

T H I R D E D I T I O N



# Our Cornelia



FOR THOSE WHO KNOW AND LOVE CORNELIA CONNELLY

*Welcome to the third 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.*

## ✕ Epiphany ✕

BY JUDITH LANCASTER, SHCJ

Epiphany, the visit of the wise men to Bethlehem, was the feast that Cornelia chose as the most important celebration of the year for the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, 'our great feast of the year' as she called it.

We may wonder: Why? Why did she not pick Christmas itself, with the little family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, in the stable, and the angels announcing the breath-taking news to the shepherds on the hillside – to the poorest people around?

Today, with our 21st century understanding of the feast, we might be inclined to say that it was because Cornelia wanted to emphasise the truth that Christ came to save all peoples, not just the Jews – and not just Christians, either; that the feast of Epiphany is indeed a Manifestation that Christ came to save us all without exception. But it doesn't seem that that was at the forefront of Cornelia's thinking.

What we know from written sources (which is all we have to go on now) is that Cornelia wrote a letter to all the members of the Society every Epiphany from 1851 to 1878. Before 1851 there was no need of a letter, because the Society consisted of a single community at St Leonards, and by January 1879 she was too ill, too near death, to write. (*Continue*)

Sadly, we don't have all the letters, but from the ones we do have we can see something of Cornelia's thinking about the feast and what she wanted it to mean in the Society. What she emphasises is the giving and receiving of spiritual gifts. And it is for this reason that members of the Society renew their vows on this feast day – recalling to mind that God has given each of us so many gifts and that we are to dedicate ourselves again to living them as fully as we can in the year ahead. (The first letter, written in 1851 – less than five years from the founding of the Society – shows that the practice of renewing vows on 6 January was already established.)

In Epiphany letter after Epiphany letter, Cornelia suggests three gifts to reflect on – because, of course, the magi gave three gifts to the Christ Child. So one year she will speak of Faith, Hope and Charity, another of Poverty, Chasity and Obedience which, she hopes, 'you may day by day understand more and more brightly, and love more intensely, and practice more diligently'.

In the letter of 1856 Cornelia chooses three gifts which are more personal to herself and more revealing of her hopes for the Society – 'our old friends, though ever new, Vigilance, Humility and Fidelity'. We might want to reflect on these three gifts and what they mean to us and how we live them. Cornelia, expanding on her theme, gives us some pointers:

'Be then like the Holy Child Jesus in your thoughts, in your words, and in your actions, cherishing diligence [that is, vigilance] and fidelity in what is called little by daily occurrence – and be persuaded that nothing is little with God, if it is the practice of virtue – God and I – Fidelity.'



# On the Road to Canonization: The Cause of Cornelia Connelly



Photo: Holy Child Sisters Carlotta Bartone and Helen McDonald

This is the first in a series of articles written by Carlotta Bartone, SHCJ, for Our Cornelia. Sister Carlotta presents an overview of the canonization process from early Christian times to the present. She shares the journey of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus to promote the cause of Cornelia Connelly, Founder of the Society, for beatification and eventual canonization, and where this effort stands today. Her “On the Road to Canonization: The Cause of Cornelia Connelly” explains the canonization process as it pertains to Cornelia’s life and the Society’s hope that one day, she will be recognized as a Saint.

By Carlotta Bartone, SHCJ

Within the past few months, the Roman Catholic Church recognized as a Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

## **What does it mean to achieve such status, and how does one become a saint?**

In the first years after the death of Christ, his followers were being persecuted for their faith. Those who were willing to suffer martyrdom rather than deny their faith were considered saints and venerated as such. As time went on, the making of saints was a spontaneous act of the local Christian community, and those who lived holy and exemplary lives were acclaimed as saints. In the Middle Ages, the names of the founders of religious orders, both men and women, were added to the list. By their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they were considered confessors, as opposed to martyrs, and they were typified

according to their sex and state of life. Men were bishops, priests, or monks; women were virgins or widows.

By the fifth to the tenth century, bishops assumed greater control over the process, and insisted that petitioners provide them with written accounts of the candidate’s life, virtues and death, and especially of any purported miracles.

At times it was found that some who had been acclaimed as saints were not truly worthy of the title, so that by the 12<sup>th</sup> century the Church gradually developed a legal process of investigation into the lives of candidates for sainthood. Witnesses were called and evidence was gathered in an effort to determine whether the candidate’s reputation for holiness was deserved. From the late 12<sup>th</sup> century onward, the papacy required posthumous miracles as signs from God, especially for non-martyrs, confirming the candidate’s reputation for holiness and proof of heroic Christian virtue. *(Continue)*

## What has this to do with Cornelia?

After Cornelia's death in 1879, the second mother general of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus asked one of the Sisters to collect all her writings, evidently with a view to eventually writing a biography of Cornelia and possibly introducing her cause for beatification. The same mother general later asked the Sister to destroy all the writings. Fortunately, on the advice of her confessor, the Sister disobeyed the order, but the first biography of Cornelia was not published until 1922. Finally

the General Chapter, which is the governing body of a religious congregation, decided in 1924 to formally introduce the Cause for beatification of Cornelia Connelly.

A second biography in French was produced in 1930, and this was then translated into Italian. The priest who was consulted about the possibility of introducing the Cause was not encouraging, and it was only in 1946, on the occasion of the Centenary of the Society, that the General Chapter established a commission to promote the Cause.



## Cornelia's Purse

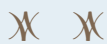
Cornelia's purse, which is kept in the European Archives, seems to have doubled as a notebook and address book for her.

# Telling the Story of Cornelia on Stage

A play about her life is being workshopped in Europe and America.

*“You know, one of the girls back in the day . . . described how . . . if someone was at the piano playing . . . and Mother Cornelia happened into the room . . . She’d sweep up the nearest one and waltz her off her feet.”*

Scene 1, Act 1, WALTZ WITH ME by Diane Samuels (pictured at right)



WALTZ WITH ME is a new play by Diane Samuels. Also involved in developing the project is creative and research consultant Ghislaine Kenyon, alumna of Mayfield School.

In WALTZ WITH ME, Aggie, who herself once attended Mayfield, revisits the school for the retirement lunch for a beloved teacher. Struggling to decide whether to leave a deeply unhappy marriage, in desperation, though lapsed, she finds herself in the chapel beside Mother Connelly’s tomb and turns to her in prayer for guidance. During the acrimonious divorce that follows, including loss of custody of her two children, Aggie, continues to call on Cornelia for solace and never lets go of the hope that one day she will be



reunited with both her children, despite the increasing alienation from them. Cornelia’s own life story, initially happy home life and marriage to Pierce Connelly, conversion to Catholicism, losses, struggles, discovery of her calling as a nun and foundress of an order and schools, then heart-breaking separation from Pierce and her children, weaves and dances alongside and through Aggie’s journey, somehow informing and inspiring her to some kind of redemption, perhaps even a miracle. With a company of actors and musicians, Cornelia’s story and legacy are brought alive through modern lives with words, music and dance.

**By Diane Samuels**

I first came across the remarkable story of the life, marriage and pioneering work of Cornelia Connelly when it was told to me by Ghislaine Kenyon (a Mayfield School alumna). I was immediately compelled, listened with rapt attention, gasped more than a few times, and was on the edge of my seat till the end. This story was all the more powerful for being true and felt like it was already finding its way into dramatic life merely in the telling. In those first few moments *WALTZ WITH ME* was born.

Researching for the play has been quite an adventure, brimming with surprises, strange coincidences and fascinating discoveries. I was raised in a Jewish tradition and had little knowledge about the church and what it meant to be a nun. So I listened and learned what I could, helped most generously by sisters belonging to the Society.



Especially significant was my first visit to Mayfield School one wintry Ash Wednesday. Being led to the chapel to visit my first ever Catholic service, I passed by photographs on the wall of a student production of my play *KINDERTRANSPORT*, inspired by the true-life experiences of Jewish child refugees before and during World War 2. Cornelia's commitment to the arts as a hugely important and integral part to education, particularly drama and live theatre, rings strongly for me too. I wondered if theatre might be a crucial medium for addressing human relationships with the Sacred or Infinite, across boundaries of different religious or non-religious affiliations.

I also realized that day that *WALTZ WITH ME* is in some ways a surprising sequel to *KINDERTRANSPORT*, picking up the theme of mother/child separation and taking it further, to some kind of restitution.

*WALTZ WITH ME* is a story within a story within a play, owing a great deal to true-life experience and just as much to imagination of the playful, psychological and spiritual varieties.

My understanding of what it means to be married, to bear and lose children, and to take up a path of spiritual devotion has been enriched by learning about Cornelia. My commitment to the arts being central to the education of the whole person has been deepened by researching and writing this play. My heart and life are bigger and better for it.

This is a play about faith in the broadest sense of the word, without limits. In a world where different belief systems often regard each other with incredulous hostility, I am glad to make a contribution to the exploration of what is in essence true for all. I hope that all who come to see *WALTZ WITH ME* will have their eyes opened, hearts moved and minds expanded in unexpected ways too.



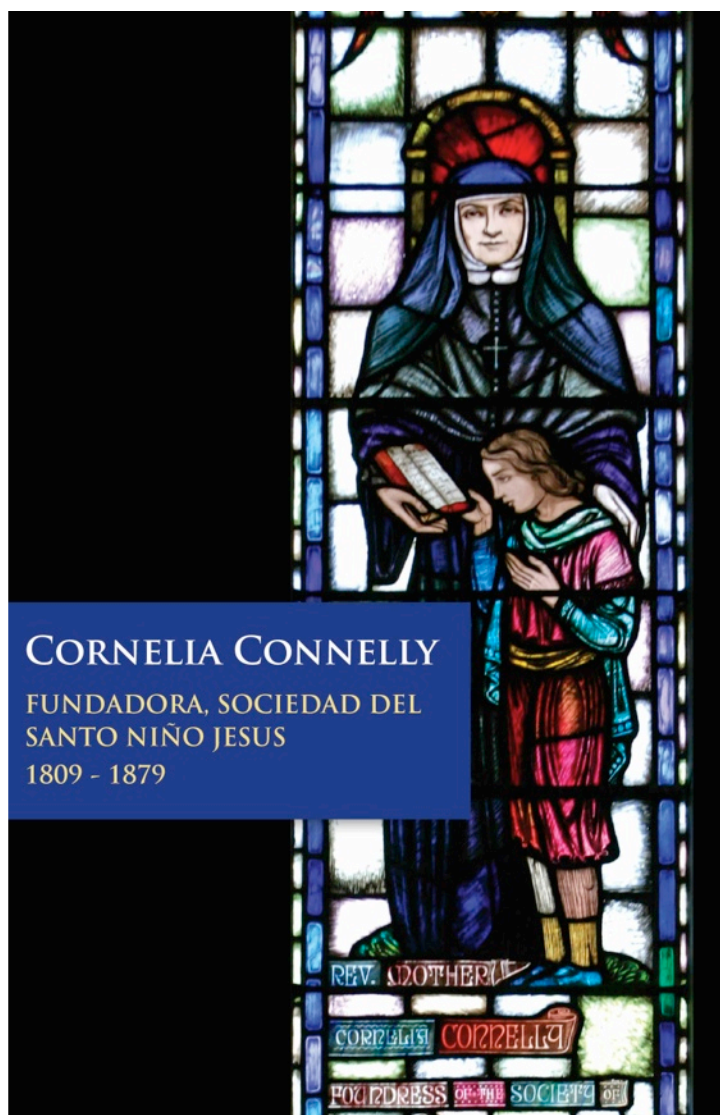
*Photo: Actors Claire Price reading Aggie and Katey Fraser as Iris.*

The Life of Cornelia Connelly by Judith "Judy" Talvacchia is now available in Spanish in addition to the original English version. To receive a copy, please email [holychildsisters@shcj.org](mailto:holychildsisters@shcj.org).

*Oración para obtener  
la Beatificación  
de Venerable  
Cornelia Connelly*

Oh Dios, que has elegido  
a Cornelia Connelly  
para fundar la Sociedad  
del Santo Niño Jesús,  
inspirándola a seguir el  
camino trazado por  
tu Hijo Divino,  
obediente de la cuna  
hasta la cruz,  
queremos compartir su fe,  
su obediencia y su  
confianza incondicional  
en el poder de Tu Amor.  
Concédenos (el favor/ los favores)  
que imploramos ahora  
por su intercesión...  
y complácete en glorificar,  
aun en la tierra,  
a tu sierva fiel,  
por Jesucristo Nuestro Señor.

Amen.



## *Contact Us!*

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Do you have a special Cornelia story or connection to share?

Do you want to receive the Our Cornelia newsletter or to enquire about Cornelia?

**Email [Generalate@shcj.org](mailto:Generalate@shcj.org)!**