



Our Cornelia

FOR THOSE WHO KNOW AND LOVE CORNELIA

Welcome to the first issue of the *Our Cornelia* newsletter, a regular publication for all those who want to know Cornelia Connelly better and pray to her.

The *Cornelia Connelly Promoters Committee (CCPC)* has put this out to keep you informed on activities regarding the founder of the *Society of the Holy Child Jesus*.

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Cornelia Connelly

✧ Cornelia Connelly ✧

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BY JUDITH LANCASTER, SHCJ

It has often been said that Cornelia Connelly's life has all the makings of a Hollywood blockbuster: sex, religion, nuns, bishops, abducted children, a wife threatened with kidnap by her estranged husband, salacious court proceedings, high profile media interest... Even in sober reality, her life was undeniably dramatic and controversial; strong feelings, both for and against her, are still

aroused whenever the story is recounted.

But what is really important about Cornelia is not so much what happened to her as what



she learned from her experiences, what she did with them, how she grew through them so that she had something worthwhile to offer to others. Arguably, the most important

lesson she learned and shared with others was how to find God in the ordinary events of

daily life – the joys and sorrows, the successes and failures – and how to respond faithfully to what God seems to be asking.

In 1846 Cornelia, an American convert to Catholicism and mother of five children, whose husband had recently been ordained a priest in Rome, founded the Society of the Holy Child Jesus in Derby. She was far from being a run of the mill founder of a religious congregation: as Archbishop Ullathorne drily remarked, ‘Rose water will not do with her.’

Cornelia established schools and, as it turned out, her educational methods were not run of the mill, either. The schools were, thankfully, more rigorously academic than most girls schools of the period. But Cornelia was interested in a good deal more than exam results. At the heart of Holy Child education, rooted in Cornelia’s understanding of the Incarnation, was reverence

and respect for each student. Trusting her own experience as a mother, and with a surprising grasp of the psychology of adolescence, Cornelia stressed the importance of happiness at school. (Art and theatricals, swimming in the sea, playing cards, learning to waltz, running about in the fresh air were all regular features of school life.)

Cornelia’s aim was to discover and develop potential, to enable the students to become themselves. Encouragement, she told the nuns, was more effective than punishment: they were to turn a blind eye to misdemeanours as far as possible.

Cornelia was, above all, passionate, a woman of zeal and enthusiasm; she took risks and made mistakes. Her vision and desire was to enable others to grow strong in faith and live fully human lives.



Cornelia’s Rome by Cathi Duffy

For me, one of the highlights of the International Associates Coordination meeting was the walking tour of Cornelia’s Rome. We walked streets where Cornelia lived, visited churches of significance to Cornelia, toured parts of Trinita Monti, and saw the homes of her new friends in Rome, such as the Borghese and Shrewsbury families.

On their first visit, Cornelia and Pierce stayed on a side street a few blocks off Piazza di Spagna. It was a fashionable shopping area then and now. The narrow streets

may have reminded them of Philadelphia and their apartment would be entered similar to the row houses of Cornelia’s upbringing. When looking to the homes of the Borghese and Shrewsbury families, any familiarity with an American home ceased. Their homes were each a full city block of several stories! Cornelia wrote letters about sitting next to dukes and lords but first Pierce and Cornelia walked into homes that were beyond their American experience! The extravagance of the art on a second floor ceiling was still visible from the street today. One can only imagine what the rest of the home revealed.



The size, art, and architecture of the churches also would have surpassed

any experience in America. Philadelphia was considered a cultural, cosmopolitan city in Cornelia's youth. Its Quaker background and colonial roots had little of the opulence that Rome displayed. The art within each of the churches would definitely have caused Cornelia to feel that she needed to study the art within it. For me, each included a sensory overload – where to look, what to focus or gaze upon! I recall that the Mass was in Latin and the Mass 'participants' were not necessarily following along. Each painting would be a source for much reflection to Mass attendees.

Our visit to Trinita Monti was special. We prayed in the small, simple chapel where the Mater Admirabilis was painted during Cornelia's stay. It was easy to imagine Cornelia spending hours there praying, imploring God's help, discerning her future calling.

From the small convent chapel, we went to the large church in which Pierce celebrated his first Catholic Mass and Adeline received her First Communion from her father. Joy for Cornelia but what else did the church hold for her?

During the visit to the Trinita Monti, I was struck by the enclosure in contrast to the lively square just below the Spanish steps, of the expanse that Grand Coteau or the Natchez countryside provided, and of the world unseen from the small cloister courtyard that became Cornelia's world. It was also striking that the Connelly's first

apartment in Rome is only a few blocks from the Trinita Monti – a recognition that in such a small space of time and distance, Cornelia's life was entirely changed.

Cornelia experienced joy and sorrow in the simplicity that life offered at Natchez and Grand Coteau. She appreciated that the trappings of the social life in Rome were not needed or desired. From all we read, she adapted well to the setting but, unlike Pierce, did not grasp at these external expressions of grandeur.

By the end of the tour, I felt a new appreciation for Cornelia's life in Rome – especially her initial visit and the time of her formal separation and founding of the Society. Her faith, her strength and courage, her love of God and family echoed in those places – Yes, Lord, Always Yes!

Reflection

1. Have you been exposed to new world views? What was your reaction initially? What would it be today?
2. How do you experience a life of simplicity in the midst of the riches of our world?
3. What provokes in you awe and wonder of God's grandeur?

Cathi Duffy is Director of SHCJ Associates, USA



Children Learning From Cornelia

Students from Mayfield Junior School in California hold placards of quotations from Cornelia Connelly. With the students are Justina Akpakpan, SHCJ, and Genevieve Ibedu, SHCJ, both Holy Child Sisters from the African Province.

Venerable Cornelia Connelly, A Reflection

BY MRS. EDITH O. BABALOLA, LOYOLA JESUIT COLLEGE, ABUJA, NIGERIA

I first had the opportunity of reading the full life story of Cornelia Connelly, at the Residence of the Holy Child Sisters in Ikoyi Lagos State Nigeria on the 21st of April 2015 while on a trip to the Lagos Branch of the Loyola Jesuit College Parent-Teachers Association meeting.

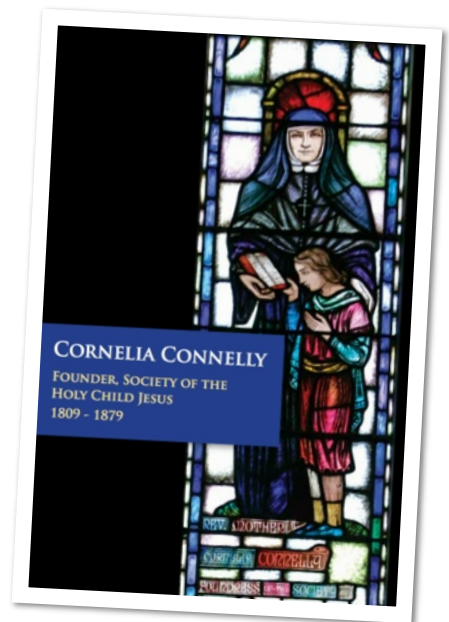
That day while sitting in the little living room, waiting to be picked up for the meeting, I reached out for something to occupy my time from among the books on the reading table and what I picked happened to be a book titled CORNELIA CONNELLY, FOUNDER, SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS 1809 – 1879 by Judith A. Talvacchia.

In matter of minutes I was totally absorbed in one of the most compelling stories I have ever encountered in my life. What made this story stand out for me as a Nigerian, an African married woman? Cornelia was a woman ahead of her time; she was not a stereotype of the usual submissive, insipid and spineless woman who did as she was told in order to fit into the socially acceptable mold. She demonstrated this quality when she married Pierce Connelly, a young Episcopalian clergyman, despite the disapproval of her sister/guardian Isabella.

Cornelia had the unique gift of nurturing relationships and not geographical locations or material possessions. What counted with her was being with family and loved ones much more than living in favourable geographical locations or amassing material wealth.

Her life was one of movements from place to place, often at great inconvenience; first from Philadelphia (a city considered to be the cultural centre of the U.S.) to Natchez in Mississippi, to a small cottage in Grand Coteau, in Louisiana (a small centre of commerce), to Rome and eventually England to start a new religious order.

In all of these movements she did not cling to the past or regret any of the luxuries and conveniences she must have had to forgo. Instead, purpose and finding the will of God for her life were her major pursuits. Even Pierce described her as always cheerful regardless of whatever deprivations they experienced.



I saw a woman hungry for God, loving God, ready to do His will at all cost. She even sang in the choir on the day of Pierce Connelly's ordination to priesthood! I cannot imagine singing for a spouse who (I feel) had put his personal ambition above family commitments.

A normal woman (writing from my context as an African woman) would have felt rejected and crawled away to lick her wounds in private. Or change religious belief and thereafter mount a campaign of calumny against the Catholic Church for supposedly taking her husband away from her (as Pierce would later do). But Cornelia did none of these; she chose instead to see the hand of God in everything she lost for she thought she had given Pierce to God who had a prior claim on him.

I saw a woman of remarkable strength; she rode the storm of separation from her husband and children and overcame the castigation of a world that heartily disapproved of her independent and strong-willed nature and still fulfilled God's purpose for her life. Many women would have been cowed into submitting to societal dictates of how a woman should or should not behave. Ironically, many women today have been caged from attaining their full potential because they want to be seen as the ideal meek, mild and submissive woman!

Grief drew her nearer to God rather than away from God whom she drew strength from. It brought a life-long devotion to Mary, the Mother of Sorrows. This devotion made her so strong in the face of adversity that Pierce would fall to pieces later, when he missed her steadying presence and go ahead to do what ALL weak people do—try to destroy what they cannot have, control or understand.

She fearlessly refused Bishop Wiseman's questionable request to set aside guest quarters for him within the convent walls. This was in spite of the fact that he was her chief sponsor and mentor at a time that she had very few friends. She did not allow the fear of losing a friend and sponsor to compromise her principles.

Like the Apostle Paul, Cornelia weathered the storms of controversy, treachery, betrayal and persecution from friends, the British public and even her children without bitterness. She forgave and did not allow her emotions to degenerate into bitterness. Even the much touted superior English justice system deprived her of justice when they eliminated her statement from the evidence she presented at Pierce's suit for restoration of conjugal rights filed against her, the court would then do the unthinkable and rule in Pierce's favour. (In the 19th century legal system in England in which women had no rights, Pierce of course was bound to win the case. (This type of ruling is still happening in some parts of the world today). Through it all Cornelia maintained a heroic degree of calm and self-possession and she won the case in the end.

How she endured estrangement from her children with all the attendant misunderstanding and bitterness on the part of the children (who had been led by their father to see her as a woman without feeling who had abandoned husband and children for her own selfish purposes) only God knows!

Even well into her old age, controversy dogged her steps and as usual she always came out triumphant. For example all efforts to manipulate the Rule as she envisaged it, including the SHCJ Preston "cabal"

failed and her original rule preserved in vision and spirit was released in 1893, fourteen years after her death. This came to pass after damage had been done to Cornelia's relationship with her Sisters of the Order who felt she was revising the Rule to exert arbitrary control over them.

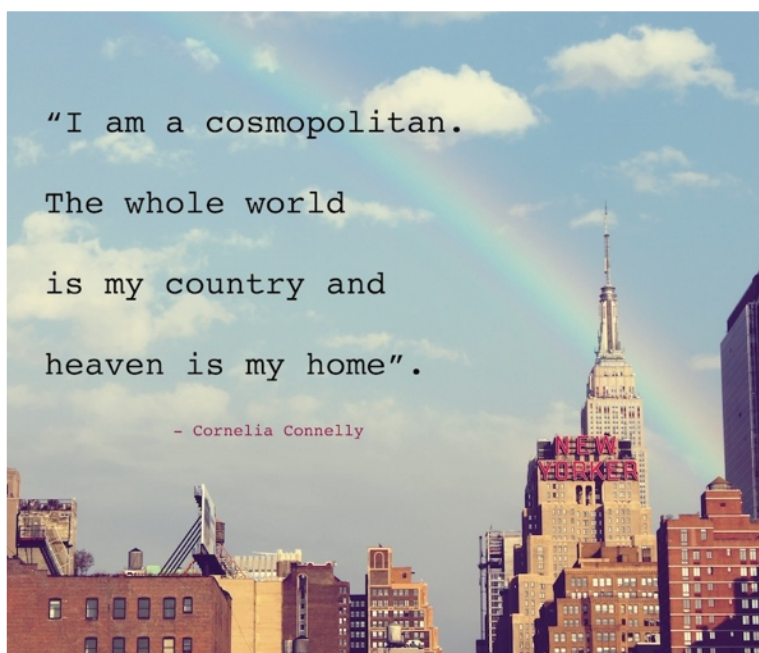
After Cornelia's death, for a period of fifty years her name was not mentioned nor was she discussed publicly. Her letters and journals were sealed away and were nearly destroyed by a superior who was trying to exercise caution in the face of the controversy that had trailed her life time. They were afraid of stirring up all the controversy once again.

But again truth prevailed and in 1930, the Society began to initiate the formal process of canonization. I truly was not surprised to read that her body when it was exhumed was so well preserved in death that it was still recognizable after having been buried for fifty years.

The Church did what was right when she was declared Venerable in 1992. I hope soon to hear of her beatification. At the time of her death in 1879, she had lived out the motto "Actions not Words".

In her portrait by Ellen Cooper 2007, her eyes and hands tell it all..., we see eyes that have seen pain and trouble still radiating innate kindness and peace...even twinkling with humour, hands that have been made rough by hard work yet still retaining their sensitivity. Cornelia was a kind and sensitive soul that treachery, betrayal, controversy, rejection, and vilification could not harden and make unfeeling.

Many people in our society today have become hardened by the harsh blows that life has dealt them and have consequently become cynical and condemnatory. This was not the case with Cornelia who had had more than her own fair share of life's troubles. I believe women... even men have a lot to learn from this woman, wife, mother and Sister — Venerable Cornelia Connelly 1809 -1879.





Questions to Enquirers on Venerable Cornelia

When the Cornelia Connelly Promoters Committee receives enquiries about Cornelia we ask how they became familiar with her and how they can relate to her story.

The reason is because we would like to document any favours or miracles received through the intercession of Cornelia.

Here are two examples of responses from recent enquirers:

Gervin in The Philippines writes, "I personally was inspired by the life of Mother Cornelia. Her being a convert too, mother, wife and her devotion to Our Lady Sorrows really influenced me in spreading her legacy."

Dawid in Poland writes, "The story about her conversion is important to me because I was born in Catholic Church but at a period in my life I became a protestant and I have now returned fully to the Catholic church. I feel closer to persons who have also moments of conversion because they understand me. So, she is closer to my heart because we have similar moments of life. Now I am in the seminary and I believe she can help me with good formation to the priesthood."

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