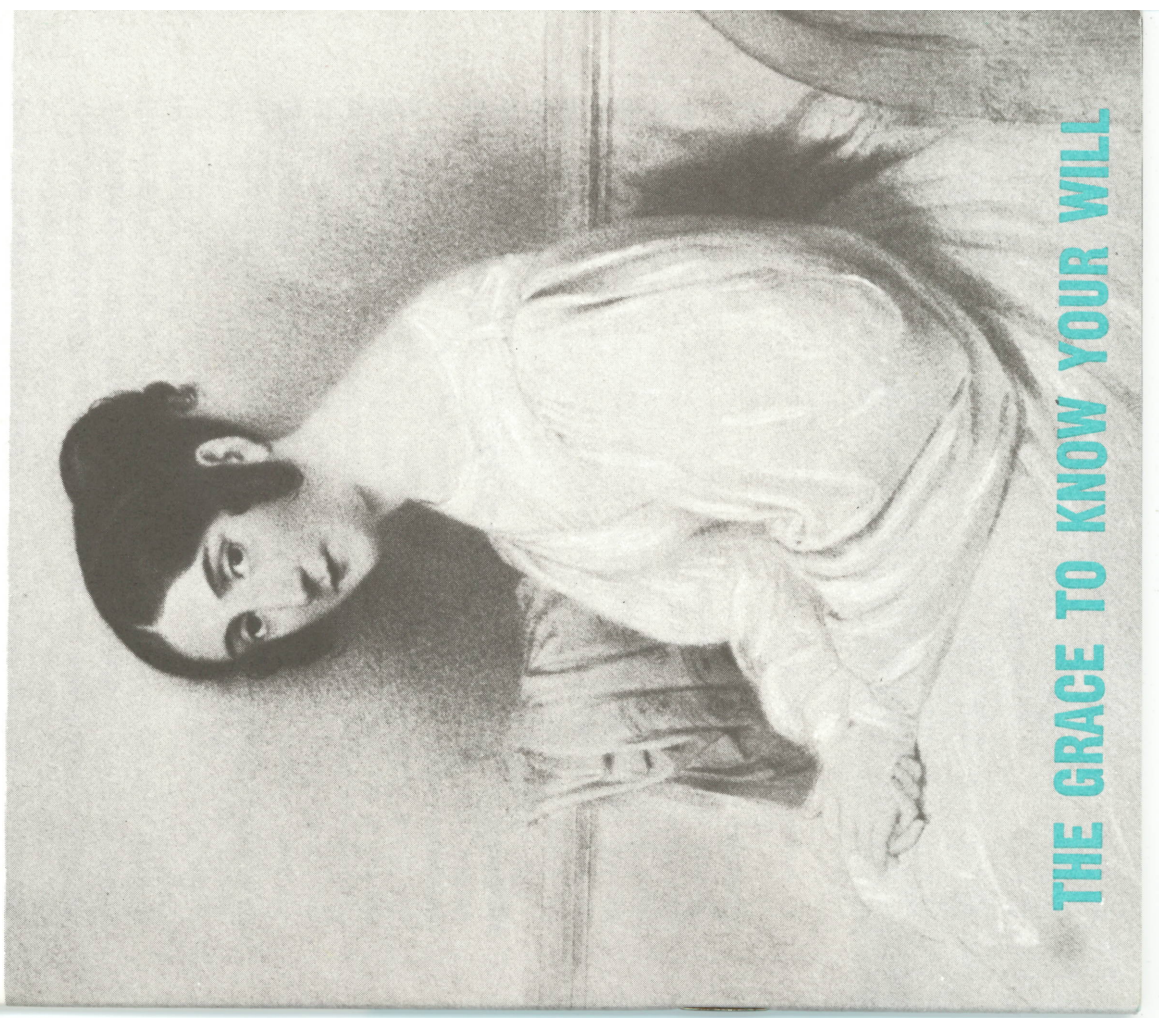


Cornelia Connelly

*Foundress of the
Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus*



THE GRACE TO KNOW YOUR WILL

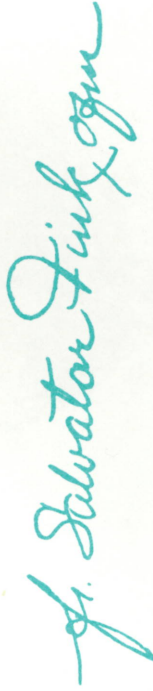
Dear Friend:

All of us have our trials and troubles. Sometimes we handle them well; often we do not. We present the story of a woman who endured crosses almost without number. She persevered, indeed she matured into a saintly woman under almost intolerable burdens. Her story may be difficult to understand; but, if you read it very carefully, you will realize she struggled to fulfill God's will according to her lights.

We Franciscans would like to think she had a fondness for the Franciscan family because of the support she received from a Franciscan friar during a particularly painful time in her life.

Her name is Cornelia Connelly. She was the foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus.

Sincerely,



Fr. Salvatore Fink, O.F.M.
Director of St. Anthony's Guild

Cover: Cornelia Peacock Connelly, at the time of her marriage.

Fr. Salvatore Fink, O. F. M., Editor, Pictures and Layout; Fr. John J. Manning, O. F. M., Research.

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THE GRACE TO KNOW YOUR WILL

By BONIFACE HANLEY, O. F. M.

IT WAS the perfect match. She was the seventh child of Ralph Peacock, a prominent Philadelphia businessman, and the widow Mary Swope Bowen, a woman wealthy in her own right. He was the son of Henry Connelly, a famous furniture designer whose pieces are collectors' items today.

She was twenty-two, rather small, slender, dark. She possessed a warm and cheerful personality that belied her iron strength of character. He was twenty-seven, a University of Pennsylvania graduate and member of the bar of that state. Tall and slender, if not handsome, he possessed a devastating charm that he surely inherited from his northern Irish ancestors.

Her name was Cornelia Peacock; his, Pierce Connelly. He had given up law to serve as an ordained Episcopalian minister at St. James Episcopal Church, Kingsessing, Philadelphia. Bishop William White of Pennsylvania officiated at their wedding December 1, 1831.

Soon after the wedding Pierce, who owned property in Natchez, Mississippi, accepted the rectorship of Trinity Church in that city.

"Natchez," an historian noted, "was a lawless river port, famous for thieves, gamblers and horse cheats."

The city also boasted a wealthy district "famous for its intellectual class and political and social influences." It was from these latter that Trinity Church drew its congregation.

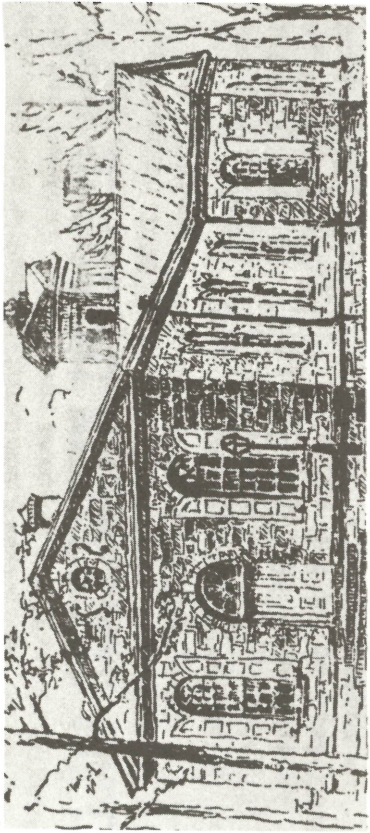
It did not take long for the newly-weds to win their flock's admiration and affection. Pierce impressed many of his wealthy parishioners with his evident sincerity. Many sought him out for spiritual counsel. Cornelia wrote about the deep responsibility she felt as his wife "for all those whom her husband received at the communion rail, those to whom he preached . . . at whose bedside he knelt . . . and at whose graves he stood."

Her love for Pierce was deep and tender. She calmed and balanced his mood swings and sometimes volatile reactions to pressure. "They are and always have been about the happiest couple that ever breathed," gushed Cornelia's sister Mary after a lengthy visit to White Cottage, their beautiful home in Natchez.

As rector, Pierce earned a generous income. Further, his wealthy parishioners were only too willing to guide him to a number of profitable land investments.

At the end of their first year of marriage, Cornelia presented her husband with a fine son whom they baptized and named Mercer, after Doctor William Mercer, a leading citizen

NATCHEZ



St. James Church, Kingsessing, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

of Natchez. Three years later Adeline, a daughter, was born.

Pierce's parish covered the whole state of Mississippi. When he traveled on church business, Cornelia wrote him regularly. The poignant suffering his absence caused her was evident as she addressed him in one letter, "Dear Love, My More than Life."

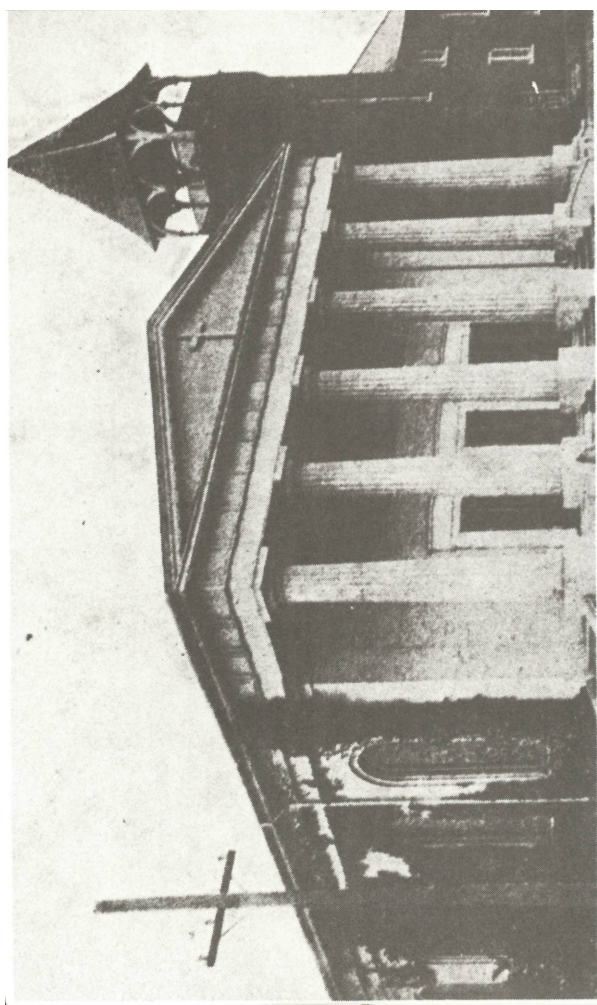
In early 1835 church authorities selected Pierce chairman of the Episcopal Convention of the Southwest. The appointment augured well for a future bishopric.

Only one cloud appeared on the bright horizon of Pierce's future, the American Nativist Movement. The movement, which originated in the northern industrial cities, aimed to counteract the effects of the massive immigration of Catholics from Europe. Waves of new arrivals threatened both the labor market as well as the American Protestant tradition. Nativists generated hysteria and hatred of all things Catholic among the American people. In Charlestown, Massachusetts, a mob burned

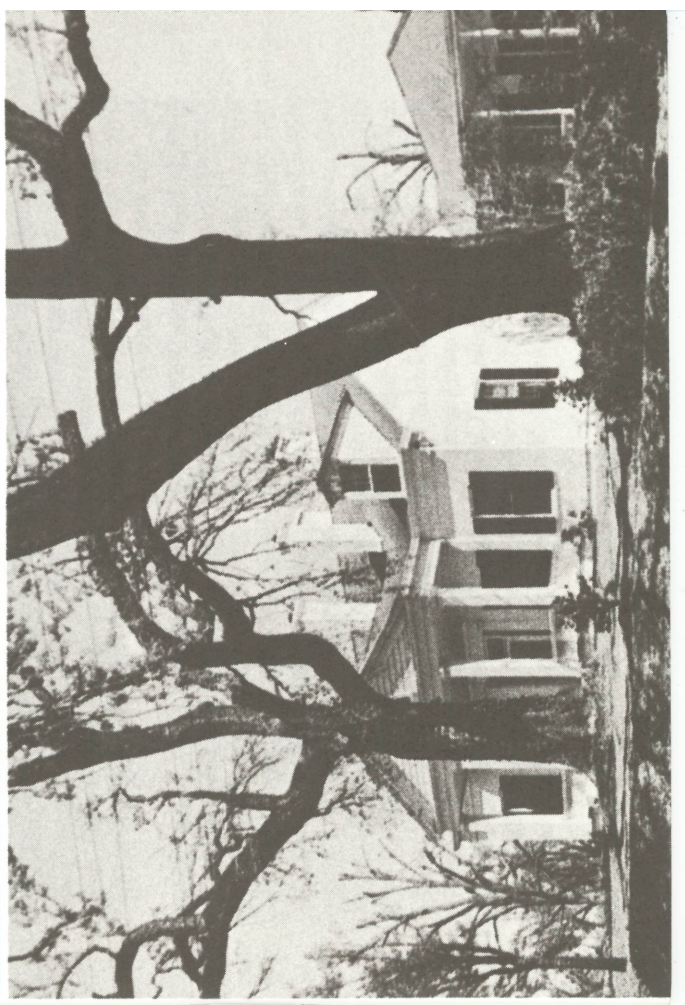
an Ursuline convent. Rioting swept the cities. Priests and nuns were not safe on the streets. A torrent of pamphlets, books and newspapers spread lies and calumnies particularly about the Church's missionary efforts in the western states. Vicious rumors maintained that clergy and religious on the western frontier were outriders for papal armies preparing to rendezvous in the Mississippi Valley and drive eastward. Anti-Catholic zealots swarmed through the Mississippi region distributing pamphlets and tracts describing an imminent popish invasion in lurid terms.

The hysteria swept over Natchez and had a curious effect on Pierce Connelly. "The attacks from every quarter upon the Roman Catholic Church have forced me into a laborious study of this controversy," he explained, "and I confess my faith is shaken in the Protestant religion."

So shaken was his faith that he resigned his parish in 1835 "to examine at leisure and with care the distinctive doctrines of the Roman Catholic religion."



At Trinity Episcopal Church, Natchez, Mississippi, Pierce Connelly zealously carried out his duties as rector. The warm-hearted and cheerful couple were very popular. At White Cottage, the Connelly home (below), their first two children, Mercer and Adeline, were born.





Joseph Nicolas Nicollet, French explorer of the Upper Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, encouraged the Connellys' interest in Roman Catholicism.

The gesture was heroic. He sacrificed his promising career and deprived himself of the material support it insured. Cornelia respected him the more. "I have perfect confidence in the piety, integrity and learning of my dear husband," she wrote. "I am ready to submit to whatever he believes to be the path of duty."

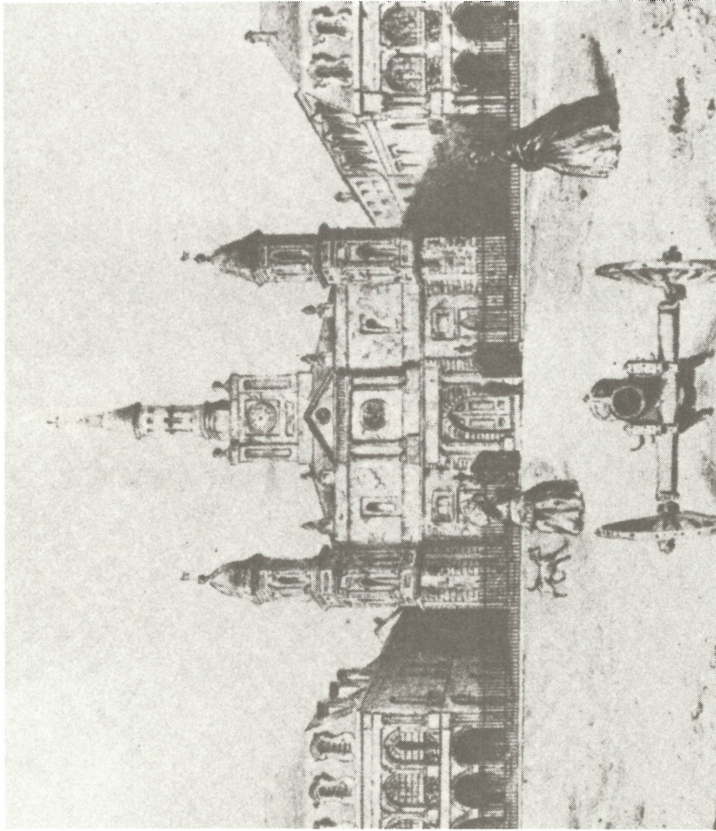
NICOLLET

The Connellys became close friends of French-born Joseph Nicolas Nicollet, a learned mathematician, astronomer and explorer, whom the United States government had hired to survey and map the Mississippi River

and its environs. A devout Catholic, Nicollet often discussed the Native American Movement with Pierce and Cornelia on his visits to Natchez. He laid bare the unwarranted fear and deceit at the core of the hysteria. More importantly, he raised the religious question to a much higher level than mere defense. Endowed with a fervent spirit and remarkably exact mind, he proposed the central mysteries of Catholicism to his two eager listeners.

"Our conversations," Pierce wrote, "never indeed turned upon differences of religious faith, much less partook of the nature of controversy. It was more about systems of philosophy and politics, a comparison of moral views." The three entered into genuine dialogue and found that they had much in common. Nicollet encouraged Pierce to articulate thoughts he had long since hidden, ideas the Episcopalian was afraid to reveal because their consequences would profoundly influence his life. "I felt a confidence in the opinions I had formed and in myself that I had never felt before," Pierce wrote.

Cornelia took part in many of these conversations and decided to embrace Catholicism. Pierce, too, felt strongly attracted to the Roman Church. One problem remained for him, however; he yearned to become a Catholic priest. Nicollet suggested that Pierce accompany him to St. Louis and discuss conversion and his desire for ordination to the priesthood with that city's Bishop Joseph Rosati. Rosati received Pierce warmly and suggested he present his predicament to Rome.



Before sailing for Rome, Cornelia decided to become a Roman Catholic. Bishop Rosati of St. Louis received her into the Church at the New Orleans Cathedral. Bishop Blanc of New Orleans gave her First Holy Communion.

Pierce decided to do just that in order to settle the question of ordination before being received into the Catholic Church. After his interview with Bishop Rosati, he returned to Natchez, collected his family and took them to New Orleans to await passage to Rome.

Cornelia met Bishop Rosati in New Orleans. She deeply impressed him. "Madame Connelly," he later wrote, "was a very cultured woman with a fine education."

While the Connellys were awaiting passage in New Orleans, Cornelia decided to seek reception into the Church rather than wait until the family arrived in Rome. On December 10, 1835, Bishop Rosati received her into the Church and on the following day Bishop Anthony Blanc of New Orleans gave her her First Communion.

On December 12, 1835, the Connellys sailed for Europe on their first trip abroad.

DILEMMA

Cornelia, while experiencing the first joys of conversion, was concerned at the same time about Pierce's painful dilemma. "Pierce," she had written in a letter, "could not be a Catholic priest while I lived."

Nevertheless, after their arrival in Rome in February, 1836, Pierce petitioned the Holy Office to be admitted to the Catholic Church, to be confirmed and to be considered a candidate for Holy Orders. In March, 1836, he had a private audience with Pope Gregory XVI. The Pontiff remarked later that his petition moved him to tears. He kindly suggested that Pierce enter the Church and then give himself some time before considering the possibility of ordination. Following the audience, Vatican authorities advised him that, if he wished to maintain his family and receive ordination as a priest, he might join an Eastern Rite. He never seriously considered that possibility, however. Besides the fact that neither the United States nor England had any Eastern-Rite parishes, Pierce realized he could never receive a bishopric in an Eastern-Rite Church if he was married.

Pierce was received into the Church by Cardinal Carlo Odescalchi, the vicar of Rome, on March 27, 1836. Roman high society, welcoming the Connellys into its glittering whirl, lionized the impressive, courageous American convert and his lovely wife. The gracious Cornelia and her charming Pierce won the admiration of the

Eternal City's civilian, ecclesiastical, and diplomatic dignitaries.

As the social season progressed, Pierce revealed another talent; he was an enormously successful celebrity collector. His personal accumulation of calling cards of the rich and famous numbered in the hundreds. The English Earl of Shrewsbury, John Talbot, active in Catholic causes in his native land, who spent considerable time in Rome, became the Connellys' particularly close friend.

Cornelia greatly admired Talbot's daughter Gwendalin, who had married into the noble Roman Borghese family. Gwendalin's personal, loving service of Rome's poor left a lasting impression upon her.

In May, 1836, Lord Shrewsbury invited Pierce to England. Cornelia remained at the Palazzo Simonetti, Lord Shrewsbury's Roman residence. She spent the summer caring for her children, visiting the sick, learning French and Italian and refining her skills in music and art.

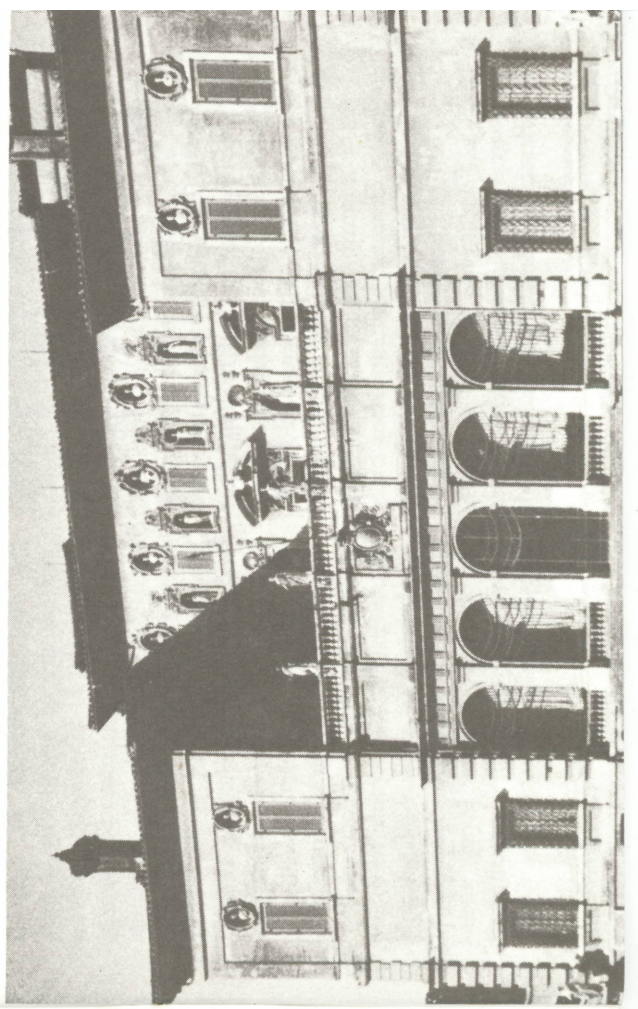
Pierce returned to Rome for the winter season of 1836-1837. In April, 1837, he and Cornelia had a private audience with Gregory XVI.

During all this time few people realized the anguish Cornelia was suffering because Pierce continued to explore the possibilities of priestly ordination. The cardinal vicar of Rome advised him against it. "Your prospects of usefulness in embracing the Catholic faith will be greater as a married man than as a priest," the cardinal counseled.

Cardinal McCloskey of New York, while a student priest in Rome, re-



Married at seventeen into one of Rome's wealthiest families, Gwendalin Talbot became Princess Borghese. Her genuine piety, graciousness and concern for the poor won Cornelia's affection and esteem. Gwendalin bore four children and died from scarlet fever at the age of twenty-two. She was the daughter of John Talbot (right), the sixteenth Earl of Shrewsbury. The Earl introduced the Connellys into Roman high society. Cornelia often visited Gwendalin at the Villa Borghese (below) in Rome.



membered Cornelia "with hands clasped, pleading with me: 'Father McCloskey, is it necessary for Pierce Connelly to make this sacrifice and sacrifice me? I love my husband and my darling children. Why must I give them up?'"

THE GRAND TOUR CONTINUED

In May the Connellys left Rome to journey leisurely to Vienna where Pierce, the celebrity collector, managed to obtain an interview with Prince Metternich, Europe's most outstanding diplomat.

Cornelia gave birth to the third Connelly child, John Henry, June 22 in Vienna.

As summer's end approached, the Connellys traveled to Paris via Switzerland.

The financial panic which hit the United States in 1837 forced Pierce to hasten home and pick up whatever of his land investments had survived the disaster.

NATCHEZ REVISITED

There was not much left. Fortunately, the Jesuits offered Pierce a teaching post at St. Charles College in Grand Coteau, Louisiana. He accepted and eventually moved Cornelia, his three children and two slaves into a small but comfortable home called Gracemere, which Bishop Blanc had made available to the family. The home, located on the grounds of the Sacred Heart School and Convent of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, was conveniently close to their

places of work for Pierce and Cornelia. To supplement his meager income at the nearby college, she taught twenty-three music lessons a week at the school.

The Connellys were now living on the rim of the western frontier. Life was considerably more simple than the graceful life of Natchez and the glitter of European capitals. Cornelia did not mind the deprivations. Indeed, Pierce reported from their humble home, "She is as gay as a bird!" She bore a fourth child, Mary Magdalen, in the summer of 1839. The infant died in six weeks.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF ST. IGNATIUS

Some months after Mary Magdalen died, Cornelia made a retreat under the direction of Father Nicholas Point, S. J., rector of St. Charles College. He introduced her to the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius and encouraged her to keep a spiritual notebook. During the retreat she tried to sort out the strange twists and turns her life had been taking. She sensed that Pierce, an instinctive manipulator, would get the ordination he craved. She wrestled with the problem of what would happen to her if he did. Her suffering was so profound that she found herself entering into a deeper relationship with God. She confided to her sister that "she could not fancy anyone seriously making the Exercises of St. Ignatius without giving themselves wholly to God"—as many had done before her.

dog, playing with two-and-a-half-year-old John Henry, knocked the baby into a cane sugar boiler full of scalding liquid. There was no medical help available in the rough frontier. Cornelia held the burned child in her arms until he died two days later, on February 2.

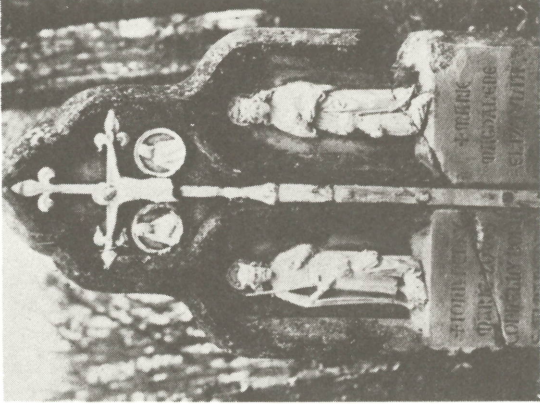
Several months after John Henry's death Pierce told Cornelia: "My dear, God is calling me to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church. Please help me to take the steps necessary to receive ordination."

"Pierce," she responded, "this is a very serious matter; do consider it deeply and repeatedly. Great as the sacrifice is, if God asks it of me, I am ready to make it to him with all my heart."

Cornelia, pregnant with their fifth child, knew that church authorities would permit Pierce's ordination only on condition that she take a solemn vow of chastity. She and her husband, to test their sincerity in the matter, decided to practice mutual abstinence from the use of their marital rights. Nevertheless, Cornelia did not expect Pierce to leave her until both of them had fulfilled their parental obligations to the children.

A prayer in Cornelia's spiritual notebook revealed both her anxiety and determination to do whatever God required of her. "O my God," she wrote, "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 fervor."

In the spring of 1841 she gave birth to their last child, Pierce Francis.



The Connellys erected tombstones over the graves of their children Mary Magdalen and John Henry, who died at Grand Coteau.

TRAGEDY

A premonition of tragedy, or danger to her marriage, began to haunt Cornelia. Despite the loss of Mary Magdalen, she had been happy in her marriage. From its very beginning she had viewed it as her way of serving God. She was supremely happy. One day after the retreat she prayed: "My 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." She was blending her will with what she perceived to be the will of God.

She would need God very soon. Early in 1840, a big Newfoundland

Cornelia made another retreat in September, 1841, with the nuns at Sacred Heart School. "O my good Jesus," she wrote in her spiritual notebook, "I do give myself to thee to suffer and to die on the cross, poor as thou wert poor, abandoned as thou wert abandoned by all but thee, O Mary." Then she added laconically: "Examined Vocation — Decided." The note indicated little besides the fact that Cornelia had determined her future. She prepared to shape events rather than allow them to control her.

SEPARATION

In the spring of 1842 Pierce returned to England to place ten-year-old Mercer in a Catholic boarding school. At the same time, he took a job as tutor-traveling companion to a young Mr. Berkeley, scion of a wealthy British Catholic family.

Bishop Blanc, now a close family friend, felt Mercer was too young to send away. Pierce insisted. Old English friend Lord Shrewsbury had offered to pay tuition for the boy. Besides, Pierce felt this trip would provide him an opportunity to renew his efforts for ordination in Rome.

With Pierce's departure from the St. Charles faculty, the Connellys gave up Gracemere. Cornelia enrolled Adeline in the Sacred Heart Convent School and moved into Bishop's Cottage, consisting of two small rooms near the convent. She was very much alone. Only her baby, Pierce Francis, whom she called Frank and sometimes "Bun," lifted the heavy

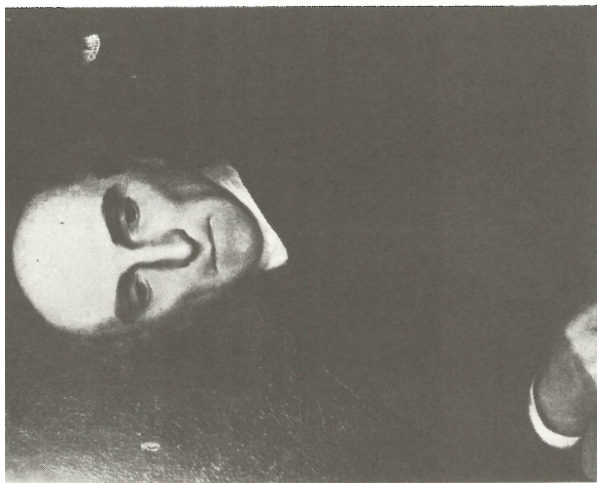
cloud of loneliness hanging over her heart. She intensified her efforts to grow spiritually by establishing a pattern of prayer, meditation and work. She continued her teaching duties at the school. Nevertheless, she could not rid herself of presentiments of great sorrow.

QUEST FOR ORDINATION

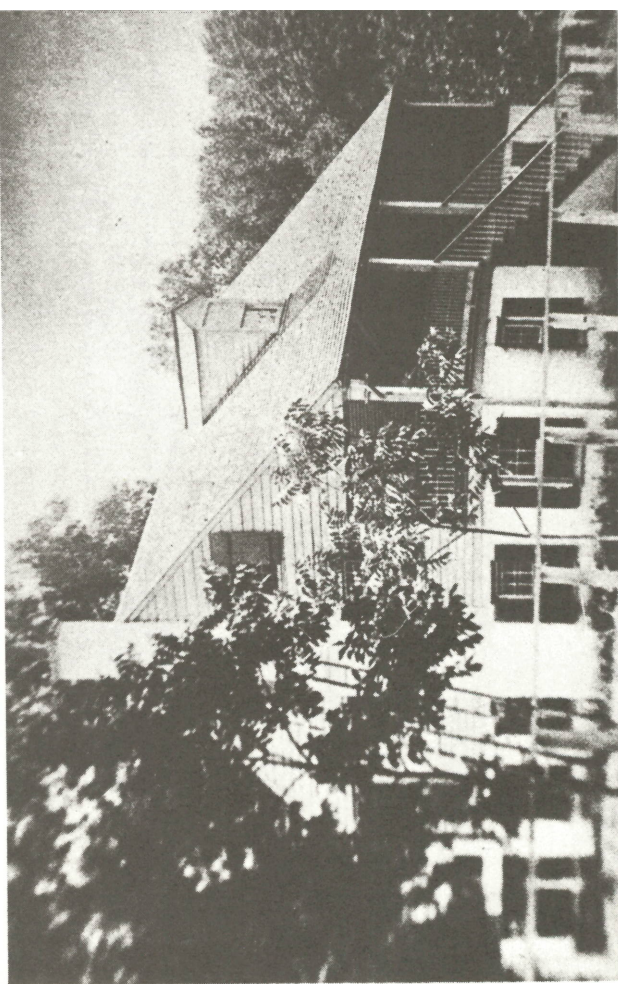
Pierce, in Rome, presented his case for ordination. Pope Gregory XVI received him warmly. The Pope had judged that his request for the priesthood on his first visit was precipitous. Now that the American had spent seven years as a faithful Catholic and persisted in his belief that God was calling him to the priesthood, the Pope accepted his petition seriously. He ordered him to send to the United States for his wife and children. Canon law required church authorities to consult Cornelia before the beginning of the process of marital separation which would precede ordination.

ROME AGAIN

Pierce returned to the United States, met Cornelia and the family in Philadelphia and returned to Rome with them in December, 1843. Cornelia persisted in believing that the Vatican, with its customary extreme discretion, would not press for the separation of herself from Pierce. After arriving in Rome, the Connellys enrolled Adeline at a convent school at Trinita dei Monti and settled down in a comfortable apartment.



The Connellys' youngest son Frank, at age eighteen, painted this portrait of his father. Mercer (*right*), the Connellys' first-born, left for an English boarding school at the age of ten, when this portrait was painted. In Gracemere, their home at Grand Coteau, Louisiana, (*below*), the Connellys reached decisions that profoundly affected their marriage and the lives of their children.





Pope Gregory XVI who had taken an interest in the Connellys. He supported Pierce's quest for ordination.

Pierce, with Berkeley in tow, reentered the world of Anglo-Roman society. "Mr. Berkeley," he confided to his brother, "is in my charge because of the access I am able to give him to high society."

Pierce, as well as Cornelia, did not expect his case for ordination to move quickly. He made travel plans for the next two years.

Neither Pierce nor Cornelia counted on the incredible swiftness of Pope Gregory XVI. "I'll take care of everything," he assured Pierce early in 1844. Canon law required a two-month delay for prayer and reflection on the part of any couple seeking separation in preparation for the ordination of the husband. Pope Greg-

ory gave them three months, and by April 1 they signed a decree of separation. Pierce immediately began his studies in theology.

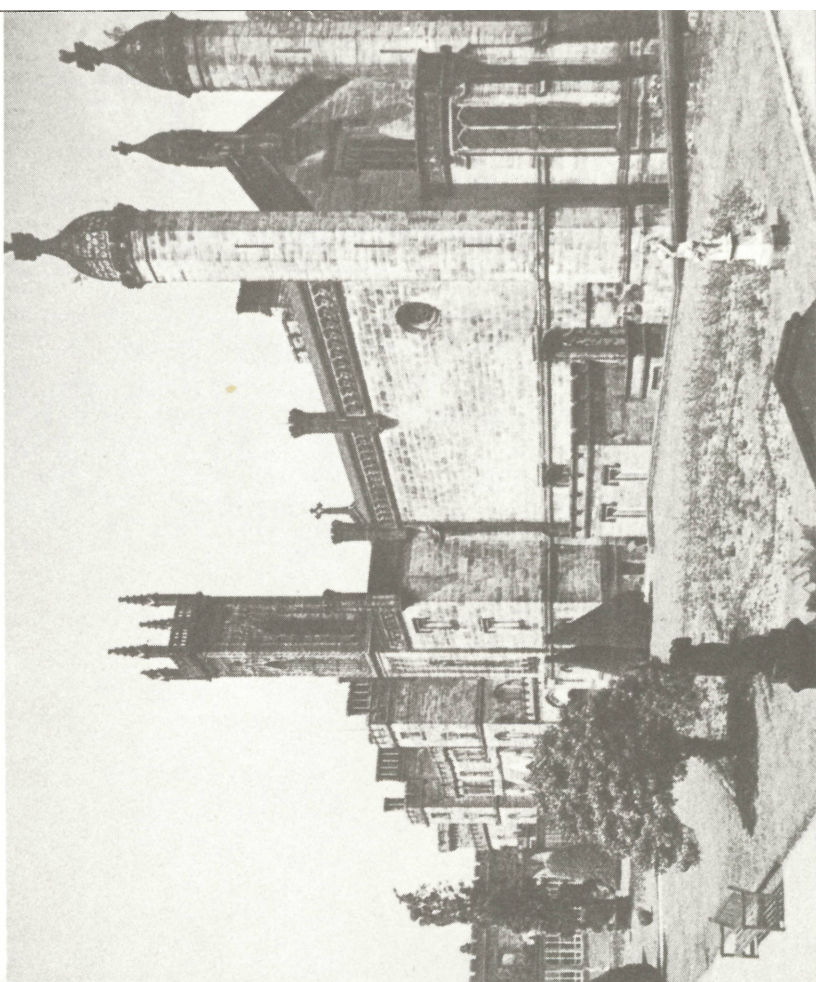
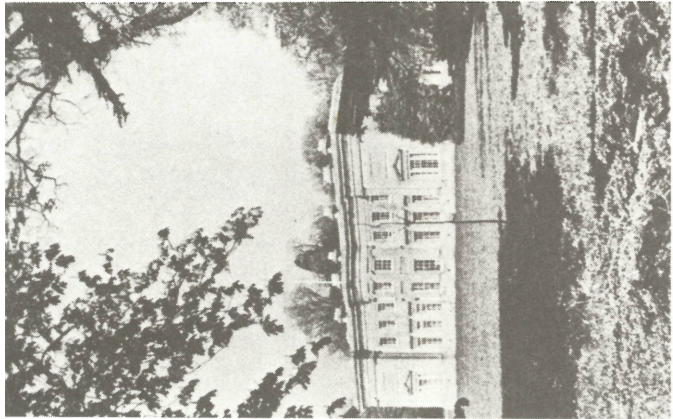
The cardinal vicar had arranged for Cornelia to live with her two children at the Sacred Heart Convent, Trinita dei Monti, in Rome. As a condition for Pierce's ordination, canon law required her to profess a public vow of perpetual chastity. Before she did so, Cornelia had a long talk with him. She begged him to consider carefully what he was demanding of himself, herself and their children. She offered to release him from the burdens he was about to assume by returning to a normal married life. Pierce insisted upon being ordained. Cornelia pronounced her vow of perpetual chastity June 18, 1845, in the convent chapel. Pierce signed a document giving his consent. Less than a month later he was ordained to the priesthood.

HER PROBLEM

What was Cornelia to do? Beginning with her closeness to the nuns at Grand Coteau, she had seriously considered entering religious life if Pierce became a priest. This was probably what she had meant by her "Examined Vocation—Decided" note of September, 1841.

Although feeling a call to religious life, she had the children to consider. Mercer was already enrolled in a British boarding school and Adeline was attending the Sacred Heart Convent School in Rome. At that time

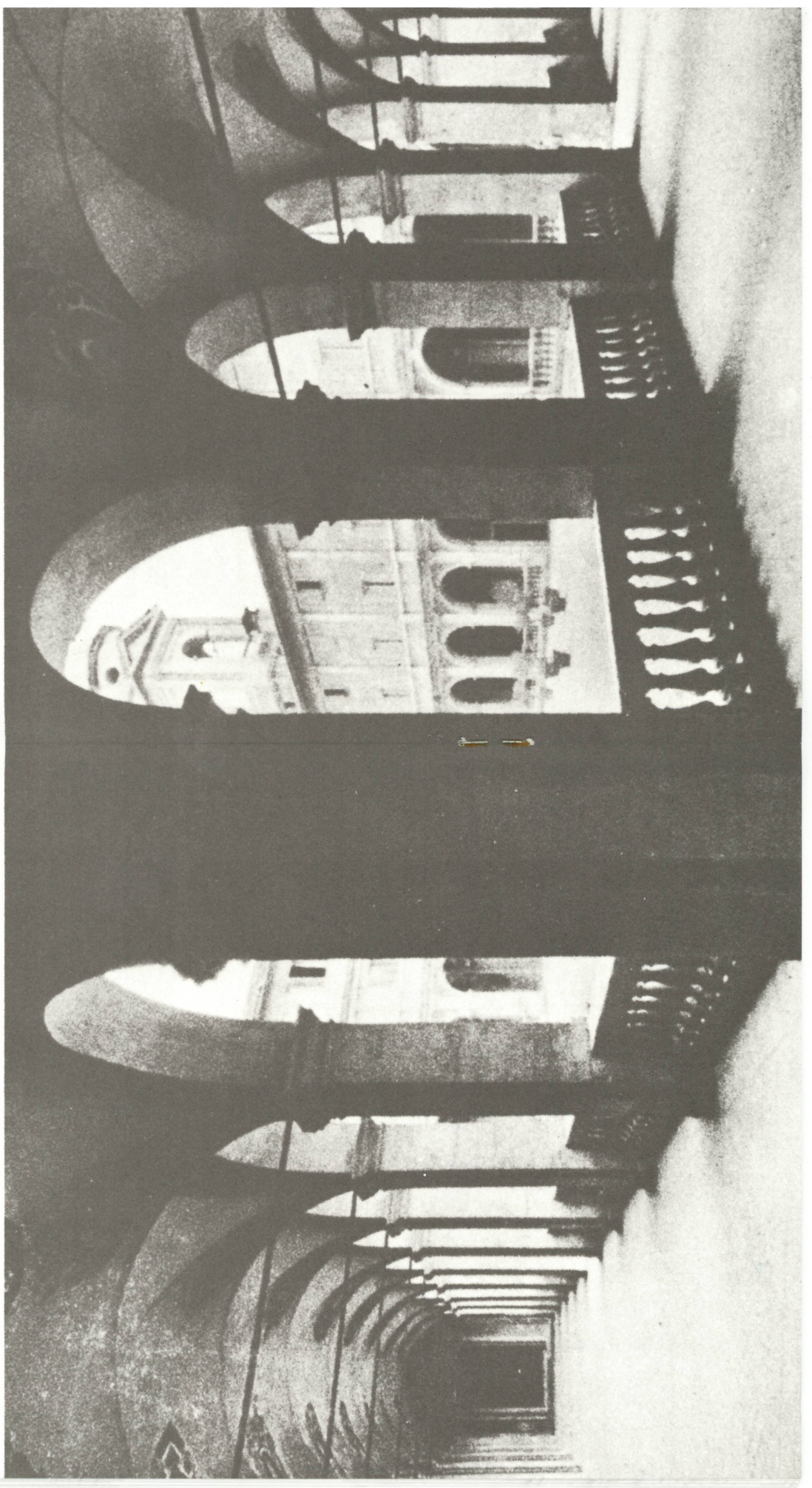
Spetchley Park (left), home of Henry Berkeley. In 1842 Pierce became Henry's traveling tutor. "Berkeley," Pierce wrote his brother, "is from one of the best families in England. He will come into a large fortune." During the tour with his pupil, Pierce wrote often to Cornelia in Grand Coteau and lamented how much he missed her. On Pierce's first visit to England in 1836, he stayed at Alton Towers, Lord Shrewsbury's English manor house (below).



All the forces that reshaped Cornelia Connelly's life found their confluence in the Trinita dei Monti cloisters above the Spanish Steps in Rome. "Refuse no sacrifice that would be for God's greater glory," she wrote early in 1844. The impact of this brave statement fell mercilessly upon her as she waited there for Pierce's ordination. Late in 1844 her health reflected the stress she was experiencing. "Unless the Lord had been my helper," she prayed, "my soul had almost dwelt in hell."

Pierce was ordained at Trinita dei Monti July 6, 1845. At his first Mass three days later, Cornelia joined with the choir in singing the hymn, "Thou Art a Priest Forever." She also led their daughter Adeline to the altar rail to receive her First Holy Communion at her father's hands. "Cornelia's face," an observer remembered, "was radiant with joy."

"Give me the grace to know thy will and the strength to do it," Cornelia wrote. In the cloisters of Trinita dei Monti God answered her prayer.



boarding school was considered the best style of education and the privilege of the wealthy. It was the practice of the day to send very young children away to school. Cornelia nevertheless had no intention of surrendering her little Frank. After taking her vow of chastity, she wrote: "The dear Cardinal Patrizi said my duty was to take care of my children and he said he was very content with me, which made my heart palpitate with joy."

"Frank," a priest friend advised her, "should stay with you until he is eight years old."

Vatican authorities willingly gave Pierce permission to visit Cornelia and the children once a week.

PICKING UP THE PIECES

"I have given him to God," was Cornelia's own response to a lost husband and fatherless family; "this thought gives me much consolation." Although tried by intense suffering, loneliness, separation from her children and Pierce's rejection, she did not yield to despair. Under the impact of these harsh blows, she grew ever more spiritually mature.

The humility and simplicity of Jesus and his Mother became the inspiration of her spiritual growth. She continually meditated upon the Gospel and those passages of St. Paul which referred to this central mystery of Catholicism. She determined to follow what she perceived to be her vocation, to take an active role in the Church as a Religious.

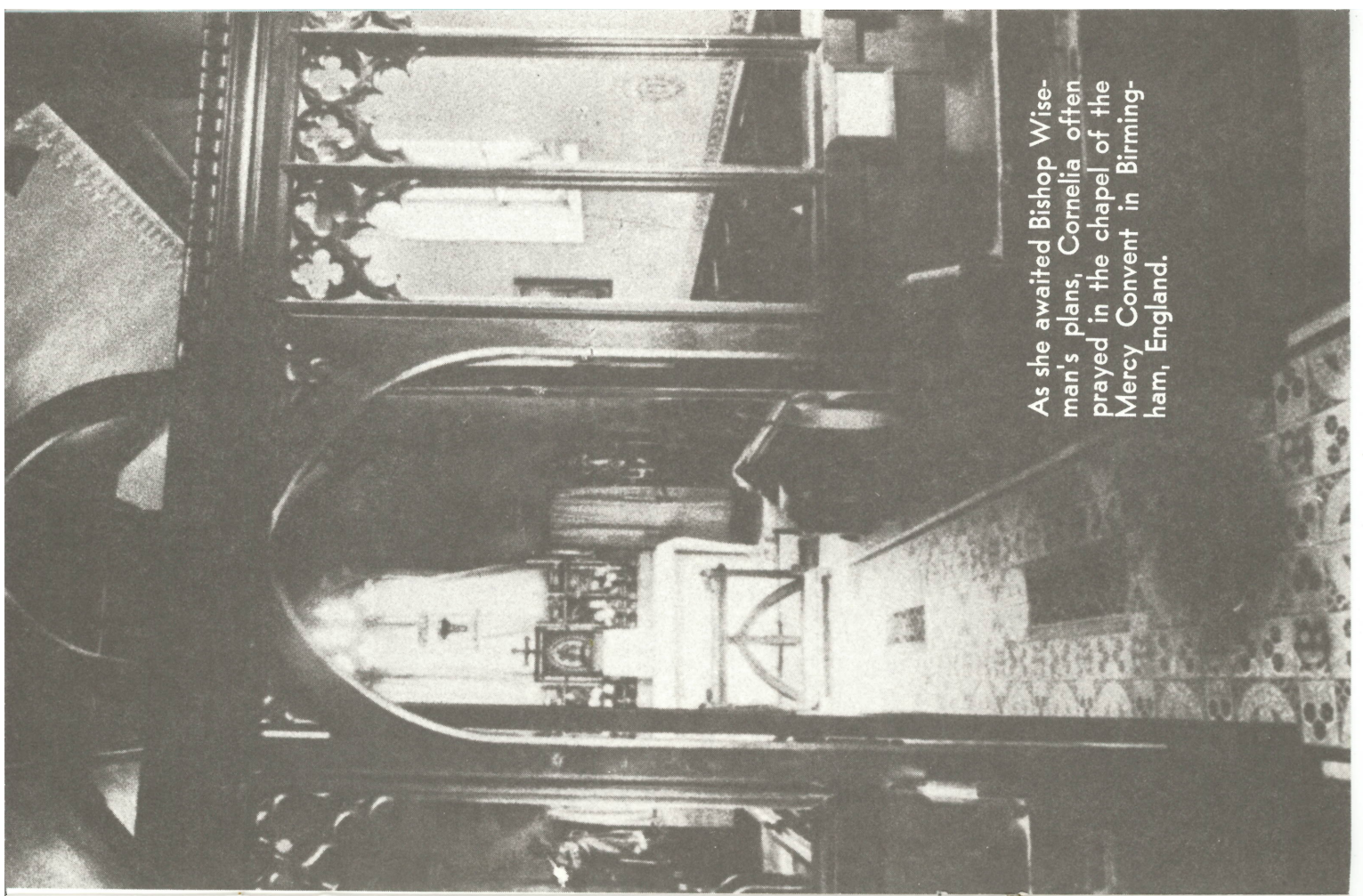
She could not do this at the con-

vent in Rome since it was cloistered. She had the responsibility of her children, so it was necessary for her to devise some kind of situation in which she could follow a religious way of life and care for Adeline and Frank at the same time. Father John Grassi, a veteran of the Jesuit American missions and a former rector of Georgetown University, in Rome at the time, counseled her.

She wanted to start a religious community that would embody the spirit of Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God. She first considered establishing an order in the United States, but Lord Shrewsbury and Britain's Bishop Nicholas Wiseman appealed to the Pope to ask her to make an initial foundation in England. It was the heady days of Britain's Oxford Movement and the Catholic Revival. Father (later Cardinal) John Henry Newman had successfully established The Oratory, to which English male converts could belong. Wiseman asked Cornelia to provide a similar institute for English female converts devoted to Catholic education. Accordingly, she packed up Frank and Adeline, whom she planned to keep with her, bade good-bye to Pierce and left Rome for England, which she reached after a three-month stay in France.

ENGLAND

Shortly after her arrival in England in 1846, Cornelia took up quarters in a cottage next to the Convent of Mercy in Birmingham. Soon three postulants for her community, which she was going to call the So-



As she awaited Bishop Wiseman's plans, Cornelia often prayed in the chapel of the Mercy Convent in Birmingham, England.

ciety of the Holy Child Jesus, appeared. Two of them, converts Emily Bowles and Mary Ann Walker, remained in the order. Bishop Wiseman came to visit and informed Cornelia that he expected her to go to work right away. "I want you to begin by opening a school for the education of Catholic girls," he said. The Catholic poor, most of them refugees from the Irish potato famine, had flooded Britain's industrial areas.

Pierce had long since grown restive in Rome. Presuming that his celebrity status would earn him a post in the Vatican diplomatic corps, he made a determined but fruitless attempt to obtain the post of apostolic nuncio to Ireland. He sorely missed Cornelia's support and admiration of his every effort, as well as her loving, cheerful presence. Without her, he foundered. Fed up with priestly life in Rome, he obtained a chaplaincy on one of Lord Shrewsbury's English estates and left Rome for Great Britain only a year after his ordination.

Bishop Wiseman, familiar with the Connelly case, realized that Pierce would soon be requesting permission to visit Cornelia and the children. While these visits would cause no scandal in Rome, Wiseman knew they would add fuel to the flames of anti-Catholicism already sweeping England. To head off any such difficulties, he insisted that Cornelia send Adeline to a boarding school. He also ordered Cornelia to enroll five-year-old Frank in Mrs. Nicholson's school at Hampstead. He assured Cornelia that she could have both Adeline and

Frank back after she completed her year of novitiate.

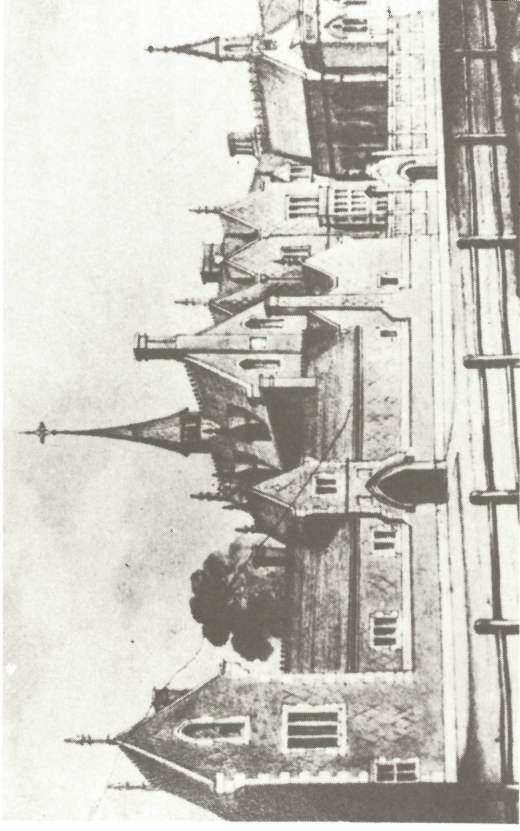
Wiseman's move caused Cornelia great anguish. "Never shall I forget the struggle of that separation," Mary Ann Walker, who eventually became Sister Aloysia, wrote of Frank's departure. "It was, I think, one of the greatest sacrifices she had to make; still, there was never seen a cloud of sadness: the 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 very calm and peaceful under so many annoying and trying circumstances."

Fourteen-year-old Mercer was enrolled at Stonyhurst.

THE NOVICE

In September, 1846, Bishop Wiseman suggested that Cornelia and her little group move to Derby to begin work in that town's extensive slums. He had arranged for the little band to inhabit a large Gothic house whose cellar sheltered a pack of large rats. Derby was a filthy factory town, jammed with English and Irish laborers. Soon after her arrival, Cornelia found herself responsible for a two-hundred pupil school, a night school and a still more crowded Sunday school.

"I should have written yesterday to thank you for your remembrance of us," she wrote to Lord Shrewsbury, "but Sunday is a very busy day with two hundred girls to lead to church for the High Mass after an hour's



In this bewildering array of turrets, gables and doorways at Derby, England, Cornelia began her work.

labor teaching them and from two o'clock to four in the afternoon teaching them to read, etc., etc. Much as we deplore the state of things which renders this necessary, we cannot but acknowledge it is the only way to get hold of the working class—the factory girls. With respect to our poor day schools, they are going very well, but we shall never get on without some pecuniary assistance."

THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD

A modest but steady stream of candidates continued to apply for entrance into Cornelia's community. Finally, some sense of order returned to her life. The ambiguity of roles she had experienced as wife, mother and separated, and finally nun began to fade.

Then Pierce, unannounced, showed up at the Derby convent. Cornelia, aware that Bishop Wiseman would disapprove of his visit, was deeply disturbed and reacted spiritedly. She and Emily Bowles remonstrated very strongly with him for coming and insisted that he leave and not return. He was furious. After his visit he wrote Cornelia a letter expressing his anger. She replied: "Your letter has just come and makes me cry, so that I can scarcely see what I write. Forget your visit to Derby. I never told you, nor meant to tell you, that I assumed that excitement to hide nature . . . as I must do sometimes. No, you have not the violent temptations that I have, thinking of our home at Gracemere, nor have you perhaps gone through the struggles of a woman's heart. No! You never have."

CONNELLY VERSUS CONNELLY

In January, 1848, Pierce kidnapped Adeline, Mercer and Frank from their boarding schools. He took the children abroad and then, posing as founder of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, went to Rome and presented a spurious rule of life for Cornelia's society to the Roman Curia for its approval. Returning to England some months later, he once more went to Derby to visit Cornelia. She refused to see him unless he returned Adeline to her care.

In January, 1849, Pierce brought suit against Cornelia for restitution of his conjugal rights. The English anti-Catholic climate ruined her defense and she lost the case. Her lawyers, however, immediately appealed and, after two years of wrangling, the English courts suspended the decision against her pending an investigation into the marriage laws of Pennsylvania.

Pierce, his funds exhausted, could no longer pursue the case. Cornelia paid his court costs to keep him out of jail. He took revenge by speaking and writing petitions to the House of Commons and launching endless diatribes against the Roman Church. He published about seventeen different pamphlets attacking the hierarchy, religious orders, the papacy, the convents. He pilloried the Jesuits, Roman Catholic morality and Cardinal (Bishop) Wiseman. He was able to eke out a meager living for himself and his children from these tracts. He continued to hold the children in

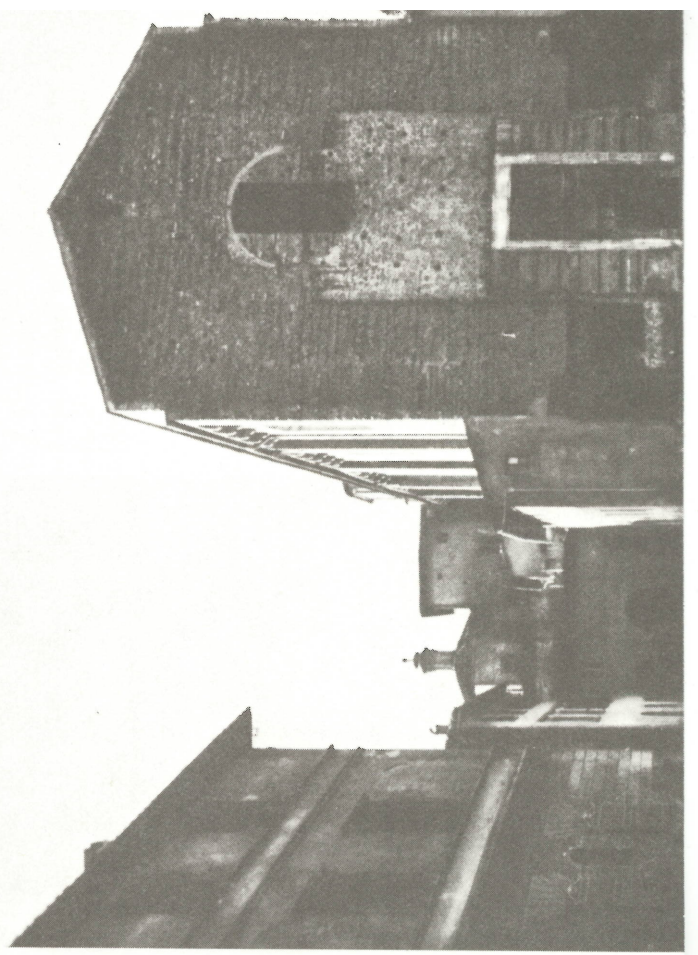
custody as his pawns in this mad game. Through them, he hoped not only to get Cornelia back as his wife but also to acquire property which they would eventually inherit through her.

British law, which considered a man's wife and children as his property, prevented Cornelia from regaining the children from Pierce. She never saw Mercer again. He died at the age of twenty in New Orleans, a victim of yellow fever. Adeline remained so closely attached to her father that she never developed her own personality. Pierce spent the last seventeen years of his life as rector of the American Episcopal Church in Florence, Italy, and Adeline remained with him until his death there in 1883. She visited her mother once or twice in England and, after her father's death, returned to the Catholic Church. Frank became a distinguished international artist and sculptor. He maintained sporadic contact with his mother, whose character and disposition he inherited. He loved her but hated the Church, which he blamed for ruining his childhood home and his parents' lives. Frank's daughter Marina attended the Holy Child Convent School in Neuilly, France, and married into the Borghese family that had befriended Pierce and Cornelia when they first came to Rome.

THE FOUNDRESS

Cornelia, under attack in the press and the courts, denounced in pulpits and lecture halls, despised by some

Bitterness and almost intolerable frustration marked Pierce's later years. Without Cornelia's affection, all the flaws in his strange personality broke through the surface. He wandered about Europe and America, an object of pity or scorn. Cornelia loved him to the end of her life and never ceased to hope and pray for his happiness. In 1868 Pierce became rector of the American Episcopal community in Florence, Italy. He lived in the building to the left (*below*). He died there in 1883.



her American sense of freedom, she developed programs and curricula unheard of in English girls' schools. For her brightest students she introduced Latin and Greek authors in translation. She expected all of her nuns and students to learn enough Latin to enable them to use and understand the Roman Missal. Cornelia herself taught science and mathematics as well as basic logic. She encouraged her teachers to allow their charges to express themselves creatively through art, music and drama.

Bishop Thomas Grant of Southwark, scandalized when he heard that Mother Connelly's nuns were teaching their charges to dance and play cards, wrote her: "Inquire prudently, as it is said that in one of your houses 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." Cornelia knew it was true; she had originated the whole idea. At one convent, St. Leonards-on-Sea, she allowed her Sisters to swim in the early morning. This drew Bishop Grant's ire. The humorless prelate suggested that, if the Sisters were attracted to the sea, they should add salt to their baths.

She challenged the British educational system, long noted for the severity of its discipline, at its very roots. Her schools were built on a mutual, trusting relationship between teachers and students. The school, in Cornelia's view, was a home and her nuns were mothers who must respect and love their students.

Working tirelessly for thirty-one years, mostly from her second four-

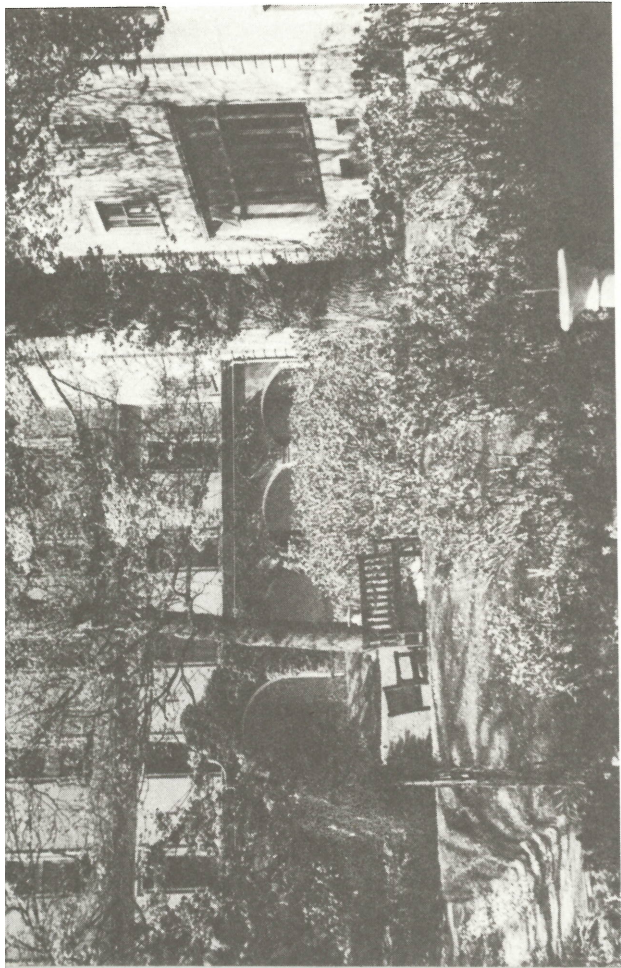
members of the Catholic Church in England who had enough troubles of their own and wished these two Yankees would go back to America with their ridiculous quarrel, nevertheless continued to develop her vision of religious life. She refused to return to the United States. "To do that," she stoutly maintained, "would be an acknowledgment of some cause for flight which would be contrary to the truth." She proved, eminently, to be a sound businesswoman, a clear-headed educator and a superb religious superior. As an educator, she drew upon two resources: her early education and her American spirit of independence.

Her first biographer, Sister Frances Bellasis, reported "that even when Cornelia was a young girl her intellect and talents were of an exceptionally high order." Her parents had provided her an excellent array of professors and tutors who educated her at home. She conversed in several languages, was an artist and musician, and possessed a melodious, well-trained voice.

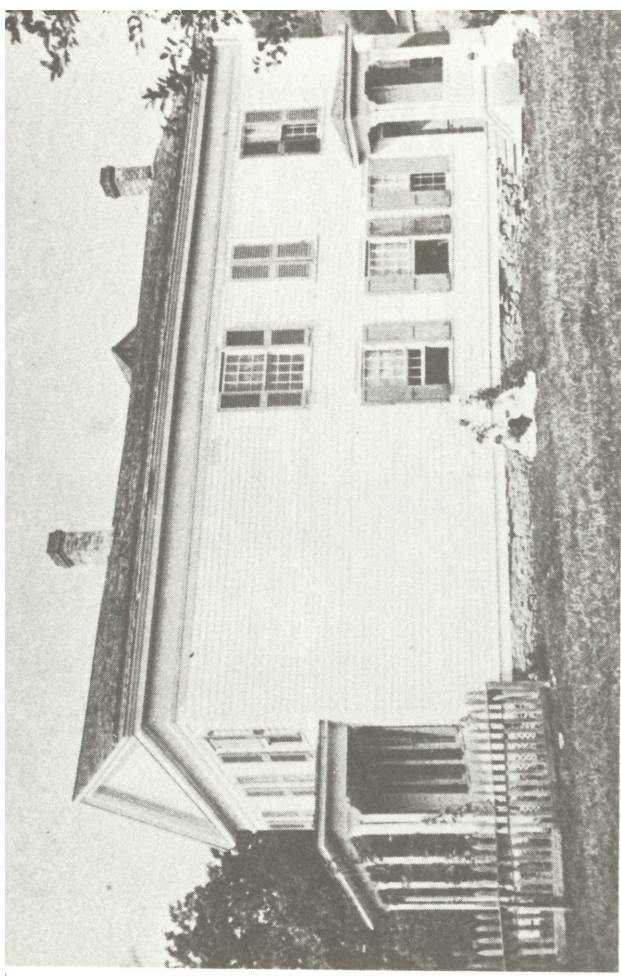
She pioneered a teacher-training college for both the nuns and lay teachers who staffed her schools at a time when Britain did not possess a comparable institution for men or women. Lord Shrewsbury and the English hierarchy wanted her to direct her efforts toward improving the better-class English Catholic schools, but Cornelia refused to neglect the poor. She broke the impasse by providing a broad range of schools — boarding schools, day schools with tuition and poor schools. Moved by

Frank and Adeline Connelly, eighteen and twenty-three years of age, respectively (*left*). Frank Connelly with his daughter Marina, the Princess Borghese (*right*). Adeline Connelly in later years (*below*).





In December, 1848, Cornelia took up residence at St. Leonards-on-Sea. She called St. Leonards "the dearest place on earth." For two decades of her life she governed her society from there. In the convent garden she found peace amidst the turmoil of her life. Mother Connelly (seated) with the community at Blackpool, England, 1860.



A later photograph (above) of the society's pioneer American foundation at Towanda, Pennsylvania, disguises the wretched conditions the first Sisters endured. After two years (1862-64), Cornelia closed the fruitless mission and opened Sharon Academy (below) at Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania. She visited there in October, 1867.



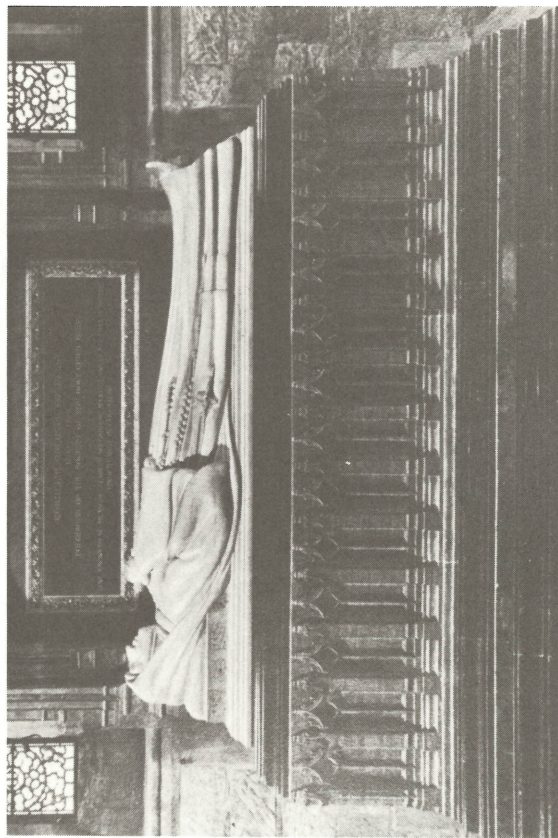
the age of seventy. All of her suffering along with the years of anguish and deprivation bore down on her and filled her poor body with rheumatic pain and marred her beautiful face with exzema.

One Sister of the Society who had not seen her in a number of years until her last moments wrote: "My first impression when I saw our beloved foundress was very sad, and I was much struck with the change that her great trials had wrought in her. Her eyes especially were sunken and had lost much of their brightness, and her whole bearing was much depressed. When this first impression had worn off, I began to admire the work of grace in her soul, manifest even to an exterior observer. If

she had too great an assumption of authority and too independent a spirit, all this had gone away and she was yielding and gentle to everyone in a way that used to fill my eyes with tears. She seemed quite grateful for sympathy and leaned on us in a way which was most touching when we remembered how all had leaned on her as a rock. Her death was peaceful. With the coming of death the exzema faded. The beauty of her youth returned."

In the near future, Sisters of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus will present to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints documentation in support of the process for the beatification and canonization of their foundress.

"Love knoweth no measure, feareth no labour, maketh sweet all that is bitter, findeth rest in God alone."
— **Inscription on Cornelia's tomb, Mayfield, England.**



Mother Cornelia Connelly, foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

dation of St. Leonards-on-Sea, Hastings, she directed the growth of her society and developed her educational theories. Her daughters bravely entered slums in Liverpool and London.

"Where is there such another maze of streets, courts, lanes, and alleys?" wrote Dickens of The Seven Dials, the first slum the Sisters of the Holy Child entered. "The streets and courts dart in all directions," Dickens continued, "until they are lost in the unwholesome vapor which hangs over the rooftops and renders its dirty perspective uncertain and confined." Cholera frequently swept through these areas. Londoners called 1858 the "Year of the Great Stink" because of the evil smell hanging above the Thames from the Fleet River's foul discharge.

FOREIGN MISSIONS

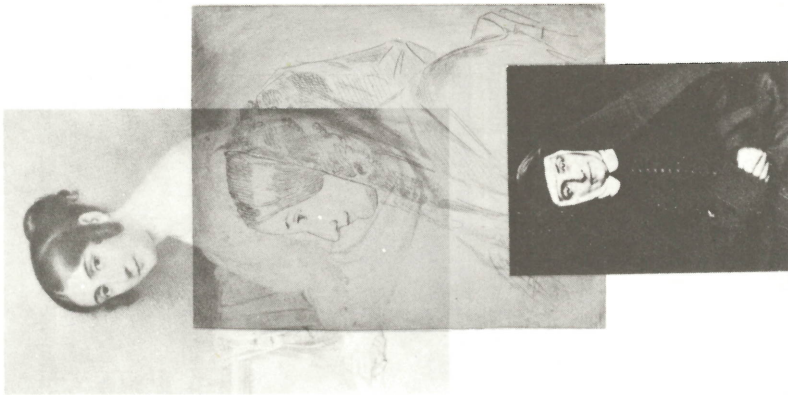
Candidates continued to join Cornelia's society.

In 1862, despite the American Civil

War, she dispatched her first missionaries to the land of her birth. They opened their first American mission at Towanda, deep in the hinterlands of Pennsylvania. The six pioneer nuns battled bravely to gain a foothold in the desolate area. They had been ill advised from the beginning. The area was sparsely populated, there were few children and the winters were terrible. When Cornelia found out how the nuns were suffering, she ordered them back to Philadelphia in 1864. She established two foundations in France, one at Toul in Lorraine and another in Neuilly, a suburb of Paris.

So many people involved themselves in codifying a rule of life for the society (including Pierce who delivered his own version of a rule to the Vatican), that she never had the rule finally approved in her lifetime. Rome did not give it approval until 1887, eight years after her death.

Cornelia died April 18, 1879, at



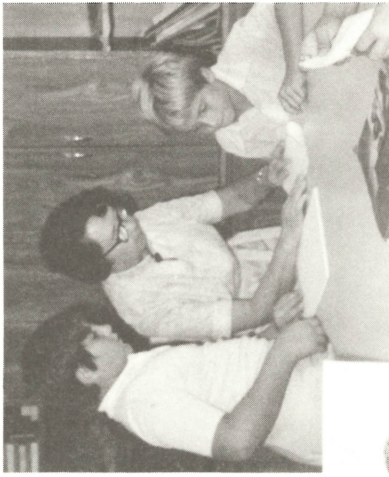
Cornelia Connelly

**PRAYER TO OBTAIN
THE BEATIFICATION
OF THE SERVANT
OF GOD**

O God, whom it pleased to glorify the name of your Son, the Holy Child Jesus, through the obedience which he learned in the school of suffering, be pleased also to glorify the name of your servant, Cornelia, who was inspired to found the Society of the Holy Child Jesus in his spirit of suffering obedience. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

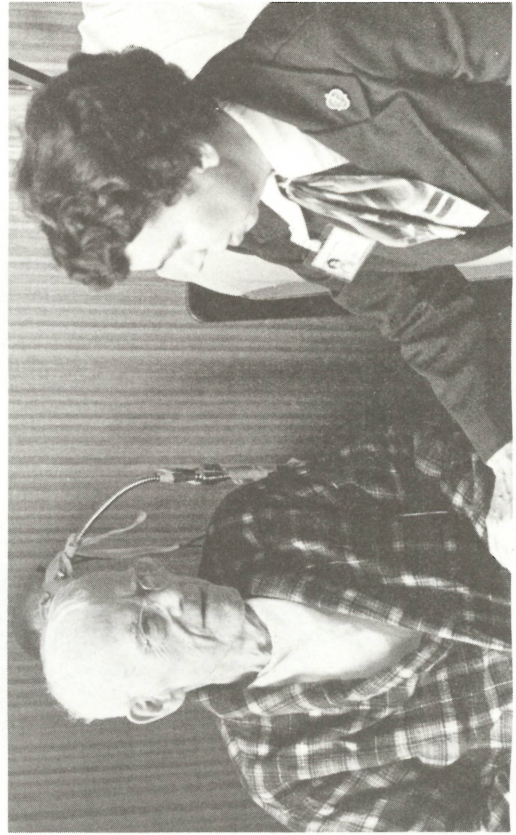
The Society of the Holy Child Jesus is an international community of approximately 700 religious women. The Society serves in the USA, England, Italy, Ireland, Wales, France, Chile, Nigeria, Ghana, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, and New Guinea.

The mission of the Society is to help others understand that God lives and acts in them and in our world and to rejoice in His presence.

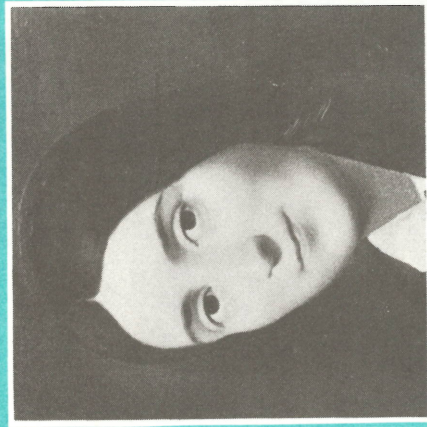


*"We inherit from Cornelia
a spirit of concern
for the whole
world."*

(SHCJ Constitutions)



On the First Friday of September, 1841, Cornelia wrote a prayer which summed up her life: "O my good Jesus, I do give myself all to thee to suffer and die on the cross, poor as thou wert poor, abandoned as thou wert abandoned."



Cornelia Connelly, Rome, 1844

For information on SHCJ write:

**The Provincial Offices
460 Shadeland Avenue
Drexel Hill, PA 19026**