

Cornelia Connelly

Three Characteristics

CORNELIA CONNELLY – Three characteristics

Founders of religious communities are very often quite unusual people, but Cornelia Connelly, who founded the Society of the Holy Child Jesus at Derby in 1846, lived a life which fortunately is demanded of very few. Married to a Protestant Episcopal clergyman who decided to become a Catholic priest, she agreed to enter a convent. But then...

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CORNELIA CONNELLY - THREE

CHARACTERISTICS

by **Annette Dawson, S.H.C.J.**

Biographical sketch

Cornelia Augusta Peacock Connelly was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on 15th January 1809. Her father, Ralph Peacock, a merchant and speculator, had emigrated from Yorkshire and become an American citizen in 1797. He married Mary Swope Bowen, widow of John Bowen, in 1798. Cornelia's mother was a second generation American descended from Daniel Steinmetz who had emigrated from the Palatinate in 1732.

After the death of her father in 1818 and her mother in 1823, Cornelia Peacock became the ward of her married step-sister, Mrs Isabella Bowen Montgomery. Although as a child she had worshipped with her parents at the Second Presbyterian Church, the Montgomerys were Episcopalians, and Cornelia was baptized at St Stephen's Protestant Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in February of 1831.

It was probably at St Stephen's that she met the handsome young Pierce Connelly, newly ordained Episcopal minister. They fell in love, but their marriage was opposed by the Montgomerys. Cornelia, now 22 years of age, accepted the hospitality of her older sister, Mrs Adeline Peacock Duval, and was married to Pierce Connelly at the Duval residence by the Protestant Episcopal Bishop of Philadelphia on 1st December 1831.

After their marriage, Mr and Mrs Connelly established their home in Natchez, Mississippi, where for four years the Reverend Pierce Connelly served as the rector of Trinity Episcopal Church. Two children were born at Natchez, called Mercer and Adeline.

In August of 1835, appalled at the virulent anti-Catholic Popery campaign in the Mississippi Valley, Pierce Connelly resigned his rectorship to investigate the claims of Catholicism at

their source. He left Natchez with his wife and two children, travelling by steamboat to New Orleans, from where they hoped to embark for Europe. Their sailing was delayed, and during their stay in New Orleans, Cornelia Connelly and her two children were received into the Catholic Church by Bishops Blanc and Rosati in December of 1835.

Pierce Connelly made his abjuration in Rome on Palm Sunday, 27th March 1836. He made enquiries in Rome as to the possibility of ordination as a Catholic priest, but was advised at that time that his usefulness would prove greater as a married man than as a priest; however, if he wished, he could consider the possibility of ordination in the Greek rite. Pierce chose the first alternative.

The Connellys remained in Rome, warmly welcomed into Roman society, until the spring of 1837. In Rome they met John Talbot, the sixteenth Earl of Shrewsbury, the English Cardinal Weld, and the young rector of the English College, Nicholas Wiseman. They also met the young Father McCloskey who would later become the first American Cardinal.

Leaving Rome, the Connellys travelled northward, and their third child, John Henry, was born in Vienna. Here they received the disappointing news of serious financial reverses arising from the panic of 1837. They made immediate preparations to return to America via Paris and arrived back at Natchez in January of 1838.

It was necessary now for Pierce to obtain employment and he gratefully accepted a teaching position at the newly founded Jesuit College of St Charles in Grand Coteau, Louisiana. Since he would not be receiving a salary immediately, Cornelia helped to support the family by giving lessons in piano, guitar, and singing at the nearby Convent of the Sacred Heart.

The Connellys settled in a small house midway between the convent and the college and they were welcomed by the two religious communities, the small missionary band of Jesuits and the religious of the Sacred Heart, who seem to have been their only neighbours. A fourth child, Mary Magdalen, was born about a year after their arrival, but died in infancy.

It was at Grand Coteau that Cornelia Connelly was to receive so many spiritual graces as she responded generously to the riches of Christ's gifts. It was here that she made the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises for the first time under the direction of Father Nicholas

Point, S. J. The busy young wife and mother, employed as a teacher in the Academy of the Sacred Heart, was able to make a happy home for her husband and children and still find the time necessary for a deeply spiritual life.

After her first retreat in 1839, she drew up a Rule of life for herself. She resolved to make an annual retreat, or if this were not possible to follow the Exercises of St Ignatius in her own home. She made a daily meditation and a general examen of conscience. The little family joined together for evening prayer each night before a copy of Fra Angelico's picture of the Annunciation.

Cornelia's openness to grace led her to a greater desire to suffer with Jesus. One day, her heart filled with love and joy at the sight of her children playing about her in the garden, she prayed, 'Oh 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.' Within twenty-four hours her youngest son lay dying in her arms, the victim of a tragic accident. Her sorrow was deeply and humanly felt, that of a devoted mother. Her devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows dates from this unfortunate event.

There were more sorrows to come.

Pierce was not successful in his teaching career and apparently longed to resume his acquaintance with the important people he had known during his few years in England and Rome. He missed the active ministry which had been successful for him as rector of Trinity Church. Giving further thought to his vocation during an eight-day retreat, on the Feast of St Edward, 1840, he decided that God was calling him to the priesthood and asked his wife to agree to 'celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom'. She did agree, but speaking to some of her religious in later years she said that the Feast of St Edward marked the beginning of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus and that it was founded on a breaking heart. Cornelia was carrying their fifth child, born five months later in March 1841.

A year after the birth of their son Pierce Francis, Cornelia's husband, with her consent, took their oldest son Merty to England where his education had been arranged by the Earl of Shrewsbury. Although his journey was ostensibly to accompany his son to Stonyhurst, Pierce intended to proceed from England to Rome to take the necessary first steps towards his ordination as a Catholic priest.

Cornelia, her daughter Adeline and the baby Frank remained at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, where she expected to remain to the end of her life. However, after a delay of fourteen months, Pierce wrote that he was returning to the United States to bring her and the children to Rome. It was necessary for her to be present to give her consent to the separation.

Shortly after their arrival in Rome in December of 1843, they were granted an audience with Pope Gregory XVI and within two months Pierce's petition was approved. Arrangements were made for Cornelia to be received at the Convent of the Trinità dei Monti in Rome with Frank and his nurse. Adeline was already a boarder in the school.

Pierce was ordained and said his first Mass at the Trinità on 9th July 1845. He gave his daughter Adeline her first Holy Communion and Cornelia sang in the choir.

Although their separation was initiated by Pierce so that he could be ordained, Cornelia, during her two retreats at Grand Coteau in 1841, gave prayerful thought to her own call to the religious life. She wrote in her notebook in September: 'Examined vocation. Decided.' Hers was a genuine call to serve the Lord, and she responded with generosity.

While Pierce studied at the Collegio dei Nobili, Cornelia taught at the Trinità and took part in the regular spiritual exercises of the community. She made her solemn vow of chastity before Pierce was ordained, but had come to realize that her vocation was not to the Society of the Sacred Heart.

She was allowed to remain at the Trinità while she 'pondered the wants of the age' and began to write Constitutions for a new, uncloistered Society devoted to spiritual works of mercy.

There were many spiritual influences upon Cornelia Connelly during her years in Grand Coteau and at the Trinità dei Monti in Rome. Above all, she was devoted to the Ignatian spirituality to which she had been introduced at Grand Coteau. Her Constitutions also reflect the influence of St Francis de Sales, the Society of the Sacred Heart and *Le Figlie del Sacro Cuore*. She had devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows, to St Francis of Assisi, and to St Teresa of Avila.

Her own unique charism was her devotion to the Child Jesus, her understanding of the mystery of redemption as expressed through

the Incarnation, Emmanuel, God with us. This understanding developed gradually. She urged her Sisters to follow the Child Jesus in his life of hiddenness and ordinary labour. They were to grow as he grew until they, too, could walk towards Jerusalem with confidence and trust in his merciful love. It was a life of love and sacrifice.

She thought first to return to her native land to begin her Society, but Pope Gregory XVI, through his Cardinal Vicar, asked her to go to England to establish schools for Catholic girls. The numerous converts to the Catholic faith at this time and the growing numbers of Irish immigrants made the need for Catholic education critical. Cornelia was admirably prepared to engage in this work and she agreed to undertake the task.

She left Rome on 18th April 1846 with her daughter and young son to travel to Birmingham, where she was joined by her first three companions. Bishop Wiseman offered them the Convent of St Mary's at Derby, and the first Mass was said in a Holy Child Convent on the feast of St Teresa, 1846. They began teaching in a Poor Day School, a Night School and a Sunday School serving the numerous young girls employed in the mills in Derby.

The bishop insisted that Adeline and Frank be sent to other boarding schools in England during Cornelia's canonical year of novitiate, but she expected to receive them back into her own convent school at the end of that year. This separation, nevertheless, was agonizing for Cornelia.

Meanwhile, Pierce had been given permission to serve as chaplain to the Earl of Shrewsbury at Alton Towers, not too far from Derby. Bored with his routine duties and frustrated in his failure to advance as rapidly as he had hoped, he began to interfere in the affairs of the convent.

When Pierce realized that he no longer had authority over his wife, he took the three children from their schools hoping that thus Cornelia would be forced to yield to his demands. Despite Cornelia's pleas to return the children to her, his unstable character led him to sue for the restoration of conjugal rights in the English Courts.

The case of *Connelly v. Connelly* dragged on, causing uneasiness among many of the clergy and further suffering for the foundress. It was two and a half years before it was terminated. Although

Cornelia in effect won the case, she was not to see her children again for many years, long after Pierce reverted to the Episcopal ministry in Florence, where he died in 1883. Merty died of yellow fever in New Orleans at the age of 20. Adeline visited her mother once, at the age of 42, and returned to the Church after the death of her father. Frank Connelly won a measure of renown as a sculptor and painter. He spent some time with his mother in 1867.

Mother Connelly continued her work as foundress, establishing schools at St Leonards-on-Sea, London, Birmingham, Preston, Blackpool, and Mayfield. She opened two houses in France and was finally able to send missionaries back to her native country in 1862. She herself was to return there for a brief visit in 1867.

On 18th April 1879, just thirty-three years after departing from Rome to begin her spiritual work of mercy in England, she died peacefully at her beloved St Leonards-on-Sea.

Today, Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus continue the work of education for all classes in the United States, England, Ireland, France, Italy, Ghana, Nigeria, Chile, Lesotho, and Ethiopia. They remain devoted to the ideals of their foundress – to serve the Church with ardour and to serve the needs of youth through education of all types.

Her outstanding characteristics

This an age of frenetic creativity. Science seeks new worlds and new men; art and music seek new forms and new modes. Governments fall as their citizenry seek new systems and new heroes. It is an age when individuals desperately seek some way to find their own identity, to stand apart from the anonymity of mass-produced housing, clothing, and foods. And yet, paradoxically, those who flee the forced similitude of city dwellings find their suburban-ranch-style conforming to another man-made and too frequently mass-produced pattern. Those who cast aside conventional garb meet themselves in countless other blue-jeaned, beaded copies; and those who reject standard frozen foods all chew the latest health food fad together. And as for man's opinions, the opinion polls report mass shifts in thought from pro to con, from left to right, and inevitable mass reversals.

Today, in our search for our own 'inscape', our own *Thisness*, we frequently fail to recognize or account for the 'instress', to use Hopkins's terminology¹ – the power of Christ within us. We fail to allow the Divine Creator to mould us to our own full potential.

The saints, and very often the poets, are sensitive to this reality. Again to use Hopkins's phrase: '... none but truth can stead you. Christ is truth'. The world today needs Christ as it has always needed him. The saints have taught us by the concrete example of their own lives throughout the history of the Church what Christ himself taught: that self-fulfilment, self-realization cannot come from adding *more* but from having less and giving more – that only by dying to self can one find oneself; only in losing one's life can one find it. The Kingdom is within.

The saints have lived this Good News, each in his or her own unique way according to their own personalities in their own cultural and historical milieu, and the Church has proclaimed these witnesses of hope. They reveal for us not various facets of Christ, but each reveals the total Christ. Their message is: 'Imitate me as I imitate Christ' (1 Cor. 11:1). They are, Karl Rahner says, 'the initiators and the creative models of holiness ... for their own particular age. They create a new style ...'.² Their horizons are wide and they dare to risk. Their wholeness in Christ, their oneness with the spring of all creativity, can help to heal our fragmented personalities by showing us how to give ourselves totally to Christ, who alone can give life and give it abundantly (cf. John 10:10).

There are many saints, many models from among whom we can, as Henri Nouwen suggests, choose the personality which most resonates with our own to be a 'real guide in the search for our own personal way'.³ Not all saints have been officially canonized. The time necessary for researching and evaluating every aspect of a person's life precludes this. But the Holy Catholic Church 'must praise the grace which has had powerful effects', which has 'conquered, which has become real and manifest to us ...'⁴ in every age. And so, some persons are selected who reveal most fully the power given them by Christ 'to return his love from the depths of [their] unique personalities ...'; persons who because of the reality of the incarnation could give themselves 'freely and lovingly with all that [they were and had] to the Word Incarnate, God-made-man'.⁵

The foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Cornelia Connelly (1809–1879), is under active consideration for beatification. She is certainly a model of holiness with relevance for today's searchers for identity.

Cornelia Connelly was typically representative of her environment and family background. She escaped from the maze of social conformity and found that when she abandoned herself completely to the Will of God, she became most herself, her own unique personality, with full scope for all of her own unique gifts. A brief look at her total response to God's presence and care can help us today to find a way to our own growth in holiness.

I would like to look briefly at the facts of Cornelia Connelly's life from the point of view of Cornelia as a woman, as a religious, and as a candidate for sainthood. In each of these categories one finds, I think, three predominant characteristics: evidence of the continuous presence of God in the direction of her life, her spirit of joy and love of life as well as generosity and courage in the acceptance of suffering and loss, and her adaptability to change. The latter could probably be labelled today, 'openness to the Spirit'.

Her life from girlhood was that constant blend of joy and sorrow experienced by one fully alive. Her home in early nineteenth-century Philadelphia was a happy one. The youngest of seven children (six of whom lived to adulthood),⁶ she learned early to adjust herself to the needs and wishes of others. She grew up in a home where religion was important, art was important, and freedom was a heritage which her ancestors had helped to win.⁷ She knew security and love.

The strength of the bond of love which existed among the members of her family is attested to in their correspondence in later years. Her sister Mary stated that in their family there was never an unpleasant word spoken.⁸ Cornelia's one surviving comment about her own mother was written thirty-eight years after the latter's death to a niece, 'None can ever quite equal a mother's love'.⁹

The only difficulty, or perhaps it was a blessing, was that the Peacocks did not stay in the same house, and, according to the records of her father's residences in Philadelphia, Cornelia must have lived in at least seven different houses by the time she was orphaned at the age of 14. Her father, Ralph Peacock, speculated in real estate and the family moved about as he sold one property

and purchased another. Between the ages of nine and fourteen, Cornelia suffered the loss of the three persons most dear to her – her father, her older brother (Dodsworth), and her mother.¹⁰ Cornelia became the ward of her step-sister.¹¹

The move to her sister's fashionable Philadelphia town house was more than just another change of residence. Isabella Montgomery, a daughter of Mrs Peacock's first marriage to John Bowen, was married the same year as Cornelia's birth 1809, and had been a member of the Peacock household for less than eight months of Cornelia's life. She inherited a considerable sum of money from her father, John Bowen, and had married a successful Philadelphia merchant, Austin Montgomery. The life-style of this wealthy, socially-prominent, childless couple would have been quite different from the down-to-earth give-and-take Cornelia had experienced as the youngest of a large family, moving from house to house as her father struggled not too successfully to make his way in his adopted country. His own boyhood had been spent on a Yorkshire tenant farm.

What Cornelia's education had been before going to live with her sister Isabella is not known. She may have attended one of the many small schools in Philadelphia. Her earliest biographer, Mother Mary Bellasis, simply says that she was 'highly educated at home by professors and tutors'.¹² Certainly, we know from her later life that Cornelia had inherited much of the Steinmetz business acumen from her mother's side of the family,¹³ that she was talented in both art and music, could converse well in both French and English and had studied Italian, and, above all, she had acquired the knowledge of how to continue one's own education.¹⁴ The visible results of her education were her only credentials. That she was usually successful and always undaunted is indicated by her later counsel which became a tradition in her schools: 'Anyone can do anything until proved to the contrary.'

The Philadelphia of 1809–1831 offered opportunities and challenges and many reasons for patriotic pride. It was then the second largest English-speaking city in the world. It had glorious memories as the birthplace of the republic; it was financially secure, although the war of 1812 brought much suffering to its inhabitants, and it was still the cultural centre of the young nation. It could boast of wide, well-lit streets lined with three and four-storied

houses. There were pleasant squares planned by Franklin for relaxation, flourishing theatres, well-established libraries, a university, an Academy of the Fine Arts and an Academy of the Natural Sciences.

Education, mostly based upon English models, was a priority. The establishment of the Sunday School movement under Dr Benjamin Rush, the Pestalozzi-type boarding school opened by Joseph Neef, and, most of all, the beginning of the public school system based on the methods of the English innovator Joseph Lancaster must all have been topics of conversation at social gatherings which Cornelia attended as a young woman. The importance of education for all became a political issue with candidates from the Working Men's Party from 1828 to 1831, and there were more than ten daily newspapers keeping the public informed of the latest developments and plans.

Cornelia Peacock, as a product of this environment and of her own family circle, was, at the time of her marriage in 1831, a well-educated, well-mannered, talented and, judging from her portrait at this time, a very beautiful young woman. Isabella Montgomery had every reason to expect that her young step-sister would soon marry well and enjoy a prominent place in Philadelphia society.

But Cornelia fell in love – totally, joyously. The Montgomerys did not approve her choice, but with a resolute firmness she persisted in marrying a young Episcopalian clergyman, newly ordained, who had much talent but slight prospects for advancement at that time. He was, however, a man of considerable charm, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, who had studied law and then prepared himself for ministry in the Protestant Episcopal Church.¹⁵

Pierce's family, like the Steinmetz family, had been prominent in the establishment of the republic. His uncle, John, served as a senator and as a representative in the Pennsylvania State Legislature and became the first president of Pennsylvania Railroad Company.¹⁶ Pierce's father was a cabinet maker of distinction.

It could not have been Pierce Connelly's family background which Isabella Montgomery found objectionable, but possibly the fact that his calling meant a very low income with which to support a wife and family. It seems to have been Pierce's religious convic-

tions, however, which Cornelia found so attractive.¹⁷

Seventeen days after their marriage Pierce resigned his position at the little church in Kingessing (Philadelphia) and accepted the rectorship of Trinity Church in Natchez, Mississippi.¹⁸

Pierce and Cornelia Connelly were an attractive, intelligent young couple, very much in love, and united in their religious beliefs. During their four years at Natchez, Cornelia's keen mind eagerly followed her husband's more learned discourses, and many of his phrases and ideas are echoed in her own letters from Natchez and later from Rome in the early years of her marriage.

All was submission, tenderness, and self-giving on Cornelia's part, and in retrospect one can look back and see how necessary this was to Pierce.¹⁹ It is interesting to note how much Cornelia herself grew spiritually under his inspiration.

In Natchez, Cornelia was introduced to a new type of society – a society not of culture but of power. Many of the most politically influential men on the national level had lived or were living in or near Natchez.²⁰ It was a small oasis of wealth and power in the midst of vast plantations and very close to large uncultivated land areas acquired in the Louisiana Purchase. Through the use of slaves, plantation owners made quick fortunes. Speculators became rich by taking advantage of the gullibility and desperation of immigrants eager to purchase land in Arkansas and Louisiana. Although the society may not have been as elegant as in Philadelphia, it was leisurely and secure.

Two of Cornelia's children were born in Natchez, Merty and Adeline. Cornelia's sister Mary, who visited them, could testify that Pierce and Cornelia 'are and always have been about the happiest couple that ever breathed'.²¹

The change to enter their lives at this time, their conversion to Catholicism, brought more joy. It was also ultimately to demand the sacrifice which would become a stumbling-block for Pierce and a sword of strength to Cornelia.²²

Cornelia's love for Pierce intensified the suffering she was to endure when she found that in her role as wife and mother she was to re-enact the pattern she had experienced as a child. In the early years of her marriage there was great joy and security of love; then came a gradual change in life-style,²³ loss (her two youngest children, Mary Magdelen and John Henry, died within five months

of each other), and finally the radical change leading to a termination of the joys of her married life, the loss of her three children, Merty, Adeline, and Frank, and the beginning of a completely new adventure in faith.

It is interesting to reflect that during the first thirty-two years of Cornelia's life, so far as we can tell, she made only one major decision of her own – and that, characteristically, was a decision for which she could accept sole responsibility and which she made whole-heartedly: the decision to marry Pierce Connelly. Every other change in her life was the result of circumstances and the decisions others made for her.²⁴ It is interesting, too, to note that that one major decision meant that she was knowingly renouncing a more affluent and stimulating social life in Philadelphia to follow a man of faith to the fringe of the American frontier. She showed herself willing to establish their home in a completely different atmosphere from that to which she had been accustomed.

Her place of birth, her many different homes, her gradual education into the polite society of Philadelphia,²⁵ the powerful society of Natchez, the international society in Rome, and the religious society which dominated their lives in Grand Coteau were all simply conditions of life which she accepted.

But each move, each change, led her gently and finally to her own transformation from society woman to woman of faith. By 1841, almost ten years after her marriage, she was ready, after much suffering and prayer, to make her second important personal decision, to say Yes to God²⁶ totally as a woman and with considerably more maturity than she had when she had agreed to marry Pierce.

This second decision was not hastily made. When Pierce told her, in October of 1840, that he had decided that God was calling him to the Catholic priesthood and asked her to agree to celibacy, she cautioned him to 'Think of it twice and with deliberate attention, but', she added, 'if the good God asks the sacrifice, I am ready to make it to Him and with all my heart.'²⁷

Her love for Pierce and for her children prompted her to continue to try to make him think very seriously of the consequences of his determination. Three and a half years later, just ten days before Pierce signed the petition for separation, Cornelia, during her retreat at the Trinità dei Monti in Rome listed in her notebook

the pros and cons, but ended with, '... if our confessors decide that our propositions are for the glory of God, without doubt it is his holy will. *Without reserves*.'²⁸

Indeed, not only their confessors, but the Holy Father himself, Gregory XVI, and his Cardinal Vicar, both approved.

Again, before Pierce was to receive major orders, Cornelia, knowing his nature,²⁹ offered to release him from 'the difficulties and trials' which she knew he would encounter in his new vocation by returning to their previous mode of life,³⁰ but Pierce persisted in pursuing his course.

Cornelia could rejoice then only in the promise of the Cardinal Vicar that she should keep her youngest children with her, Frank at least until he was 8 years old, when he could then be sent to a school in England, Adeline, she believed, would remain with her, attend the school in the convent, and perhaps even become a religious herself.

When Cornelia ascended the steps of the Trinità with Adeline and Frank on 9th April 1844, she was entering into a way of life not entirely unfamiliar to her,³⁴ but the swiftness with which she became confirmed in her new direction was unexpected.³² She was to find in her religious life the same pattern of being led by the Spirit, of making her response in joy to the suffering he offered, and, as always, of being adaptable to change.

Gradually, right from the time of her entrance into the Church, and with great leaping strides during her years at Grand Coteau, she became more herself. Her own powerful and grace-filled personality made that self what God wanted her to be.

She became less dependent upon Pierce and totally dependent upon the Will of God. But as her growth in the spiritual way continued, she frequently found that the Lord was a God of surprises.

She had thought to live with if not join the Sacred Heart order, but was told instead to found a new congregation. She had hoped to begin her spiritual works of mercy in her own country, in Boston if possible, but was told to go to England to begin an apostolate of education. She was attracted to the poverty of Bethlehem and immediately found herself burdened with two very large and very troublesome properties, one after the other, St Mary's at Derby in 1846 and then St Leonards-on-Sea in 1848.

She was willing to and desired to 'belong all to God', but her life in religion was not to be passive submission. She fitted better the pattern of 'active receptivity' to God's Word spoken to her. She was called not only to live the life of the vows but to found a new order and teach others and to help them to love the Lord and serve him in the example of his hidden life.

She always carried with her the agonizing sorrow of the loss of her children, having been promised that the two youngest could remain with her. But Pierce, whom she loved deeply, turned against her and took the children with him when he left the Church within three years of his ordination. He frequently returned unopened the letters she wrote to her children and refused to allow them to write to her or to visit her.³³

She never doubted, however, that this was the Will of God for her. She wrote in 1845 while she was at the Trinità, 'I have no doubts about my vocation to a religious life. Oh no, this is the thrice blessed road that our dear Lord has been pleased to place me in and I am but too happy and grateful for so blessed a vocation. ... Praise and bless the Lord, O my soul. How good God is - how good.'³⁴

Cornelia came to appreciate what it meant to be 'on the way', and her references to this appear many times in her letters. A few years before her death she wrote to her niece Bella Bowen, 'Ah, where has all your joy gone my darling . . . this is only a little dream of sorrow and we must never forget the *happiness* that is in store for all who walk on with faith and courage in the Pilgrimage of life. We are on *our way home*, my darling, and the trials and thorns must be gently brushed aside so as not to interrupt us on our way.'³⁵

She herself had been led on her own particular way and gathered courage and strength as she gave all to God. She took her own advice: 'To do anything well, we must do it with our heart, with our mind, and with our strength for the love of God, of ourselves, and of our neighbour.'³⁶

All anxiety - the anxiety that 'kills by inches' - was swept aside. Idle imaginings were a waste of time,³⁷ and she practised and preached an active apostolate filled with joy and dependent only upon confidence in God.³⁸ She did not feel that she herself was an important agent, but simply the servant of the Lord. She was aware

that 'circumstances' can change things. 'He does not always will that which is the most perfect in itself', she wrote to one of her Sisters, 'but the most perfect *possible* under the circumstances. . . .'³⁹

Mother Connelly was willing to undertake new ventures, opening schools and convents in London, Liverpool, Preston, Blackpool, as well as at Mayfield and St Leonards-on-Sea. She undertook the first restoration of one of the ancient shrines of pre-reformation England at Mayfield, fought her legal battles, developed an educational system second to none, wrote and re-wrote her *Rules and Constitutions*, opened houses in France and in America, and with painstaking thoroughness provided for the spiritual and temporal welfare of her Sisters and the children under her care.

Her key words were *attention*, *confidence*, *joy*. She listened to discern God's Will as revealed to her by her Superiors (Popes, Cardinals, Bishops, priests) and by the 'answers of the King Himself' in her own prayers.⁴⁰ She was confident that what the Lord wished he would provide for. It was his work. Her 'jubilee of heart which had not been bargained for in this life of accepted suffering'⁴¹ arose from the spontaneous overflow of his joy dwelling within her.

Her use of the word *attention* undoubtedly was inspired by Rigoleuc's injunction to 'an *habitual* and *frequent attention* to our interior . . . to follow the inspirations of the Spirit of God'.⁴² It was part of her own active and practical nature to give her whole effort to the job at hand, whether that was prayer, daily labour, study or recreation. She stressed attention in prayer and in all one's actions.⁴³ Her writings on this subject range from the invitation to meditation on this word and discussion about it in her Epiphany letter of 1858, to a short analysis of how to get the attention of the pupils,⁴⁴ attention in managing a house, preparing the meals, and even in making tea.⁴⁵ In other words: 'Do what you are doing.'⁴⁶ It was '*pains-taking* for the eagerness of love.'⁴⁷

Her use of the word *confidence* embraced the concept of trust not only in God (which was a paramount virtue of her life), but also confidence in one's own ability (stemming from confidence in God), and confidence in others.⁴⁸ She wanted her young Sisters to say, 'I will do my best and trust in God.'⁴⁹

Her joy was evident not only in her references to her 'jubilee of heart', but by her zest for living life to the full. She loved beauty in nature, art, music. Despite a daily schedule demanding an infinite variety of labour, she found time to sit and enjoy God as he manifested his beauty in the changing colours and pounding of the sea, in the sunset, to enjoy picnics and pilgrimages, to devote some time to her own artistic development, to sing, and to laugh.

She lived with sorrow and accepted it. 'We do not,' she wrote, 'renounce our good sentiments and heart throbbings though we try to supernaturalize them. . . .'⁵⁰ Just two years before she died she reflected, 'Oh, how full of sorrow is this passing world, and yet how full of joy in the depths of sorrow.'⁵¹

This study is limited of necessity to a very brief reflection on Cornelia's spiritual life, but these qualities of total gift to God, realistic self-acceptance, and practical day-by-day giving to others are most characteristic of her single-minded devotion to the Will of God.

These qualities, in themselves, are indicative of a life of heroic virtue, and in particular a reflection of the virtues of faith, hope and charity as they were practised by her. (She was insistent that one did not possess virtue but had to exercise it.)⁵²

In promoting Cornelia Connelly as a candidate for beatification, it would be right to draw attention to the idea of the presence of God in her life, her equanimity in joy and suffering, her acceptance and appreciation of both, and her flexibility in the face of adversity and consider them as lived signs of faith, hope and charity. This line of thought owes its basis to a series of talks given by Father Ladislav Orsy, S.J., to the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus in Rome, December 1978.

To have faith is to believe in the 'things that cannot be but are,' as the poet Francis Thompson put it so beautifully. It is to receive new eyes that enable the believer to see clearly what was hidden before, and new ears to hear what was inaudible. It is a 'new capacity' to recognize the Lord present in every circumstance of our lives.

The outward fruit of faith is conversion, a change of heart. One must become 'at once what Christ is, since he was what I am. . . .'⁵³ And although we strive to achieve this oneness with Christ 'at once', God's work is usually a gradual, step-by-step process.

With Cornelia, the change was gradual and continuous, with a few occasional 'spurts' of growth – influxes of grace which steadied her and remained with her to the end. She was changed from a young woman of charm and social accomplishments to an independent, dynamic, and grace-filled individual who could teach others how to live the only life worth living, where 'God teaches us to know ourselves'. She wrote, '... when we doubt our motives and wish to purify them it is a sign that we begin to know ourselves, our sinful nature, and then alone we learn to act for God alone and to do all for his greater glory, as the apostle says, 'whether we eat or drink'.⁵⁴

God wants to give us a share in his goodness, to reveal to us the riches of his life, but he respects the readiness of his children to receive his gifts. Cornelia's growth in the spiritual life was rapid during her five years at Grand Coteau as wife and mother, where she followed with eagerness and fidelity the counsel of her Jesuit director. She was encouraged to make a daily meditation, daily examination of conscience, a monthly day of retreat, and had permission to undertake bodily penances.

She longed for a closer relationship with the Lord through union with him in suffering and offered, in her First Friday retreat of 1841, to give herself all to Jesus to 'suffer and die on the cross, poor as thou wert poor, abandoned as thou wert abandoned by all but thee, O Mary'.⁵⁵

Her remarkable growth in faith at this period, which enabled her to see the will of God in every circumstance of her life, led her to relish the goodness of God. She could look squarely at the reality about her, accept it, and find God in it. Her 'Yes' to God was the natural and spontaneous result of her intimate knowledge of his goodness. Her experience of his goodness in her own life, this gift of hope, enabled her to accept both the joys and sorrows of her life in a spirit of peace and tranquillity because all came from God.

Cornelia's joyful spirit seemed to be as spontaneous when she was waltzing with the children at recreation in her boarding school at St Leonards-on-Sea as it had been years earlier in Grand Coteau when she played the piano so that her children could dance and march about in a pre-bedtime frolic.

Her acceptance of sorrow was learned early in life, but hope taught her to welcome it. She was grateful 'for every little cross . . .

for it is only suffering which brings us to the peace of God which passeth all understanding.⁵⁶ She counselled casting aside all thoughts of 'self-love and self-compassion. The heavier the cross the more Our Lord loves you, the more constant the touches of his hand. . . . Walk on steadfastly in your sorrows to meet Jesus at Jerusalem.'⁵⁷

Faith perceives God; hope relishes him, and charity longs to share him with others. Hopkins's simile of the grandeur of God infusing the earth 'like the ooze of oil/Crushed . . .' could be applied to the diffusion of God's goodness in the world through those who love him.

Cornelia's apostolic spirit was characterized from the beginning by generosity and self-sacrifice. In the earliest letter extant from Cornelia to her husband (22nd September 1835), she asks Pierce to encourage his brother George to become a Catholic and suggests to him that they bring in from Havana 'a few hundred emigrants, Catholics,' to have a Catholic establishment on the riverlands owned by Pierce. The object was to rescue them from the conditions in their own country.⁵⁸

Her energies were diverted to more conventional, but more difficult, projects when in obedience she changed her original plans in 1845 for work in America to accept the Holy Father's request that she begin the work of education for Catholic girls in England. Her tremendous labour against opposition on all sides, her willingness to accept new challenges, to change her plans when obedience demanded, is a matter of record.

She wanted to meet the needs of the age and did so with joy and courage. She who was changed by love could effect change in the emerging Catholic England of the nineteenth century by educating its future wives and mothers in the ways of God.

What can Cornelia Connelly say to us today? In just these three characteristics – her attention to the presence of God in her life, in others, and in the world, her spirit of joy and her abandonment of herself to experience life to the full with its joy and sorrow, and her adaptability to meet new circumstances, new needs, 'full of confidence in God',⁵⁹ she can show us how to free ourselves to give ourselves completely to God's work, whatever that may be now, wherever that may take us in the future.

To women everywhere and in every state of life she can be a

model who encourages them to be strong, developing their own unique personalities, accepting the daily circumstances of their lives and reaching out to others to help them along the way – women filled with faith and joy who can change things for the better.

Footnotes

- ¹ Cf. W. H. Gardner, *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Penguin Books, 1953), or any standard work on the Jesuit poet.
- ² Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. III. (Baltimore, 1967), p. 100.
- ³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (New York, 1975), p. 99.
- ⁴ Rahner, op. cit., p. 94.
- ⁵ Paul Molinari, S.J., *Saints: Their Place in the Church* (New York, 1965), p. 59.
- ⁶ This fact in itself in the first quarter of the nineteenth century is indicative of the good health and the good care within the Peacock family.
- ⁷ For information on Cornelia's forbears, see Maria Caritas McCarthy, 'Cornelia and Pierce Connelly: New Perspectives on their Early Lives,' *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society*, vol. 72 (September–December 1961), pp. 95–98. Also, Mary Andrew Armour, Ursula Blake and Annette Dawson, *Cornelia* (New York, 1979) pp. 4–5.
- ⁸ Told to Mrs Mary Gaenslen, Cornelia's niece, by Mother Mary Frances Peacock, R.S.C.J., Cornelia's sister. See letter from Mary B. Gaenslen to Mother St John McMaster, S.H.C.J., undated, c. 1925. This could well be an exaggeration, but it does give an indication of the underlying atmosphere of peace that must have existed in the Peacock household.
- ⁹ To Cornelia Duval, St Leonards, 27 January 1861. CC 1: 117.
- ¹⁰ Ralph Peacock died in 1818, Dodsworth in 1822, and Mrs Mary Peacock in May 1823.
- ¹¹ Cornelia's mother, Mary Swope Bowen Peacock, was the widow of John Bowen when she married Ralph Peacock in 1798. There were two children born of Mrs Peacock's first marriage, Isabella and John Bowen. Isabella Bowen married Austin Montgomery on 5 September 1809.
- ¹² Mary Francis Bellasis, S.H.C.J., an unpublished *Life*. D 72: 2–3.
- ¹³ Cornelia's great-uncle, John Steinmetz, was one of the principal wholesale merchants and importers of Philadelphia.
- ¹⁴ She studied Italian grammar, music, and art in Rome. Although only Pierce Connelly could converse in French when the Connells first arrived in Europe in 1836, Cornelia soon acquired facility in that language and encouraged her religious to do the same. As a mental discipline, she applied herself to the study of mathematics.
- ¹⁵ According to a family history compiled by Pierce Connelly's grand-nephew, Henry Connelly Groome, Pierce changed his religious views from Presbyterian to Protestant Episcopalian during his university years, studied law after his graduation from the University and was admitted to the bar, and subsequently decided to devote himself to the ministry within the Protestant Episcopal Church, being ordained by Bishop White in 1828 three years before his marriage. (It is not possible to verify whether or not Pierce Connelly was admitted to the bar or ever practised law.) *The Groome Family and Connections: A Pedigree* (Philadelphia, 1907). D 2: 3ff.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–8.
- ¹⁷ She wrote to her sister Adeline less than four years after her marriage, 'I have

perfect confidence in the piety, integrity, and learning of my dear husband.' 1st September 1835. D 2: 42. It seems to be these three characteristics in Pierce which most impressed all who met him at this time.

¹⁸ Pierce was offered a salary of \$1,000 a year in Natchez, a substantial increase over the \$400 he was receiving at Kingessing. The move, however, is typical of most of Pierce's impulsive and sudden decisions. It meant a journey of over 1,592 miles down the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers *plus* a journey overland from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh in a wagon.

¹⁹ See Georges Cruchon, S.J., 'The Case of Pierce Connelly', *Source*, 5 (Autumn 1976), pp. 5–19.

²⁰ To name a few: General Andrew Jackson had been married at a plantation in the vicinity. (He was President of the United States during the time of the Connells' residence in Natchez and Rome.) The former governor of the Mississippi Territory and the first governor of the State of Mississippi; Thomas Reed, the United States Senator from Mississippi; Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy (married to General Zachary Taylor's daughter); and General Zachary Taylor, twelfth President of the United States, elected in 1848, all had property in or near Natchez.

²¹ Mary Peacock to Adeline Duval, 13th October 1835. D 2: 53.

²² 'Is not our faith a sword of strength? I feel it so, My Lord', she wrote to Bishop Grant, 24th November 1853. CC 11: 9.

²³ From Natchez, Pierce and Cornelia travelled in England and Italy (during 1836–37), enjoying the intimate companionship of the highest society; then in 1838 in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, they experienced another change – humble lodging and the deeply spiritual companionship of the missionaries of the Society of Jesus and of the Society of the Sacred Heart.

²⁴ Although Cornelia made her abjuration in early December 1835, almost four months before Pierce (27th March 1836), her letters to her sister Adeline in September and October 1835, and her letter to Pierce in September 1835 make clear that she is submitting as she says 'to whatever my loved husband believes to be the path of duty'. Although Pierce did not mention Cornelia's reception into the Church in his letter to his friend Nicolle two days after the event, Bishop Blanc wrote to Bishop Purcell that Madame Connelly's 'happiness was great on the day of her Communion, and her husband fully shared it!' New Orleans, 13th February 1836. D 3: 62. Mother Catherine Gompertz, S.H.C.J., in her biography states, regarding Pierce's adherence to his original plan to be received into the Church in Rome, that he and Cornelia 'agreed to act separately', Gompertz, *The Life of Cornelia Connelly* (London, 1922), p. 9.

²⁵ In a letter to her sister Mary from Rome, March 1836, Cornelia commented that she and Pierce found 'no difference between the polished society of Philadelphia and the society of the English nobility excepting that they carry more humility in their politeness'. D 3: 77.

²⁶ *Spiritual Notebook*, CC 21: 15.

²⁷ Recorded by Father Abbadie, S.J., her spiritual director at Grand Coteau. His letter of recollections of CC, 5th September 1879. D 64: 7.

²⁸ 5th March 1844. CC 21: 21.

²⁹ She wrote to him in May 1836, just two months after his abjuration when he

left Rome to travel to England with Lord Shrewsbury, '... I knew it would be so... don't give way to depression.' D 3 : 109-110.

³⁰ Allegation on behalf of Cornelia Connelly entered in Court of Arches on 23rd April 1849. D 7 : 28.

³¹ She had lived with the Religious of the Sacred Heart at Grand Coteau during 1842-43 while Pierce was travelling in Europe and had thought to live her religious life there until summoned by Pierce to come to Rome. Before this, she had taught in the school there for four years.

³² Upon their arrival in Rome in December 1843, Pierce wrote to his brother Harry that he expected to superintend the studies of the future Earl of Shrewsbury, and Cornelia and he would 'probably spend one or two more winters in Rome', with Cornelia probably spending the summers at Frascati. 28th December 1843. D 4 : 214-215. Within two months of their arrival, however, their separation was 'approved' by the Holy Father and everything was determined (Letter of Pierce to his brother John Connelly, Rome, 17th March 1844. D 5 : 20). The deed of separation was signed on 1st April; Cornelia entered the Trinità dei Monti on 9th April, and on 10th April Pierce received the tonsure.

³³ Frank did visit briefly in 1867. Through Sister Theresa Hanson, Cornelia kept in touch with Adeline. Cornelia's daughter was 42 years old when she visited her mother for the first time after their separation when she was a girl of 13.

³⁴ To Adeline Duval. Rome (Trinità), 12th November 1845. CC 1 : 51.

³⁵ St Leonards-on-Sea, 25th September 1872. CC 1 : 113. In 1859 she chose the title *Walking with God* for the translation of the Jesuit Père Rigoleuc's writings.

³⁶ To Merty, 1846. CC 1 : 27.

³⁷ To Sister Xavier Atkinson, S.H.C.J., 5th April 1865. CC 6 : 1.

³⁸ Her own practical approach was to use 'active energy... [to] make us all the more useful and happy'. 16th December 1875, to Bella and Lizzie Bowen. CC 1 : 114a.

³⁹ To Sister Angela Hunt, S.H.C.J., 5th August 1870. CC 7 : 17. Father William Yeomans's article, 'The Will of God,' in *The Way*, vol. 18, No. 2 (April 1978), p. 123, expresses much this same idea. 'The will of God does not demand an ideal me in an ideal situation; it is to be found in myself as I am here and now with my gifts and my sinfulness.' In fact, much of Father Yeomans's article could be a description of Cornelia's attitude. For instance: Yeomans - 'What... does seeking and finding the Will of God imply? It implies first of all that I accept myself in the here and now as God accepts me... So I come before God in my ignorance, my weakness and my poverty' (p. 124). Cornelia - 'We are what God sees us and knows us to be, nothing more' (CC 22 : 11). Yeomans - '[God] wants me to be my unique self, and consequently to be able to express that self in whatever I may do. What I do may not always be what I would choose to do' (p. 124). Cornelia - 'Heaven must be won according to God's way upon us in particular and on each one in particular' (CC 6 : 1); 'Be yourself, but make that self just what Our Lord wants it to be' (D 73 : 174).

⁴⁰ '... the soul's whisperings are answered by the King himself...?' CC, in Preface to *Walking with God* (London, 1859), p. 4.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Père Rigoleuc, S.J., *Walking with God*, p. 81.

⁴³ In this sense she comes close to Kennedy's idea of 'responsible awareness'. Eugene Kennedy, *A Sense of Life a Sense of Sin* (New York, 1975), pp. 86 ff.

⁴⁴ CC 29 : 34.

⁴⁵ CC 29 : 28-30.

⁴⁶ To Merty, Derby, 1847. CC 1 : 34.

⁴⁷ To a religious, 30th August 1874. CC 8 : 76.

⁴⁸ To Mother Veronica Fronduti, 7th September 1877. CC 6 : 113.

⁴⁹ To Mother Mary Angelica Croft, 7th February 1871. CC 6 : 76.

⁵⁰ To Mother Catherine Tracey, 18th December 1873. CC 8 : 17.

⁵¹ To Mother Xavier Atkinson, Paris, 19th February 1877. CC 6 : 45.

⁵² Note her letter to Adeline Duval. Trinità, 12th November 1845. CC 1 : 52. Also notes from Retreat of 1842, CC 21 : 18, 44.

⁵³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection.'

⁵⁴ Letter to George Peacock, Trinità, 16th July 1844. CC 1 : 102.

⁵⁵ *Spiritual Notebook*, CC 21 : 15.

⁵⁶ Letter to the Novices (in America), 13th November 1876. CC 8 : 118.

⁵⁷ *Spiritual Notes*. June 1872. CC 22 : 17.

⁵⁸ D 2 : 48.

⁵⁹ She wrote to Mother Veronica Fronduti in 1877. 'Do not worry over temporals. You will see that our Lord will do everything if we do our best. There would not be one of our Convents on the face of the earth if we had not trusted to Our Lady of Sorrows next to God's Providence.... You must be full of confidence in God and diffident in ourselves.' St Leonards, 7th September 1877. CC 6 : 113.

N.B. CC refers to the *Writings of Cornelia Connelly*, 60 volumes. D refers to *Documentation* presented to the Historical Commission for the process of Beatification and Canonization of Cornelia Connelly, 86 volumes. The first numeral is volume number; numeral following colon is page number.

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