

God Knows What We Require

During my Religious Studies lessons in year 7, I was introduced to the founder of my school, Cornelia Connelly, and soon noticed some shared transcultural experiences. At 11, I moved to England from Hong Kong; I noticed the stereotyped ideas others had of Chinese Hong Kongers. We were all expected to be amazing at Math! Analogously, Cornelia Connelly moved to predominantly Protestant England with her children at age 36 from the US. When she tried to start a new Catholic Congregation, doubts were expressed.

Since biblical times, Jubilee years have happened every 50 years, a religious year of celebration, liberation, freedom, and forgiveness. As Pope Francis opens the holy door at St Peter's Basilica on Christmas Eve, we hear his message, "through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instils hope." Originally it was a year where all debts would be paid; all slaves would be set free; everyone would return home; and the people and the land would be allowed to rest. To me, it is a reminder that God is the provider of our needs. As St. John Paul II said "Do not be afraid. Trust in Him."

This year's Jubilee centres around being a pilgrim of hope. According to Pope Francis, "We must fan the flame of hope that has been given us and help everyone to gain new strength and certainty by looking to the future with an open spirit, a trusting heart and far-sighted vision." Cornelia said her greatest suffering was being separated from her children, and in a small way when I have felt anxious about the future, I have found praying to God has given me peace of mind and a feeling of hope and trust in what would otherwise be a painful time.

I am not conscious of having personally suffered tremendously either physically or emotionally yet, but Cornelia stands out as an example of Millennium Values. Born to a wealthy Presbyterian family, she married Pierce Connelly, an Episcopalian priest at 22. Pierce later joined the Church in Rome. He broke up his family and sold their home. Cornelia moved into a convent with her two remaining children, leading a life of work and prayer, before taking a vow of perpetual chastity. After moving to England, she founded the first modern female religious congregation, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ), since the Reformation, dedicated to the education and care of young women and established Mayfield School. She had to deal with Pierce then trying to claim her back and suing her for the restoration of conjugal rights, presenting her as a bad mother to the public, while putting himself forward as the true founder of the SHCJ.

I see Cornelia as someone who fulfilled the demands of Jubilee and the purpose of having one. As Jesus extended his kindness to other people on the cross, Cornelia extended her

kindness, by providing education and bringing hope to those who otherwise unable to afford it; as Pope Benedict XVI said “God is the creator of all things and the owner of all things. We are only caretakers,” Cornelia devoted her time to others. She exemplified the idea that we were enslaved to sin until Christ came to set us free. Through her faith and devotion to God, she said, “Is not our faith a sword of strength?”

Cornelia not only inspired her generation by making a positive difference to society, but a remarkable legacy continues to be visible across many areas in Mayfield School. We are constantly reminded to take pride in her principles and encouraged to lead with her philosophies. When I thought about whether I have been a pilgrim of hope, it was small actions that struck me: the joy in music where inspirations are shared; the compassion of fostering a positive environment through being an Anti-Bullying ambassador; the integrity of attentiveness when participating in Model United Nations; the generosity to share my opinions with others; the respect of teamwork through numerous sports matches; the courage to act for justice through the UNICEF outright campaign; and, the gratitude for all these opportunities to hopefully make a positive difference.

Decisions to be more God-friendly during the Jubilee are to also be more Earth-friendly. Values held by Catholics are naturally values of persons of any religion or none. As Pope Francis said, “Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.” It is not just Catholics who have infinite value; everyone deserves infinite love and is of infinite value, as is the natural world. It is not just the Catholic social teachings that highlight the importance of this, but many international documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that share the same values as Catholic doctrines.

I think it is important to have some clear moral values as taught by the Church on which to base decisions rather than just what is legal or illegal, or even through examining my conscience and reading the gospels. I often think about the disparity of wealth in the world and the dangers of war and famine. Pope Francis says it would be fitting to celebrate the Jubilee Year 2025 by cancelling all or most of the debts of world's poorest countries. Hope is more needed than ever, and faith could not be more important.

Cornelia’s motto ‘Actions not Words’ motivated her life. Even with a broken heart, Cornelia set up a religious congregation that is still thriving in 14 countries. Being a Pilgrim of Hope does not mean we have to be a ‘traveller’ of hope at every moment, but if “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference” (as Niebuhr expressed in the Serenity Prayer), we too can feel the Spirit giving us the courage to work towards a future full of compassion and purpose... at least most of the time.

