

## JEANNE BIGARD (1859-1934)

Jeanne Bigard was born on December 2, 1859, in Coutances, a small town in Lower Normandy, France. Her mother Stéphanie Cottin was a woman of character and affectionate love. Between mother and daughter such a symbiosis of feelings and ideals developed that the two became almost inseparable from each other.

Due to her frail health, Jeanne spent her school years in the family's home in Caen, the city where her father, a magistrate, had moved for work. The level of instruction that she received at home was certainly higher than that received by many of her peers, considering the high cultural level of the Bigard family, but it did not grant her the experience of much freedom, carefree playfulness, or friendship.

Jeanne's childhood took place during the era of the full development of the modern network of missionary cooperation, which had its roots in pre-Napoleonic France. The Paris Foreign Missions Society became the focus of the missionary reawakening and the driving force of some missionary associations that, with prayer and spontaneous help, set out to support missionaries sent to the Far East and North America.

With the initiative of several people, especially Pauline Jaricot (1799-1862), the Society for the Propagation of the Faith had been established in Lyon in 1822. During its first three decades the organization's work spread to several European countries, including Italy, stimulating popular interest in the missions, through edifying publications like the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*, which told stories of adventurous and helpful experiences of missionaries, but also shed light on the various problems of the indigenous world.

Through reading the *Annals*, Stéphanie and Jeanne Bigard, already in close relationship with the Paris Foreign Missions Society, came to know some missionary priests working in the Far East, of whom they would later become confidants and supporters. At the same time the missionary forces were multiplying, Europe began to perceive an urgent need to establish a local hierarchy in the mission territories, free of any political pressure and autonomous in its pastoral exercise. The Bigards, thanks to their ongoing contacts with the missionaries, sensed the problem and began to think of an adequate response. The Paris Foreign Missions Society, which they visited often, had long since incorporated into its efforts the immediate establishment in the indigenous churches a hierarchy composed of local leaders. But the implementation of this plan was not easy.

At the Vatican, the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide* took up the problem of indigenous clergy with resolve, referring to the famous Instruction of 1659,<sup>3</sup> which encouraged missionaries to be attentive to the formation of the local clergy. With the Instruction of 1845,<sup>4</sup> apostolic vicars in the mission lands who were directly connected with *Propaganda Fide* were invited to hand over responsibility for the missions to indigenous priests and not to fear letting European missionaries act subordinately to them. Persecutions, with the probability of a mass expulsion of foreign missionaries, made the creation of an indigenous clergy an even more urgent task. So as to guarantee the growth of the local churches in mission territories, for many years the formation of the indigenous clergy remained the central issue. The two Bigards dedicated themselves to address this concern.

The starting point was a letter addressed to them dated June 1, 1889, by the bishop of Nagasaki, Giulio Alfonso Cousin of the Paris Foreign Missions Society. Concerned that he would, for lack of funds, have to send boys back to their families who could have been excellent seminarians and, later, good

<sup>3</sup> Congregation *De Propaganda Fide*, *Istruzione* 1659, *Collectanea* 1 (1622-1866), n. 135, 42-43.

<sup>4</sup> Congregation *De Propaganda Fide*, *Collectanea* 1 (1622-1866), n. 1002, 541-545.

priests,<sup>5</sup> he asked the Bigards to become supporters and promoters of his seminary. He suggested the idea of “adopting” a seminarian who would later bring to the holy altar the memory of the “parents” who had supported him, both during their life and after their death.<sup>6</sup> For Jeanne and Stéphanie, the letter sounded like a call. Support of the indigenous clergy was the vocation to which they could offer their lives without reserve. They immediately devoted themselves to raising funds for the seminarians of Nagasaki and at the same time gathered information from the bishops and apostolic vicars of the Paris Foreign Missions Society on the status of indigenous clergy in their countries.

They wanted to solve the central problem of the mission by ensuring the presence of the local clergy. The foundation of the Society of St. Peter the Apostle went through various stages. At first, to meet the requests of Bishop Cousin and of other missionaries, scholarships were awarded to seminarians and sacred furnishings for mission churches were made. Jeanne understood that her work would have to include support of all of the missions throughout the world,<sup>7</sup> because the whole missionary world needed priests.

The Society wanted to invite people throughout the world to contribute what they could to support:

1. Creation of perpetual grants
2. Adopting a seminarian
3. Prayer, sacrifices, and work

But to guarantee a good foundation, two indispensable elements were necessary: the grace of God and the blessing of the Pope. Leo XIII offered to the occasion his encyclical *Ad Extremas Orientis*,<sup>8</sup> with which he supported the urgent need for the formation of indigenous priests.

<sup>5</sup> P. Lesourd and A. Olichon, *Jeanne Bigard. Fondatrice della Pontificia Opera di S. Pietro Apostolo per il Clero Indigeno*, translated and edited by P.F. Casadei (Rome: Ed. PPOO.MM., 1979), 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical *Ad Extremas Orientis* (24 June 1893), *Acta Leonis XIII*, 13 (1894), 190-197.

Missionaries who ignored the language and customs of the place were considered foreigners, while indigenous priests would carry out the ministry more easily. Equally troubling were the number of foreign missionaries who could not keep up with the increase in conversions.

The Society of St. Peter the Apostle already had, to its credit, a thousand associates and a long list of scholarships, worth one hundred thousand francs, for Asian and African seminarians. A sign of approval from Rome was highly anticipated. The Pope's blessing came in 1895, when the French episcopate also approved the Society of St. Peter the Apostle for the indigenous clergy of the missions, which thus entered fully into the universal Church. *Propaganda Fide* assured its full support to the Society through its prefects Cardinal Ledochowski and Cardinal Jacobini. The latter, in a letter, anticipated its inclusion in the Pontifical Mission Societies, which took place on May 3, 1922, at the behest of Pius XI.

The solitude and abandonment experienced by many founders and foundresses also affected Jeanne. Alone at the bedside of her dying mother, Stéphanie (January 5, 1903), Jeanne offered to God her suffering and the love of those who had helped and followed her. Afraid of spiritual darkness Jeanne begged Jesus to be her traveling companion "until the day I lose myself in your love."<sup>9</sup> She was worried about the continuation of the Society, which she eventually entrusted to the religious congregation of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary.<sup>10</sup>

The long illness that led to her death on April 28, 1934, reveals the mysterious ways God works, often offering an abundance of his gifts in response to people who know how to totally give their lives unto the cross.

The Society of St. Peter the Apostle was now fully part of the life of the

<sup>9</sup> P. Lesourd and A. Olichon, *Jeanne Bigard. Fondatrice della Pontificia Opera di S. Pietro Apostolo per il Clero Indigeno*, translated and edited by P.F. Casadei (Rome: Ed. PP.OO.MM., 1979), 88.

<sup>10</sup> The Institute of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary was founded by Elena de Chappotin de Neuville (1839-1904) who took the religious name Mary of the Passion. Approved on July 17, 1890, the institute, because of its essentially missionary character, obtained the approval of its Constitutions by the Congregation *De Propaganda Fide* on August 7, 1922.

Church. For the first time, it appeared in a document of solemn teaching, Pope Benedict XV's *Maximum Illud*, as the competent authority in the area of seminaries and local hierarchy. On May 3, 1922, Pius XI declared it a "Pontifical Society." He also consecrated the first bishops of China, Japan, and Vietnam. Pius XII followed suit by consecrating the first apostolic vicars of Africa in 1939.

