

# CORNELIA CONNELLY

## The Life and Legacy of Cornelia Connelly

Cornelia Connelly, who in 1846 founded the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, was born in Philadelphia in 1809. The youngest of seven children, Cornelia had lost her parents by the time she reached the age of 14.

Her early sorrow perhaps foreshadowed the anguish that would soon follow. By the time she was 32 years old, two of Cornelia's five children had died and her husband of 10 years, Pierce Connelly, had chosen to enter the Catholic priesthood. When Pierce had told her of his decision, Cornelia responded selflessly, "If the good God asks the sacrifice, I am prepared to make it and with all my heart."

## Faith leads Cornelia on a new path

Since the Catholic religion does not permit its priests to marry, Pope Gregory XVI granted the couple a deed of separation contingent on Cornelia's vow of chastity and a promise that she would become a Sister.

Cornelia lived at the Trinita dei Monti in Rome with their children and began sharing in the life of the Sisters. Pierce was ordained in 1841, and, during the Mass, Cornelia sang in the choir and their daughter, Adeline, received her First Holy Communion.

## Cornelia strives to "meet the wants of the age"

Despite the obstacles she faced, Cornelia is respected, loved, and remembered today for her inspiring resilience in the face of adversity. While sharing in the life of the Sacred Heart Sisters, Cornelia expressed in a letter to her brother that she did not feel that God was calling her to join the Sacred Heart congregation. She articulated her belief as "meeting the wants of the age," which has since become a cornerstone of the Holy Child mission and spirit.

## Roots of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus

At the Pope's request, Cornelia was invited to begin a congregation that would educate Catholic girls in England. The words "Society of the Holy Child Jesus" came to her, reflecting her incarnational spirituality. She considered this a gift from God, and ultimately, it was the name she gave her congregation.

On October 13, 1846, the Society officially began as Cornelia traveled to Derby, England with three other women who became Sisters of the Holy Child. The Sisters began offering basic education to the girls who worked in the silk mills and factories surrounding the convent. They also ran a night school for about 100 girls and taught on Sundays to accommodate workers' schedules.

In December 1847, Cornelia officially took vows of poverty and obedience and Bishop Nicholas Wiseman installed her as

Superior General of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. By that time, Cornelia had welcomed 16 women into the community.

## Cornelia expands the reach of SHCJ

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

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

In 1862, the first Sisters to serve in America had sailed for Towanda, Pa., where they established a school and convent. By the time Cornelia died in 1879, the Society was flourishing in both England and the U.S. and Cornelia had fulfilled her dream of establishing convents in France.

## Cornelia's legacy lives on

The Sisters of the Holy Child carry on Cornelia's work in North America, South America, Europe, and Africa. They seek to help thousands find a better life through education, social work, health care, legal work, pastoral care and administration, and spiritual direction.

Cornelia's philosophy—while unconventional at the time—is widely praised today for its innovation and vision. Cornelia's leadership has allowed the Sisters of the Holy Child to "meet the wants of the age" through "actions not words."

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