RESOLUTION #1

RESOLUTION URGING THE INCLUSION OF SR. CECILIA IN THE CALENDAR OF THE COMMEMORATION OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

RESOLVED, that this 137th Convention of the Diocese of East Carolina add a commemoration on or about January 21 of each year for Cecilia Foster Lawrence, Episcopal nun of the Order of the Good Shepherd, to A Great Cloud of Witnesses (or successor publication), with appropriate papers assigned, and be it further

RESOLVED, that the Secretary of the Convention of the Diocese of East Carolina forward to the Secretary of the General Convention a copy of this resolution within sixty days of the adjournment of this Convention

EXPLANATION:

Cecilia Foster Lawrence (1836-1894) served St. James’ Home and the Lord in Wilmington, North Carolina for 19 years: for 7 years as a private citizen and 12 years as a Sister in the Sisterhood of the Good Shepherd. Only her sickness, noted in 1890 but not explained, forced her in 1892 to relinquish her mission and that of her order to aid the poor, sick, the homeless, the outcast, and care for the little children. She died two years later on January 21, 1894 in New York.

Wilmington in 1867 was devastated by the war, and became a regional center for those in need, being the largest city in North Carolina. The Parish of St. James took it upon themselves in that year to establish a Mission to the Poor, being a ‘Home for Orphans and for the Aged and Indigent’, education for the children, and religious services.

Cecilia Foster Lawrence was a cradle Episcopalian and her mother a charter member at St. Philips in nearby Louisburg, NC, and from birth and marriage was well-to-do. She gave it all up to join the effort at St. James. After becoming widowed, she taught school prior to moving to Wilmington in 1873. When the need overwhelmed the women of St. James in 1879, Bishop Thomas Atkinson travelled to New York and asked Bishop Horatio Potter for assistance. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd order were enlisted in the effort and Cecilia joined in 1880, saying her vows to Bishop Atkinson.

Herself an orphan, and a widow, she made serving the needy her life mission with the evangelical order. She became the leader of the Home, and taught, led worship, acted as family counselor, and sent in annual reports without ever mention of her name. The results were astonishing: she established the first free day school for children of working mothers, grew the Sunday School to 177 (exceeding St. James), and the Parish school to 123 students. Children working during the day in the riverfront cotton mills would attend educational classes at night. The Fresh Air program the order began in New York to give the impoverished children access to the unspoiled outdoors, was continued in Wilmington with boat trips on the Cape Fear River compliments of a friendly boat captain. In 1889, Bishop Alfred Watson of the newly formed Diocese of East Carolina called her work “one of the most valuable spiritual agencies in the diocese, working for the working class and having done a large amount of missionary work.”
Even crime decreased where they worked, according to the chief of police at the time. The success outgrew the Home and a Chapel of the Good Shepherd was established in the working class neighborhood of Dry Pond in 1892, succeeding a reading room established by St. Paul’s.

To appreciate their success, one must remember the considerable opposition as popeish in the church to religious orders, and especially of Sisters. The plaintive plea in the Sisterhood of the Good Shepherd Annual Report of 1876 is an example: “the clouds of prejudice and misunderstanding which have so long ensnared this whole subject of sisterhood in the church seems to be gradually vanishing as the light to experience dawns upon those willing to be taught.” Indeed, an opposing bishop from Montana eventually supported them, inviting them to Montana.

However, in Wilmington she was revered. On her death, Rt. Rev. Robert Strange, rector, and the vestry of St. James added the saintly invocation to the minutes, “having been one of the choice vessels of the grace of our heavenly Father and one of the lights of the world in her generation.” The Wilmington Messenger included the headline “A SAINTLY WOMAN DEAD. sister Cecilia’s Noble Life Work Ended – A Tribute to Her Memory”. She was brought back to Wilmington and buried in a donated plot in the prestigious Oakdale Cemetery. Her “boys” (she had no children) were her pallbearers. Not a dry eye could be found. That she was humble is undeniable, her name never mentioned in the order’s Annual Reports even her death, and only once appearing before the St. James vestry for a request. Her grave is marked with a simple marble stone cross, with the epitaph “Sister Cecilia, Sisterhood of the Good Shepherd, N-Y.

Church of the Good Shepherd began annual commemorations at her grave in 2018. We have also commissioned and installed a stained glass window of the order’s seal in her honor, dedicated by current Bishop of the Diocese of East Carolina, Rt. Rev. Robert Skirving, and then rector of St. James Parish, Rev. Ron Abrams. The beautiful window joins an equally beautiful silver chalice and wine cruets dedicated to her in ‘Loving Memory’ in 1894 and used to this day.

The work of Sr. Cecilia continued and continues to inspire. The Chapel of the Good Shepherd grew rapidly to become the Church of the Good Shepherd parish at the same site in 1907. In 1911, the cornerstone was laid for a beautiful English Gothic rural church by renowned architects Hobart Upjohn and John Conable, which are preserved in all its magnificence today. In 1918, the parish house was used as a hospital during the flu epidemic. With the encouragement and support of Bishop Sidney Sanders of the Diocese of East Carolina, the vestry of Church of the Good Shepherd voted in 1983 to open a soup kitchen, which served almost 1 million meals over twenty years and was the major such outreach at the time in Wilmington. The work was expanded to include a day shelter and other services at the church with construction of the Good Shepherd House, and continues at the now independent and highly lauded Good Shepherd Center. We currently coordinate an ecumenical effort to assemble and distribute on Easter Sunday over four hundred Easter baskets and four thousand Easter eggs for the Hispanic farmworkers' children nearby. This has been an annual event, now in its 20th year.

As a shining example of and inspiration for the courage and power of the individual to act to further the glory of God rather than wait for help, and to keep a key part of Wilmington’s and the
Episcopal Church’s history alive, we seek inclusion of Sister Cecilia in the *A Great Cloud of Witnesses*.

Submitted by,

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**Note:** A resolution to this same effect is being introduced concurrently in the Diocese of North Carolina by their Historiographer, The Rev. Dr. N. Brooks Graebner. The vestries of Church of the Good Shepherd and St. Paul’s approved the submitting of the resolution and urge it’s acceptance.