

CHARLES DE FORBIN-JANSON (1785-1844)

Charles de Forbin-Janson was born in Paris in 1785 into a noble, military family. Only four years later, the French Revolution forced his parents into exile in Germany, which led him to experience the life of a refugee, persecution, insecurity, fear, and poverty. This is one of the many significant “details” that serve to orient his life-story around two points of reference: the vulnerability of childhood and mission as a paradigm for the apostolate.

After returning home and receiving First Communion, the adolescent Forbin-Janson showed his charitable sensitivity by joining an organization that helped the most disadvantaged in prisons and hospitals. But it was during meetings held in the seminary chapel of the Paris Foreign Mission Society that he had the opportunity to hear news from the mission in China. The missionary dimension thus made a subtle but early impact on his life. Charles had a promising career ahead of him when Napoleon appointed him to be a supervisor in the Council of State. However, perceiving the call of God, he did not allow himself to be seduced by this opportunity, and in 1808 he entered the Sulpician seminary in Paris. He was ordained a priest in 1811, and after serving in diverse places he returned to Paris where he provided Christian formation for children in a local parish.

His passion for the missionary apostolate, which marked his ministry from its onset, manifested itself in a special way by his dedication to “popular missions” that were developed to revive the faith in post-revolutionary, de-Christianized France. He manifested both a convincing eloquence and a profound love and generosity for the poor, which led him to give away his

own clothes to the needy. This phase of his life ended with his departure for the Holy Land in 1817.

In 1824, De Forbin-Janson was consecrated bishop of Nancy-Toul, a diocese in the North-East of France. At that time, he maintained a very close contact with the missionaries who wrote to him and asked for his help. He was particularly attentive of the situation of the missions in China, having once considered the idea of being a missionary. In fact, when the revolution of 1830 forced him to leave his diocese, he went to the Pope to ask to be sent to the Far East. Alas, his desire could not be fulfilled, even though Pope Pius VIII consented to his request.

Bishop De Forbin-Janson continued to carry out a great ministry of charity and welfare, until another providential event provided an opportunity for him to follow his inclination for evangelization *ad gentes*. He was invited by some missionary bishops in North America to visit that continent, where he would remain from 1839 to 1841. In Canada, surrounded by its natural beauty, he developed a way to proclaim the Gospel to people of the country's first inhabitants. Later, he also visited the United States of America. In all of this, his desire grew to create a foundation for the missions.

Upon his return to France, news about many children – and especially little girls – in China who were harshly abandoned or killed without ever being able to receive baptism continued to move him. He received agonizing requests for help from the priests of the Paris Foreign Missions Society, which he himself had considered joining. The idea of saving the innocence of children in mission lands through the innocence of Christian children in Christian lands made a profound impact on his heart, where the two points of reference of his life definitively came together: childhood and mission.

With these in mind, in the summer of 1842, Bishop De Forbin-Janson went to Lyon to talk with Pauline Jaricot, the young lay woman who, twenty years earlier, had laid the foundations of the Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith. From this decisive dialogue, he began to

perceive a way to organize help for children in China, which blossomed into inviting the children of the diocese to carry out a “double gesture”: the daily recitation of the Hail Mary with a short prayer for the children of the mission, and to offer a dime every month for children in mission lands.

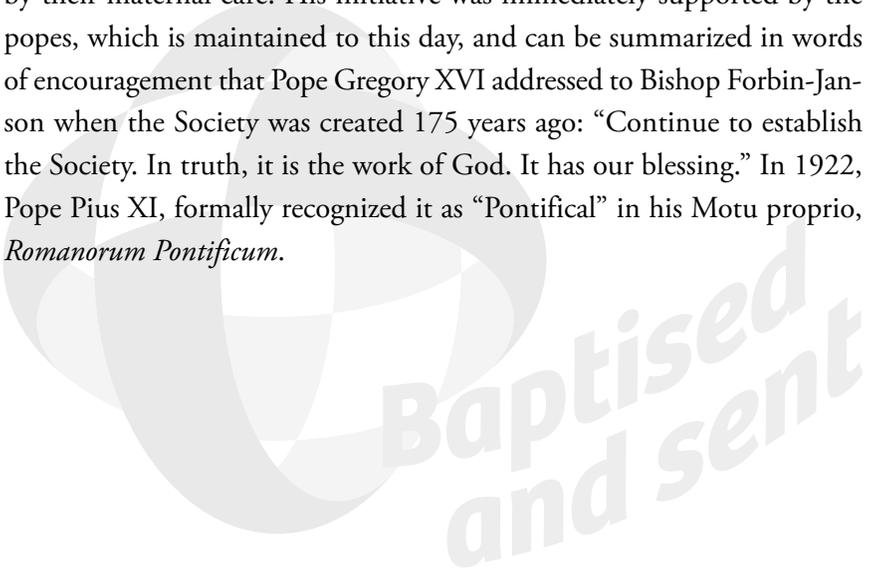
The bishop diligently dedicated himself to this project of mobilizing Christian children for the benefit of their brothers and sisters in mission lands. And so on May 19, 1843, the “Holy Childhood” (referring to the childhood of Jesus) was founded. Finally there was an answer to the restlessness that he endured for almost forty years!

To extend the initiative, he traveled home and arrived in Belgium, where he received the support of the royal court and the Apostolic Nuncio, Bishop Gioacchino Pecci, who would later be elected Pope Leo XIII. The Society of the Holy Childhood was immediately welcomed in France and gained memberships from all over the world, but not without some resistance. Contrary to the expectations of some skeptics, the new ministry did not weaken, but rather strengthened the work and mission of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. It also addressed vocational issues, thus anticipating the creation of the Society of St. Peter the Apostle founded in 1889.

In contemplation of the Lord’s childhood, De Forbin-Janson discovered an exceptional way of understanding the mystery of the Incarnation and what it means to become one with Christ and share his saving love. In the episodes of the Gospel in which Jesus refers to children, he said, we find “a new language of teachings and example” that manifest “Jesus’ clear desire to restore children the rights of which they had been deprived and to augment their privileges.”

To explain the significance of the Society and to organize its functioning, four months before his death, De Forbin-Janson announced the creation of the *Annals of the Society of the Holy Childhood*, a sort of two-way correspondence between the children of the more established churches and those of the missions. The project would be formally inaugurated in 1846.

Exhausted, Bishop De Forbin-Janson, died near Marseilles in July of 1844, when the Society of the Holy Childhood was barely one and a half years old. Being entirely dedicated to the Society he founded, he would never fulfill his dream of being a missionary in China, nor see the fulfilment of another one of his dreams, the sending of religious sisters to China to provide for the needs of disadvantage children in the missions by their maternal care. His initiative was immediately supported by the popes, which is maintained to this day, and can be summarized in words of encouragement that Pope Gregory XVI addressed to Bishop Forbin-Janson when the Society was created 175 years ago: “Continue to establish the Society. In truth, it is the work of God. It has our blessing.” In 1922, Pope Pius XI, formally recognized it as “Pontifical” in his *Motu proprio*, *Romanorum Pontificum*.



Baptised
and sent

October
2019