

The Venerable Cornelia Connelly, 1809-1879
Foundress of the Congregation of Women Religious:
The Society of the Holy Child Jesus

Cornelia Augusta Peacock, born at No. 1-3 Filbert Street, Philadelphia, was the youngest of seven children in her wealthy Presbyterian family. Due to the deaths of her parents, her married step-sister and husband adopted her and took her to the Episcopal Church where she was baptized in 1831 and was married that same year to Pierce Connelly, a minister there. Once the need was realized, Pierce took the ministry of Rector in Natchez, Mississippi and for four years they served there. At the same time, they were actually drawn by the zeal of the Jesuits and Sacred Heart Sisters to Catholicism. Their happy marriage was also blessed with their first two children, Mercer and Adeline. Before long, Pierce knew he had to address the longing in his heart for priesthood. He renounced his Episcopal faith and orders. Cornelia, aware that they were going to the Vatican, made a Profession of Faith and received her First Holy Communion in January, 1836. When they arrived at the Vatican, Pope Gregory XVI received Pierce and as surmised, he, Pierce, a married man and father, was not a candidate for priesthood. They both then were confirmed on March 27, 1836.

The two years in Rome were rich experiences meeting new Catholic friends, and for Cornelia, becoming steeped in the arts, spiritual, linguistic and cultural experiences. On their unexpected return trip to America, she gave birth to their second son, John Henry. Family finances were low, so Pierce took a teaching position with the Jesuits in Louisiana and she with the Sacred Heart Sisters. These five happy years were not without the tragic loss of two of their children; Mary Magdalen, who lived only six weeks, and five months later John Henry, who was pushed by a large dog into a vat of boiling sugar cane and died on February 2nd, the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. For the rest of her life, Cornelia leaned on the Heart of Our Mother of Sorrows. Then one day Pierce asked Cornelia if she would join him in living a life of celibacy. This challenged her, but if it was God's will she would comply: they were off to Rome again.

They now lived separately; she much like a cloistered nun, visiting her two children in nearby boarding schools: Mercer was in a boarding school in England. On June 18, 1845, she made her perpetual vow of celibacy, as the formal separation took place prior to Pierce's Ordination. She was hearing God's call to form a religious community for the teaching of women in her beloved America. The Holy Father, however, saw a far greater need for her ministry in England, due to a growing Catholic population. Once again, she bowed to God's will, heard in this papal advice. She, two of her children and three postulants departed for England in 1846. Bishop Nicholas Wiseman offered her a residence in Derby. It was in this convent garden when with her little son, Frank, that she was inspired to name her congregation **The Society of the Holy Child Jesus**. Cornelia was captured by the beauty and simplicity of childhood and the glory of His Incarnation, while gazing at the statue of Mary holding Jesus.

On December 21, 1847, Cornelia renewed her vow of celibacy taken in Rome, and made religious vows of Poverty and Obedience. Bishop Wiseman solemnly installed her as Superior of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus: twenty-one postulants and novices were admitted that day. One year later the very successful work of the Sisters would come to an abrupt end and they would need to find a new home and ministries in St. Leonards-on-the-Sea in East Sussex. Prayerfully they moved on, grew in numbers and in loving and joyful service, meeting many needs, especially of women and girls. Cornelia focused intently on the beauty of soul of the sisters and saw the need for each one to be her best self, happy in her life of service. She was inspired by the Incarnate Jesus and wanted her sisters to walk closely in His footsteps: that Jesus was also human was to be made known to all and was at the heart of her mission. For this reason, the Society celebrates to this day, the Feast of the Epiphany as their Congregational feast. After many revisions, Cornelia's Constitutions received Papal approbation. Unknown to her was the fact that, early on, Pierce had submitted a Rule, claiming that he was the founder of her order: this fallacy was soon denounced by the Vatican.

Pierce tried to win her back, kidnapping the children and taking her to court to reclaim his conjugal rights, which in the end he lost. He angrily went to Florence as Pastor of an Episcopal Church. She grieved his giving up of his Catholic Faith and feared the same for their children. Her private vow to God was to acquiesce to the reality that she may never see her children again. She never saw Mercer again, but Frank who remained Protestant, she saw on two occasions, and Adeline, who returned to her Catholic faith, visited her mother once.

In 1992, Mother Cornelia Connelly was declared "Venerable" by Pope John Paul II on her Heroic Virtues.

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