

## *Keeping Vows*

# CORNELIA CONNELLY

(1809—1879)

Cornelia Connelly, Superior General  
Society of the Holy Child Jesus  
St. Leonard's-on-sea  
England

Miss Adeline Connelly  
Mr. Pierce Frances Connelly  
Rome, Italy

8 February 1878

My Dearest Addy and Frank,

Three weeks ago Father Spencer gave me Last Sacraments, followed by Holy Viaticum a week later. Everyone, including myself, expected God to take me. But, despite the infirmities of old age that cause me to be nothing but a burden to our community, He has decided that my time has not yet come. I am, in fact, pronounced slightly better by our doctors and likely to live on for some weeks or even months.

I am reminded of one of the slave songs we learned back in Mississippi before the emancipation. "All My Trials, Lord, Soon Be Over." Remember, Addy, how we used to sing it together when you were very young? I do. I treasure every memory of each moment when we were all together. When I asked myself why I had been spared once more, what tasks and trials I must complete—which ones I could do in what capacity remains in this body before I die—the answer seemed suddenly clear and obvious. I must write to my surviving daughter and son, must try to help them to understand the true nature of their so-called desertion by their mother. Why should you not believe the fault is mine alone? You are told to blame me, not only by your father, but by his church, by many members of both his family and mine in America, by the courts of England, by both the British and American newspapers, and by the gossip and rumors spread throughout Europe every time your father publishes another attack or delivers another lecture (followed, of course, by newspaper reports quoting his usual intemperate accusations against me). You are of age now, and could act independently of his wishes, but I understand why you have refused any communication with me—your relation to

your father would become awkward, full of guilt for his suffering. It is well that we not add guilt to what you have already suffered.

You must not think that throughout these thirty years, I have not done whatever I could to follow your lives, to know what you are doing, how you are faring. I have sought news of you from distant family members as well.

For instance, I know, Addy, of your visit to our family in America with your father a few years ago. I received a letter from his brother, who was concerned that you were shy and awkward, with—he wrote—none of the education and poise he expected of a young woman of your class. I too am concerned that your devotion to your father's needs narrows the scope of your interests. It worries me that you may feel obliged to do the impossible—to fill my place in your father's life, the place he believes I should have obediently resumed as his lawful wife. I assume that if you are reading this letter, your father has died, and now you can make decisions to live a wider life. I assure you it is never too late to follow a different path—as I know from experience.

Frank, it has been easier to follow your path as a man of the world who fulfilled his promise as a boy. I still keep and treasure a dozen or more pictures you drew when you were seven years old, not long before I lost you. On one of my trips to London, I made a point of seeing your sculptures on display. I was so proud of you that I blurted out to the museum guard that the sculptor was my son. His eyes widened as he looked at my habit and wondered if I was a demented old lady. When I began laughing at his expression, he, no doubt, felt confirmed in his suspicion.

I hope that neither of you thinks I write this long letter to cause you pain. On the contrary, my hope is to give you facts that may help you to you to endure the pain your parents brought to you. You are certainly old enough now—Adeline, at 43, and Frank, at 37—to know and understand the whole truth. In fact, you are about the same age as your father and I were when I made the decision to—according to the common belief—“desert” my family.

Too tired to go on today.

10 February 1878

A few days of rest and I am able again to hold a pen. I will continue this letter, a bit each day as I feel strong enough, even if only a line at a time. In that way I can surely complete this task God presses me to perform before my release. What I am less certain of is how to make sure this letter reaches you both. Addy, even if the uncertain Italian postal service delivers my letter to your father's house, he may destroy it before you can become aware that it has come. Frank, your receiving my letter in Rome will not be so hindered. I can only hope that, free to choose, you will not refuse to accept it.

Aside from the unreliable Italian postal service, I have another problem. If I designate a sister here at the convent to carry the letter to Rome, she may agree to deliver it—but then destroy it. I have heard—one hears so much when one is assumed to be unconscious—that many of the sisters propose destroying every trace of me, every scrap of paper, as soon as I am dead. It seems the bishop enthusiastically supports their intent. Even I support that intent. It is desirable, perhaps vital, for the work of the order that my

name be forgotten, wiped out. My only certain hope for the survival and delivery of this letter is Sister Ambrose.

Sister Ambrose was with me almost from the beginning and knows the whole truth. She often acts as our courier to the Vatican. She promises to keep silent about this letter and bring it to you on her next journey—a minor intrigue that hurts no one. Frank, I hope that you will read my letter and, upon your father's death, will pass it on to Addy. By then, your father and I will have met in the next world, where we will no longer see "through a glass darkly, but face to face," and his anger will be gone. Any anger I felt was long ago replaced by gratitude to him for his unintentionally giving me the life I was meant to live. In this, he also fulfilled the hope he lived for—to be an instrument of God. (I almost smile, like a mischievous girl, writing that. Your father, I know, does not see our situation this way.) I pray constantly to be cleansed by complete forgiveness of his taking you from me. I also pray that, after reading this letter, you will be able to forgive me—without withdrawing your sympathy from him.

Enough for today.

20 February 1878

I remember how we sang songs and told stories when you were children, but I do not remember telling you of my childhood. It strikes me that, assuming no one mentions me in your presence, you may know little of my early years. My parents died when I was very young, shortly after my father had lost the family fortune in unwise speculation. I became a penniless orphan, but a fortunate orphan, being raised by my well-to-do half-sister. Your Aunt Isabella not only gave me a mother's love; she broke all accepted custom in Philadelphia by giving me an education equal to that of any young man. She intended that I should become a helpmate worthy of the leaders of America, at least the wife of a congressman from Philadelphia, and possibly the wife of a future president.

She was appalled when I repaid her generosity by declaring I would marry your father. It was not that he lacked intelligence or talents or a fine appearance or a good education or a respectable profession as an Episcopal minister. What he lacked was money, but, even more important, status equal to that of our family. She did not take our high status as lightly as I did—to me it was a fortunate accident that mattered little. So little that I failed to notice how your father suffered from the gap between his family status and mine. He once told me I could not imagine how much confidence, what easy assurance I had that had been denied to him and to others by accident of birth. (Without that assurance, would I have had the courage, the indifference to the opinions of others, to choose your father?) I was, said your Aunt Isabella, headstrong and stubborn. Others called me too outspoken, especially in correcting any young man who displayed ignorance—instead of following the accepted standard of behavior for a woman—wide-eyed, smiling pretence that whatever a young man says is a revelation! The most frequent accusation was "bold"—admirable in a man, but a grave fault in a woman. They expected this fault to be corrected by the duties of marriage and ordeals of motherhood, even for a woman whose way could be eased by all the services that money can buy. Like Isabella,

they warned that if I made so unsuitable a marriage, the sobering correction of my willfulness would be even more drastic.

Isabella insisted that it was not only class difference that concerned her, but something she discerned in your father: zeal?—ambition?—craving?—something she tried to name but could not. She warned me of my folly in “putting my whole life into his hands.” Those were her very words, as she reminded me that by law and custom a husband owns his wife, her money, their children, everything. To make her point, Isabella refused to attend our wedding. If she were alive today, she would say—citing the improbable events beginning early in our marriage—that she had been right. Yet, all that happened was a great gift from God—even the path of heartbreak by which He has led—pushed, dragged me—to discover and put my best talents to His work.

The first year of our marriage was almost unalloyed joy, except for your father’s disappointment in not being called to the Boston congregation he had hoped to serve. The only call came from Trinity Church in Natchez, Mississippi, so far from the lively intellectual life of Philadelphia (let alone Boston!) On the very edge of the frontier in 1831, Trinity Church served a congregation of a few rich planters whose slaves preferred the mission of Catholic nuns across the river. This arrangement suited the planters, who looked down on Catholics far more than they looked down on their slaves. In fact, some of them were paternal and kindly toward their slaves. Our good friend Doctor Mercer went further; he broke all local custom and some laws by educating his slaves “to prepare for the time that must come, is coming.” Yes, many people, even some slave owners, even in 1832, believed that slavery should and must end, whatever the cost to them.

Dr. Mercer gave me a slave, a young girl, as a companion. I followed his example, taught her to read and write, and, as she was the only property that I, as a woman, could dispose of as I liked, I began legal proceedings to assure her freedom when we left Natchez. I visited her a few years ago, as soon as the Civil War was over and travel to America became possible. She, her husband, her children and grandchildren did me the honor of welcoming me as a member of their family.

I am wandering. And tired. Sister Heloise comes to bathe me, an exhausting luxury after which I must sleep a while.

21 February 1878

Your brother Mercer was named after Doctor Mercer. Poor Mercer suffered most from the upheavals within our little family, and suffered alone, given the “privilege” of being sent across the ocean to boarding schools in England at only the age of nine. I think you hardly knew Mercer, all those years away in schools and colleges, and then sent back to New Orleans—only to die of yellow fever at twenty, still so young and still so full of anger. You yourselves, so much younger, were already swept up in our family turmoil in that year of 1853. Perhaps there was no room in your hearts for more grief, no ability to grieve for the always distant Mercer.

Each death of a child is the death of part of his mother. Sometimes it seems that the death of Mercer struck my heart with more force than the death of your sister Mary in infancy, or even of your little brother John Henry, burned in that terrible accident, the last catastrophe we suffered all together as a family. As I write this letter, neither of you has yet had children. I presume Addy can no longer bear a child. I regret, Addy, that you

have missed the joy that you and your brothers brought to me, but I must say I do not regret your being spared the inestimable pain that comes to almost every mother, the pain of outliving most of her children—and then, as so frequently happens, dying in childbirth, leaving her surviving children motherless.

Physical pain I can bear with resignation and God's help, but my soul is inadequate to bear the weight of such memories.

More laudanum and a nap.

22 February 1878

It was during those three years in Natchez that we had our first contact with a Catholicism not identified with the ignorant slaves who added their songs to the stories and rituals of the nuns across the river, nor with the superstitions of the poor, illiterate, and despised Irish immigrants pouring into America. The French diplomat Dr. Nicollet, passing frequently through Natchez, gave your father and me an image of the Church steeped in European culture and history, its rituals (so ruthlessly “cleansed” from our Protestant churches) rich in complex symbolic meaning, inspiring the greatest artists and composers over centuries. I think it was the beauty of church art and ritual that first drew your father, as well as his admiration for the cultivated Dr. Nicollet.

Your father, as you know, is a man ruled by his passions; this was one of his qualities that first drew me to him—there was no gap between conviction and action, whatever the cost. Not long after you were born, Addy, he gave his last sermon in Natchez, and resigned his post. He told his fond parishioners that he meant to go to Rome to study the Catholic Church at its source.

I knew that he had already made up his mind to be converted by some highly placed prelate as soon we reached Rome. This knowledge led me to quietly take instruction and baptism from a local priest even before we took ship from New Orleans. I confess that my conversion came out of my hope that by hastening to follow him, even to anticipate his act, I would not lose him. Yes, from the beginning I feared. I knew that your father—never one for half measures—planned to confer with church authorities, not only on his conversion to Catholicism, but on the possibility of his becoming a Catholic priest. I said nothing, made no protest, not even in my prayers, but you can imagine my relief (especially since I was then expecting John Henry) when the Vatican affirmed the rule that while I lived, your father could not leave us to become a Catholic priest.

Despite his disappointment, our nearly two years in Europe were a dazzling experience for two Americans, hovering on either side of age thirty, who had never seen Europe. Not only were we awed by ancient monuments and art. I confess that I was so full of vanity that our acceptance into the highest society of Rome was a joy to me as well as to him. In Rome, the Catholic Church was not an object of hate and derision, as it was in England and America, but the center of true faith adhered to by the highest classes and by the nobility.

You are both aware, and not only through your father's recent pamphlets and speeches, of the continuing conflict among all Christian churches, but especially between Catholics and all the Protestant denominations. Today the rise of scientific atheism begins to arouse more public interest, but in the decade of your birth, Addy, forty years ago, the conflict among differing forms of Christianity was almost as heated as it had

been in the time of Luther. For a minister of the American branch of the Anglican Protestants to resign his ministry and affirm the truth of the Catholic faith—this was a great Catholic victory in a war that never seemed to end. In and near Rome, your father's conversion was celebrated by some Church officials with childlike exuberance—like the Bishop who sent a whole fish to a dinner for Tuscan clergy, to be placed in front of your father, and proclaimed “the catch of the day.”

Your father traveled throughout Europe, where he was received warmly, especially by highly placed Catholics like Lord Shrewsbury in still violently anti-Catholic England. For myself, awaiting the birth of John Henry, I cherished my dear friends in Rome, and my hopes that your father, through these contacts with powerful men, might secure some high position in the Church, short of the priesthood.

It seems I am to sit up today, an effort which is likely to tire me enough to send me into another long nap.

6 March 1878

Our European idyll ended abruptly after John Henry's birth, when cholera swept down upon Rome. At the same time, an urgent summons came from Natchez; the financial crisis of 1838 had wiped out your father's investments, comprised of all funds both of us had brought to our marriage. We must return home and find work to support ourselves and our three children.

An offer came from Grand Coteau, Louisiana. I am sure you can remember Grand Coteau, Addy. You quickly made friends at the Sacred Heart Convent School, where I taught music. Your father was less content teaching English nearby at St. Charles College. He was bored with his students, his colleagues, and with teaching itself.

To my surprise, teaching art and music in the convent school was a challenge I loved. Without that joy discovered in teaching, I can't imagine how I would have survived the trials of the next two years, the saddest of my life thus far. I began to lose so many of those most dear to me. First your dear little sister Mary lay dead within weeks of her birth. Less than a year later, John Henry lay in my arms, dying of burns suffered in an accident. (I pray, Addy, that you have no memory of that horror.) Then I learned that my closest friend in Rome, Gwendaline Borghese, and all three of her little sons, had died of cholera. Then came a heavy blow of another kind: shortly after I learned I was expecting you, Frank, your father told me that after deep prayer and consultation with his spiritual advisor, he knew that God wanted him to be a priest. Furthermore, he knew I would not stand in his way, and had decided that we must test our resolve to give him to God by living for a time as brother and sister.

I urged your father to think again, and yet again, before making this break with our present lives. I had no doubt, you see, that this time he would surely convince the higher authorities of the Church. Who could resist the strength of his passion? I never could. I could stop him, of course, by officially refusing to release him, or by drawing him into my bed—that is, by becoming his jailer or his harlot. Finally I realized that if I used either of these methods effectively, I would only chain him to a marriage that no longer existed, not as we had known it.

Even to relive that struggle in memory is too much.

16 March 1878

After a week of rest, and with great trouble to everyone, I have been raised up to sit in a chair near the window, where I see the water. The view from Leonard's-on-Sea is a healing gift. For the rest of this day, at least, I must rest from the effort and enjoy the view. Tomorrow I will go on.

17 March 1878

In May 1842 your father left for Europe, taking nine-year-old Mercer first to England, where Lord Shrewsbury had offered to pay for an education available only to boys of the upper classes. Mercer was placed in the first of several English boarding schools where his unhappiness at being taken from us only grew. When he finished Stonyhurst, there was no hope of his qualifying to attend Oxford, although by 1853 a few Catholics were finally being admitted. In any case, at twenty, he wanted nothing but to "go home, back to America." Your father sent him to work with his uncle in New Orleans, where we lost him to Yellow Fever. Ever since the year he first left for England, throughout Mercer's years of anger, his death, and ever since, I have prayed and grieved for him. It comforts me to know that our reconciliation comes soon.

At each obstacle to your father's plans, at each rejection of his petition to be ordained, he went on to a higher authority in the church hierarchy. Finally, after a year, he was able to present his request for matrimonial separation to Pope Gregory. His persistence prevailed, as I knew it eventually would. On the condition of my personally stating my consent and support, he won Pope Gregory's permission to leave us and become a priest. You were only two years old, Frank. Addy, at age eight, you perceived more. You believed we must be traveling to Rome in order to join your father. If that were so, you kept asking, why did have to go, without him, to live at Trinitá dei Monti, the convent at the top of the Spanish Steps?

I did my part as I believed I should—as the poet (albeit a Protestant) says, "He for God, she for God in him." I gave Pope Gregory my consent, signed the deed of perpetual separation, took a vow of lifelong chastity. When the Pope agreed that I could keep you two with me, I followed your father's wish that I enter the order at Trinitá as a postulant, while your father completed the process of his ordination. I had wholly accepted the faith your father had led me to. Taking the next step—becoming a nun—was not hard to do. What other life would be possible in the world, either in Europe or in America, for a married woman with small children, separated from her husband? At best I could live as an unwelcome, disgraced guest with one relative and another in America, diminishing their social standing by my presence. As for earning my own way, who would hire a woman of such dubious status as a teacher, or even tolerate her and her children in their community? One last time, I reminded your father that we could still back away from making these irrevocable vows. We could even now return to our former married state. He brushed away my words as those typical of a weak, vacillating woman, as indeed I still was.

I felt bereft at Trinitá. I missed being able to speak my own language, or to speak much at all, even during the weekly visits your father was allowed with the children,

chaperoned by an elder Sister of Trinitá. I felt cramped, stifled, suffocating. The more resolutely I kept the silence, the harder I prayed, the further I seemed to be from God.

Perhaps, Addy, you keep one happy memory of that time. July 9, 1845, the day your father first celebrated mass, the day of your first communion. A lovely mass in one of the smaller chapels of Rome. I sang in the choir, keeping a smiling, joyful countenance, until I could be alone to weep, as I often did in those days, as I still do even now, sometimes, when I think of you and Frank, and pray for your health and happiness.

Another few days of rest before I try to relate the events that followed. I will try to present them to you in the sequence I remember, which differs substantially from what you have been told. I trust you will believe that I would not lie to you in these last days before I face my Maker.

7 April 1878

Soon after your first communion, Addy, I informed the Mother Superior of Trinitá dei Monte—according to rule and form—that I did not feel suited to the cloistered life of the order. I asked if I might be sent, with my children, to join sisters who did more active work in the world—perhaps nursing or teaching. The Mother Superior told me she would do what she could, but that I should pray to be grateful to God for whatever He had chosen for me. I obeyed her. I prayed.

My prayers were answered in a most astonishing way.

Bishop Wiseman of England came to see me. I had met him socially, along with Lord Shrewsbury, at the Borghese Palace in Rome, during those happy days of our first stay in Europe. This time Bishop Wiseman approached me in his official capacity. He explained that in the two decades since the Catholic Church had been restored to legal status in England, the education of Catholic children had remained woefully neglected. The only schools in England were those established by the Anglican Church, and they did not admit Catholics. There were a few schools—like the one Mercer had attended at Lord Shrewsbury's expense—for the sons of rich Catholics. But for Catholic girls—nothing.

You know what followed. Bishop Wiseman asked me to come to England, to found a new order, a teaching order, and to open a school at a donated property in a town called Derby. I questioned my qualifications for such a project. He assured me that the education my dear sister Isabella had procured for me was equal to the best afforded any woman in Europe, and that he would offer guidance in this very important work. I reminded him that I had not even completed my novitiate. He brushed this aside as a detail that would work itself out in time. I had only one more doubt, set only one condition: could I keep you two with me? and could Mercer come from nearby Stoneyhurst to visit us? Bishop Wiseman assured me that my children would always, always remain with me. Believe me, if he had not given me this assurance, I would never have accepted this task even if it meant remaining in the suffocating silence of Trinitá until you were grown.

Your father enthusiastically approved my appointment and insisted that he participate in writing the Constitution, which I was to submit before leaving Rome. When Father Grassi tried to limit his participation, he wrote a Constitution independently. His continued submissions of these writings to the Vatican during the following years,



claiming higher authority that those I submitted, created an image of an order founded in confusion. These conflicting documents are one reason for the delay of over thirty years in our gaining official Vatican approval for The Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

I mention this, not to blame him for the many problems of the Order, but to show one sign of your father's state of mind in the second year of his priesthood—his eagerness to work, his need to work. I believe he had expected his ordination to lead immediately to exciting, important work for the Church. Instead, he had been ordered to study, pray, and wait, while I had been given work and authority to satisfy an immediate, specific need of the Church.

I think that your father had also underestimated how much he would miss our family life. Weekly two-hour visits with us at the Trinitá convent might have been a refreshing reunion, if he had had a busy schedule as a Vatican official or as an emissary for one of the Bishops. Sentenced to idle anonymity within the Church, he must have been reminded—by every visit to us—of how thin a public life he had gained by giving up his family. And now, even weekly visits with us would end—as we left for England.

I was sent to open the first Holy Child Convent in Derby, a factory town not far from Lord Shrewsbury's estate, where, to my surprise, your father was staying, having preceded us to England! Without consulting Bishop Wiseman or me, he had won a leave of absence from Rome in order to become assistant chaplain on Lord Shrewsbury's estate. His motive was, obviously, to be near us. He immediately asked Bishop Wiseman to appoint him chaplain to the new convent, a request denied with a caustic question, "You propose becoming your wife's confessor?" Furthermore, Bishop Wiseman refused to grant him weekly visits to us. In the still-hostile atmosphere among the English toward Catholics, rumors had already spread throughout Derby that the Holy Child Convent was a brothel for priests, and that your presence was the result of immoral relations. Your father felt betrayed by Bishop Wiseman.

I confess that I soon felt betrayed by the Bishop, who told me that, in these hostile, difficult beginnings, you two must be sent away to boarding schools for the rest of the year. You could return, promised Bishop Wiseman, after I had made my final vows, had been installed as Superior General, and the school at Derby had been firmly established. Six months. Visits could be arranged. I could write you every day. Only six months, and then you would be with me again. Six months.

Have I reached only 1847? I have been feeling so much stronger, able to sit up and write longer, and, I hope, faster, the better to reach the end of this account. Instead I have reached only the beginning of the saddest part of our story—I am exhausted and must rest another day or two before I can bring myself to describe the struggles of the next three years.

2 May 1878

Your father's protests began even before I was installed, formal claims lodged on any pretext—such as a claim that, still my husband under secular law, he might be held responsible for any debts incurred by the Order I had founded. Letters came daily. He accused Bishop Wiseman of "dominating" me, which was only another way of saying that I was keeping the vows of obedience both of us had taken. He became angry when I

reminded him that these vows were taken at his instigation. He proposed that we leave the Church, then became truly enraged when I answered that he could not be serious.

He must already have had his plan in readiness should I refuse. Two weeks later a letter came to the convent, informing me that he had left the priesthood, had left the Catholic Church, had taken you two and Mercer out of your schools, and had put you in other schools on the continent. The names and locations of these schools were to be kept secret from me, but if I learned them, school authorities had been instructed that our children were to receive no visits and no letters not approved by him. The letter concluded that if I ever wanted to see you or hear from you again, I must renounce my vows, leave the Church, and join him.

You may have wondered why I did not attempt to use the secular authorities to force him to bring you back to me or at least to let me communicate with you? Neither of you having married, you may hardly be aware that under law, in England as in America, then as now, a mother's rights to her children are solely those granted by their father. Since your father had also disavowed our separation, (granted by the Vatican, not by a secular court) his authority over me as well was total, according to English law.

Days passed, weeks. I hoped that after reflection, he would realize his error and come to some compromise, at least allowing you to visit me. He did not.

When, after another six months of silence, during which, believe me, my dears, I thought of you constantly, I was still in the convent at Derby, your father came, demanding to see me. Perhaps I was more angry than I had let myself believe. Perhaps I erred by sending word to the visitors' parlor that I would see him only when he returned you, Addy, to my care. (I was willing to allow the boys to remain in their boarding schools as is the custom, providing I could write to them.) For six hours your father refused to leave the visitors' parlor. An attending Sister described his final hour there as "prostrate and weeping and raving." For those six hours, I remained on my knees upstairs—praying for the strength to keep to my resolve, not to break my vows and return to him, even under threat of his keeping you from me.

Can I hope that you will understand and forgive my stubborn resolve? I will try to describe my thoughts during those terrible six hours.

During our fifteen years together, I had kept my marriage vows. I had borne his five children, mourned beside him as we buried two of them. I had followed him to a parish on the frontier. I had followed him out of the Episcopal Church, into a Church despised in America. When he sold all we owned to go to Europe, I went without question. When our money was gone, I returned with him to teach in an even more isolated, poorer southern slave state. When he broached the change I feared more than any other, I questioned, reasoned, begged him to move slowly. Even at the last moment, when the pope had overruled the entire Church hierarchy and agreed to our separation and his ordination, I begged your father to consider yet again. He had no doubts.

We both took solemn irrevocable vows, and I tried to rejoice, tried to see my aching heart as only another exquisite trial—like the death of my two children—with which God would purify me, make me into a tool worthy of His work. In a sense, it did; that agony confirmed me in the Church which I had, at first, entered for your father's sake.

Less than eighteen months later, he began his protests. At the beginning of 1848—less than three years after his ordination—he left the priesthood and the Church,

and tried to coerce me into following him again, using the strongest, most cruel weapon at hand: our children. My refusal must have been stunning to him. I had never failed to obey and support him before. Now—as if I were paralyzed—I could not take another step to follow him.

Your father asserted that I had changed, had come under evil influences. Yet he was the one who had made mercurial, passionate changes, one after another, while I had been stubbornly (my sister Isabella would have said) faithful to each vow I made. Obeying my vows, I had begun important work, work that I loved. If I now dropped that work, broke the vows he had urged upon me, and went back to him, what new passions, what new demands would he make on my vow of obedience to him?

It is dark now and my old eyes see little by candlelight.

16 June 1878

As if to contradict what I last wrote, I must admit that your father's conduct for the past thirty years demonstrates a strange consistency. Can his passionate aims and desires remain firm only when frustrated? When the Church first refused to ordain him, his resolve only hardened until he won ordination. In my refusal to break my vows, has he found a struggle, a passion, a cause to last him all his life?

Under the influence of some anti-Catholic organizations, he appealed to the English courts. In 1849 I was served with a writ ordering me to answer his suit for "restitution of conjugal rights." Under this English law a wife who leaves her husband without his permission must return to him, if he so desires, or go to prison. This law was rarely invoked, and, of course, the solicitor hired by Bishop Wiseman believed it could hardly be applied to our situation, in which our separation was not only granted by the husband, but initiated by him and approved by authorities of his then religion.

I need not appear in court, I was assured by Bishop Wiseman—whose annoyance with "this mess" was made clear to me. Far worse for me than his annoyance was the uncertainty about when I could see you two again. The case dragged on into the next year, as I tried to locate you and write to you, while carrying on my duties, including the opening of our second school here at St. Leonard's on Sea. Anti-Catholic hostility still ran so high that sisters who left the convent on errands in the town wore street dress, lest they be stoned in the roads.

Proof of the English hatred of Catholics came with the verdict in 1850. Despite the careful laying out of facts by Church solicitors, your father won his case. I was ordered to return to him or face prison. My solicitors immediately filed an appeal, assuring me that we could hope for many delays, during which my work should go on as usual. They only cautioned me to remain within the convent walls whenever possible, and to keep street clothes and an escape plan ready in case my husband or men hired by him should break in to abduct me—such actions entirely supported by law.

I finally did learn the names of your schools, and I wrote to you, but my letters were returned unopened. I believe this was done by school authorities, on instructions of your father, rather than by you. I want you to know that I did write to you. Constantly.

During the week that we opened our first "poor school" for the daughters of illiterate workers, your father presented a petition to the House of Commons demanding

that I be returned to him and that “all nunneries be immediately closed and prohibited by law.” (I understand he was cheered from the gallery, but won no support in Parliament, which was indifferent to “squabbles among the Catholics.”) But if such a petition had no force in law, it did serve to keep the focus of public attention on me, on the SHCJ, and on imaginary scandals about us and our work. Terrible things were printed in the newspapers and on the outside garden walls of our convent. On Guy Fawkes Day—shortly after your father’s appearance in the House of Commons—an effigy of me was carried through the streets of London and burned at Trafalgar Square. News stories quoting your father’s accusations of immoralities in the convent spread to American newspapers. Our family, embarrassed by the sensational news stories— stopped writing to me. (This sad rupture was fully healed fifteen years later when I traveled to America to open our Philadelphia school and was welcomed warmly by the family.)

In 1853 it seemed to me that my isolation could go no deeper. Then I learned that Mercer had been sent back to America and had died in New Orleans. I told my confessor that I must indeed be an evil woman, not only destroying my family and bringing more hatred onto the Church, but now punished by the death of my first born, with no possibility of reconciliation in this life. His mild reassurances were little comfort in that dark time. Now I had lost the husband I had so loved, and all five of my children—three to death, and my remaining daughter and son to the public odium that made their mother’s name a byword.

Your dear, sensible Uncle Ralph first broke the family silence by refusing yet another of your father’s many requests for money from the funds we had set aside in America for your education. Ralph threatened to cut off any further payments unless your father abandoned his case and “stop squandering your children’s future in lawyers’ fees.” Thus, Ralph effectively ended your father’s action in court. But he was deeply in debt to lawyers hired by the anti-Catholic associations that briefly supported his suit. I arranged for our Order to pay his outstanding fees when I learned that he might be sent to debtor’s prison.

I was relieved to learn that he was then taken back into the Episcopal Church and given a ministry at the American Chapel in Florence. This seemed a good post for him, for several reasons. Neither of you, nor your father, wanted to return to America, where gossip made it unlikely he would be called as pastor, except to some isolated parish. For you, Frank, Florence was an ideal place for you to study art. I would have wished for you, Addy, that your father had sent you to school too, instead of keeping you at home to manage his house. But at least you were near your brother for a few years. Your father’s work at the American Chapel suits him, brings him into contact with rich, cultivated Americans on their Grand Tour, who appreciate his knowledgeable guidance to the great works of art and architecture.

I regret only that this ministry leaves him ample time to write and publish continuing attacks on the Catholic Church—citing me as an instance of the Church’s pernicious influence. These articles are published throughout Protestant countries in Europe, as well as in Canada and the United States to this very day. That they are still widely reprinted, not only in church periodicals, but in popular magazines, is a sign of the general, unrelenting hostility toward the Church. I suspect that the American Episcopaleans who stop by your father’s church in Florence have heard of the scandal, and that they pity this man deserted by this wife under the influence of wicked Catholic

priests. The thought of your father himself becoming somewhat of a tourist attraction is, forgive me, somewhat amusing. Perhaps Our Lord commands that we laugh through our tears when the end is near.

Your father's efforts have had continuing effects inside the Catholic Church as well as outside. I believe that Bishop Wiseman came to regret his request that I found our SHCJ order, as did several Bishops who followed him. I have even learned of covert efforts to abolish the SHCJ and send me to some cloistered order where the world may be allowed to forget me. I have benefited from the benign Vatican inertia, slow to make such a decisive change as to abolish an order willing to operate schools in such a hostile country as England, and now in other countries as well.

When I was first able to sit up at my desk, two months after I awoke from the near-death during which I was given the Last Sacraments, I noticed that a new supply of official SHCJ stationery had been delivered, and that it no longer carried my name as Founder. I indulge in the (I hope) venal sin of being deeply amused to have disappointed the hopes of some sisters that God would finally remove this infamous inconvenience. They must exercise patience a bit longer. Soon they will be able to use their new stationery.

One last thing to tell you. I wonder, if I had known, thirty years ago, when your father abducted you, that he would never relent

28 February 1879

My Dears,

Nearly eight months since the relapse which should have ended my ordeal. Yet it goes on. How many times on the edge of death. Sip a bit of broth, then falling, falling into terrible dreams. Burning in a lower circle of Dante's Inferno. With little John Henry, burning, burning in that terrible accident.

Nephritis, says the doctor, kidneys failing their purifying function, skin covered in burning, itching eczema. I am already in Hell. Why can I not die?

Sister Emily has again wrapped my body in wet sheets. I should have at least half an hour almost free of burning.

Sister Ambrose brings me these pages to "sign before you go under again. Can you write your name?"

14 April

Again                      Holy Viaticum

Sister Ambrose agrees to help me finish this so I can die. She writes as I speak

I think I know why God refuses to take me. He gives me one last chance to confess the whole truth. Confess my true sin. If it is a sin.

When I married your father, according to law and custom, I and everything I owned or would ever earn became his. Even my thoughts. Every decision for my life, for your lives, was his to make.

Then Bishop Wiseman thrust upon me the authority to make decisions—to create a community, a small world—in a half finished building—create a name, a habit, a motto,

“actions not words!,” a Rule—principles, purposes, and practices governing the smallest and greatest acts, hour by hour, year by year.

How many women?—indeed, how many men?—have been granted the power to create a way of life, even in so small a world as our convent?

Then the most holy task—state a holy philosophy of education. Obvious: to see and love Jesus in every child we teach. A simple principle: children are meant to be happy; we teachers are meant to be happy. (Remember, sister? Reverend Sing, of the sour countenance, saying we did not behave like proper nuns—we laughed too much!)

Not a penny from the Vatican, properties and funds begged from rich Catholics—in England, France, eventually in America, near Philadelphia, where I had begun. (Some sisters dream of our even going to far continents like Africa.)

We pushed beyond the limits of “proper” education for girls. Daily physical education. Drama—not only the usual Christmas pageant, but classic plays staged and performed for townspeople. Music and art, of course, but higher mathematics as well. Latin, of course, but modern French as well, the international language. Which bishop was it who resisted most, fretting that our girls might learn to read immoral French literature? We laughed and went on with the work. Remember the bishop who said it was inappropriate for girls to sweat and shout on playing fields? I listened, bowed, nodded, and we went on with our work. I knew I could count on the parents who rejoiced at their healthy daughters happily reading complex books “beyond the female brain”.

(Mother Connelly laughs, then coughs, then waves her hand at me to indicate that she can go on.)

When a bishop sought a reason to rid the church of me, he was faced with the final sentence of the report by Her Majesty’s Inspector of Schools. Say it with me, Sister Ambrose. We all memorized it: “These schools are models of the results of devotion and patience, the best of their kind.”

Yes, I confess my pride in our work. If I had believed that your father would never relent, that I would never be reunited with you, I would have broken my vows, gone back to your father. In full honesty, I thank God that I did not believe him, I thank God for my work. He made your father push me through a low, dark doorway that opened on a bright new world of freedom. A world that came at a terrible price, but it is my world, my place, my joy. I did not choose it over you two—I would never have chosen it over you. I was not given a choice. I confess—I rejoice that it was chosen for me.

My dearest Addy and Frank, forgive me if you can.

*This letter/story is a spinoff from my play based on a little-known episode from 160 years ago, when American women had few of the choices or legal remedies that today we take for granted. Jerked around by each contradictory whim of her volatile, unstable husband, she escaped his power by remaining in the institution into which he had forced her, and where she not only discovered her potential as an educator and administrator, but found unheard-of range (for a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman) to use it. The high price of her disobedience was her husband’s then-legal revenge—separation from her children.*

*Although the law, public opinion, and her family, including her children, took Pierce's side, their son Frank, a sculptor, may have expressed his own subconscious or veiled understanding of the truth. On display at the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington D.C. is his bust titled "Cordelia." His model was his sister Adeline, who lived with and cared for her father until his death. Cordelia, of course, is the name of the devoted, abused daughter of an old madman, Shakespeare's "King Lear."*

*Cornelia Connelly died on April 18, 1878, Pierce Connelly in 1882. After his death Adeline returned to the Catholic Church, devoting herself to works of charity with Holy Child nuns in France. Neither she nor Frank ever married. Frank (adamantly anti-Catholic) had one daughter, Marina, born out of wedlock. He sent Marina to be reared and educated by Holy Child Sisters. Upon Cornelia's death, the bishop ordered all her papers at the convent destroyed, and nuns were instructed never to mention their founder, whose very name still fueled anti-Catholic fervor. British government and court officials joined a fifty-year silence, perhaps preferring to forget their roles in using a troubled family as pawns in now-forgotten 19th century Protestant/Catholic wars. The first biographies of Cornelia, relating actual facts, were published in the 1930s.*

*Schools and missions of the order founded by Cornelia continued to spread and now exist on four continents. One example: in 2001, in Berkeley, at a public reading of my play, "The Trial of Cornelia Connelly," a black Nigerian Holy Child nun in the audience approached me after the reading, to tell me that "all higher education for women in Nigeria" can be traced back to the seven Holy Child nuns who started a school there in the 1930s.*

### References

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|-------------------------------|--|
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