

JUAN CARLOS CARVAJAL BLANCO

RAFAEL SANTOS BARBA

**HISTORY, CHARISM AND
SPIRITUALITY
OF THE
PONTIFICAL MISSION SOCIETY
OF THE HOLY CHILDHOOD**



**Published by
International Secretariat
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Cover

First prize in the competition for hearing impaired students of the
Government of the Indian State.

Helen Keller Home, Kollapuram, Diocese of Kumbakonam, India

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Presentation

“Missionary Childhood, that is, those children and boys and girls — there are many in various countries of the world — who dedicate themselves to pray and to donate their savings so that the Gospel might be proclaimed to those who do not know it.”¹

The Society of Holy Childhood, or Missionary Childhood and Adolescence, is one of the four Pontifical Mission Societies and probably the most widespread and well known.

An in-depth study of its origins, its charism - a gift of the Holy Spirit to Bishop Charles de Forbin-Janson -, and its spirituality can help us to better understand the educational content of this Society, its role in the Church’s evangelizing mission, and its relevance today, almost 180 years after its foundation and 100 years after its designation as Pontifical.

Such knowledge can help us appreciate this Society more and actualize its mission in any context.

It is a Society for children, with children, and of children, which reminds the Church of its identity and vocation and is, in a certain sense, its conscience.

The specificity of the Society of the Holy Childhood is that of forming disciples of Jesus, an ever-pressing issue and the ultimate goal of every Christian life.

This text by Professor Juan Carlos Carvajal and Rafael Santos Barba, rich in historical analysis and pastoral theological reflection, presents the breadth and depth of this Society, dedicated to evangelization, also highlighting its prophetic

¹ Pope Francis, Angelus 6 January 2022.

aspect by recalling the Holy Childhood of Jesus Himself, the Son of God made flesh.

Jesus, sent by the Father, is the center of the Society. His lowliness is an example to imitate.

In references to the Founder and his writings, it is necessary to consider the language and thought of the time in which he lived and its context; we cannot judge with the language of today.

For example, when we speak of the efficacy and necessity of baptism for salvation and therefore of the necessity and concern to liberate/redeem from sin as many persons and children as possible through the sacrament. The term “redemption” is now obsolete in the ecclesial sphere, but its content should still be close to our hearts, just as it was close to the heart of Bishop Charles de Forbin-Janson, who was concerned that many children who died without receiving baptism would not enjoy the redemption wrought by Jesus Christ.

Likewise, the use of the term infidels with regard to all those who were unbaptized. It is not to be understood in a derogatory way, but with a sense of concern for the salvation of the other.

A brief explanation of the “School of Jesus” alluded to in the text. It is a tradition in the Society of the Holy Childhood. It is a program presented about twenty years ago by the International Secretariat of the Society and used in many countries, with the necessary adaptations to the contexts and the passage of time, for the formation and animation of groups of missionary children and adolescents and of the animators. It follows the pedagogy of Jesus with his disciples.

I hope that these pages will give a taste of the freshness of the Society of the Holy Childhood and the commitment it proposes not only to children and adolescents, but also to all adults who are involved in it directly or indirectly.

Sr Roberta Tremarelli AMSS
Secretary General
Pontifical Society of Missionary Childhood

I.- FOUNDATION OF THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILDHOOD

1.- Context

What we know today as the Society of Missionary Childhood, or by its original name of the Society of the Holy Childhood, is, according to the date of its foundation (May 19, 1843), the second of the Pontifical Mission Societies. To be one of these Societies means to be part of this “worldwide network of prayer and missionary charity of the Successor of Peter”², with particular features that give it its own personality: it is addressed to children and gives them the experience that to be Christians is to live actively and effectively the mission of the Church; that it is to take part in the giving and receiving of the mission³, in the life of communion of the churches in the Church (that is, to live catholicity). Concretely, this Society makes operative its original motto, “Children helping children”, which should be understood, more precisely, as “Children evangelizing children”.

It is convenient to situate Missionary Childhood in the general framework of the Pontifical Mission Societies in order to understand its historical transcendence in the Church and, from the Church, in the world. This Society is, strictly

² Cf. FRANCESCO, *Lettera del Santo Padre Francesco al Presidente delle POM in occasione dell'Assemblea Generale dei Direttori Nazionali delle Pontificie Opere Missionarie* (29-V-2019).

³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical Redemptoris Missio* (7-XII-1990) 85.

speaking, the first worldwide initiative in favor of children, being more than eighty years ahead of the first declaration of children's rights (Declaration of Geneva, 1924) and more than a century before the creation of UNICEF (1946). But Missionary Childhood is not only an evangelical “leaven” because of its pioneering character, but also because of its unique, rather unusual character. Since its foundation, children are not spectators, they are protagonists. They are not recipients; they are agents of the mission. This manifests a non-restrictive vision of human promotion, since the Society seeks, based on the Gospel, to promote the integral development of all the little ones of the world. It is impressive to see that so many children - with a myriad of needs - are not only cared for thanks to the missionary mobilization of other children, but that they themselves become actors in the mission.

2.- The journey to the foundation

2.1.- A climate of missionary effervescence

The historical and social context of the foundation of this Society is that of France after the Revolution of 1789-1799. It was precisely in this period of anti-religious and anti-clerical atmosphere that the Spirit made various charisms flourish, among them several specifically centered on the mission. The French missionaries, through communications with their native country, reported the dramatic situations they encountered, which they faced with means inversely

proportional to their faith. Their appeals for help created a climate that nourished the desire to help the mission “from the rear” and that had as its seal the inspiration that Pauline Jaricot received to start the Society for the Propagation of the Faith (founded in 1822), the first of the four Pontifical Mission Societies. It was to her that the Spirit manifested the essential charism of participating in the universal mission through prayer and charity. The other works will express this inspiration in particular and complementary ways.

2.2.- The founder

Bishop de Forbin-Janson, Bishop of Nancy, participated in this missionary effervescence and animated it.⁴ Charles de Forbin-Janson, second son of a French noble family, was born in Paris in November 1785. Four years later, the French Revolution forced his parents into exile in Germany, which led him to experience persecution and insecurity in his own childhood, and allowed him to always maintain a particular

⁴ We closely follow the brief biographical sketch published in CONGREGATION FOR THE EVANGELIZATION OF PEOPLES - THE PONTIFICAL MISSION SOCIETIES (2019), *Baptized and sent: the Church of Christ in mission in the world. Extraordinary Missionary Month. October 2019*, Milan, St. Paul, 228-231. The first biographical note about him was written by his successor in Nancy: MSGR. MENJAUD (1846), “Notice sur Mgr de Forbin-Janson Évêque de Nancy et de Toul, Primat de Lorraine”, *Annales* 1, 4-21. For further information, we refer to his biography, cf. PAUL LESOURD (1944), *Un grand cœur missionnaire, Monseigneur de Forbin-Janson 1785-1844*, Paris, Ernest Flammarion.

attunement with children, especially the poorest and most disinherited.⁵

After returning to Paris and receiving his first communion, the adolescent Forbin-Janson revealed a great charitable sensitivity when he enrolled in an association that helped the most disadvantaged in prisons and hospitals. In the chapel of the Foreign Missions Seminary in Paris, he was able to hear news about the mission in China. Thus, in a simple way, the mission was making its way into his heart. Charles had a promising career ahead of him, since Napoleon had appointed him supervisor of the Council of State. However, the pain of the de-Christianization of his country, the lack of priests and their inadequacy to the challenges of his time made him feel God's call to the priesthood. In 1808 he entered the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. There, together with a group of companions, he considered the idea of going to China. In 1811, he was ordained a priest and, after some initial assignments, he soon returned to Paris, where he joyfully took charge of the Christian formation of the children of his parish.⁶

He wishes to serve the Lord wherever he is called. He hesitated between going to China or staying in France to collaborate in his evangelization. With the intention of making this discernment, he met with Pope Pius VII, who advised him to stay in his own country. He fervently collaborated with the "Society of the missions for the interior of France", which was approved (January 9, 1815) in order to revitalize the faith of his nation. In this period, he stands out for his apostolic zeal and eloquence, as well as for his love and generosity. It is

⁵ Cf. LESOURD, 9-18.

⁶ Cf. LESOURD, 18-23.

surprising how, in his apostolic expeditions, he shares his possessions with the poor. During this time, his closeness to the foreign missions is maintained to the point of ceding a property on Mont Valèrien, near Paris, to be a place of rest and retreat for missionaries and to promote devotion to the Holy Cross among the people. This phase ends with his departure for the Holy Land in 1817, where he visits the Holy Places and carries out some missionary activity.⁷

In 1824 Charles de Forbin-Janson was consecrated bishop of Nancy and Toul, in northeastern France. Convinced that the mission in the interior of France was intimately linked to the foreign missions, he kept in close contact with the missionaries who wrote to him and asked for help. But he never gave up his idea of being a missionary in China. When in 1830, for political reasons caused by a new revolution, he was forced to leave his diocese, he saw the opportunity to fulfill his dream. He then turned to the Pope to ask him to send him to the Far East. However, although Pius VIII agreed to his request, his wish could not be fulfilled. Faced with the impossibility of returning to his diocese and of fulfilling his dream, the bishop of Nancy gave himself - in the words of his biographer - to an “eloquent and ardent apostolic activity...”⁸

Bishop de Forbin-Janson has a reputation as a passionate preacher; he is also known to the missionary bishops, who know of his readiness to respond to the call of the mission. The occasion arose when the bishops of North America called him to preach in their lands. There his apostolic

⁷ Cf. LESOURD, 24-45.

⁸ Cf. LESOURD, 47-165. The expression is from the title of chapter IV, which reviews the period 1830-1839.

activity was fabulous. In little more than two years (1839-1841), he traveled through a large part of the United States and Canada, participated in the regional council of Baltimore, preached “popular missions” in the many cities to which he was called, promoted places of formation for the clergy, by means of interpreters sowed the seed of the Gospel among the nomadic tribes, in New York he promoted the construction of a church for French-speaking Catholics...This frenetic activity would exhaust his health, and the consequences would be seen within a few years. In the meantime, his desire to create a foundation in favor of the missions increases.⁹

After his return to France, in the first months of 1842, Bishop de Forbin-Janson visited the Holy See to report on his missionary journey to Pope Gregory XVI - who gave him extraordinary praise - and to discuss his return to the diocese of Nancy. The political circumstances did not seem favorable for this to be possible. This situation was decisive for an old project to become a reality. In his mind and in his heart, the plea that Father Mouly, a Lazarist and superior of the mission of Peking, had written in a letter of October 16, 1837, was still echoing in his mind and in his heart. After giving news of the many children - and especially girls - in China who were dying abandoned or killed, without even being able to receive baptism, he expressed his desire in these words:

“Oh, I hope that one day Providence will have pity on these poor children and will procure for them a tender and paternal heart in another as Vincent of Paul. As Providence in Europe has pitied the foundlings, she will

⁹ Cf. LESOURD, 166-206. See also, MENJAUD, 13-16.

also one day pity the abandoned of China: this is one of my most fervent desires.”¹⁰

3.- Foundation and definition of the Society

With these concerns and on his return to France, in the summer of 1842, Bishop Forbin-Janson went to Lyon to meet with Pauline Jaricot, with whom he had been in contact since she, twenty years earlier, had founded the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. Thus, in addition to carrying out the steps promised to the American bishops before the Central Council of the Society, in dialogue with Pauline, his project began to take shape. The following text from Bishop de Forbin-Janson himself can summarize the fundamental content of that interview:

“To free from death a multitude of children born of unfaithful parents, whom caprice or misery, superstitions and the most repugnant and unnatural barbarism destroy by hundreds of thousands, either in the waters of rivers and the abysses of the sea, or

¹⁰ Part of the letter, including the rogation, is transcribed by Bishop de Forbin-Janson himself; cf. MONS. FORBIN-JANSON (1844), “Noticia del Ilustre Señor de Forbin-Janson sobre la obra de la Santa Infancia”, en: CONSEJO CENTRAL DE LA SANTA INFANCIA (1906), *Manual de la Santa Infancia que contiene los principales documentos relativos a su institución a su organización y a los favores espirituales con que está enriquecida. Destinado especialmente para los Directores y Celadores de la Obra*, París, Oficinas del Consejo Central, 118-119. In the note on page 119, he cites the reference of this letter: *Anales de la Congrégation de la Mission*. Paris, 1838. Cf. LESOURD, 207-221.

devoured by dogs and swine; above all, to open, by baptism, the gates of heaven to the greatest possible number of these poor creatures, deprived at birth of paternal love; to prepare a sure and effective means to regenerate idolatrous nations, by giving a Christian education to those who can be freed from death, and later to make of these rescued children instruments of salvation, as school teachers, doctors and midwives, catechists, and even priests and indigenous missionaries, this is the idea that concerned the Bishop of Nancy many years ago, the idea that he judges should be fruitful, worthy of being proposed to the Catholic charity.”¹¹

The intention that led him to plan the new society was to interest the children of Europe in the fate of the Chinese children and to promote their collaboration for their rescue through a double gesture: the daily recitation of the Hail Mary, followed by a small invocation, and the offering of a small coin a month; to which was added a spirit of mortification for the good of those children. This society was conceived with an integral character; it not only sought to rescue the children of unfaithful parents from death in order to provide them with acceptable living conditions, but also to form them in a human and Christian way, in a series of centers, so that they could become those new Moses who, rescued from the waters, would be the liberators and evangelizers of their own peoples. In short, the idea was to create a “childlike” Propagation of the Faith. Pauline Jaricot encouraged this purpose and facilitated

¹¹ FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 109-110.

the realization of the project of the Bishop of Nancy. From this conversation, Bishop de Forbin-Janson was enthusiastic about the idea and, until the end of his days, he would dedicate all his efforts and goods to make this missionary association a reality.¹²

Before setting out, and in fulfillment of the promise he had made on his trip to America, he took some steps before the English court in favor of the deportees in Canada and Australia, in order to facilitate their return to their country.

The Society of the Holy Childhood - in reference to the childhood of Jesus - was founded on May 19, 1843. On that date, the Bishop of Nancy gathered the first Committee, constituted by great ecclesiastical and social personalities, with the task of supporting the new Society with their fame and authority. In order for the initiative to spread, he promoted it among the French bishops and traveled to Belgium, where he received the support of the kings and the nuncio, Bishop Gioacchino Pecci, the future Pope Leo XIII.

From the beginning, the Society of the Holy Childhood was well received; however, it soon encountered difficulties in getting the French bishops to promote it in their diocese. There was the fear that this new Society would rival and weaken that of the Propagation of the Faith, which was bearing such good fruit. Faced with these obstacles, on December 8, 1843, Bishop de Forbin-Janson sent a circular letter to the Vicars Apostolic of the mission countries, in which he explained the aims of the Society and its current organization. After the death of its

¹² Cf. LESOURD, 221-227. See also, MENJAUD, 13-16.

founder, a few months later, the extraordinary reception of this letter was the impetus for the consolidation of the Society.¹³

The Bishop of Nancy soon realized that, in order for the Society of the Holy Childhood to develop and fulfill the mission for which it had been conceived, its auxiliary and complementary character with the Pontifical Society of the Propagation of the Faith had to be made clear. In an attempt to remove the misgivings, Bishop de Forbin-Janson wrote a long note to the Councils of the Propagation of the Faith in Lyon and Paris, in which, against any spirit of competition, he expressed his desire that the Holy Childhood be recognized as the children's section of the mother Society, an auxiliary Society that would remain subordinate to it.¹⁴

The Holy Childhood's guiding intention was to add new charitable efforts to those already being made in favor of the mission, this time coming from the children. To create a "special and distinct fund" to rescue and take care, in a permanent way, of those affected children who escaped the Society of the Propagation of the Faith.¹⁵ To establish houses of formation in which the children would be cared for and educated in a Christian way; houses that would become points of arrival and departure of missionaries, and places where they would be prepared for a mission more adapted to the different territories.¹⁶ And, finally, that it would be a seedbed for new subscribers and missionary vocations that would enrich the

¹³ Cf. LESOURD, 227-240.

¹⁴ Cf. LESOURD, 240-250.

¹⁵ Cf. FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 124-125.

¹⁶ Cf. FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 121-124.

Society of the Propagation of the Faith.¹⁷ The proposal did not meet with the expected acceptance. From that moment on, the Society of the Holy Childhood began its own journey, although always in a spirit of collaboration with the Society of the Propagation of the Faith, which was the source of its inspiration.¹⁸

In a short time, the Holy Childhood was advancing by leaps and bounds. This is what seems to emerge from a sort of balance sheet that Bishop de Forbin-Janson sent to his associates on December 23, 1843¹⁹: the bishops begin to welcome it favorably; even non-believers recognize it as “a powerful instrument of civilization”; it also extends beyond French borders; countless families subscribe their children from baptism; it also arouses interest among Protestant families... The positive effects of the Society are not only felt in the mission lands; it also contributes to raising the spirit of piety and sacrifice in Christian societies. On March 13, 1844, the first funds were sent to China, from which 11 apostolic vicariates benefited. A few months later, on May 19, in a letter of Cardinal Fransoni, Prefect of Propaganda Fide, the Holy See approves the beginning of the new Society and its valuable collaboration in the missions; however, it indicates some

¹⁷ Cf. FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 129.

¹⁸ A few years later, after the death of its founder, the official organ of the Society points out the similarities, as well as the differences, that it maintains with the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. It also expresses the spirit of collaboration that should reign between the two societies. The text appears unsigned under the title: “Coup d’œil sur l’Œuvre de la Sainte Enfance”, in *Annales* 1 (1846), 21-65.

¹⁹ Cf. LESOURD, 254-272.

difficulty regarding the concurrence with the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.²⁰

In order to show the need and importance of this Society and to organize its functioning, four months before his death, the Bishop of Nancy announced the creation - which would take place in 1846 - of the *Annals of the Society of the Holy Childhood*. This periodical publication was also conceived as a system of “exchange of correspondence” between Christian children and their brothers and sisters in mission lands. Over the years, the reports of the Vicars of those territories about the works undertaken with the donations received, as well as the Christian witness of the rescued children, who even went so far as to give their lives to bear witness to their faith in Christ, were a great stimulus to the growth of the Society.

Bishop Charles de Forbin-Janson died near Marseilles in July 1844, when the Holy Childhood was barely a year and a half old. He couldn't fulfill his dream of traveling to China, once his Society was up and running, nor did he get to see the expeditions of the nuns who, starting in 1847, and in line with another intuition of his, would take maternal care of the most disadvantaged children of the missions.

With the death of its founder - the one who promoted and endorsed it - the Society of the Holy Childhood went through a period of uncertainty.²¹ Despite its diffusion, its bureaucratic and administrative organization was in its first steps; no bishop could be found to replace Bishop de Forbin-

²⁰ Cf. LESOURD, 275-277.

²¹ Cf. unsigned text: “Coup d’œil sur l’œuvre de la Saint-Enfance”, in *Annales* 1 (1846), 36-42.

Janson as president; it was still the victim of misunderstandings and misgivings...; even Rome, beyond a positive evaluation of its inspiration, did not make an explicit act of recognition. Nevertheless, subscriptions are increasing considerably, the Vicars Apostolic are asking for its help and the Superiors of the missionary congregations are showing interest in it. It seems that, in spite of the difficulties, Providence is pushing the Society to move forward and carry out its goals. A few months later, the Archbishop of Chalcedon, Pierre-Dominique-Marcellin Bonamie, SS.CC., assumed the presidency of the Society. He received it, fulfilling the promise he had made, before his death, to the Bishop of Nancy and knowing that the difficulties that the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide had expressed to him were of an administrative and circumstantial nature, and that he would not be able to carry out the Society's objectives.²² The first fruits of the Society and its evident complementarity and collaboration with the Propagation of the Faith were enough to definitively smooth his path.²³

²² Circular of the Archbishop of Chalcedon, President of the Society of the Holy Childhood to the Associates of the Society of the Holy Childhood (May 1845)

<https://books.google.es/books?id=RJKoK2ZJg1EC&pg=PA1&lpg=PA1&dq=1%27archev%C3%AAque+de+calc%C3%A9doine,+sainte-enfance&source=bl&ots=yIbhrPyif&sig=ACfU3U3svTU0CD71YLiIJWs4XqkNLcrGvQ&hl=es&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiVlrOSprbrAhWQmBOKHT3FAvkQ6AEwAHoECAEQAQ#v=onepage&q=l'archev%C3%AAque%20de%20calc%C3%A9doine%2C%20sainte-enfance&f=false>

²³ Cf. unsigned text: “Coup d’œil sur l’Œuvre de la Sainte Enfance”, in *Annales* 1 (1846), 43-65.

4.- Connection with other PMS

4.1.- *The Popes, the PMS and the Holy Childhood*

Pope Gregory XVI encouraged Bishop de Forbin-Janson in his efforts to launch the Holy Childhood: “Continue to found the Society. It is truly the work of God. You have our blessing.” These words anticipate many others with which successive popes have supported and recommended this initiative, which Pius IX approved and elevated to the category of canonical institutions by the brief *Quum Aetate Qualibet* (July 18, 1846). This document notes that, far from being in competition with the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, the Society of the children is a preparation and support for it:

“By the very fact that it kindles in the hearts of children the first spark of charity and penetrates them with the true sentiments of a merciful compassion, it inflames and encourages them in such a way to procure the salvation of souls and to spread the light of true religion, that these children will naturally be prepared in later life to become more affectionately attached to the pious Society for the Propagation of the Faith.”

Benedict XV recommended this Society in numbers 38-39 of his apostolic letter *Maximum Illud*, the “magna carta” of the modern missions (1919), and Pius XI insisted on it in number 17 of *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926). Four years before the publication of this encyclical, the same “Pope of the Missions” had recognized Holy Childhood as a “Pontifical” Society, together with the Propagation of the Faith and Saint Peter the

Apostle; he did so through the *Motu Proprio Romanorum Pontificum*, dated May 3, 1922. Finally, it was Pius XII who instituted, with universal character, the celebration of an annual Holy Childhood Day, by means of the letter *Praeses Consilii*, dated December 4, 1950.

Of the many words of praise for the Society or addressed to it by successive Popes, we mention only a few by St. John Paul II on the occasion of the International Year of the Child, because of the simplicity and closeness of his approach. The Pope then referred to Holy Childhood or Missionary Childhood as “a real network of human and spiritual solidarities between the children of the old and the new continents.”²⁴

4.2.- Articulation of the Holy Childhood within the PMS

It is interesting to note the initial hesitation in identifying the specific place that Holy Childhood should occupy in relation to the Propagation of the Faith. And it is very necessary to contemplate the charismatic initiative that is at the origin of the Children's Society to understand that finally it was recognized that this was not a sort of “children's branch” of the Propagation of the Faith (even if this was something like its “older sister”), but a Society with its own characteristics that made it necessary to individualize it.

²⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Message to the President of the Pontifical Society for Missionary Childhood on the occasion of the International Year of the Child.* (10-IV-1979).

Pius XI already offers a clear formulation of the place of Holy Childhood within the Pontifical Mission Societies. In the aforementioned *Rerum Ecclesiae* we read:

“With the head organization, the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, there are affiliated, as We have written, two other societies - the Association of the Holy Childhood and the Society of St. Peter the Apostle. Since the Holy See has made these latter organizations in a peculiar manner its own, the faithful from all over the world ought to help and maintain them by their offerings, and this in preference to other pious works whose aims are more or less specialized. The object of the Association of the Holy Childhood is, as is well known, to train children so that they will accustom themselves to set aside a certain amount of their money allowance in order to give the same for the redemption and Catholic education of heathen babies who have been abandoned by their parents or have been exposed to death as often happens in certain lands.” (nn.15-16).

A little further on, recommending them, he refers to these two Societies, saying of them that “they are rightly called complementary to the other more principal one” (n. 17; cf. n. 14), that is, to the Propagation of the Faith, to which they are auxiliary.

This process of clarification motivated the Pontiff to publish the Motu Proprio *Decessor Noster* (June 24, 1929), “norms according to which the Pontifical Mission Societies are coordinated among themselves, but without merging into a homogeneous whole, since we believe that each of them should

preserve its rights and statutes and develop according to its own ends.” After some time, for the Society of the Missionary Childhood, the point of reference will be the “Regulations of the Pontifical Society of the Holy Childhood”, approved on June 7, 1950 (Paris, 1951).

In 1951, when the then called Missionary Union of the Clergy had not yet been qualified as a fourth “Pontifical” Society (which happened by decree of Pius XII of October 28, 1956, although it had already been officially coordinated with the first three Societies since 1937), Pope Pius XII speaks of it as “the source from which depends the success of the other Pontifical Societies of the Propagation of the Faith, of St. Peter Apostle for Native Clergy, and of the Holy Childhood.” (*Evangeliæ Praecones*, 65). Later, in 1966, St. Paul VI, quoting a significant passage of *Ad Gentes* (n. 38) on the priority of the Pontifical Mission Societies in missionary animation and cooperation, says of the Pontifical Missionary Union (the new name of the fourth Society) that “established directly under the authority of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, has not only been officially recognized by the Apostolic See as a proper tool for instilling a truly universal and missionary sense among Catholics since its infancy, but is to be considered as the soul of the other Pontifical Missionary Societies in particular” (*Graves et Incrementes*), which evidently concerns, in its proper part, the Society of Missionary Childhood.

4.3.- The Missionary Childhood and the other Societies

This articulation of the four Missionary Societies manifests the need to make operational and functional, for the sake of the one mission, the diversity of aspects that derive from the charismatic initiatives that pulsate in each one of them. In this sense, it is interesting to see briefly the “place” of the Holy Childhood in the progressive emergence of the Societies.

The participation of all the faithful in the universal mission, facilitated through material and spiritual cooperation thanks to the Propagation of the Faith (founded in 1822), leaves open the door to an educational task of what the adult will later live: it is the just mentioned aspect of accompanying children in the “truly universal and missionary spirit”, a pedagogy that the Holy Childhood (founded in 1843) will be in charge of. This Society will not only attend to the formation of the children of the old Christian communities, but also to the formation of those newly incorporated into the Church in the mission territories. For this reason, this organization will also take on the task of fostering native vocations, marking an area that will later be specifically addressed by the Society of St. Peter the Apostle (founded in 1889). Finally, the Pontifical Missionary Union (founded in 1916), dedicated to the “formation of missionary formators”, has an important contribution regarding the means that can be used by the Missionary Childhood, both those directly oriented to children, as well as those aimed at the adequate theological and catechetical preparation (and “adequate” implies “missionary”) of its pastoral agents.

Along with this “historical” vision, it is interesting to highlight the “actuality” of the linkage of the Societies. In this regard, the overall vision offered by number 4 of the Instruction *Cooperation Missionalis* (October 1, 1998) of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples is of great help, as it helps to situate Missionary Childhood in the context of the Pontifical Mission Societies. We will only mention that, in summarizing the purpose of each Society, it says of Missionary Childhood that it is “to help educators to gradually awaken missionary awareness in children; to encourage them to share their faith and their material goods with their peers in the most needy regions and Churches; and to promote missionary vocations from the earliest age”.

The *Statute of the Pontifical Mission Societies* (May 6, 2005), also published by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, the Roman dicastery to which it depends, is the point of reference currently in force. It is indispensable, therefore, to refer to it, specifically to number 13d of Part I and articles 13-18 of Part II, dedicated to Missionary Childhood (known by the acronym MCA). We highlight only the role attributed to this Society in order to imbue the entire pastoral care of children (and therefore, family and general pastoral care) with a missionary sense: the MCA “should always be integrated into the general pastoral work of Christian education, to which it brings a missionary dimension” (art. 14). And also, some words that help to situate in the concrete circumstances of our world today the original inspiration of basing the Society on the Holy Infancy of the Lord: “Children are encouraged to offer to other children of the

world their help in the terms of prayer, sacrifices and offerings,
and to discover in them the face of Jesus” (art. 15).

II.- CHARISM OF THE HOLY CHILDHOOD OR MISSIONARY CHILDHOOD

1.- A charismatic association

As with any work born in the bosom of the Church, Holy Childhood has a conjunctural character: it arose in a context of missionary effervescence and as a response to the unfortunate fate of the children of China. However, this Society, which was the brainchild of Bishop de Forbin-Janson and was born of the generosity of the People of God, turned out to be a gift of the Spirit, as the title of “Pontifical” given to it by the Successor of Peter acknowledges in a certain sense.²⁵ In this way, its validity in time will not be found in what was circumstantial, but in “the charismatic initiative”²⁶ that gave rise to it. This charism, which - it could be said - history has confirmed, is what has made it capable of constantly regenerating itself in order to respond to the challenges that the Church's mission has faced.

Thus, if the Society of the Holy Childhood or Missionary Childhood is to remain a Society that fulfills its proper mission within the group of Pontifical Societies, it is necessary to detect, within the common charism, its specific charism; that gift of the Spirit that identifies it among its sisters

²⁵ Cf. FRANCIS, *Message to the Pontifical Mission Societies* (21-V-2020).

²⁶ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE EVANGELIZATION OF PEOPLES, *Statute of the Pontifical Mission Societies* (2005), Part I, History and Doctrine, n. 10. In n. 5 of Part II, Norms, the Statute insists that the PMS were born from “particular charismatic initiatives”.

and allows it to make its particular contribution to the mission it shares with the other Societies.

In fact, the Pontifical Mission Societies are united by a common charismatic trunk, which has its origin in the Propagation of the Faith. This first Society, founded by Pauline Jaricot, was inspired by a missionary charism that was proper to it; however, this charism has been shared by the later Societies. This missionary charism found a very simple expression: all the members of the People of God who walked in the Churches of ancient Christianity could collaborate, through prayer and charity in the form of alms, with the activity of the missionaries in distant lands. Such was the Catholic perspective of this Society and the great acceptance it had among Christians of every class and nation, that soon the Holy See recognized it as a true “an instrument of service in support of the particular Churches in the work of proclaiming the Gospel [...] as part of the universal ministry exercised by the Pope and by the Church of Rome, which ‘presides in charity’”²⁷. We have seen above how the Society of the Holy Childhood was born encouraged by this universal missionary charism; however, and not without difficulties, it was soon characterized by its own charismatic impulse which, right from its origins, distinguished it from what became its elder sister.

However, it is not easy to determine the charism of the Holy Childhood. Often it can be confused with the particular ways of organization (distribution of groups, collections, campaigns...); other times, with its functional contribution to the whole of the Societies (missionary formation of the

²⁷ Cf. FRANCIS, *Message to the Pontifical Mission Societies* (21-V-2020).

children, vocation quarry...). Undoubtedly, these elements are an expression of the charism and, at first, the means of identifying it. However, the charism, as a grace of the Spirit, is that which remains in time as an inexhaustible source capable of revitalizing these expressions and, from their roots, renewing them to give a creative response to the new challenges of the mission.²⁸

In fact, charism is a gift of the Spirit, and the Spirit is the divine Person whom the risen Christ sends from the glory of the Father to bear witness to him (cf. Jn. 15:26).²⁹ Whenever the Spirit, through a founder or foundational group, raises up and blesses an ecclesial work with his grace, he seeks to actualize a particular dimension of the salvific mystery of Christ for the Church and the world. Therefore, it is by pointing to this mystery that we can discern the charism proper to the Society of the Holy Childhood or Missionary Childhood. And it is by discerning the concrete way in which the Spirit makes Christ present in this Society founded by Bishop de Forbin-Janson that we will be able to recognize it in all its worth, access its source of renewal and find the particular vocation to which it is called to respond in order to make its unique contribution to the mission of the Church.

²⁸ For a first approach, cf. PONTIFICIUM OPUS A SANCTA INFANTIA (2008), *Holy Childhood. History and Charism* (text: Mariateresa Crescini), Roma, POSI.

²⁹ Cf. LUIS F. LADARIA (2013), *Jesús y el Espíritu: la unción*, Burgos, Monte Carmelo, especially pages 80-86.

2.- Under the patronage and exemplarity of the Child Jesus

The Regulation of the Association, referring to the patron saint, state: “The Society of the Holy Childhood is placed under the patronage of the Child Jesus.”³⁰ This indication alone guides us in the search for the charism with which the Spirit has invested the Society founded by Bishop de Forbin-Janson.

2.1.- “The adorable child of two natures”

In the mind of its founder, the Holy Childhood is governed by an idea that can be formulated in the following terms: “Children helping children”. That is to say, Christian children have compassion for their peers in distant pagan lands and, with their poor means, collaborate in their rescue and evangelization. But, at the same time, these rescued and baptized children, with their Christian journey and even with their own martyrdom, stimulate their brothers and sisters in Europe and America in their faith and missionary activity. Herein lies the novelty: the Society revolves around childhood. A childhood that has been protected and reintegrated in its rights by Christianity, and a childhood that, as in ancient paganism, continues to be mistreated and abandoned wherever the Gospel of peace and love has not arrived.³¹ Where does this

³⁰ CONSEJO CENTRAL DE LA SANTA INFANCIA (1906), *Manual de la Santa Infancia...*, 1. Cf. RAFAEL SANTOS BARBA (2017), “Actualidad de Infancia Misionera”: *Misiones Extranjeras* 281, 677-678.

³¹ Cf. FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 110-112.

unequal treatment lie? Bishop de Forbin-Janson puts it down to the incarnation of the Son of God:

“After so many centuries, such was the fate of childhood in pagan societies, when in Bethlehem was born the adorable child of two natures, Son of God and Son of man, a Child of charming gentleness and kindness.”³²

The Son of God, by becoming incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary through the work and grace of the Holy Spirit, has become one of us, similar in everything to us except sin. And by his incarnation he took on all that is ours: nothing in our life is foreign to him, he is not absent from the circumstances through which we pass, nor are our ages, including childhood, foreign to him. Bishop de Forbin-Janson emphasizes this: “His nascent humanity already seemed to consecrate the first age of life, making Childhood lovable and covering it with the sweet reflection of his own glory.”³³ The Son of God became a child and - paraphrasing the Second Vatican Council - we can say that, by his incarnation, he has united himself, in a certain sense, with every child.³⁴ From that instant, his own glory radiates its “sweet reflection” on all the children who come into the world. They all claim to be recognized in their dignity, not only because they are God's creatures, but also because, in a certain way, they bear the glory of the Son of God. Moreover, all children can live a spirit

³² FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 112.

³³ *Ibidem.*

³⁴ Cf. CONCILIO VATICANO II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* Gaudium et Spes (7-XII-1965), 22b.

of holiness, because, by becoming one of them, the Son of God has “consecrated the first age of life”. This, which is unknown to those who are ignorant of Christ, is well known to those who have received the Gospel and have made him their light and guide.

Let us go deeper into this mystery in order to understand the scope of the Society of the Holy Childhood. Jesus, the son of Mary, is, from the very moment of his incarnation, the Son of God. However, it was at the age of twelve that he revealed what he had been aware of from the beginning. The occasion arose during her family's annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. Jesus did not return with his parents, but remained in the Temple, conversing with the scholar of the Law. Mary reproaches him for his indelicacy. And it is then that Jesus reveals the relationship that constitutes him: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” (cf. Lk 2:41-50).

At the age of twelve, then, Jesus reveals his filial mystery: he is the son of Mary and is under the patronage of Joseph; but, in reality, he is the Son of God, whom he calls with all tenderness and confidence “Abba, Father”. This fact explains the importance of the number twelve in the Society of the Holy Childhood. At the beginning, children could be members of the Association “from the day of their baptism until the end of their twelfth year, in memory of the adolescent Jesus.”³⁵ Also, in memory of the twelve years of the Child

³⁵ OBRA PONTIFICIA DE LA SANTA INFANCIA (1950), *Estatutos de la Obra*, Article IV: Members of the Association. For its part, in the Rules (1906), in Section II: Organization of the Society, in number 3, it says: “Any baptized child may be a member of this Association”; and in number 4: “Children are

Jesus, it was decided to group the children of the Association in series of twelve members.³⁶

There is no doubt that these references are neither anecdotal nor of merely organizational value. They point to the Gospel passage we have just reviewed, in which Jesus himself, the adolescent Child, reveals his filial mystery and his permanent reference to his Father, God: “Did you not know that I should be [occupied] with the things of my Father?” Jesus, the Son, in his very infancy, is the apostle of the Father (cf. Heb. 3:1). He was sent to fulfill the mission of reuniting the family of God (cf. Heb. 3:4,6). A new world of relationships is created around Jesus and his relationship with the Father. The Son of God has become a brother to men and treats them as such. In this way, he reveals to them that his Father is also their Father, and they are children of God and brothers and sisters to one another. There is no distance between continents, there is no difference of race or language; the divine plan that “the adorable child of two natures” has begun to carry out urgently needs to be carried out, and to it are summoned, in a special way, his younger brothers and sisters, those with whom he shares his infancy.

admitted from their youngest age up to twelve years of age”, in: CONSEJO CENTRAL DE LA SANTA INFANCIA (1906), *Manual de la Santa Infancia...*, 2.

³⁶ Cf. Reglamento (1906), in Section II: Organización de la Obra, in number 6, it says: “The Association is divided into groups of twelve members in honor of the twelve years of the Savior’s childhood. Twelve groups form a section and twelve sections make up a division” in: CONSEJO CENTRAL DE LA SANTA INFANCIA (1906), *Manual de la Santa Infancia...*, 2.

2.2.- “Giving back to children their neglected rights and adding privileges”

Bishop de Forbin-Janson not only sees in the Child Jesus the reason why childhood has been dignified, but also considers that Jesus, through “a new language of teachings and examples, soon revealed his formal will to restore to childhood its despised rights and to add privileges.”³⁷ In fact, children possess something, which Jesus knows how to detect, that makes them privileged subjects for the mission of the Kingdom. The Founder of the Holy Childhood gathers some gestures and words of Jesus that show it:

“Who of us, in fact, does not keep in his memory the enchanting stories in which the Evangelist shows Jesus *caressing and blessing the children*, either calling them with these words of love: *Let the children come to me*, or protecting their innocence with these words of terrible threat against anyone who was not afraid to scandalize one of them: *It would be better for such a one to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck*; or, to conciliate respect for childhood, revealing to us the new honor to which it was the object: Children have angels charged with their care, *and those angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven*; sometimes setting them as models at all ages of life: *The kingdom of heaven is for those who are like these children*; at other times, proposing them for the imitation of his own disciples: Truly I tell you,

³⁷ FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 112.

unless you are like these little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven; and finally, these paternal words, so gentle to encourage them to love and serve them: Whatever you do for the youngest of these little children, who are my brethren, it is as if you had done it for myself.”³⁸

As a little sister-if not daughter-of the Society of the Propagation of the Faith, since its beginnings, Holy Childhood could be considered as an auxiliary Association of the general Society, a school of formation, a quarry of vocations, a channel for the exchange of goods between children...There is no doubt that these elements correspond to reality and recognize part of its specific contribution to the mission. However, there is a danger of ignoring the contribution of childhood, as itself, to Christian life, in general, and to the mission, in particular. However, there is a danger of ignoring the contribution that childhood, as itself, makes to Christian life in general and to the mission in a particular way. The description made by Bishop de Forbin-Janson makes this clear. For Jesus, childhood possesses “privileges” for the kingdom of God that must be taken into account in the evangelizing mission. Beyond any functional reduction, the Society of the Holy Childhood or Missionary Childhood promotes, in regard to the mission, the proper contribution of children and - as Jesus himself did - it proposes to the People of God as models for the actual exercise of the mission. It is necessary to recognize that the Spirit has wanted to grant a particular blessing to the ecclesial mission through childhood. To forget this not only pauperizes the

³⁸ FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 112-113.

Society that brings it together, but also the missionary activity itself, in general.

**a.- “The kingdom of God belongs to such as these”
(Mk 10:14b)**

In Christianity, children have a preferential place. For Jesus, far from being an inconvenience, childhood brings with it, conditions that make it especially receptive to the kingdom of God.³⁹ The evangelist Mark declares it in the following way: the children are brought to Jesus to be touched, the disciples want to prevent it and, then, Jesus says the following words:

“Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it.” (Mk 10:14-15).

Jesus does not say “bring me the children”, but “let them come to me.” The Lord sees in children an innate disposition that he invites his disciples to recognize and

³⁹ This point is inspired by H. U. VON BALTHASAR (2006), *Si no os hacéis como este Niño*, Rafaela Province of Santa Fe (Argentina), Fundación San Juan. K. RAHNER (1964), “*Thoughts for a Theology of Childhood*”, Selections of Theology vol. 3, no. 10, 142-148 (translated and condensed: Victor Codina from the original; “Gedanken zu einer Theologie der Kindheit”, Geist und Leben 36 (1963), 104-114. JUAN JOSÉ BARTOLOMÉ (2018), *Los niños en el ministerio de Jesús de Nazaret. Sujetos de curación y modelos del Reino*, Madrid, CCS. JUAN CARLOS CARVAJAL (2017), “El proceso espiritual de conversión en la iniciación cristiana de niños y adolescentes. Fundamentos y esbozo”: *Actualidad catequética* 253, 99-144; also ID. (2019), *Sorprendente infancia. Recibir el Reino de Dios como un niño*, Madrid, CCS.

accompany. He considers that their capacities, peculiarly from childhood, he makes it easier for them to open themselves and receive the mysteries of the Kingdom. They can take precedence and play a leading role in the affairs of the Kingdom because they are sensitive to the fatherhood of God and to that project of fraternity that is born of his love manifested in his Son, Jesus. Moreover, children littleness, their weakness, their insignificance moves the Father and make them the blessed recipients of his providential care and to whom he gives his Kingdom of grace (cf. Mt 6:25-34; 5:3 par.).

Jesus' words are surprising, not only because they reveal the disposition of children towards the divine mysteries and their privileged place in the eyes of the Father, but above all because they are put forward as models. They are the measure of access to the Kingdom: “the kingdom of God belongs to those who are like children.” This “like children” shows that the disciples of Jesus must not have an attitude of conquest and domination - pelagian or Gnostic, in the terminology of Pope Francis⁴⁰ - regarding of the kingdom of God. On the contrary, like children, they should let God himself give them his Kingdom of grace. In fact, Jesus reiterates this idea: “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it”.

The Pontifical Society of the Holy Childhood or Missionary Childhood Association has been granted to guard, generation after generation, a true treasure. Children are the treasure of society and of the Church. Undoubtedly, they are,

⁴⁰ Cf. FRANCIS (2018), Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, 36-62.

because they constitute the future of both. But, in keeping with the words of Jesus, childhood possesses its own value which, to the extent that it is recognized and promoted, it gives access to the mysteries that God has willed to reveal, while at the same time offering the attitudes necessary to receive his Kingdom and to be placed at his service. And this is not only for the children of the Missionary Association, but also for the animators who take care of them and, raising our gaze a little, for all those who participate in the life and mission of the Church. Missionary Childhood is a Society by and for children, but also a “sign” to adults, believers and even non-believers.⁴¹

b.- “Receive the one who sent me” (Mk 9:37)

There is no exaggeration in what we say. Jesus himself manifests his identification with his little brothers and sisters and reveals how to welcome them is to receive, through them, the Father who sent him:

“Taking a child he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it he said to them, whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me.” (Mk 9:36-37).

⁴¹ John Paul II emphasized this significant character that the children of the Society have for adults: “And doing so, not only does their baptismal and human life develop and become personalized, but such children question and evangelize the world of adults, who are sometimes hardened and sceptical about the necessity and the efficacy of solidarity and the gift of oneself.” (JOHN PAUL II [1979], *Message to the President of the Pontifical Society for Missionary Childhood on the occasion of the International Year of the Child*).

Why does Jesus make this identification? Actually, childhood is crossed by a filial condition. Children are aware, even unconsciously, that they do not have their origin in themselves and that in everything they are under the protection of their elders; they know they are dependent on their parents. This means that, as Bishop de Forbin-Janson perceived, there is no greater injustice and scandal than an abandoned or neglected child.⁴² However, when people grow up and gradually become self-sufficient, they forget this original dependence, which is not only innate in childhood, but is proper to human beings because of their creaturely character and because their life is always in the provident hands of God.

Thus, because of their dependence, children evoke the Child Jesus; they are his little brothers and sisters. However, Jesus was not only dependent in his infancy, he is always dependent. It is true that, Jesus is the eternal Child-Son of God. He knows himself to be linked to the Father, permanently dependent on his divine providence: he lives receiving everything from him (cf. Mt 11:27) and fulfilling his will (cf. Jn 4:34); and it is from this dependence that he saves men. This clarifies the identification that Jesus makes between the children, himself and the one who sent him, and its imperative character to his disciples: to receive a child - in his name - is to welcome the Child-Son of God, and to welcome him, in truth, is to embrace his provident Father, with whom he is one in love (cf. Jn. 10:30; 14:9). Indeed, by welcoming children in their weakness, protecting them from threats and fostering their integral development, we are welcoming and rescuing the Son

⁴² Cf. FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 119.

of God himself, who has hidden his glory and presented himself as powerless and in need of human attention and care. By welcoming the weakness of Jesus represented in children, we accept the salvation that God the Father freely offers and grants to those who - with a merciful and generous heart like his own - welcome and care for his youngest children.

The Pontifical Society of the Holy Childhood or Missionary Childhood Association shows that every human being depends on divine providence, mediated by justice and solidarity, and it makes this evident through children. That is, through those who, by virtue of their age, are vulnerable, lacking in power and influence, radically dependent on others. However, the surprising thing about the Society is that, in order to rescue vulnerable children, it turns to other children who are no less vulnerable, but with the particularity that they have recognized that they are loved by God, the Father of Jesus and their Father. Bishop of Forbin-Janson rightly points out the gratitude to the “religion” as the origin of the movement of solidarity of Christian children towards children in difficulty; and, for this reason, he assumes that in those gestures of solidarity are inscribed the evangelizing dynamism. Here are his words:

“The Association of Childhood was preferred to all other Associations, because Infancy does not yet have one established by its own and, so to speak, proportionate to its age and strength; because, after having received so much from religion, we thought it right that it should contribute in its own way, with some prayer and some alms, to procure for infidel Infancy the

joy of knowing the God of Calvary and of the Eucharist.”⁴³

How significant is the contribution of children to the mission, how necessary they are for the Church!⁴⁴ Their weakness, the poverty of the resources with which they contribute to the mission, their very candor, it is a constant reminder that the fruits of evangelizing activity do not come from strategies, a magnificent bureaucratic organization or from mere human activity, just from the blessing of God, who reaches where the poor dedication of the brothers and sisters of his Son does not reach. In this way, the Pontifical Society of Holy Childhood is a model for the Church and for the world, and it is a standard for the motto of St. Paul: “The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:25). There is a quote from the Founder to prove that the Association was born with the conviction that the destitution of the children is precisely what stimulates the generosity of God:

“...because we know that if their [the children's] prayer pleases the Lord and that he loves this sacrifice of the dawn of life, we also know that he does not allow himself to be overcome in generosity and that his richness and fullness only seem to ask of the indigence of his creatures in order to give them the right to a magnificent reward.”⁴⁵

⁴³ FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 126; italics added.

⁴⁴ Cf. RAFAEL SANTOS BARBA (2017), 677-678.

⁴⁵ FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 126-127; italics added. Shortly before, the Bishop of Nancy had already underlined how the weakness of the means leaves free to the

In this line, it is important to underline that the contribution of children to the ecclesial mission is not only at the origin of the Association: it is also in its goal. In the first place, the children affected are rescued, baptized and educated in the faith through the donations and prayers of their Christian brothers and sisters; but, as time goes by, they became the subjects of the mission of their communities and the encouragement of the life of faith of their brothers and sisters in the Churches with a long Christian tradition. At that time, the words of the Founder of Holy Childhood quoted above become a reality in them: “having received so much from religion” and having given themselves in the dawn of life to bear witness to the Gospel among their heathen lands, God will not fail to make their missionary work bear fruit and will grant them a “magnificent reward.”

c.- “Their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father” (Mt 18:10)

What is it about childhood that makes it the object of divine pleasure? What traits constitute it that all the disciples of Jesus are called to imitate? In what way do they contribute to and enrich the ecclesial mission? A phrase of Jesus puts us on

action of Providence and allows us to trust in divine mercy: “...being the simple and docile instruments of Providence, we cannot restrain or limit its action: then we will also have the right to trust in his mercy; the right to expect everything from the inventions of the wisdom and love of the *Lord who wants the salvation of all men* and especially of children; then we will *let him do his work* who knows how to inspire generous sacrifices at the right time, and from a great evil to draw a great good.” (p. 125-126, italics by the author).

the path: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father” (Mt 18:10). An enigmatic phrase, as the Scriptures teach: But my face you cannot see, for no man sees me and still lives (cf. Ex 33:20). Indeed, God always remains in an impassable Mystery; even after having revealed himself in his Son, Jesus, his Mystery endures; and still, Jesus declares that the angels of the children enjoy a special familiarity with God. They do see his face, in a way, they are knowers of his Mystery of Love. Children's angels are the messengers God sends to his little children to, in an extraordinary but almost imperceptible way, make them the witnesses of his Mystery in the midst of the world. Somehow, in every child who is born, and as long as he or she remains a childhood, God visits the world.

In fact, children have a special sensitivity to the mystery that envelops the world and their own lives. Moreover, we could say that they are attracted by this mystery, they grow in the attempt to decipher it, they rejoice when they discover its secret and wish to recognize it in everything that surrounds them. Sensitive to the mystery of the world, they are as open as anyone to be introduced to the mysteries of God's kingdom and receive them with such fervent faith that they are immediately ready to involve themselves in its service.⁴⁶

In the School of Jesus - in dialogue with their older Brother - they come to understand, with astonishing simplicity,

⁴⁶ This appreciation of childhood is included into the document that will govern catechesis in the coming years; cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION (2020), *Directory for Catechesis* (23-III-2020), 236.

the plans of God in favor of all men; they desire that, around the Father of all and his Son, Jesus, beyond any difference of race, language, nation or economic situation, universal fraternity be built; they penetrate with piety into the ultimate meaning of the life and death of Jesus; they adhere to him and they generously desire to follow in his footsteps; they understand that with whatever they can offer, they can also participate in the mission of Jesus... It is true that sometimes all this is forgotten, and the commitments are not always kept. But it is also true that, when they are helped to return to the Mystery of God, they always take it up again with an extraordinary seriousness and their commitment flourishes with extraordinary generosity.⁴⁷ This is the contribution that children make to the mission. This is the encouragement they offer to all those who collaborate in the mission of the Church.

That is why scandalizing the little ones is so disastrous. To scandalize a child is not only to mock a defenseless creature, in a certain sense, it is to close the door to God. When his innocence is sullied, his gaze is soiled, his generosity is dishonored; in fact, he is not recognized as one of “those messenger-angels” that God sends to call unbelieving humanity to a filial relationship; then the words of Jesus cease to be a warning and become a real threat: “It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the

⁴⁷ As we have indicated above, the *Annals of the Society of the Holy Childhood* were born, among other reasons, to bear witness to the dedication and generosity of the children, and so that this would be stimulated by the history of their brothers and sisters in distant lands; cf. FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 128, footnote. Even today the International Secretariat of the Pontifical Society of Holy Childhood publishes the *Annals* together with the *Bulletin*, which has a similar function.

sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. Be on your guard!” (Lk 17:2-3).

All collaborators of the Society of Missionary Childhood should consider that Jesus has placed under their care one of his dearest treasures: his little brothers and sisters. For the same reason, they must also fear its threat.

d.- “a little child to guide them...” (Is 11,6)

It is necessary to recognize that Jesus' way of looking at childhood is surprising and does not conform to the way it is usually contemplated. In fact, it is common to think that children are a kind of *tabula rasa*, that is, a book with all the pages blank, waiting to be completed by the things they are taught, by the experiences they are given, by the relationships they are made able to have... It seems as if everything had to come from the outside, as if they were only receptacles to receive what is given to them. The ways in which this teaching is given can be debated: dynamic or passive, emphasizing the cognitive or the affective, in a fun way or in an effortful way...; but rarely does it start from them, starting from what they see, from what they look for, from what they observe, from what they ask... This way of proceeding in all areas of teaching is particularly disastrous with regard to the spiritual and religious. It is thought that “it is necessary to take them to God”; it is not considered that they “are in God” and, in a certain way, aroused by the same Spirit, they possess “a-thematic” (not expressed) experiences of it. Precisely, with his attitudes and his words, this is what Jesus himself has made us see.

The collaborators in the Society of Missionary Childhood cannot serve God and his work without God. They cannot think that they are the first and most interested in bringing children to God and in disposing them to serve his evangelizing project. God himself with his grace is the one who draws them to himself. He does what is necessary so that the children can come to the appointment of love that He imprinted in their souls on the very day of their birth.⁴⁸ Every child, with different modulations, the words that God, through the prophet Hosea, addressed to his people, become true:

“I drew them with human cords, with bands of love; I fostered them like one who raises an infant to his cheeks; Yet, though I stooped to feed my child, they did not know that I was their healer.” (Hos 11:4).

Children, as human beings, are born with the vocation to be children of God. From the moment of their birth, this call beats in the depths of their lives. Moreover, God is not satisfied with merely placing this seed, but, by the mysterious but real action of his Spirit, “with bonds of love” he draws children to himself. This is so: not by their own merits, but by the pure grace of God, children are attracted to the mysteries of the Kingdom. Christian adults must make an effort to detect the impulses of this attraction, to recognize them in the light of the Holy Gospel and to accompany the action of the Spirit who wants to bind the children to Jesus.

In fact, children must always be accompanied towards

⁴⁸ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* Gaudium et Spes (December 7, 1965), 19a: “From birth, man is invited to dialogue with God”.

Jesus and, with Jesus, towards the Father and their brothers and sisters; but we must always start from those motions that the Spirit places in the depths of their hearts. Children have a spiritual experience, but they do not know what it is, nor do they know how to interpret it. Many adults also ignore and even despise what children experience. However, the task of Christian educators, in general, and of the animators of Missionary Childhood, in Particular, is to detect these spiritual experiences, to recognize their value and to discover how, through them, Jesus is drawing them to Himself. In this contemplative dynamism, the Virgin Mary is a great teacher (cf. Lk 2:51). They, like the mother of Jesus, must keep in their hearts the words, the gestures, the questions, the yearnings... of the children they accompany, in all this to detect the movements of the Spirit who draws them to Jesus. Only after this contemplative and obedient attention to the Spirit, they will be able to put the means to facilitate that the children know Jesus and enter into a relationship of friendship-fraternity with Him, enabling them to become missionaries, as He is missionary of the Father.

At this point, the Christian educator is a witness and herald of Jesus, the Son of God, the true Little Child. Sometimes it is not easy to understand what children and adolescents are experiencing, nor do we know how to support them. There are many impediments in a world where God seems to be excluded and the dignity of children ignored. However, in the midst of this sea of difficulties, there is a sure compass: Jesus himself. Jesus is that Child who guides the educators of his younger brothers and sisters so that they can

accompany them to Him, their elder Brother and, with Him, to the common Father and to the rest of their brothers and sisters.

The key to the Christian formation of the children of Missionary Childhood is that the animators of the Society of Missionary Childhood - in the midst of the vicissitudes of life - are able to detect the movements that the Spirit produces in the hearts of the children in their care, know how to read them in the light of the experience of the Child-Son of God and propose this experience to the children with a simple but revealing announcement of the presence of Jesus in their lives.⁴⁹ By doing this, the children will be able to recognize the company of Jesus, who empathizes with them and loves them as his brother-friends and also incorporates them into the mission he has received from the Father, in favor of his brothers and sisters who do not know the love of God and suffer the ravages of evil and injustice. The objective is that the children become passionate about Jesus and thank him for the love he has for them. From this joyful relationship will spring in them the permanent impulse towards the mission and to be attentive to the spiritual and material needs of other children in any part of the world.

e.- “...and was obedient to them” (Lk 2:51)

“He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these

⁴⁹ In reality, the work of the animators is always a mediation of the witness that Christ gives of himself before the children. In the words of Pope Francis: “Christ, with his Spirit, bears witness to himself through the works he carries out in us and with us” (FRANCIS, *Message to the Pontifical Mission Societies* [May 21, 2020]).

things in her heart, And Jesus advanced (in) wisdom and age and favor before God and man.” (Lk 2:51-52).

As we have already seen, at the age of twelve, Jesus - the Son of God since his incarnation - fulfilling the Paschal precept of pilgrimage to the Temple of Jerusalem, manifests his awareness that he has come to be about the Father's matters. And yet, from that moment until the day of his baptism, on the banks of the River Jordan, Jesus returned with Mary and Joseph to Nazareth, where he lived for 18 years of what has come to be called his “hidden life”. Only a few small indications from St. Luke give us an idea of what those years were like: “he was growing in wisdom, in height and in grace in the sight of God and of men”. This is in continuity with what he had said about the previous period of Jesus' life: “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” (Lk 2:40). With these comments, the evangelist shows that, although the mystery of the divine filiation is part of Jesus' conscience and grace overflows in Him, nevertheless, His humanity follows the laws that govern every man: He must grow in height, become stronger, progress in the wisdom of things, advance in the penetration of His mystery in the human way... Jesus, the son of Virgin Mary, needs time for His humanity to grow to the height of being able to express the mystery of His divine person and to carry out the redemptive mission entrusted to Him by the Father.

The surprising thing is that this growth takes place under the tutelage of Mary and Joseph in Nazareth: “He came down with them and went to Nazareth and was attached to them”. It is the mystery of the Holy Family, it is the “school of

Nazareth.”⁵⁰ After revealing his Mystery and outlining his mission in the world, Jesus returns to the normal situation of his family: to the simple life, to daily discipline, to human relationships, to mutual respect, to daily work, to attentive listening to the divine Word, to a life of prayer both in the synagogue and at home..., and always living under the tutelage of his parents, an expression of his obedient attitude to his Father God whom they represent.

For Missionary Childhood, the “school of Nazareth” can never cease to be a source of inspiration and a daily reference for both families and animators of the Society. Children and adolescents, because of their age and divine grace, they have magnificent aptitudes to enter into a relationship with God and also to maintain a collaborative attitude towards the ecclesial mission. Nevertheless, these dispositions need to be cultivated, especially when the environment no longer favors a Christian and missionary experience, neither in the countries of ancient Christianity nor in those where other religions or cultural situations prevail. Here it is important that families, Christian communities and the animators of Missionary Childhood, as far as possible, work together with the children, to create an atmosphere similar to that of Nazareth.

Families, known as the “domestic church”, are the natural place where faith is born⁵¹, where the action of grace is woven with human growth, where the Gospel acquires

⁵⁰ Cf. PAUL VI, *Address at the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth* (January 5, 1964).

⁵¹ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION (2020), *Directory for Catechesis* (23-III-2020), 227-231.

meaning and becomes experience, where Jesus reveals his face and where the paternal mystery of God is revealed in the paternal love of the mother and father. It is in the center of a Christian family that, in the first place, the foundations of the experience of faith are laid, from which children and adolescents can open themselves to the ecclesial reality. The very sensitivity of parents to the mission of the Church is the leaven of that missionary vocation to which children are called by virtue of their baptism.⁵²

The local Christian community is the place where the seed of faith planted by the parents germinates. “It is a living catechesis in itself. Being what it is, it announces, celebrates, lives and always remains the first and indispensable vital space of catechesis.”⁵³ Children and adolescents learn to be Christians in contact with other Christians. It is in the fraternal relationship with those who believe in Christ where Jesus manifests himself as the elder Brother and the reference to the paternal love of God becomes real. The Christian community, while being a school of discipleship, is also a school of mission. The apostolic projection of the community in its immediate environment is, for our children and adolescents, a school of learning the universality of the good news of the Gospel.

⁵² Bishop de Forbin-Janson counted on this missionary sensitivity of the parents so that they would enroll their children in the Work as soon as they were baptized and provisionally fulfill the obligations of the children until they came to their senses. Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical Letter Redemptoris missio* (December 7, 1990) 80.

⁵³ For this point, cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION (2020), *Directory for Catechesis* (23-III-2020), 164; also 88-89; 133.

The animators of Missionary Childhood, who are always members of the Church, incorporate their work into that essential and daily relationship that should exist between families and the local Christian communities. In some cases, if this relationship suffers from a deficiency, they will provide the necessary means to correct it and, if this is not possible, through the School of Jesus, they will try to make up for the shortcomings they find. Their formative task -which will be defined later- is inserted in the process of Christian initiation of children and adolescents. Regarding baptized children, their work must always start from the baptismal grace, and with those who are preparing to receive the sacrament of baptism, their work is to favor its better reception. In any case, baptism and the other sacraments of Christian initiation are their reference points. In these sacraments are found the source of Christian life and the origin of the missionary vocation of the disciple-brothers of Jesus, the Son of the Father.

III.- SPIRITUALITY OF THE HOLY CHILDHOOD OR MISSIONARY CHILDHOOD

The charism of Holy Childhood is a gift of the Spirit that God has given to the Church and to the world through the mediation of Bishop de Forbin-Janson. As a divine grace, it is a spring that flows permanently to revitalize the Society and, in a specific way, to enable its members to advance on the path of holiness. They are called to identify themselves with Jesus, the Child-Son of God, and to participate, in the fulfillment of the Father's saving will, in his self-giving on behalf of his least brothers and sisters. The spirituality of those who belong to Missionary Childhood draws from the charism with which the Society has been blessed by the Holy Spirit.

1.- “Baptism above all...”

1.1.- Mission of Baptism and Christian education

The Society of the Holy Childhood was born in the Founder's mind to respond to the tragic situation of children in China. The French missionaries, who were there on an outpost, reported how their parents were neglecting them and literally handing them over to death.⁵⁴ Faced with this news, Bishop de Forbin-Janson was deeply touched in his heart, felt great

⁵⁴ Cf. FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 109-110, 114-119. The title of this item is taken from page 132.

compassion and sought to provide the means to free these children from death:

“Here is precisely our thought; here is our work. Indeed, we want to snatch from death the greatest possible number of children born from idolatrous parents, and since they sell them for the benefit of greed and debauchery, we want to buy as many as we can for the benefit of Religion, for God, for the glory of His name, *for their baptism*: we also want to assure eternal bliss to all those who die at a tender age; we want to make those who live to be instruments of salvation for their own brothers.”⁵⁵

Baptism is an urgency and a priority for the Society of the Holy Childhood. It is necessary to “open, through baptism, the gates of heaven to the greatest possible number of these poor creatures, deprived at birth of paternal love.”⁵⁶ There is no doubt that, for Bishop de Forbin-Janson, this urgency stems from the missionary mandate that Jesus gave to his disciples shortly before returning to the Father: Then Jesus approached and said to them, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28: 19-20a). But the founder of the Society wanted to make this mandate effective, not only through the imperative of baptism, but also with regard to the teaching of the Gospel message. In this way, through the

⁵⁵ FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 119. italics added.

⁵⁶ FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 109.

articulation of the double aspect of the missionary mandate, the Society of the Holy Childhood acquires a truly integral perspective.

Baptism, specifically, is the primary motive and means for rescuing damaged children from the power of evil and death, and for regenerating them as children of God. But, once regenerated, “these new Moses”⁵⁷ possess divine grace and, in the centers provided for this purpose, they can receive the Christian education necessary to become “instruments of salvation for their brothers and sisters.” These children, Christians by baptism and formation, will become schoolteachers, doctors and midwives, catechists and even indigenous priests and missionaries who will be able to evangelize their people by speaking their own dialects and sharing their own cultures.⁵⁸

If baptism is part of the objectives of the Society, it is also a condition for children to be associated with it.⁵⁹ As we have seen above, childhood naturally possesses extraordinary values; however, there are other values that can only be granted by baptism. These new values come from regeneration in Jesus

⁵⁷ FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 123.

⁵⁸ Cf. FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 110, 124.

⁵⁹ Cf. In the Rules (1906), in Part II, where some of its points are explained, in section IV, when speaking of the conditions for belonging to the Association, it is stated that the first is “*Baptism* of the Catholic Church, the only one that can give the right to enter an association of Christian Children” in: CONSEJO CENTRAL DE LA SANTA INFANCIA (1906), *Manual de la Santa Infancia...*, 17. On the importance of baptism in the Association, cf. PONTIFICIUM OPUS A SANCTA INFANTIA (2008), *Missionary Childhood. History and Charism*, 9, where, speaking of the foundation of Holy Childhood, the author affirms: “a new style of mission was born, which placed baptismal grace at the center and recognized the children’s right to receive it and their duty to give it”.

Christ and are such that - in the words of the bishop of Nancy - they make children worthy of “a kind of special worship.”⁶⁰ In fact, through baptism, children are born again as sons in the Son of God, the Father of Jesus becomes their Father, and the rest of the children, independently of their situation, are their brothers and sisters. For the proper development of the Society's work, Holy Childhood expects from these baptized children their particular contribution. As they are united in a particular way with Jesus, the Child-Son of God, they carry upon themselves the fulfillment of the objectives of the Society. Their prayers, alms and sacrifices, precisely because they are limited, will draw from the provident Father sufficient gifts to cover the needs of the youngest brothers and sisters.

1.2.- Salvation and the Integral Character of Evangelization

As the foundation of Holy Childhood is conditioned by the political, social and economic context in which it was born, so it is conditioned by the theological conceptions of the time. There is no doubt: in Christians' minds and hearts in the first half of the 19th century, there was a desire to see pagan people baptized and to gain access to the faith as soon as possible. According to traditional teaching, they were well aware that the Church was necessary for salvation or, according to the Latin adage, “*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*” (outside the Church there is no salvation). For this reason, a Society that collected dying children from the streets and baptized them shortly before their death was so successful; also, a Society that “bought” children

⁶⁰ Cf. FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 113-114.

whose parents despised them and first baptized them and then educated them in the faith. In this apostolic work - in which all Christianity became involved - the aim was not only to rescue children from death and inhuman social conditions; but above all, and as a priority, the objective was to introduce them into the Church so that, through faith and baptism, they could fulfill the salvific will of God, “who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4).

It is true that that generation probably lived the notion of salvation in a restrictive way and, perhaps, the administration of baptism in a legalistic way. Nevertheless, it is very stimulating, nowadays, the positive evaluation they made of baptism, its faith and the Church. The humanizing and evangelizing process was articulated in the same dynamism. The Second Vatican Council, after emphasizing that salvation comes to humanity through Jesus Christ, the only mediator between God and mankind, has reiterated the traditional teaching:

“The Sacred Council... based on Sacred Scripture and Tradition, it teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. Christ, present to us in His Body, which is the Church, is the one Mediator and the unique way of salvation. In explicit terms He Himself affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism⁽¹²⁴⁾ and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through baptism as through a door men enter the Church.”⁶¹

⁶¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium* (NOVEMBER 21, 1964) 14.

However, trusting in divine mercy and knowing the will of God that salvation achieved by Christ should reach the majority of men, the Church qualifies the traditional affirmation with the following conciliar teaching:

Those who without their own fault do not know the Gospel of Christ and his Church, but seek God with a sincere heart and try in their life, through the help of grace, to do the will of God, known by what their conscience tells them, can attain eternal salvation. Nor does God in his Providence deny the necessary help to those who, through no fault of their own, have not yet come to a clear knowledge of God, but strive with his grace to live righteously. The Church appreciates all that is good and true in them, as a preparation of the Gospel and as a gift of Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life.⁶²

According to conciliar thought, God, by ways known only to himself, can lead men, by means of his grace, to fulfill the filial vocation they carry in their hearts and thus come to share in eternal life and happiness. However, this does not justify the Church postponing her evangelizing activity and devoting her forces to human promotion alone, thinking that God will fulfill his salvation in the eschatological order. To contemplate things in this way is not only to ignore the integral character of human promotion-which aims at all men and women and all their human dimensions, including the religious dimension-but also to fail to understand that evangelization itself integrates this promotion and is never a later moment

⁶² *Ibidem*, 16.

juxtaposed to it. In any particular case, how well Bishop de Forbin-Janson understood - in the theological coordinates of his time - the need to place man's salvation in the foreground and to conceive the mission with an integral character. In this sense, Missionary Childhood offers a fundamental contribution to the mission, a stimulus to revive the evangelizing perspective in our Church today.

2.- Baptism, a Gift for the Society of the Holy Childhood

Above - from the Gospels and the reflections of the Founder of the Society of the Holy Childhood - we have seen how the charism of the Holy Childhood revolves around the infancy of the Child Jesus. We have observed how, in an extraordinary way, Jesus bonds children to himself, the eternal Child-Son of God. And we have understood how, from this bonding, the children have been introduced into a new world of relationships: Jesus' Father becomes their Father; they go from being mere creatures to being children in the Son of God; the imperative of solidarity that they have with other children is transformed into an exercise of fraternity with those whom God has given them as brothers and sisters.

Therefore, it is the sacrament of Baptism that gives the Society of Missionary Childhood an extraordinary realism. These relationships, to which all men and women who come into the world are called, are fulfilled as a grace and activated as a task by the reception of the sacrament of the water and the Spirit in the bosom of the Church. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that the Society of Missionary Childhood is built around

Baptism and that the baptismal font is the permanent source of spirituality, both for the children and for the animators and catechists who accompany them. However, in order to fully understand the scope of what we are saying, it is necessary to consider baptism in the context of the baptismal catechumenate at the service of Christian initiation.

2.1.- Baptismal catechumenate and catechesis of catechumenal inspiration

Faith can no longer be taken for granted either in the territories of the mission ad gentes or in those of old Christianity. Neither can we hope that cultural colonization, caused by globalization, can bring the faith to people who do not know the Gospel, or trust in the socialization processes of people with Christian roots to transmit the faith to the next generation. At the Council, the Church became aware that, beyond the supports or impediments that society puts in its way, the Christian community is responsible for announcing and proposing the Gospel, for awakening and educating the faith, and for being the maternal womb where Christ's disciples are born into the new life of the children of God.

Facing this situation and, in a certain way, anticipating the course of events, the Council restored the baptismal Catechumenate⁶³, an ancient institution, proper to the first

⁶³ The reintroduction of the Catechumenate was decreed by the *Constitution on the Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4-XII-1963) 64. Not to mention that a first description is found in the *Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium*: “By preaching the Gospel, the Church draws the hearers to faith and to the confession of faith, prepares them for baptism, frees them from

centuries of the Church, by which Christian communities engendered in the life of faith those who wished to be disciples of Christ. From the moment of its restoration, the baptismal catechumenate has not only been received as the ordinary means of forming in the faith those who have not yet been baptized, but the Church has also wanted it to be the inspiration for the catechesis of those who, having been baptized, are not yet living a Christian life.⁶⁴ From the reference to the baptismal catechumenate, catechesis and liturgy, the initiation into the faith and a sacramental initiation, community life and participation in the mission, confession of faith and baptism..., all go hand in hand. One cannot think of a Christian education that does not integrate the reception of the sacraments of Christian initiation (baptism, confirmation and Eucharist); but neither can one conceive of the reception of these sacraments without heartily confessing faith in Jesus Christ, Son of the Father and Savior of mankind and trying to bring to life the gift of the Spirit received in Baptism. In this context, Holy Childhood helps the child to naturally integrate “faith”, “life according to the faith” and “profession of that faith”, as three corners of a triangle that defines Christian life and witness.⁶⁵

the slavery of error and incorporates them into Christ so that they may come to fullness in Him through love” (n. 17). For a global perspective on this point, cf. JUAN CARLOS CARVAJAL BLANCO (2018), “La iniciación en la fe y en la vida cristiana de quienes se incorporan a la comunidad eclesial”, in: FABRIZIO MERONI - ANASTASIO GIL (Coords.), *La misión, futuro de la Iglesia. Missio ad-inter gentes*, Madrid, PPC, 195-123.

⁶⁴ Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION (2020), *Directory for Catechesis* (23-III-2020), 61-65.

⁶⁵ CONCILIO VATICANO II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium* (21-XI-1964) 35.

Missionary Childhood has a fundamental initiatory responsibility. Many children have access to the faith and become Christians through it. Sometimes, it is in the Society that they hear about Jesus for the first time, at least outside their family environment; they meet with those who wish to be his disciples; in the School of Jesus, they are initiated into the mysteries of the kingdom of God; with Jesus, they recognize themselves as children of God and brothers and sisters of all; by participating in the Christian community, they learn the life of Christians and feel that they participate in the ecclesial mission... According to the directives of the Church, the baptismal Catechumenate baptismal or, in its case, the catechesis of catechumenal inspiration, has a referential character in the whole process of initiation and formation in the faith. The Society of Missionary Childhood should strive to ensure that, in contact with the immediate ecclesial community, this reference is effective in the educational activity it carries out with its members. The pedagogy of initiation, which is implicit in the Catechumenate, will help children and adolescents to assume the gifts that the sacraments of initiation give them; it helps them to identify themselves vitally with Jesus, the Son of God; and it offers them the means to insert themselves into the ecclesial community and to give Christian witness among those with whom they live, with an openness to a possible specific missionary vocation.

2.2.- Missionary disciples

The Society of the Holy Childhood was born in the mind of its founder as a service to the mission of the Church. The circumstances of its birth and its framing within the Pontifical Mission Societies could lead one to think that the mission-oriented formation it provides is a sectorial matter, in a certain way, optional for the rest of Christian children and adolescents. The thinking would be as simple as this: Christian communities form their youngest members to be Christians, to confess Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and to lead a life in accordance with the faith; Missionary Childhood, taking this Christian formation for granted and confining itself to its task within the Church, would focus its attention on motivating, encouraging and accompanying children and adolescents in view of the mission. As can be observed, this way of seeing things makes “missionary”, proper to the Christian faith, not to be well rooted in the dynamics of Christian initiation, nor does it appear clearly that it is a constitutive dimension of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Apostle of the Father. A text of Pope Francis orients us in a different direction:

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit” (cf. Mt 28: 19) [...] Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus; we no

longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries’, but we always are ‘missionary disciples’”.⁶⁶

Participation in the mission of the Church on the part of the disciples of Jesus Christ is not optional. They, by virtue of baptism, have been grafted into the one who is their Master and Lord and have become his missionary disciples. Thus, there are no two moments: first disciples, then missionaries. Nor are there two formations: one to be Christians, the other to be missionaries. Because of faith in Jesus Christ - who is at the same time son of the Father and sent by him on behalf of mankind - Christians are, in one and the same dynamic, sons in the Son and sent to their brothers and sisters to bear witness to the love of the Father. Once again, faith and baptismal grace are the source of this unitary dynamism, and it is by deepening them that Christian initiation integrates what often appears as a false alternative.

In order to promote the articulation of discipleship and mission in the formation of children and adolescents, the Society of Missionary Childhood will promote close collaboration with the Secretariats or Delegations that in the various dioceses have the responsibility of initiating their youngest members in the faith.⁶⁷ This collaboration will favor that the initiation processes, specific to the Catechumenate or

⁶⁶ FRANCIS (2013), *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium* (24-XI-2013), 120.

⁶⁷ Here we concretize what is said in the Statute of the PMS: “Whether using its own means or other existing catechetical structures, the Society of Holy Childhood should always be integrated into the general pastoral work of Christian education, to which it brings a missionary dimension.” (CONGREGATION FOR THE EVANGELIZATION OF THE PEOPLES, Statute of the Pontifical Mission Societies (2005), Part II, Norms, no. 14).

to a catechesis of catechumenal inspiration, contemplate not only the missionary dimension essential to the Christian faith, but also the attention to the mission of the Church beyond the diocesan limits. And, at the same time, it will allow the Society to root its formative work and its service to the mission in the processes by which the dioceses engender children and adolescents in the faith.

3.- The contribution to the mission of the children and adolescents of the Missionary Childhood

The Holy Childhood or Missionary Childhood is one of the Pontifical Societies and, like its sisters, seeks to encourage the participation of its members in the evangelizing mission of the Church by promoting simple actions among them. This simplicity as Pope Francis emphasizes is a characteristic feature of the four Societies:

*“The Missionary Societies, since their beginning, have moved along two “tracks”, or better along two parallel channels, that in their simplicity have always been close to the heart of the People of God: those of prayer and of charity in the form of almsgiving which “saves from death, and purges all sin” (Tob 12:9), the “intense love” that “covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8).”*⁶⁸

Indeed, it was precisely this simplicity of means that encouraged Bishop de Forbin-Janson to involve children in the ecclesial mission, not only as recipients, but also as active

⁶⁸ Cf. FRANCIS, *Message to the Pontifical Mission Societies* (May 21, 2020).

subjects.⁶⁹ Thus, adjusting to their age as well as their strengths, the bishop of Nancy proposed to the children to participate in the rescue mission that was being carried out in distant lands.⁷⁰ He asked them to offer a daily prayer, to sacrifice some taste in order to save, even if it was only a penny, and to contribute a monthly fee to cover the spiritual and material needs of their brothers in need. The best antidote for not reducing the Society of Missionary Childhood to a mere humanitarian aid association is to understand the value of these three elements and to observe their internal articulation.⁷¹ Moreover, this same understanding will make it easier for children and adolescents to live these three signs as concrete ways to exercise and develop their missionary spirit and advance on the path to holiness.

3.1.- The Prayer

There is no doubt that daily prayer for the missions is much more than a devotional act. It has an extraordinary meaning and is precisely what infuses the evangelizing spirit into the participation of children and adolescents in the Society. The children feel united to Jesus by faith. In Jesus and with Him, they recognize themselves as children of God our Father

⁶⁹ Cf. RAFAEL SANTOS BARBA (2017), 681-682.

⁷⁰ Here it is fitting to recall the Council's affirmation: "Children also have an apostolic activity of their own. According to their capacity, they are true living witnesses of Christ among their peers" (SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* *Apostolicam Actuositatem* [18-XI-1965] 12d). More than a century before this declaration, Holy Childhood offered a concrete channel for the apostolic activity proper to children.

⁷¹ Cf. R. TREMARELLI (2018), "Los niños en el mundo": *Misiones extranjeras* 283, 283-289.

and brothers and sisters of all humanity. Their attachment to Christ has made them passionate about the mission he has received from the Father. They wish to collaborate with him in reuniting all humanity into one family so that the kingdom of God may be established on earth. But the little ones know that most of the world's children do not yet know Jesus and that His mission to reunite God's family is far from being a reality. They are also aware that God's reign is being rejected, resulting in much injustice and suffering everywhere. The conditions in which a large part of humanity lives are not worthy of human dignity. Most people do not know that they are children of God and do not treat each other as brothers and sisters.

The children and adolescents of Missionary Childhood are capable of feeling with pain that great contrast between God's plans and a humanity that walks without destiny. They are especially sensitive to the situation of injustice of many children in the world.⁷² The animators of the Society invite them to unite themselves to Jesus so that, with Christ, they can turn to the Father and ask him to work his providence and

⁷² On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Society of the Holy Childhood, St. John Paul II made an enumeration of the new calamities suffered by children today. "Where is Love for those who are denied the right to live, for those who are killed, mutilated or locked up because they are wandering in the cities, for those very young children who are exploited in forced labor or in the trade of perversion, for those families thrown on the roads of exile? For those who are forced to bear arms? Where is Love for those who are left without schooling and condemned to illiteracy? Where is Love for those, whose families are destroyed or dislocated? What hope can hope for children locked up in materialism, deprived of awakening and initiation to moral and religious life?" (JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies on the 150th anniversary of the institution of the Pontifical Society of the Holy Childhood* [May 6, 1993] 4).

make his love felt. In fact, daily prayer first and foremost actualizes the union that, thanks to baptism, children have with Jesus and gives them a spiritual sense of things. It is through prayer that their faith is enlightened and their relationship with Jesus becomes a living, daily reality. The little ones talk with Jesus, discuss “their things” with him, but little by little they learn that “Jesus' Father's business” is also theirs. Moreover, in speaking with Jesus they will not be afraid to talk about Jesus with others and it will even be easy for them to do so. Prayer is the source of every missionary action.

From this communion with their elder Brother, the Son of the Father, and being aware of the limited capacities of themselves and the Church to face the challenges of the mission, they direct their supplications with faith in the hope that God himself will be the one to carry out his work. Daily prayer - experienced in this way - has the power to transform the feelings of indignation and solidarity that children may feel into an expression of trust in a God who, as he manifested it in the Passover of Jesus, never abandons his children. The practice of prayer ultimately helps children to expect everything from divine grace.

3.2.- The alms

Almsgiving is the second way in which children and adolescents can advance in the missionary spirit. In fact, Almsgiving is for them a very concrete way of expressing their degree of involvement in the mission of the Church and of exercising fraternal love in favor of their brothers and sisters in

distant lands. This perspective must be worked on permanently, because, with regard to almsgiving, there is a temptation to reduce its meaning to a simple economic collaboration or, if you will, to a mere gesture of solidarity. In reality, beyond the monetary value of the contribution, the almsgiving of children and adolescents has a symbolic, quasi-sacramental component. In a certain way, it is an extension of their prayer, the way to concretize and authenticate those compassionate and fraternal feelings that they have cultivated together with Jesus and have directed to the Father to act providentially.⁷³ They offer their small contribution - their five loaves of bread and two fish - so that the Church can take them where they are needed, in the hope that divine mercy will multiply them and that they will be able to cover the needs of their brothers and sisters. Thus, born of the desire for fraternity developed in prayer, the financial contribution is the concrete means by which children and adolescents can contribute to God's ability to gather their family around his Son Jesus.

In the logic of Missionary Childhood, the financial contribution of children implies a degree of complicity with God himself, which is significant and exemplary for the whole Church. As we have seen above, Bishop de Forbin-Janson himself emphasized this. The modest contributions of the children are effective, not so much because of the size of the final amount, but because, together with prayer, they move God to provide mercifully for his children in need. In this way, the children show that missionary fruits are never achieved through the efforts of the Church, because no matter what the

⁷³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical Redemptoris Missio* (7-XII-1990) 81b.

contribution of the Christian communities may be, they must always receive them from the hands of God. But at the same time, God has wanted to count on the contribution of the children - and of the Church in general - so that they do not remain indifferent to the progress of the world but feel challenged by the situation of their fellow men and women, become involved in his saving project and collaborate with him, according to their possibilities.

3.3.- Christian lifestyle

The third way for children to grow in a missionary spirit and become involved in the mission is the Christian lifestyle. The aim of this approach is to gather and renew what is included in the classic expression “sacrifice for the missions.” The Society of the Holy Childhood was born with a generalist vocation. From the beginning, not only children from noble families and the bourgeoisie were involved, but also the children of humble families, including children from the nursing homes run by religious men and women.⁷⁴ They all committed themselves to contribute “an equal and modest donation so that it would be within the reach of the poor, giving them the consolation, and the rich the honor of this Association and of this equality of sacrifices.”⁷⁵ For many children, the contribution of this fee implied renunciations and sacrifices, which they did as an expression of their love and

⁷⁴ In this connection, the Bishop of Nancy tells an anecdote of how some young people lacking financial resources were able to “make up for the lack of money by the active and assiduous manual labor of two days' vacation” (FORBIN-JANSON [1844], 128 [note 1]).

⁷⁵ Cf. FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 130.

fraternity towards their poorer brothers and sisters. In this sense, children from well-to-do families were asked to make an extraordinary contribution to the annual collection. The ultimate criterion was not to raise more money, but to express a greater empathy with their poor brothers and sisters here and there. In any case, the almsgiving entailed some sacrifices, that is, that the children renounced something of their own⁷⁶ and, in a certain way, gave themselves in the donation they gave. Renunciation, surrender and contribution went hand by hand.

Indeed, children and adolescents enjoy friendship with Jesus, the Child-Son of God; joined to Him, in praying they deal with the common Father and are mindful of their brothers and sisters in foreign lands, with their spiritual and material needs. They become aware of the different ways of life that exist between them and their brothers and sisters. The testimonies of life that they receive from them bring this to their attention and serve as a stimulus for them. In a certain way, and moved by feelings of piety and fraternity, they want to emulate the Son of God in his incarnation. They wish to resemble Jesus, to sacrifice something of their own so that their brothers and sisters may know that they are loved and accompanied. This is the dynamism of love. From this arises a new style of life that goes through resembling Jesus as much as possible, gradually feeling like Him, thinking like Him, acting

⁷⁶ The founder of the Holy Childhood speaks of “inspiring them to be detached from comfort”; cf. FORBIN-JANSON (1844), 128.

like Him, committing themselves like Him in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the service of the Kingdom of God.⁷⁷

From the beginning, the Society of Missionary Childhood helps children and adolescents to discover that their intimacy with Jesus is an itinerant intimacy and that communion with Jesus is configured as missionary communion.⁷⁸ In other words, the missionary spirit grows and is strengthened by being a disciple of Jesus, and, at the same time, one is a true disciple when one participates with Jesus in the mission of bearing witness to the love of the Father to those who suffer from His absence and do not know Him.

4.- Spiritual childhood, a spirituality that is specific to the animators of missionary childhood

As we have observed, the Society of Missionary Childhood is encouraged by its own charismatic initiative, which flourishes to the extent that it is rooted in the common missionary charism of the Pontifical Mission Societies. This charismatic breath -a genuine gift of the Spirit- is precisely given by its reference to the Holy Infancy. Jesus, the Child-Son of God, shows that the values proper to childhood have not only been assumed in his incarnation, but have been developed throughout his life as the appropriate way to respond filially to the love of the Father and to make a fraternal gift of himself to men, his brothers. From this perspective, the charism that

⁷⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II (1979), *Apostolic Exhortation Catechesi Tradendae* (October 16, 1979), 20; also, PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION (2020), *Directory for Catechesis*, 75-78.

⁷⁸ Cf. FRANCIS (2013), *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium*, 23.

defines the Holy Childhood does not only concern children and adolescents: it is also a reference and source of spirituality for all those - animators, priests, catechists, parents... - who accompany them in their journey of maturing in faith and missionary commitment.

4.1.- Being called to walk on the paths of spiritual childhood

The animator of the Holy Childhood should consider that those words that Jesus addressed to his disciples have for him a special significance and predominance: "...for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Mt 19: 14b) and said, "Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3). Jesus' condition is firm: it is necessary to become "like a child" in order to enter the Kingdom that has been given to us by God as a grace. However, how can one be a child when the experience of life, age, conceit, disappointment... have left their traces? It would be a caricature of Jesus' words if we thought that the disciples were being asked to become childish and to be regressed to the behaviour and weaknesses of childhood.⁷⁹

Jesus clearly indicates the true condition for becoming "like children": conversion. That is, to leave behind one's self-sufficiency, any hint of pride and justification - even in the name of God - and to look to Him, live in His presence, open

⁷⁹ Cf. BENEDICTO XV (1921), "Discourse on the Decree recognizing the heroic virtues of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus" (August 14, 1921): AAS 13, 449-452; this text, in which spiritual childhood is mentioned for the first time, is very illuminating for what we will say later.

oneself to His grace, submit to His will...; in short, to become children who expect everything from the One whom they know loves them. There can be no doubt that the time the animators spend with the children and adolescents of the Society will help them to detect in them those innate attitudes that make them privileged recipients of divine favors, and the educational work they carry out with them will help them to develop these attitudes in their own lives. Pastoral work itself, as long as it is inspired by the Gospel and is lived as a true service to God and to our brothers and sisters, it is a source of grace for those who carry it out.

However, in the Church there is a spiritual path that is very familiar to the Society of the Holy Childhood: “spiritual childhood”.⁸⁰ Indeed, Bishop de Forbin-Janson participated in a spiritual movement that, during the first half of the 16th century, it was deeply rooted in his native France: devotion to the Infancy of Jesus. This devotion, which inspired the name of the society he created, bore its greatest fruit in St. Therese of the Child Jesus. The little Therese Martin, at the age of 9 (12-I-1882), was enrolled in the Holy Childhood. The devotion to the Infancy of Jesus - as evidenced by her religious name - combined with the missionary encouragement she received from the Society created by the Bishop of Nancy, crystallized in this Carmelite saint in a “little way”: spiritual childhood.

This “little way” has been constantly recognized and promoted by successive Popes and has been proposed to the Church as a safe and easy way to advance along the path of holiness. But, in addition, this proposal has a special

⁸⁰ Cf. PONTIFICIUM OPUS A SANCTA INFANTIA (2008), *Missionary Childhood. History and charism*, 24-29.

significance for the missionary activity of the Church. In 1927, Pius XI, the “Pope of the Missions”, proclaimed St. Therese of the Child Jesus, with St. Francis Xavier, Patroness of the Missions.⁸¹ And in the 1950 in the Statutes of the Holy Childhood, after indicating that the “Patron and Model” of this Society is the Child Jesus, she appears among the patron saints of the Society, after the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph.⁸² In other words, the path of spiritual childhood is, for the animators and other collaborators of Missionary Childhood, not only a means that the Spirit has raised up to facilitate the accompaniment of the children and adolescents involved in the Society, but also the path by which they themselves are introduced into the secrets of the Kingdom and advance in their vocation to holiness.

4.2.- Some elements of spiritual childhood

It is not easy to summarize the nuclear elements that articulate the “little way of spiritual childhood.” It would be necessary to approach the writings of St. Therese of the Child Jesus with dedication and attention; we would even need the help of a commentary to penetrate the meaning of her texts and the connection they have with her own life journey. However, a magisterial document of St. John Paul II, the Apostolic Letter

⁸¹ Cf. PIUS XI (1928), *Decreto* (14-XII-1927): AAS 20, 147s.

⁸² OBRA PONTIFICIA DE LA SANTA INFANCIA (1950), *Estatutos de la Obra*, Artículo III: Santos Patronos de la Obra.

by which she is declared Doctor of the Church⁸³, may help us in an initial approach and offers us some keys to begin a direct reading of the society of her spiritual and missionary life.

Although her way of expressing herself is conditioned by her education and the culture of her time, there is no doubt that “Teresa presents herself as an authentic teacher of faith and Christian life.”⁸⁴ Graced by God, her writings are capable of opening the paths that introduce us into the very Mystery of God Love, of God the Trinity, and from there, united to her son Jesus, we can see ourselves committed to be his missionaries for humanity. John Paul II expresses it in the following terms:

“At the summit, as the source and goal, is the merciful love of the three Divine Persons, as she expresses it, especially in her Act of Oblation to Merciful Love. At the root, on the subject's part, is the experience of being the Father's adoptive children in Jesus; this is the most authentic meaning of spiritual childhood, that is, the experience of divine filiation, under the movement of the Holy Spirit. At the root again, and standing before us, is our neighbour, others, for whose salvation we must collaborate with and in Jesus, with the same merciful love as his.”⁸⁵

In fact, with Therese everything flows from the merciful love of God the Trinity and everything flows into him. Under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, she felt united to Jesus,

⁸³ JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Letter Divini Amoris Scientia*, declaring St. Therese of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face a Doctor of the Universal Church (October 19, 1997): AAS 90, 930-944.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 8a.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 8e.

the Son of God, she recognized herself as an adopted daughter of the Father and experienced divine filiation. This is the most authentic meaning of spiritual infancy, which in reality is defined as a path by which one advances in the spirit of filiation. But union with Jesus, together with the experience of the Father's mercy, has led her to collaborate with Him and in Him so that this love may reach all men and women - both those who are near and those who are far away - because all are recognized as brothers and sisters.

This mystery of God's love, not known from the outside or affirmed theoretically, but lived from the intimacy that comes from sharing in the divine filiation of Jesus, is the foundation that moves all the activity of the animators of Missionary Childhood and is also the horizon towards which we accompany the children of the School of Jesus. The motto of the enclosure life of St. Therese could well be the motto that animates them: "to love Jesus and to make him be loved"⁸⁶; or said in the terms of her *Offering to Merciful Love*: "O my God, holy Trinity, I want to love you and make you to be loved."⁸⁷

All expands from this center that constitutes the love of God unraveled in the disfigured face of Jesus - the Holy Face, which Therese of the Child Jesus adds to her name. Teresa herself experiences it in the task of accompanying the novices entrusted to her. Through the little way of spiritual childhood "she penetrates more and more into the mystery of the Church and, attracted by the love of Christ, she feels the apostolic and missionary vocation growing in herself, which impels her to

⁸⁶ THERESE OF LISIEUX, "Letter 220, 2r", in: *Collected Works*.

⁸⁷ THERESE OF LISIEUX, "Offering of Myself as a Victim of Holocaust to the Merciful Love of God," in: *The Complete Therese*.

lead everyone to the encounter with the divine Spouse.”⁸⁸ The animators of Missionary Childhood see in the mystery of the Church the sacramental place where to experience the divine communion, and in its Eucharistic heart - where the love of Jesus Christ beats -, the impulse to make self-giving and to arouse that same desire of self-giving in the children entrusted to them. How well Teresa understood that the missionary vocation is born in the heart of the Church! How she discovered that precisely her weakness facilitated the fulfillment of that vocation!

“Then, on the verge of my delirious joy, I exclaimed: Jesus, my love..., at last I have found my vocation! My vocation is love!...

I was just a child, helpless and weak. However, it is precisely my weakness that gives me the audacity to offer myself as a victim to your love, O Jesus!”⁸⁹

Trust in the merciful love of God and the desire to reproduce the filial character of Jesus: this is what leads Teresa to return everything to God by giving herself. She offers herself as a victim of love and thus places herself in the hands of the Father so that he can do his work, not in spite of her impotence and weakness, but precisely through that which makes her a poor instrument. In order to verify the scope of

⁸⁸ JOHN PAUL II (1998), *Apostolic Letter Divini Amoris Scientia*, 5d.

⁸⁹ TERESA DE LISIEUX, “Manuscript B - IX, 3v”, in: *The Complete Therese*. In order to penetrate into this dynamism of self-giving love, we should heed the recommendation of St. John Paul II: “in Manuscript C we find the most beautiful pages, dedicated to the trusting abandonment into the hands of God, to the unity between love of God and love of neighbor, and to her missionary vocation in the Church” (JOHN PAUL II [1998], *Apostolic Letter Divini amoris scientia*, 6d.

this theological attitude, it is particularly illuminating to reproduce a text of Benedict XV, the first Pope to sing of the excellencies of spiritual childhood:

“Spiritual childhood is formed by trust in God and blind abandonment into his hands. It is not useless to underline the qualities of this spiritual childhood, either in what it excludes or in what it implies. It excludes, in fact, the arrogant feeling of ourselves, the presumption of being able to attain by human means the supernatural end and the vain will to want to be self-sufficient in the hour of danger and temptation. On the other hand, it presupposes a living faith in the existence of God, a concrete recognition of his power and mercy, a trusting recourse to the Providence of the One who grants us the grace to avoid every evil and to obtain every good [...] We must conclude that the divine Master expressly insists that his disciples see in spiritual childhood the necessary condition for obtaining eternal life.”⁹⁰

In spite of the years, this text has an obvious value for the animators of the Society of the Holy Childhood. It is an invitation to acquire a lifestyle that, while manifesting their trust in the merciful love of God the Trinity, creates the dispositions to be truly missionary; that is, to allow God to universalize the saving work accomplished by his Son Jesus on behalf of all men. If the animators and other collaborators of

⁹⁰ Cf. BENEDICT XV (1921), "Discourse on the Decree recognizing the heroic virtues of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus" (August 14, 1921): AAS 13, 449-452.

Missionary Childhood live with this attitude, there is no doubt that they will be true witnesses before the children who participate in the Work and stimulus for them to become involved in the ecclesial mission.

Conclusion

We conclude our journey through the history, charism and spirituality of the Society of Missionary Childhood with a quote from St. John Paul II. The passage was taken from a visit of the Polish Pope to the Carmelite monastery of Lisieux. The paragraph that we bring to the end of our exposition possesses an undoubted theological density, but it has the virtue of synthesizing the essential nucleus of all that we have exposed. In fact, in the light of the life and work of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, it links childhood, spiritual infancy and participation in the mission, in the Mission of the Holy Trinity in favor of humanity:

“To have trust in God like Thérèse of Lisieux means to follow the 'little path' along which the Spirit of God guides us: He always guides us towards the greatness in which the sons and daughters of the divine adoption participate. While still a child, a twelve-year-old boy, the Son of God said that his vocation was to be concerned with the things of his Father (cf. Lk 2:49). To be a child, to become like a child, means to enter into the very heart of the greatest mission to which man is called by Christ, a mission that penetrates the very heart of man. Therese knew this perfectly well. This mission has its origin in the eternal love of the Father. The Son of God as man, in a visible and ‘historical’ way, and the Holy Spirit, in an invisible and ‘charismatic’ way, fulfill it in the history of humanity. At the time of *leaving the world*, Christ

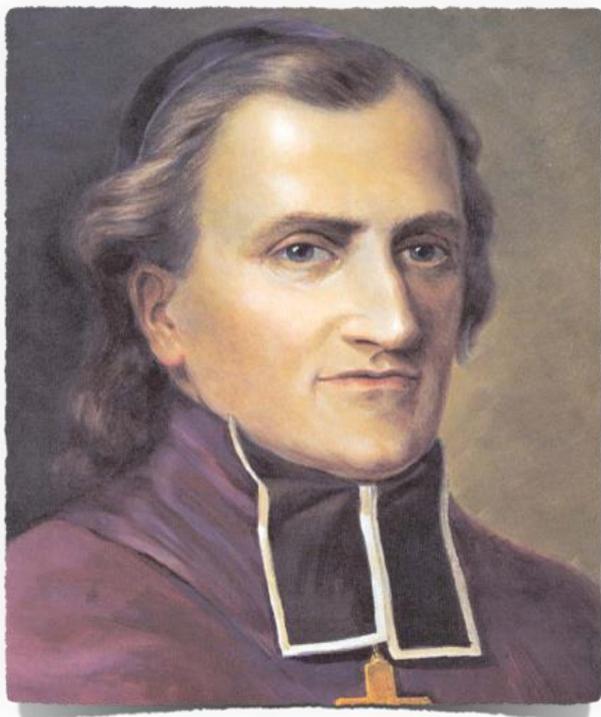
says to the Apostles: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature” (*Mk 16,15*) by the power of his paschal mystery, he inserts them into the great eternal current of the mission. From the moment he left them to go to the Father, he begins at the same time to come in the power of the Holy Spirit whom the Father sends in his name. The Second Vatican Council has brought this truth more deeply into the consciousness of our generation than all other truths about the Church. Thanks to it, all of us have come to understand better that the Church is constantly ‘in a state of mission’, which means that the whole Church is missionary. We have also better understood this particular mystery of the heart of Therese of Lisieux, who, through her ‘little path’, was called to participate in the highest mission in such a full and fruitful way. Precisely this ‘littleness’ that she loved so much, the littleness of the child, generously opened to her all the greatness of the divine mission of salvation, which is the eternal mission of the Church.”⁹¹

⁹¹ JOHN PAUL II (1980), *Homily at the Basilica of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus in Lisieux* (2-VI-1980).

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Monsignor Charles de Forbin-Janson
(1785 - 1844)
Founder of the Holy Childhood

