

Missionaries of Africa - History Series, n° 2.

BISHOP JOHN FORBES
(1864 - 1926)

Coadjutor Vicar Apostolic of Uganda
The First Canadian White Father

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Introduction

The year 2001 was the centenary of the presence of the Missionaries of Africa in North America, and the occasion was marked by important celebrations in both Canada and the United States. It was an opportunity to look back over the past, to open archives, and to remember the personalities who figured in these hundred years of missionary presence and service.

Among these personalities John Forbes was one of the most important. He was the Founder of the Province of the White Fathers in North America, and later became coadjutor Vicar Apostolic in Uganda. He was the first Canadian Missionary of Africa and the first North American to enter this missionary Society, founded in 1868 in Algiers by Archbishop Charles Lavigerie for the evangelization of Africa.

John Forbes' rich personality and several exceptional features in his missionary life make him a particularly attractive figure. He was a man totally available for any service, he had remarkable gifts as an organizer, a deep commitment to the Mission, a spirituality marked by an unquenchable optimism: these characteristics of John Forbes can still inspire us today and provide us with material for reflection.

Within the context of this Historical Series, it seemed useful to present, among other projected subjects, the origin of the presence and missionary commitment of North American Fathers and Brothers in the history of the Society. Bishop John Forbes provides us with the perfect focus for such an exercise. We thank Father Raynald Pelletier for this fine piece of work and also Father Lauréat Belley, archivist in the Provincial House in Montreal, who made a major contribution towards its realization.

Jean-Claude Ceillier, M. Afr.



Bishop Forbes towards the end of his life

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Lay-out : PETIT ECHO

I - YOUTH AND VOCATION.

In the Canada of 1886, the idea of dedicating one's life to the apostolate in a new country was not only novel but practically unheard of. For many it would probably have appeared both eccentric and foolish. Nevertheless, this was the life-project of the young John Forbes who may therefore be justly called a pioneer, an initiator.

He remained always a model for others, an example they could imitate, and he gave many other young people the desire to follow where he had led. He had many admirable qualities, but one cannot say that there was any really striking achievement in his life. It was a life rather marked by simplicity, fidelity and goodness. He was often referred to as "the good Father Forbes", and even after his ordination as a Bishop it was still said of him that he was more a father than a chief. Beneath this calm and simple exterior however there was a remarkable energy and a great firmness.

A numerous family, a brilliant school career

John Forbes was born on 10 January 1864 at Ile Perrot, Vaudreuil, Quebec, the eldest of sixteen children. The two eldest, our John and Guillaume, known in the family as Willie, both became Bishops, John in Uganda and Willie in Joliette first and then in Ottawa. The family name came from its Scottish ancestry.

The large French Canadian families of the time were a reflection of the contemporary desire to populate Canada with French-speaking people. Infant mortality however was high, and of the sixteen Forbes children only four survived into adult life, the two future Bishops, another brother Joseph and a sister, Séraphine. Perhaps partly because of all these tragic losses, the family was loving and united, and John remained very attached to his brothers and sister, as well as to his parents while they lived, throughout his life. The two Bishop-brothers were especially close. They lived together until John left for North Africa in 1886, but they continued to exchange affectionate letters all their lives.

In April 1869 the Forbes family moved from Ile Perrot to Montreal, then a city with a population of some 108,000. John and Guillaume spent two years in Nazareth Primary School, run by the Grey Sisters in the rue Ste-Catherine. After some weeks with the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 1872, John moved to a Commercial College, known as Ecole du Plateau, and he stayed there from 1872 until 1878. These years of primary education were accompanied by private courses in Latin. On 20 May 1875 John made his First Communion and received the Sacrament of Confirmation.

The historian Elie Auclair thus describes the young Forbes:

"As a young man, John Forbes was impressive, both physically and morally. From his earliest years, he was a charming boy, open and candid, with a pure and gentle expression and an attractive smile. Attentive and studious in class, pious in chapel, joyful and full of fun in recreation, he loved everyone and everyone loved him. He and his young brother Guillaume were in the same class, and they were always together and both at the top of the class. A young person in fact of considerable promise." (note 1)

A flattering portrait, one might be tempted to think, but John was a brilliant student and all the reports testify to his sympathetic and attractive character. Both he and his brother Guillaume made such good progress in class that as early as autumn 1878 they were able to enter the "Method Year" in Montreal College, then run by the

Sulpicians. John was no less successful here, and at the end of the classical course a decision had to be taken about his future.

Priestly and Missionary Vocation

In 1883, at the end of their studies of philosophy, John and Guillaume both decided that they wanted to be priests and they entered Montreal Major Seminary. They took the soutane on 13 May 1883 and began the study of theology in 1884, receiving the tonsure in June of that year. On 30 May 1885 they both received the minor orders.

The background to the missionary vocation of John Forbes is to be sought in the relationship in 1844-1846 in the seminary of Issy-les-Moulineaux, near Paris, between Charles Lavigerie, the future founder of the White Fathers, and a Canadian, Edouard-Charles Fabre, who would eventually become Bishop of Montreal. The two men became friends and kept up a regular correspondence for a number of years. Charles Lavigerie would later make use of this connection to penetrate North America both to advertise his work and to look for vocations to the White Fathers.

In 1868, even before the foundation of the White Fathers, Archbishop Lavigerie had serious financial problems with his orphanages, and he sent an Algiers priest to Montreal as his “messenger of poverty”. Lavigerie’s friend, now Canon Fabre, approached his Archbishop, Mgr Bourget, on behalf of this messenger. Some years later, after the foundation of the White Fathers, Archbishop Lavigerie was again in financial difficulties, and in 1874 he sent two more poverty messengers to Bishop Fabre, as he now was, having been appointed coadjutor to Archbishop Bourget. The new messengers were Fathers Charmetant and Delattre. Father Charmetant was particularly appreciated for a conference which he gave on “The Kabyls and the Tribes of the Sahara”. The conference was published and the proceeds of its sale went to the Missionaries of Africa.

Finally in 1883 Cardinal Lavigerie sent to his friend, now Archbishop Fabre of Montreal, another missionary, Father Voisin, to collect alms and seek vocations. Archbishop Fabre was more than welcoming, and Father Voisin was able to speak throughout the Province of Quebec. These various episodes naturally opened a number of doors for the Missionaries of Africa in North America.

The Missionary Decision

In 1881 John Forbes was in the senior class, called Rhetoric, when he read an article in the French *Bulletin des Missions d’Afrique* an account of the murder of Fathers Deniaud and Augier in Burundi by Muslim slave-traders. John Forbes later declared that he experienced this article as a sign from God. It was the spark which set alight in his heart the flame of his future vocation and determined his life’s orientation.

Shortly afterwards he wrote to his parents: “You have no doubt in the house a copy of Father Charmetant’s pamphlet on the Missions of Africa. I would be grateful if you could bring it with you on your next visit.” (note 2) Shortly afterwards he wrote to his brother: “It is a sad thing to see so many people who do not know Jesus.” While Father Voisin was in Montreal in 1883, John made a point of going to his conferences and even met him personally.

In 1886 he finished his second year of theology. After several months of prayer and reflection, and with the agreement of his spiritual director, John applied for entry to the White Fathers in a letter addressed to the Superior of the Novitiate, then in Algeria, Father Lechaptois. He included very favourable references from his spiritual director and from the Superior of the Seminary, as well as a personal letter from Archbishop Fabre to Cardinal Lavigerie. The Superior of the Seminary wrote: “He is a pious young man of solid virtue, an excellent

character, devout, attentive to others, patient...His fellow-students regard him as an accomplished young man.”

In his long letter to Father Lechaptois, John wrote:

“Montreal Major Seminary, 22 May 1886.

Dear Father Superior,

I am Canadian by birth. The good Lord has given me excellent parents who, I am glad to say, are still living. I am twenty-two years of age and the eldest of my family. I have two brothers and one sister. Our parents placed my brother and myself in school when we were very young, and since then we have never been separated. This brother is with me in the Seminary now. I enjoy excellent health. In 1882, at the end of my studies in Montreal College, which is directed by the Fathers of Saint Sulpice, I entered Montreal Philosophy Seminary, run by the same Fathers. I stayed there for two years, at the end of which I received the holy tonsure. I am now finishing my second year of theology in the Major Seminary.

On Trinity Sunday last year I received the minor orders. As far as my studies are concerned, I believe that I have satisfied my teachers, and I am always in the top quarter of the class...The Montreal Major Seminary follows the same rule as seminaries in France.

I am very fond of languages. I love Hebrew, which I have been studying for three years. One of the reasons why I study this language is that I believe it will help me later with the languages which are spoken in Africa. My mother-tongue is French, but I also speak English easily and I know a little German.

I recently received my call to the subdiaconate, but my director advised me to wait before receiving the major orders. The reason for this advice was that I have felt for four-and-a-half years that I was being called to be a Missionary of Africa. In November 1881 I was looking at one of your publications and I was struck by the title of one article: “Martyrdom of Fathers of Algiers”, reporting the massacre of some of your Fathers in Urundi. After reading this article, I felt attracted to the Missions of Africa, and the thought has never left me since then, in spite of other distractions. I remember wondering one evening, “Is God really calling me to Africa? Should I not rather work for the conversion of our poor savages of Canada?” But this idea did not remain for long.

On another occasion I had a conversation with a Trappist Father who told me that I would make a good Trappist. I wondered if God was perhaps calling me to that life. But this thought did not last long either. Throughout all these different ideas and doubts that came to me from time to time, I never lost my attraction for the life of a Missionary of Africa. This was the context within which I asked God to manifest his holy will for me, always declaring that I would do whatever he wanted of me.

I would ask you, revered Father Superior, to tell me what you think of this attraction for the apostolate and what I should do if this is really my vocation. Should I continue my studies here, while postponing the reception of major orders? My parents are not rich, and my circumstances do not allow me to seek ordination under the title of my own patrimony. I was in fact only able to enter the Seminary here through the kindness of a Sulpician Father (Sorin) who paid all my tuition expenses for eight years. Would it be better for me to set sail for Africa during the next vacation and come to you to prepare myself more immediately for the apostolate?

I am happy to inform you, revered Father Superior, that I had several conversations with Father Voisin when he came through America, and he helped me to get to know a little the Society of Our Lady of Africa. He will perhaps speak to you of me. If I had had only myself to consider, I would in fact have

left at once with this good Father, so inflamed was I with the desire to dedicate myself to the salvation of black people. Later on however I appreciated the wisdom of my superiors who advised against such a quick departure.

You will wish to know also, Reverend Father, about the difficulties I may encounter in fulfilling this project. I do not believe that my Bishop, Archbishop Fabre, will raise any objection, for he has plenty of priests and he loves the African missions. He has a special affection for Cardinal Lavigerie and I believe that this was a major factor in the success of Father Voisin's visit to Montreal. I may however encounter more obstacles on the part of my family and of my patron, Father Sorin. When they first learned of my project three years ago, they objected violently, and since then I have never mentioned it to them. I believe however that they are aware that I have never lost my old idea, and they will be less surprised when I speak of it to them again. My patron will I believe be more amenable. My dear parents are devout Christians, and I think that in the end they too will be happy to submit to the will of God...

As regards my journey, I would certainly prefer, out of zeal for the mission, to cover all the expenses myself. I cannot however expect anything from my parents, and it is likely enough that if I approached other persons for help I would meet with a refusal. I cannot be sure however, and I would certainly not wish to burden the mission with my expenses when they need the money so badly to help the salvation of poor Black people.

I would be grateful, reverend Father Superior, if you would tell me anything which you think I need to know in order to prepare better for this vocation to which I feel myself called."

The young Forbes was delighted to learn that he had been accepted for the Novitiate. This was still only 1886, and the White Fathers consisted of 110 Fathers and 34 Brothers. It was therefore a small Society which John Forbes was entering.



A Major Seminarian in 1886

Novitiate at Maison-Carrée (1886)

On 12 August 1886 John Forbes embarked for Liverpool on the *Oregon* and from there made his way to Paris, Marseilles and finally Algiers, where he arrived on 3 September. At the age of twenty-two, he was leaving his country, his seminary, his friends, his parents, his beloved brother Guillaume, and giving himself to the Missions. He was conscious of being called to a total gift of himself: "In responding to the call of God in Africa, I am thoroughly determined to give to Him for ever whatever He asks of me." We can follow the progress of this commitment over forty years in the many letters which he wrote to relatives and friends and which have been carefully preserved. The present historical study relies heavily on this correspondence.

One of the remarkable things about John Forbes was that he was always happy, wherever he was. He was thus a powerful and remarkable encouragement for all his White Father confrères. He writes from Algiers: "The Novitiate is a little paradise...I am the happiest man on earth!" He keeps saying in his letters how happy he is. When he arrived in Algiers, Cardinal Lavigerie was still alive, and the young Forbes was introduced to him. The Cardinal offered a paternal and cordial welcome to this first Canadian to enrol in the Society. There had in fact been another Canadian called Hébert, of the diocese of Nicolet, in the Maison-Carrée Novitiate, but he left after a few months.

In 1886 there were some forty novices in Maison-Carrée, from France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany. John wrote: "But America, and Canada in particular, has been very mean! I hope that, with the help of God, I shall not always remain the only one of my species in the White Fathers!" The recruitment of Canadian missionary vocations was to be a lifelong preoccupation, as his letters testify.

1886 was a years of trials and cruel persecutions in Uganda. In the Novitiate of Maison-Carrée, there was much anxiety and many prayers were offered for this sorely-tried mission. The rule of the house was strict, and the same timetable continued to be followed in the Novitiates of the White Fathers for many years: rise at 4.55 a.m., meditation, Mass, conference, manual work, particular examination, spiritual reading, walks, Thursday holidays.

John Forbes was put in charge of the sacristy. He also spent some hours of his spare time studying music and playing the harmonium, and he tried to learn Arabic in depth. We have already mentioned his gift for languages. In addition to modern European languages he had studied Latin, Greek and Hebrew at college. Now he began Arabic, and later he would learn Kiswahili and Luganda. He wrote to his brother: "I have the advantage of reading the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Arabic."

His parents sent him money for the New Year, but he sent it to Uganda for the ransom of slaves. He took his formation in the Novitiate very seriously, writing to his brother: "We have to be zealous priests after the example of St Vincent de Paul, obedient priests like Jesuits, devout priests like the Sulpicians. You will see that it is no small honour to enter the White Fathers."

John Forbes gave himself to God, but his love for God and for Africa did not mean any diminution in his love for his family. His correspondence is overflowing with gratitude towards his parents and tender love for his brothers and sister.

Birthdays were privileged occasions for writing. He writes to his mother: "How grateful I am to God for giving me such a great treasure on earth, dearly-beloved Mother. You have always inspired me with a great fear of displeasing Him and with love of virtue." One feature of his correspondence is the frequent mention of the grace of Baptism, which he received on the day after his birth. "Baptism, the greatest blessing! Yet so many millions are deprived of it!"

He had a special affection for his sister Séraphine, who was also his god-daughter. In one of his letters to her he speaks of his health. "Health is the greatest of the natural gifts, and the good Lord has given it to me in

abundance. I am very grateful. But of course more important than physical health is sanctity. And that can only come by the grace of God. When we pray for each other, that is what we should be praying for.”

Scholasticate in Carthage (1887-1888)

Throughout his life John Forbes had a deep sense that God was at work within him and in the world. He writes: “After all, this work of salvation is not my work. It is always the grace of God which does everything, even if it makes use of a feeble instrument.” He is conscious of his weakness, while he holds the priesthood and the missionary vocation in high esteem. It was during his year of theology in Carthage, Tunisia, that his brother Guillaume was ordained priest and appointed to work as a missionary to the Iroquois at Caughnawaga (now Kahnawake). John was deeply moved by this development and wrote: “To think that we parted from each other on 12 August 1886 only to find ourselves once more brothers, not only by blood but in the priesthood of Christ, and now also by the missionary vocation. How good is Providence!”

When John arrived in Carthage on 4 September 1887, there were forty-eight scholastics. On 23 September, at the end of the retreat, Cardinal Lavignerie ordained eight young missionaries, including Father Henri Streicher, the future Vicar Apostolic of Uganda whom John would later join as his coadjutor bishop. During this final year of theology in Carthage, John wrote to his parents: “I am very well, the climate really suits me. I honestly think that I was created and put into the world in order to live under the African sky.” He prepared fervently for his ordination, which took place the following year.

As John Forbes prepares to embark on the more strictly missionary life, it is interesting to recall that he was also from some points of view a pioneer and an initiator in his own home Church. The diocese of Quebec had a tradition of missionary work. In the immense territory of Canada, priests would disperse to found new parishes for Catholics in remote areas of the west, or to care for workers in the timber-yards of the huge forests. Canadian priests also worked in more “foreign” missions. Missionaries had gone abroad. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, there were Canadian religious Sisters in India, Latin America, Japan and Egypt, while there were Canadian Jesuits in the Zambezi basin and Holy Cross Fathers in the mission in Bengal.

The personality of John Forbes was part of this movement towards greater missionary openness, and of course especially of openness to Africa, which had remained hitherto neglected. One might mention the foundation of the Scarborough Foreign Missionary Society in 1918, near Toronto, and that of the Quebec Society of Foreign Missions in 1921. These were part of the missionary renewal movement in which John Forbes was one of the principal actors.



On the day of his ordination

II - PRIEST, MISSIONARY OF AFRICA

The first Appointments

John Forbes took the missionary oath on 25 September 1888. "In the presence of my brothers here assembled, and of you, Reverend Father, I, John Forbes, swear on the Holy Gospels to consecrate myself henceforth and until death to the mission on the Church in Africa." He wrote to his parents: "I count this day, 25 September 1888, as among the happiest of my life. From the moment when I pronounced the oath, I AM A MISSIONARY OF AFRICA."

The major orders followed quickly: subdiaconate on 2 October, diaconate on 4 October, and on 6 October he received "the great grace of the priesthood" at the hands of Bishop Jourdan de la Passardière, bishop of Rosea and Cardinal Lavignerie's coadjutor in Tunis. On the same day, 6 October 1888, he received his appointment as teacher in the Seminary of St Anne, Jerusalem. He would certainly have preferred Africa, for which in fact he had to wait for nearly thirty years, but he will be all his life a man of obedience. He added to the letter to his parents: "And now the great news: I am going to Jerusalem. My cup is overflowing!"

Teacher in Jerusalem (1888-1893)

So it was in Jerusalem that the young Father Forbes spend the first years of his priestly and missionary apostolate. The White Fathers had opened a community in Jerusalem in 1878 and they ran there a Junior and a Senior Seminary for the Greek Melchite clergy. They also had the guardianship of the sanctuary of the Church of St Anne, or the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady, which belonged to the government of France. Very quickly Father Forbes felt at home in these new surroundings, as he said in a letter to his brother: "Everything contributes to making me happy in Jerusalem... What a blessing to live among the Holy Places."

He was appointed first as Prefect of Studies. He also had to brush up his Greek and to give every day a singing class in Greek liturgy. After a few months he was able to act as guide to Canadian pilgrims to the Holy Land, and in 1890 he had the great joy of a visit from his brother Willie.

In September 1889 he became teacher of "the third course". He taught French, Arabic, mathematics, history and Greek liturgical chant. He was also the seminarists' spiritual director. He wrote: "I am pleased to be able to teach...I believe that I shall be able to train more actively and more immediately the hearts and minds of the children who will be entrusted to me."

From 21 August to mid-September 1890 he carried out with the rector of the seminary, Father Michel, the annual visit to bishops and parents of the children. It was also an opportunity to recruit new pupils for the next academic year. In January 1891 he was appointed Director of the Works of the Propagation of the Faith and the Holy Childhood for the Holy Land. He also helped one of the confrères in archaeological research in St Anne's, which is on the site of the Pool of Bethesda mentioned in John, ch. 5.

On 26 November 1892 the Founder of the White Fathers, Cardinal Lavignerie, died, and with the other members of the Society Father John Forbes felt the "immense and painful loss". In May 1893 he took part in the eighth Eucharistic Congress in Jerusalem.

It was unusual in those days to remain for a long time in this kind of function. The Society still had too few members, and changes of post were frequent. John Forbes however was able to benefit from a relatively long stay in Jerusalem. It was only after five years in the Holy Land that he was recalled in 1893 to serve in the Mother House of the White Fathers in Algiers.

Assistant Novice Master in Maison-Carrée

John Forbes left Jerusalem with a heavy heart. When he arrived in Algiers he wrote to his mother:

“With all my love and warmest wishes, I send you a little souvenir of Jerusalem, this city which I loved so much and will love all my life, my first missionary post, with its fine missionary work in St Anne’s, its sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception, and all the Holy Places, including Jerusalem itself which Our Lord rendered holy by the shedding of his blood. I do not deny that obedience is asking of me a great sacrifice in recalling me from such a place. But, dearest Mother, when one is a missionary one learns to walk according to the orders of the Superiors, and, even more important, the good Lord does not refuse his consolations and his blessings to the one who has made a sacrifice which he finds costly.”

In the Novitiate he became assistant to the Father Master and teacher of Arabic. He wrote to his sister:

“I have to give two classes of Arabic every day, and on Sundays I give the novices a spiritual conference. From time to time our Superior General, Bishop Livinhac, who lives next door, asks me to do some translating from English into French or vice versa... I also have some Arabic translations to do occasionally... I am learning an African language, Kiswahili.”

He continued to study Arabic while teaching, and said that he had a passionate love for this language. He had loved Jerusalem, and now he was giving himself completely to his work and to his novices.

In January 1894 the Superior General, Bishop Livinhac, had to pay an urgent visit to London in connection with violent disputes which had broken out in Uganda between Protestants and Catholics. The crisis had come to the surface especially in 1890 and 1891 and it assumed international dimensions when English Protestant missionaries and French Catholic missionaries found themselves in confrontation. The situation had eventually calmed down, but English opinion remained hostile to the French missionaries, and Bishop Livinhac was invited to London to explain the French point of view and to take the heat out of the situation. As he did not speak English, he invited Father Forbes to accompany him. The resulting meetings were successful and the visit was a help to Uganda, especially in the invitation to the missionary congregation of Mill Hill to make a foundation there. (note 3)

During the winter of 1894-5, John Forbes fell victim to an epidemic of influenza which swept through the Novitiate. He was the Father infirmarian and he no doubt overworked before he collapsed himself and had to be treated in the house for sick Fathers, called “the Sanatorium”, next to the Novitiate. The Superior were alarmed at seeing such an apparently solid man laid low, and they thought it best to recommend a return to his home country. John was happy at this decision and left quite quickly, with a warm letter of recommendation from the Superior General to the Bishops of Canada and the United States.

Journey in Canada, 1895-6

This trip to Canada lasted nearly a year, and brought great joy both to John himself and to his family. He arrived in Montreal on 2 September 1895 and lived at Caughnawaga with his family, in the parish where his brother was now parish priest, and with the Sulpicians in the Major Seminary. He had to recover his health, but he also wanted to make known the White Fathers and their work, to collect alms, and to encourage vocations. Some years earlier he had written: “What are the seminarians doing in Canada? The doors of our Novitiate are open to receive them.. I must go and see if I can move some of them...or perhaps better, pray to the Holy Spirit.”

During this year of so-called vacation, he covered the whole of Quebec and Ontario, and also visited the United States. He was not a great speaker, but he won people’s sympathy and knew how to awaken their interest. His

open appearance, attractive smile, his transparent goodness, his warm and sincere words, won people's hearts. In colleges, churches and convents, he sowed seeds which would bear fruit in future years. In his letters to the Superior General, he spoke of the good reception he was experiencing. Some gestures really touched his heart, as when a group of schoolchildren spontaneously organized a collection. He was moved too by a group of ladies in Ottawa who had not brought their handbags but put in the collecting-plate their rings and jewellery.

Finally Father Forbes had completely recovered his health. He had also collected an important sum of money for the mission, and when he returned to Algiers he brought with him five postulants for the White Sisters. In the following year, 1897, a Canadian candidate joined him at Maison-Carrée for the Novitiate. It was Eugène Beauchamp, the second Canadian White Father.

Return to the Novitiate, 1896-1900

So Father Forbes returned to the Novitiate to continue his work in spiritual formation. There was now a new Novice Master, Father Paul Voillard, who would later succeed Bishop Livinhac as Superior General. In the year beginning September 1896 there were fifty-five novices, and John resumed his language teaching: Arabic, Hebrew, Kiswahili, Kabyl. He was also in charge of organizing manual work and acted as bursar of the Novitiate. He was very conscious of the demands of his role as a spiritual director and he wrote to his father: "Pray for me that there may not be too much of a gap between my personal behaviour and the instructions which I give. It is easy enough to give fine homilies on humility and self-denial, but fruitful teaching must be accompanied above all by example, and that is more difficult."

At the end of the Novitiate year in August 1897, Father Voillard gave Father Forbes the task of taking forty-four novices by boat from Algiers to Carthage. This was a voyage of several days, and on the way back John took the opportunity of visiting some of the missions in North Africa, travelling "by railway, public coach, on horseback, by mule, or on foot." He would repeat the same journey in 1898.

In the midst of his work in the Novitiate, John did not neglect his correspondence, and it was during these years towards the end of the century that some friends suggested opening a house in Canada. A Sulpician Father, Mgr Lecoq, one of John's former spiritual directors and now Superior of Montreal Senior Seminary, was particularly interested in such a foundation, and on 1 February 1898 he wrote to Father Forbes:

"Have you never thought of the advantages your Congregation would draw from having a procure here, where you could welcome candidates who were following courses in Montreal College? I believe that this would lead to an increase in vocations, and would at the same time inspire our own students with apostolic zeal, which is still insufficiently developed in America."

Time passed and the idea took root. Shortly afterwards John wrote to his brother: "During the General Chapter of April 1900, the Fathers thought that it would be a good thing to have a house of recruitment in Canada, and I was thought of as its natural founder." He also informed his Sulpician friend Father Lecoq of the decision. This Chapter of 1900 was the twelfth since the foundation of the Society of Missionaries of Africa, and it has been called "the Chapter of Maturity". It was held from 21 to 29 April. There were twenty-seven participants, and the Society now had 470 members. It was on 28 April that the decision was taken to open a recruitment house in French-speaking Canada.

This marked the conclusion, for the moment at least, of the first part of Father Forbes' missionary life. St Anne's Seminary in Jerusalem, the formation of his young brothers in Algiers, gave him an insight into the historical bases of The White Fathers. The experiences in Jerusalem and Algiers, and the regular contact with the Superiors of the Society, strengthened his own sense of identity as a White Father. He was thus well prepared when in July 1900 he began his mission as founder of the White Fathers in North America.



Father Forbes in Quebec, 1901



III - FOUNDER OF THE WHITE FATHERS IN CANADA

Father Forbes had not found it easy to leave Jerusalem, and he experienced similar difficulty in saying good-bye to his work in the Novitiate. He was also aware that founding a house in Canada would be a real challenge. However, he knew his compatriots and he was confident that the project of a generous work of evangelization would touch their hearts. He was now thirty-six years of age, and he had still never seen those Missions in Black Africa which he was now called upon to serve in Canada. He left North Africa in mid-June and arrived in Montreal on 2 July 1900.

A Foundation in Montreal?

After visiting his family in Caughwanaga, Father Forbes embarked on a major programme of mission animation. Before a postulate could be opened, there had to be postulants and there had to be money. John toured parishes, gave conferences in seminaries and colleges of classical studies. He was naturally very anxious for the success of his mission in Canada. His first thought was that the postulate should be in Montreal, and he asked for an audience with Archbishop Bruchési who had succeeded Archbishop Fabre in 1897. He received a prompt and generous response. "Go into our colleges and seminaries and make your missions known... I will never oppose the departure of my seminarians for your fine work in Africa, even if they are my best subjects."

There would be no difficulty therefore about recruiting vocations. Finding a house however was another matter, and on this point Archbishop Bruchesi asked for time to think, saying that they already had in the diocese so many works and so many communities. There were in fact in Montreal at that period sixteen male communities of priests and brothers, and the same number of Sisters' communities.

Father Forbes had a number of interviews with the Archbishop, but the hesitations remained. Father Forbes had however already met Archbishop Bégin of Quebec, and one day this prelate had said to him spontaneously that if the White Fathers had a house for vocations in Canada there would be no lack of Canadian candidates. Father Forbes remembered this remark and quoted it to the Archbishop of Montreal who responded: "Why don't you go to Quebec? You will find there some excellent people with a living faith, and you will surely find plenty of vocations."

The Choice for Quebec

Between July 1900 and August 1901, Father Forbes wrote a dozen letters to his Superior General, Bishop Livinhac, giving an account of the progress of his mission in Canada. In his letter of 21 January 1901 he wrote:

"I believe, My Lord and Reverend Father, that we should forget Montreal and turn our eyes instead towards Quebec... The completely spontaneous reflection of Archbishop Bégin may be taken as Providential. Archbishop Bruchesi is very sympathetic as far as our work is concerned, but his serious hesitations about a foundation in his diocese have made me think of the word of the Lord that no one is a prophet in his own country. In Montreal I am only two steps from my family. It is too near for a missionary of Africa."

For men of faith, even small circumstances are seen as signs of God, and in this situation matters were quickly arranged. On 25 February Father Forbes received a letter of recommendation from Bishop Livinhac, and on the following day he was received by Archbishop Bégin in Quebec. On 2 March 1901 he sends good news to his Superior: "God be praised, My Lord and Reverend Father, we shall have a house in Quebec. After consulting his council, Archbishop Bégin told me quite simply that the way was clear and that we could establish ourselves in

Quebec.”

It was a historic moment. We might recall what was said by both parties to this agreement. Archbishop Bégin said: “These little pieces of paper will serve as memorials to the peaceful invasion of Canada by Africa.” Father Forbes drew up a formal written request to the Archbishop of Quebec, who replied in a long and gracious letter in which he said, among other things, “I agree to your request, Reverend Father, with my whole heart. It is an honour for a diocese to be able to offer the great possible fraternal hospitality to a Congregation like that of the White Fathers, destined to spread the faith in Africa.”

Questions to Bishop Livinhac

Father Forbes was very happy at this decision, but now it had to be put into execution. He was an obedient man, but he was also a practical man, and he presented Bishop Livinhac with a long list of questions. He foresaw everything, but he did not wish to take decisions without the agreement of his superiors. Here are some of the points on which he sought advice:

- All students in the University of Laval have to pay ten dollars per term. Should we ask our students to pay this sum themselves?
- Is it a good thing to summon the students for a retreat, followed by the taking of the habit, ten days before courses begin?
- He asked Bishop Livinhac for a Rule for their new house.
- Two other Fathers and two Brothers would be needed in order to form a real community.
- He also asked for vestments for the sacristy, and sought advice on the appropriate costume for postulants on holiday.

The letter concludes:

“You will excuse my asking all these questions, my Lord, which I would be grateful if you would kindly answer. I am sorely in need of advice, and I may in fact have to present you with even more questions. I have nothing to say about my health, except that it is flourishing. The confrères you send me will no longer recognize me. When you are ready to summon me from Quebec to accompany you on a journey in Equatorial Africa, I shall by then have built up immense reserves of strength. And you can drop me off in some corner of Uganda.”

In his letters to Bishop Livinhac, John Forbes is always an “obedient and affectionate son”. He offers suggestions, but he leaves the decision to the Superior General. He asks advice and even permission for small details. He tells the Superior General everything. On the spot in Canada, he realizes what an immense task he is undertaking in trying to raise people’s mission awareness. He looks for new ways of finding postulants, benefactors and subsidies. He visits the twenty-seven colleges and seminaries of Quebec, as well as the University of Ottawa. He goes to New Brunswick and even to the United States, visiting Boston, New York, Baltimore and Washington.

Opening of a Postulate

One urgent task was to find a house in Quebec, as near as possible to the Seminary and to the University where the postulants would follow courses. At the end of June 1901 he found what he was looking for and rented the house in 41 rue de Remparts. He took up residence there on 10 August, and two days later he was happy to welcome two more White Fathers to help him: Fathers Balthasar Drost from the Netherlands and Jules Saule

from France. Finally, on 28 August 1901, the feast of the great African Bishop Augustine, the first six postulants entered, namely, Edouard Lafleur, Oscar Morin, Amedée Goulet, Ulric Beauchamp, Joseph Filion and Joseph Déry. Two were from the diocese of Quebec, three from Montreal, and the sixth originally from Hollyoake, USA. All six persevered and became Missionaries of Africa.

After their entry, the postulants made a short retreat and then took the white habit on 5 September. On 8 September the Archbishop came and blessed the house. The Founder of the White Fathers, Cardinal Lavigerie, had a great devotion to Our Lady. He had made the Immaculate Conception the patron of the Society of Missionaries of Africa, and the whole of the new community of Quebec, Fathers and postulants, made an act of consecration to Our Lady of Africa on 15 September 1901, in the spirit of the Founder and in thanksgiving for the happy beginning of this first foundation in North America.



The White Father's Postulate in 37 rue des Remparts, Quebec

On 27 November two Brothers came from Algiers to join the community of the postulate, Brothers Euthyme and John of God. Father Forbes went to New York to meet them and help them through immigration (note 4). Brother Euthyme only stayed in Quebec for one year, but Brother John of God remained until his death in 1965. A detail from this time shows how attentive Father Forbes was to persons. In August 1901 he had to engage two lay domestic servants. When the Brothers arrived in November, these servants were no longer needed, and Father Forbes went to the trouble of finding suitable employment for them elsewhere.

The installation in 41 rue des Remparts was never envisaged as permanent, for Father Forbes had his eye on a neighbouring property, no. 37. Bishop Livinhac gave permission for the change, and the new property was purchased for \$10,000. In May 1902 the necessary alterations had been made and the postulate moved to its new quarters on the corner of rue Ferland where it remained until 1929, by which time 37 rue des Remparts had altogether received more than two hundred postulants.

The foundation of the White Fathers in Canada was above all the work of one man, Father John Forbes, the fruit of his skill and dedication. But it also owed a debt to Archbishop Bégin of Quebec and the other Bishops of Canada, as well as to the Superiors of colleges and seminaries, to the encouragement and support of the Sulpician Fathers, Father Forbes' first mentors, and to his family, especially his brother, the parish priest. One

must also mention the welcome and the generosity extended by the population. In the course of the following years, the White Fathers would often have occasion to appreciate all this openness and the missionary spirit of both the clergy and the ecclesial communities of Canada.

Arrival of the White Sisters in Canada

From the opening of the postulate, Father Forbes had been thinking of the White Sisters. He spoke of them to Archbishop Bégin, and he, like Archbishop Bruchesi on an earlier occasion, said that he needed time to reflect. Weeks and months went by and Father Forbes tells us that he then had the idea of putting the project under the protection of the Archangel Michael. It was on 8 May 1903, feast of the apparition of St Michael, that he received from Algiers and forwarded to the Archbishop the official request from the White Sisters to be allowed to open a postulate in Quebec. Archbishop Bégin replied at once. "I shall not forget, dear Father, the 'apparition' of your request, which coincided with the feast of the Apparition of St Michael." Eight days later he gave his authorization, and on 26 October 1903 four White Sisters arrived in Quebec from Algiers. There were three Frenchwomen and one Canadian, and they stayed in the original house of the White Fathers in 41 rue des Remparts.

This might be the place to mention the appearance of another Female missionary Congregation in Canada. While John Forbes was working to establish the Society of Missionaries of Africa in Canada, a young woman called Délia Tétrault, who would become Mother Mary of the Holy Spirit, was founding a new Congregation, the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception (M.I.C.). John Forbes and Délia Tétrault knew each other and exchanged letters of mutual encouragement. The M.I.C. would continue to send John Forbes their review, "Le Précurseur", and the Sisters retained a good relationship also with John's brother, Guillaume, in whose diocese of Joliette they opened a house.

Life and Work in the Postulate

Father Forbes remained Superior of the Postulate until 1914, assisted by two other Fathers and two Brothers. Except between 1909 and 1912, every year there were some candidates who presented themselves for the service of Christ in Africa.

Fathers, Brothers, Postulants formed one community. Cardinal Lavigerie insisted particularly on community life. "Never, in no case and under no pretext, may the missionaries be less than three together." Father Forbes was the perfect man for constructing the new community in Canada. One of those who lived with him in those early days wrote later: "Anyone who writes his life should emphasize his simplicity, goodness, amiability, gentleness, and patience under all circumstances. Nor should his unflinching gaiety be forgotten and his permanent availability to all." (Quoted by E. Auclair, p. 147)

The postulants successfully followed courses in the University of Laval. Father Forbes took an interest in their work and encouraged them. He was a real father to them, and they loved him in return. As we shall see, he was involved in a number of activities outside the house, but his first concern remained always the life of the postulate, and he gave most of his time to the formation of his postulants.

At the end of their year's study in Quebec, the students were given a month's holiday with their family and then came together again in the College of Lévis which was then free and had space for relaxation and games. Towards the end of August the students went home again to say good-bye to their families and then took ship for Algeria for the Novitiate and, a year later, for Tunisia where they finished their theology. After that it would be the Mission, in North Africa or elsewhere.

Not all the postulants persevered. It was normal that there should be departures. Some discovered that they did

not have the missionary vocation, others might be advised to try something else. Nevertheless, every departure was a painful experience for all concerned, as we can see in Father Forbes' correspondence. On the other hand the University which the students attended sometimes provided consolations. In 1905 Father Forbes wrote to the Superior General about one of the postulants, Charles Robillard, of whom he was particularly proud: "He has carried off the prize in all his courses... His professors would like him to stay and become a Doctor of the University of Laval."

John's brother Guillaume offered him a fine portrait of Cardinal Lavigerie, and this was displayed in the entrance parlour of the Postulate. In 1903 a small African museum was opened. Lotteries were also organized. Father Forbes in short spared no effort in his work for the Mission and for the formation of missionaries.

Apostolic Ministry and Work for the Mission

In addition to their work in the Postulate, Father Forbes and his priest-companions had other activities. They went into the parishes to preach about the missions, they gave retreats, they gave conferences with slides in colleges and seminaries, they sometimes replaced sick or absent parish priests.

Father Forbes spoke of his continual magic lantern shows of Africa, and of how he would cast his nets. His biographer tells us:

"His voice was gentle but penetrating, his gestures sober, his manner persuasive...He quickly won the love of others, and through him and because of him people came to love Africa and the Africans too. His hearers were deeply moved when they heard him speak of his memories of Cardinal Lavigerie, of the faith and heroism of the Martyrs of Uganda, the atrocities of the slave trade." (Auclair, p. 149)

A powerful weapon of 'propaganda' in Father Forbes' armoury was the *Bulletin des Missions d'Afrique*, the predecessor of the modern magazine *MISSION* published by the North-American Province of the Missionaries of Africa. After using for some years the French publication, in January 1905 Father Forbes launched a Canadian version, beginning with 2,000 subscribers. The annual subscription for twelve numbers was fifty cents. From 1909 an English version was published. The preparation, correction and despatch of these two bulletins involved a great deal of work for the community in the rue des Remparts, and Father Forbes admitted to the Superior General that he had to cut down on his hours of sleep in order to do everything that had to be done. In 1908 there were 7,000 subscribers, and in 1914 the figure had risen to 10,000.

At the end of 1905 Father Forbes had the good idea of having the twelve numbers of the Bulletin bound and sending copies to various people, including Archbishop Bégin and the Apostolic Delegate. Both of these responded with generous letters of appreciation. The cover of the Bulletin showed Our Lady sitting on a throne, with her Son, and kneeling on each side a White Father and a slave. Father Forbes obtained from Rome a special indulgence for reciting the invocation, "Our Lady of Slaves, pray for us."

Because Father Forbes knew Arabic, he took an interest in the hundred or so Syrian Maronites in Quebec. He also occupied himself with the Working Brothers of St Francis Régis who had settled on the Lake of St John after being expelled from France. Their Superior would later say that Father Forbes had been for them "an angel of good counsel". Father Forbes was also active on the ecclesiastical tribunal set up to consider the beatification of the Canadian Martyrs and of the Servant of God, Alfred Pampalon.

The number and variety of these activities bear witness to Father Forbes' health and unusual capacity for work, as well as to his openness of mind and generous availability. At the same time, everything which he did was connected in some way with the Mission. Speaking of the Mission, making it known, attracting sympathies and gifts, seeking vocations: this was at the heart of all his activities.

At the same time he never forgot his family. His priest-brother had been transferred from Caughnawaga to St Anne-de-Bellevue, and his family had followed him. John went to see him whenever he could and also brought his confrères with him. In addition to their Postulate in Quebec, the White Fathers thus had what they called a kind of Montreal 'outstation', at first at Caughnawaga and then in St-Anne-de-Bellevue. So we read in the Annual Report of Bishop Livinhac's journey in 1910 that he went to Montreal to greet Archbishop Bruchesi and took the opportunity "to make a pilgrimage to what we like to call here the 'Mother House' of the Canadian missionaries, which is the presbytery of St-Anne-de-Bellevue where the family of Father Forbes lives with his brother who is the parish priest."

This 1910 visit of the Superior General, Bishop Livinhac, to Quebec brought great joy to Father John Forbes and his confrères. He knew Bishop Livinhac well from the time he worked in Maison-Carrée, and he had gone with him to London in 1894. Like many other White Fathers down the years who would work on mission animation in Canada and the United States, John Forbes had never been to Black Africa but he worked tirelessly for Africa and the mission in Africa, and this visit of the Superior General was an important encouragement as well as a joy.

Journey to Algiers and Uganda (1911)

The year 1911 brought a pause in Father Forbes' hectic activity and finally gave him the opportunity of realizing his dream of going to Black Africa. After ten years of active life, all Missionaries of Africa are invited to stop and make a silent retreat of thirty days, according to the Exercises of St Ignatius, to take stock of their lives. It was within that context that John Forbes was absent from Quebec from February to October 1911. He took ship at Halifax for France with seven White Sister postulants before proceeding to Africa. He wrote from Lourdes: "The weather is magnificent, and the place beautiful beyond description. I was especially moved in visiting the Grotto."

On 22 February he was in Algiers and writes of his impressions: "What a joy to see once more this beloved Mother House, this beautiful Novitiate, all these blessed places where I spent seven years of my life." After a week's retreat, he wrote to his parents: "What a grace this retreat is! How good is the Lord to us! The temperature is ideal, the weather fine, the sun lovely, the sky a beautiful blue."

At the end of the retreat he announced to his brother the joyful news that he had received permission to make a short trip in Uganda, "the realization, at least in part, of my life's dream." While waiting to leave, he visited a number of posts in Kabylia, at the same time studying Luganda, one of the languages of Uganda. He finally left on 10 May, passed through the Suez Canal and arrived in Mombasa on the coast of Kenya. And so to Uganda, "the promised land". He was at last in that Black Africa of which he had dreamed and spoken so much.

On 14 June he wrote from Rubaga, the capital, now Kampala: "What a beautiful country and, even more, what a fine Christian community. Rubaga is the Mother Mission of all our missions in Equatorial Africa. There were twenty years of persecution, but now it is harvest-time. As elsewhere, the blood of martyrs has been the seed of Christians... Last Sunday in church I had difficulty in restraining my tears as I listened to the huge congregation all singing together so fervently."

He visited as many posts as he could: Villa Maria, the residence of the Vicar Apostolic, Henri Streicher; Mitala Maria; Katende. He wrote: "I travel by 'rickshaw', a little vehicle with two high wheels, pulled by one man with three others pushing behind. The Africans nearly always sing as they run... I hired the rickshaw for two weeks for three rupees a day (the rupee is worth 33 cents), all expenses included. It is certainly not dear." He had the joy of meeting a number of Fathers whom he knew, including some ten Canadians who had been his postulants. In Father Beauchamp's mission he baptized seventy-seven adult catechumens. The whole experience caused him to cry out: "How beautiful is this missionary life!" For years he had lived in his heart with the black people of Africa. Now he was among them in person and it was a great joy. His only regret was that he could not stay.

Last Years in Canada

Marvelling at everything he had seen, he returned to Quebec on 10 October 1911, bringing with him unforgettable memories and two dozen chests containing a veritable museum of African artefacts. In his absence, the work of the Postulate had gone ahead, and in the month before his return nine postulants had entered. Father Forbes resumed his post as Superior, as well as his work in parishes and colleges. He could now speak of the missions from personal experience, and he was able to illustrate his conferences with the various “views” he had brought back from Uganda. In 1913 both he and his brother Guillaume, now parish priest of St John the Baptist, Montreal, had the joy of celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of their priestly ordination, and they celebrated at the same time their parents’ Golden Wedding. The whole feast went on for three days.

Father Forbes had for a long time enjoyed the respect and esteem of the Quebec clergy, including the Archbishop. On 1 June 1913 the two Forbes priest-brothers were at supper together in Montreal, and Archbishop Bruchesi was there. Father Forbes wrote of the occasion to Bishop Livinhac:

“Archbishop Bruchesi recounted my history and said that thirty of my compatriots had followed me into the White Fathers. He spoke magnificently of the missionary vocation, saying that it was a blessing for the country and the diocese. Although his large diocese suffered from a shortage of priests, he would always see in the departure of his seminarians to become missionaries an assurance that for every missionary he gave, God would give him several priests in return. He then turned to me and said, ‘Carry on, Father, your ministry as a sower of the seed from college to college.’”

In August of the same year, 1913, his brother Guillaume was appointed Bishop of Joliette. This was a great joy for the Forbes family and for John in particular whose letters began to contain humorous references to “My dear Lord of Joliette” and “His Excellency, my little brother.”

May 1914 marked the long-awaited turning-point in the life of Father John Forbes. He was appointed to Uganda. He wrote to his parents: “To my great joy, my dream of being a missionary in the midst of the people of Africa is about to be realized after twenty-six years. May God bless the beautiful Mission of Uganda!” He was replaced in the Postulate by a Dutch Father, Antoine Smoor, who had already been in Quebec from 1908 to 1910. The house diary records: “The deep regret we all feel at the departure of Father Forbes, founder of the house of Quebec, is softened by our joy at seeing the fulfilment of his deepest desires to be an apostle. He will leave for Uganda, the land of his dreams.”

Father Forbes was more than pleased to be leaving for Uganda, but many people in Quebec were going to feel his departure keenly. He had been Superior of the Postulate from 1901 to 1914 and had accomplished an immense amount of work. Starting from nothing, he left behind him a well-established postulate and procure and two highly-appreciated Reviews. Sixty-six candidates had entered the Postulate, the fruit of Father Forbes’ work in colleges and seminaries, and more than half of them had become White Fathers.

One of his great concerns had always been the community. Some twenty Fathers and Brothers had passed through it during his years as Superior. He believed in community, and when there were difficulties between confrères he felt it deeply. When one reads his letters, one is conscious of his desire to find excuses for his confrères and to help them to begin again after experiencing difficulties. In this area too we meet him as a great worker. He was the perfect man for founding and advancing this work for the African mission in North America.

IV - MISSIONARY IN UGANDA

John Forbes was appointed to Uganda in 1914 and he left on 6 July 1914 with his brother the Bishop who was going to Rome. The outbreak of the Great War in August disrupted John's travel plans and he did not arrive in Uganda until May 1915. The two brothers had gone first to Lourdes, and John had then taken his brother to Algeria and accompanied him to Rome where they were present for the death of Pope Pius X.

Preliminary: Bishop's Waltham, England

The two brothers then separated. John went to England, to The Priory, Bishop's Waltham, where an Apostolic School had been recently established. John was asked to replace Father Travers, a French White Father who had been called up. The writer of John's obituary notice observed that "in this new post he showed himself as he had already done in St Anne's, in the Novitiate, in Quebec: obliging and helpful, pleasant but also pious and zealous, with good relations with people outside."

Father Forbes stayed in England for eight months, working for the formation of the students, and also improving his English. He wrote: "Bishop's Waltham is a fine place, but I am not here for long. I regard myself as still being on the way to Uganda, but I am grateful that Providence has given me this extended opportunity of learning and speaking English. I will need all the English I can learn for y work at Rubaga." He adds a note which reminds us that we are in 1914: "I have made my first attempts at riding a bicycle."

Uganda at Last!

Father Forbes left England on 20 April 1915, "leaving behind him the aroma of his goodness", as the house diary records. He then began a thirty-day journey which took him first to Marseilles, where his ship had a stop; then it passed through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea before entering the Indian Ocean. He left the ship in Mombasa, on the coast of Kenya, went to Kisumu on Lake Victoria by train, and then crossed the Lake and arrived in Entebbe on 26 May 1915. He was welcomed by many of his acquaintances and former students, including Fathers Fillion, Goulet, Robillard and Bissonnette. They were all overjoyed to see each other, and John received his appointment at once as Superior of Rubaga High School.



Seated in the middle, Father John Forbes leaving for Uganda, 1911

The first White Fathers arrived in Uganda in 1879, the caravan of ten Fathers and Brothers having left Algiers the previous year. Of these, five settled in the area of Tabora, in the middle of what is now Tanzania, while the other five went north to Mwanza and Lake Victoria and so to Uganda. This group included Fathers Siméon Lourdel and Léon Livinhac, the future Superior General.

The mission prospered at first and the catechumenate developed, but then difficulties arose, largely because of the unstable political situation and the machinations of the two Kings, first Mutesa and then Mwanga. We do not repeat here the history of the mission in Uganda, but mention may be made of the two major crises which occurred between 1880 and 1890. The first was the murderous persecution of Christians, both Protestants and Catholics, in 1885-6. There were a number of martyrs, many of them burned at Namugongo in June 1886. The second crisis concerned the confrontation between Protestants, supported by British military power which was now established, and Catholics, defended by the White Fathers. In January 1890 there were armed clashes and Bishop Hirth, the Vicar Apostolic, and the missionaries were obliged to flee for a time. After various diplomatic exchanges calm was eventually restored, and we have already seen how Bishop Livinhac went to London in 1894 in an attempt to clear up the situation.

The Catholic Mission of Uganda, founded in 1879, became an Apostolic Vicariate in 1883 under the first Vicar Apostolic, Léon Livinhac. Recalled to Algiers by Cardinal Lavigerie to become Superior General of the Society of Missionaries of Africa, he was replaced by Bishop Hirth. In the following years, new apostolic vicariates were established in the Great Lakes region, and when Father Forbes arrived Uganda was part of the Vicariate of Northern Nyanza, of which Henri Streicher had become Vicar Apostolic in 1897. In the early 1900's, the Vicariate consisted of thirteen mission posts and two communities of White Sisters. The first local priests were ordained in 1913, and in 1915 there were still some eighty missionaries on the spot, in spite of the departure of many French Fathers and Brothers for the War (note 5).

When Father Forbes arrived, there were two important Protestant Colleges in Uganda, Mengo High School and King's College, Budo. The Catholic college of St Mary's, Rubaga, of which Father Forbes was now appointed Superior, opened in 1908. It taught English, grammar, history, geography, arithmetic, singing and drawing. Religious instruction occupied a privileged place on the syllabus. There was also physical training and sport, and students were introduced to the rudiments of scientific agriculture.

During the years of Father Forbes' tenure of office, the number of pupils remained fairly steady at about 150, and there were normally five Fathers on the staff. In 1916 however, because of the War, Father Forbes found himself alone with one other, Father Alarie. They then recruited local collaborators, including particularly three of their former students. John Forbes was the overall director, but he also had to do some teaching. This school, like a number of others, provided the country and the Church with well-trained and competent professional personnel.

Yet Another Language

The first thing a newly-arrived missionary usually has to do is to learn the local language. Mission is essentially encounter and communication, and John Forbes himself said that without the language it is impossible to do anything in a missionary country. Normally language-learning occupies the first six months, without any other important duties. The best place for this task is a remote country parish where there are plenty of people, especially children, only too pleased to help the student Father or Brother. It is however much more difficult to learn the local language while working in an English-speaking school.

Nevertheless Father Forbes, now aged fifty-one, got down to the study of Luganda with great energy. He had already learned Kiswahili, but Luganda is different and more difficult. After nine months he passed his Luganda examination, authorizing him to hear confessions and preach.

In Love with the Mission

Father Forbes was very quickly seduced by this country which he had been so anxious to see again. His correspondence again manifests the exceptional temperament of a man who seemed to be happy everywhere, whatever the difficulties. No doubt he was blessed in the first place with a naturally optimistic and well-balanced character, but he was also sustained by his evangelical convictions and deep spirituality. He describes with kindly enthusiasm, although never naïvely, the scenery, the situations and the persons he encountered. His zeal for Africa was a mixture of realism and humour which give a remarkable character to his correspondence.

He loved Uganda, “the most beautiful country in the world, the finest mission in the world...Ah, the beautiful sky of Rubaga! If only I could send you a little piece of it to soften your winter! And then it is the same all the year round, perpetual summer. A country clothed in flowers and carpeted with fresh verdure...And the abundance of fruits: oranges, pawpaws, mangoes, bananas, lemons.. The only things missing are apples and maple-syrup!”

He loved the country, and he also loved his work and the people. He speaks of them constantly in his letters, especially of the children he taught, and one senses his love for them. He wrote to his parents: “Bless me, and bless my little black children as well. They are my children, so your grandchildren, and you must love them too.”

His correspondence shows too his gift for telling a good story. To his sister he writes:

“As I write, a small child of nine or ten is passing my half-open door. He greets me and kneels down, as is the custom here. Then he comes in, places himself near my table, and watches me write, without saying anything or disturbing me. When he sees that I have to stretch out to dip my pen in the inkwell, he picks it up and brings it over to me, still saying nothing. I suppose eventually he is going to ask me for a medal or a picture. I know it!”

Or again writing to his parents:

“As I write to you, my room is full of little black people. Every evening during the month of the Rosary we have devotions in the mission church. We recite the rosary before the Blessed Sacrament Exposed, as we do in Montreal, except that we pray in Luganda, which Our Lady understands. The people make no noise when they enter or leave, for they are barefoot, and they do not disturb the benches for the simple reason that there are no benches.”

Father Forbes' Holidays

During the school holidays, Father Forbes liked to go and help his confrères in the parishes. They knew this and were happy to ask for his help, which was especially appreciated in wartime when there was a shortage of manpower. Some thirty French missionaries had been conscripted to fight in Europe while others had left to become military chaplains. So John was called upon to give catechism, to baptize catechumens, to hear confessions in Luganda, Kiswahili, French, English. He also spent time visiting the people, a task which a sociable man like him found particularly congenial.

In those days, the sacrament of Confession occupied a prominent place in the parish ministry. Father Forbes wrote from Gayaza, a parish not far from Rubaga:

“One goes to the confessional after breakfast and stays there until particular examination at 12.45p.m. At 2.30 p.m. we begin again, and continue until it is time for the evening spiritual exercises and supper.”

He preached a retreat to the White Sisters at Kisubi, and another to the Goans in Entebbe. Sometimes he paid a visit to the Junior Seminary of Bukalasa or the Senior Seminary of Katigondo. “What a beautiful work it is,” he

wrote, “to make these young Africans into priests.” In fact the White Fathers had from the first made the training of a local clergy one of their priorities. This was in the spirit of their Founder, who had said: “You are only pioneers, the real work will be done by the Africans themselves.” We recall that the first two Ugandan priests were ordained in 1913.

In his various journeyings, Father Forbes no longer made use of his former rickshaw but rode a bicycle, as he had learned to do in England. His brother, Bishop of Joliette, gave him a fine Raleigh bicycle, for these were the years in which the bicycle was quickly becoming the principal means of transport in the little world of the missionaries.

A New Church at Rubaga

Almost from the moment he set foot in Uganda, one of Father Forbes’ preoccupations was the building of the church of Rubaga. He wrote to his brother the Bishop: “We are still using the old church in which many of the pillars would not be out of place in Pisa, while the thatched roof is falling to bits. I am anxious that the work should begin as soon as possible...This is the Mother-Church of all the churches of Uganda. We need very quickly a house more worthy of Our Lord.”

In fact he launched the project and on the Feast of Pentecost 1917 he had the joy of taking part in the ceremony of the laying of the foundation-stone by Bishop Streicher. Father Forbes would play a major part in bringing to fruition this project of a new church, through the large sums of money which he collected on his next visit to Canada. The construction of Rubaga Cathedral was under the direction of Brother Cyprian and it would take a number of years to complete.

Father Forbes had now been in Uganda for nearly three years and he had won the confidence and the esteem of his confrères. His fraternal spirit, his attentiveness to persons, and his organizing talents had quickly made him an important person in the Church in Uganda. It was no doubt these qualities which attracted the attention of his superiors and led to his appointment to a post of still higher responsibility.



Archbishop Streicher, Vicar Apostolic of Uganda

V - COADJUTOR BISHOP

The Appointment as Coadjutor

We have seen that the Vicar Apostolic of Uganda was a French White Father, Henri Streicher. He lived at Villa Maria, some eighty miles from Rubaga. On 21 November 1917 Father Forbes was giving a class of mathematics to his students when a telegram arrived, informing him that he had been appointed by the Holy See Coadjutor to Bishop Streicher, and titular Bishop of Vaga, now Béja, in Tunisia. That was the end of the maths class, and there was a good reason for a holiday. Bishop Forbes was the first Canadian White Father to be made a Bishop. He would eventually be followed by sixteen others.

John Forbes reacted to the news with his habitual simplicity. He was neither dazzled nor overwhelmed. It was the will of God. He wrote first to Bishop Streicher.

“My Reverend Lord, I was teaching arithmetic when I received your telegram telling me of my appointment as Bishop and Coadjutor to your Excellency! Since this is the will of God, of the Holy Father, and of you, my Lord, I can only say, Thy will be done! counting on the mercy and the help of God, and on your charity and that of the confrères. I have only one desire, but it is a burning one: to help you to extend the reign of Jesus in all the souls entrusted to you.”

John had known Bishop Streicher, his “Revered Vicar Apostolic and old friend”, in Jerusalem. John was then teaching in the Junior Seminary and Henri Streicher was teaching History and Holy Scripture in the Senior Seminary. We may say a word here about the man whose close collaborator John Forbes now became.

Henri Streicher was born in 1863 in Alsace, Eastern France. In 1884, when he was already a senior seminarian, he entered the White Fathers’ Novitiate in Algiers. He then went to Carthage, near Tunis, to continue his theology, and on the same day of 23 September 1887 he took the missionary oath and was ordained priest. He was appointed to teach in the Senior Seminary of St Anne’s, Jerusalem, but in 1890, at his urgent request, he was appointed to Equatorial Africa, as the region was then called. He left Marseilles with other missionaries of the ninth caravan on 12 July 1890.

The group consisted of four priests, two Brothers, and two African doctors who had just finished their studies in Malta. They arrived at Rubaga on 25 February 1891. We may recall that Father Siméon Lourdel, a remarkable pioneer of the Catholic mission in Uganda, had just died, and that this was the period when the British government established its authority over Uganda.

During the following years, Father Streicher worked in different posts of the Vicariate, but especially in the big mission of Villa Maria. In 1894, because of the rapid development of the mission and also for political reasons at this time of colonial partition, the Holy See divided the apostolic Vicariate into three: the Vicariate of South Nyanza, corresponding to the German sphere of influence, was entrusted to Bishop Hirth; the north-west of Lake Nyanza became the new Vicariate of Upper Nile, and the Mill Hill Fathers were put in charge of it; finally the Vicariate of Northern Nyanza covered the important central part of the old Vicariate, including Uganda, and it was put under a new Vicar Apostolic, a White Father, Bishop Guillermain.

Bishop Guillermain was only thirty-three, but only two years later, in July 1896, he died in a few days from blackwater fever. Just before dying he had suggested as provisional administrator Father Streicher, whose pastoral and spiritual qualities he had come to know and admire. In the following year, 1897, Henri Streicher was duly appointed Vicar Apostolic of Northern Nyanza. He was thirty-four years of age.

Such in brief was the man whose coadjutor Father Forbes had now become. He was a recognized and remarkable personality. He had been able to establish clear priorities for his vicariate and he oversaw their practical application. He was very concerned about the spiritual and community life of his missionaries, sometimes indeed seeming to usurp the role of their religious superior. With advancing years, he did not appear to lose his remarkable energy, but he had asked the Superior General of the White Fathers to look for someone who could replace him when the time came. Father John Forbes was the response to his request.

Bishop Streicher did not hide his satisfaction when he heard of the appointment. His pastoral letter went far beyond the platitudes and expected compliments of such occasions.

“The remarkable aptitudes which Father Forbes has displayed during his thirty years in the Society and in the Vicariate, his profound and infectious piety, the facility of his relationships, and the distinction of his manners, combined with his perfect knowledge of English, make him a most acceptable person in all quarters. His natural qualities and his acquired virtues make Mgr Forbes the providential person for whom we were waiting.” (note 6)

The new Bishop for his part did not wait to write of his reactions to his parents.

“I am still in a state of astonishment! My confrères, the Europeans here, and our dear Africans, headed by the King and his ministers, are writing and congratulating me. They are right of course. The episcopate is a great honour. But as our Willie knows only too well, it is also a heavy burden. For the last ten days people are calling me Monsignor Forbes, and no longer Father Forbes, and I cannot get used to it. I keep thinking that Willie is behind me and that the people are speaking to him...If it were not for the War, I think that Willie would want to consecrate me, and that would be a great joy for both of us...Dear parents, do not just thank the good Lord. You must also pray for your two Bishops, for they both need wisdom and strength, a strong interior life, and holiness.”

Bishop Forbes, Coadjutor Bishop

In Canada the news of Father Forbes' elevation to the episcopate brought great joy. His former directors, the Sulpicians, decided to offer him a pectoral cross. He was their forty-fifth former student to become a Bishop. As was expected, his brother Guillaume sent him a telegram inviting him to come and be consecrated in Joliette. Neither the new Bishop himself however nor Bishop Streicher considered this feasible, given the War and the difficulties of travelling. Instead the Bishop of Joliette sent Episcopal regalia: mitres, pectoral cross, rings, gloves, chasuble...The precious parcel left Canada in February, and arrived in Rubaga on 15 May, four days before the consecration. Thus John Forbes became an exceptionally well-equipped Bishop, and he wrote later to his brother: “Really, you are going to make all the other Vicars Apostolic in the world jealous!”

It was decided that the Coadjutor Bishop should continue to reside in Rubaga even after his consecration. For the moment, he retained his office as Headmaster of St Mary's School and he carried on studying Luganda, asking his students to correct any mistakes he made. At the end of the class, his correctors would run to him and say, “My Lord, you made so many faults!” And he would laugh with them.

Tradition demanded that he choose an Episcopal coat-of-arms and a motto. For the motto he took a phrase from the Our Father, *Adveniat Regnum Tuum*, and his coat.-of-arms represented a Sacred Heart, a palm in memory of the Martyrs of Uganda, a Capital M for Mary, and a golden star, sign of faith. John Forbes was a passionate missionary and a passionate follower of Christ, and the symbols he chose expressed his missionary ideal and the great spiritual inspirations of his time.

During this period a sad event took place to cast a shadow over the festivities. His father died at the age of

seventy-eight. John accepted the loss with faith, courage and serenity. It is evident that such sorrows are the lot of many missionaries who have left home and see their loved ones disappear without being able to be present to share the grief of the family. This of course was even more common before the advent of modern communications.

The consecration, or ordination as we now say, of Bishop Forbes was fixed for 19 May. While preparing for this great event, he was also thinking about the future of St Mary's School and was involved in negotiations for a new site. He was to have the consolation of blessing this site at Kisubi in 1924, and he also founded an Association for former pupils of St Mary's School.

On 4 May the future Bishop went to Entebbe to make a preparatory retreat for his Episcopal ordination which took place as planned on the Feast of Pentecost, 19 May 1918, in the old Rubaga church. Bishop Streicher presided, assisted by Bishop Sweens, Vicar Apostolic of South Nyanza, and Bishop Biermans, Vicar Apostolic of the Upper Nile. The leading personalities of the Protectorate attended, including the governor, King Daudi Chwa and his ministers, along with some fifty White Fathers, including several Canadians who had been the new Bishop's pupils. A brochure was later produced, in the emotional style of the time, recording the events of this unforgettable day.

After the religious ceremony there was a festive meal followed by an evening's entertainment, in which the principal events of the life of John Forbes were recalled: teacher in Jerusalem, director in the Maison-Carrée Novitiate, founder in Quebec, and now coadjutor in Uganda. There was also a semi-humorous pamphlet recalling his work for missionary and vocation animation in North America which pleased the many Canadian Fathers and Brothers now working in the Vicariate: "Ex tribu Quebecensi...nearly forty missionaries, including nine from the tribe of Quebec, sixteen from Montreal, one from Nicolet, two from St Hyacinth, three from Joliette, two from Rimouski, three from Valleyfield, two from Trois-Rivières, two from the United States..."

Some years later John wrote to his brother, the Bishop of Joliette: "In spite of the burdens which I feel I am now carrying, I am full of confidence and my heart is filled with joy." John Forbes was now a Bishop, but he had not changed. He retained all his former modesty, simplicity, tranquillity of soul, trust in God, goodness. This first Bishop given by Canada to distant missions continued the tradition of the great Bishops which the country had already given to the Church: Laval, Plessis, Bourget, Taché, Laflèche.

Bishop Forbes' Episcopal Ministry in the Vicariate of Uganda

In January 1915, Rome had changed the name of the Vicariate of Northern Nyanza to the Vicariate of Uganda, which included the whole of modern Uganda and a part of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. The whole is about the size of the Province of Quebec. It included 31 mission posts, also called stations or parishes.

The new Coadjutor Bishop had often to cover this vast territory, at first by bicycle, and from 1921 by motor-cycle. In 1924 he had the luxury of a fine Ford donated by friends which he said he learned to drive in ten minutes.

He lived in Rubaga, part of the actual Kampala, not far from Entebbe which was the seat of the British Protectorate government. Being a British subject and with his knowledge of English, he was given by Bishop Streicher responsibility for relations with the civil authorities.

The documents of the period as well as Bishop Forbes' own correspondence give us a fairly clear picture of his activities as Coadjutor Bishop. He visits the posts of the diocese, spending each time ten days or so with the confrères, listening, advising, encouraging, equally attentive to the Ugandan priests and his own fellow-missionaries. He gives the sacrament of Confirmation to the newly-baptized and to hundreds of children. He takes catechism classes, preaches, hears confessions, encourages the people, gives retreats. Sometimes he has the joy of ordaining Ugandan priests. Here, as an example, is his calendar for the year 1918.

On the day after his Episcopal ordination, on 20 May, he took part in the first meeting of the Association of former pupils of St Mary's School, and was elected honorary president by acclamation.

On 28 May he administered the sacrament of Confirmation for the first time, and on 30 May, the Feast of Corpus Christi, he celebrated at St Mary's his first Pontifical Mass. This was followed by the moving occasion of his farewell to the College, to which he remained very attached.

In mid-June he is in Bishop Streicher's residence in Villa Maria, spending a month with him discussing the affairs of the Vicariate. He says that he still has many things to learn. From 16 July, he spent eighteen days with Father Michaud visiting the district of Ankole: Mbarara, Kitabi, Ibanda. He wrote to his brother in Joliette: "In this last post, I blessed the church and confirmed 214 newly-baptized Christians... I have very happy memories of this fine Christian community."

Whenever he arrived in a district, he made a point of contacting the civil authorities, especially the Kings of the different Kingdoms into which the country was then divided. One of them, a Protestant, wrote to him:

"To John Forbes, Bishop of Rubaga. How are you? I was very happy to receive your kind letter in which you say that you would like to pay me a visit at three o'clock this afternoon. That suits me very well, and I will await your visit with pleasure. We can have a conversation with each other. Good-bye. I am E.S. Kahaya, King of Nkole."

In September he returned to Villa Maria and had the joy of ordaining the first Ugandan deacon in Bukalasa seminary. He then gave a retreat to the White Sisters and began a visit to the eleven missions of Buganda, a programme which lasted for several months. We may recall that on 11 November 1918 the Great War finally came to an end, which meant that a number of confrères, mostly French, could return to their missions in Africa.

It is evident that Bishop Forbes did not spare himself, and although his health was robust the climate and fatigue took their toll, as we shall see. He spent the end-of-year feasts in bed with a high fever in Mulajje. Nevertheless, he never lost his good humour. Here is an incident which he recounts in a letter to his mother:

"As regards Katende, you cannot imagine what happened to me during a Confirmation ceremony. I had just finished a short instruction to the candidates, and was still in cope and mitre. I wanted to sit down facing the people and wash my hands before beginning the ceremony. The chair was light and I wanted to move it when it somehow caught the edge of my cope and I landed flat on my back. So there I was on my back in the middle of the choir with my legs in the air, but with my mitre, I think, still solidly on my head. Such things cannot happen often to a bishop, I imagine. But you see how it is on the mission, anything can happen. I managed to get to my feet as quickly as I had fallen down. Father Thériault was next to me, but I did not dare to look at him in case I lost what little self-possession I still had. I took the resolution to watch out for the armchair in future."

The General Chapter of 1920

In April 1919 Bishop Forbes had finished the visits in Buganda and he went to Villa Maria to see Bishop Streicher. The two men had plenty of things to discuss: changes in the appointments of missionaries, marriage cases to solve, arguments about catechists' salaries, relations with the government, transfer of St Mary's School, dispensation from the Lenten fast because of famine and epidemics, the need for a secondary school in Toro, Lenten retreat for the faithful, relations between Catholics and Protestants. All these subjects crop up in the correspondence.

1920 was no less busy. Bishop Streicher and Father Grange, Regional Superior of the Missionaries of Africa in Uganda, had to go to Algiers to take part in the White Fathers' General Chapter. They would

be absent from April to October, which meant that Bishop Forbes, now fifty-seven years of age, would be in charge of the administration of the Vicariate while continuing his pastoral visits in Buganda and Toro.

On 6 June 1920 he ordained three priests, three deacons, and a subdeacon. This was a happy occasion, and on the same day in Rome Pope Benedict XV beatified twenty-two Martyrs of Uganda. This was a major event in the history of the Church in Africa and a great joy for the Missionaries of Africa, the White Fathers. Bishop Forbes was not there in the flesh, but he was certainly present in spirit. The administration of this vast Uganda mission would have been enough to tax anyone's strength, but there was also the need to launch projects which could only be carried out with the help of the generosity of Christians in Europe and America. One had therefore to arrange a journey during which Bishop Forbes could both attend to his health and solicit help for the multiple needs of the growing Church in Uganda.



Bishop John Forbes with Ugandan Priests, 1921

VI - JOURNEY IN CANADA AND EUROPE (1921-23)

It had been decided that Bishop Forbes would go to Canada in 1921. This however was the period in which the British government was planning to offer the missions important subsidies for education. Bishop Forbes was involved in the negotiations, and Bishop Streicher asked him to conclude this matter before leaving for Canada. While he was waiting, Bishop Forbes embarked on another pastoral visit, this time by motor-cycle. He commented what a pleasure it was to be able to travel so quickly and painlessly. He went to Bunyoro and to the Belgian Congo. In Hoima and Masindi he administered more than seven hundred confirmations. Then he proceeded to Toro to prepare the founding of a school with Father Beauchamp.

It was during this period that the diocesan clergy of Uganda became solidly established. After the first ordinations in 1913, the African priests had worked in parishes run by the White Fathers, but in the early 1920's the Vicar Apostolic began to hand over parishes to the local clergy and to appoint African parish priests. Meanwhile the schools question was satisfactorily settled, and in August 1921 Bishop Forbes was able to prepare to leave for Europe and America.

In 1921 at the end of Bishop Forbes' first six years in Uganda, there were thirty-one mission posts in the Vicariate: 19 in Buganda, 4 in Ankole, 2 in Toro, 2 in Bunyoro and 4 in Lake Albert, in the Congo.

There were 120 White Fathers, 104 priests and 16 Brothers, 14 Ugandan priests, 29 White Sisters, 13 African Sisters belonging to the Bannabikira Congregation. There were then 190,000 baptized Catholics and 54,000 catechumens. Nearly 1,350 catechists collaborated, often heroically, in this work of evangelization. There were about 15,000 baptisms per year. These statistics give some idea of the success of the missionary endeavour, although this did not prevent John Forbes from saying that there were still at least one million souls to be converted to God.

He often laments the shortage of personnel. In 1920 he writes to his brother Willie: "We need at present twenty-three more Fathers, and our Mother House has not a single one to send us this year. But Providence is always there." There were seven or eight more posts to be opened. The words of Jesus in the Gospel are always true: The Harvest is abundant, but the workers are few.

Departure for Europe

At the beginning of the twentieth century and for many years thereafter, White Fathers working in Africa only went home after a period of at least ten years. This was their first holiday. John Forbes had only been in Uganda for six years, but, as already mentioned, he had two reasons for going home: his health, and the need to find help for the work of the Church. The help covered two precise projects: a community of Teaching Brothers to work in Uganda, and money for building a new church at Rubaga.

John Forbes left Rubaga for Mombasa on 16 August 1921. He wanted to travel second class, considering this more suitable for a begging bishop, but there was no cabin available and he had to go first class. In Marseilles he met one of his old students, Oscar Morin, who was accompanying twelve young Canadian postulants to the Novitiate in Algiers. Bishop Forbes joined them and visited the Superior General in Maison-Carrée, re-living, as he said, "so many dear and happy memories". He took the opportunity of this visit also to make his annual retreat.

On 22 October he was back in Marseilles and from there he went to Rome where he saw Cardinal van Rossum, Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda, before being received in audience by Pope Benedict XV. He wrote that same evening to the Superior General that that day, 6 November 1921, would always remain one of the most beautiful in his life. He spoke to the Holy Father about Uganda, about the beatification of the twenty-two Martyrs, about the plans for a cathedral, about the Teaching Brothers. We may note here that Benedict XV, who received John Forbes so warmly, died shortly afterwards, on 22 January 1922, and was succeeded by Pope Pius XI.

Bishop Forbes left Rome on 15 November. He went to Paray-le-Monial where he dedicated his journey to the Sacred Heart and then proceeded to Paris. He went on from there to England and spent Christmas in his old home of Bishop's Waltham before going on to Scotland, the home of his ancestors. He sent postcards to his family showing a castle and the coat-of-arms of the Forbes family. He next went to Ireland, where he hoped to find Teaching Brothers, and finally, on 20 February 1922 he boarded the *Saxonia* at Southampton for Halifax, where he arrived on 6 March to find his brother Willie waiting for him.

There was a joyful reunion and the two brothers then went to the rue Mont Royal, in Montreal, where their elderly mother was living. John resided there during most of the two years he was in North America, and he made it his base for the begging tours which he undertook in Canada and the United States. His first visit was to Archbishop Gauthier who had replaced the sick Archbishop Bruché, and he then went on to a magnificent reception in Joliette. He also visited the Apostolic Delegate in Ottawa.

Teaching Brothers for Uganda

In the course of his journey in Europe, Bishop Forbes made several attempts to find Teaching Brothers willing to make a foundation in Uganda. In Italy he met the Superior General of the Little Brothers of Mary, and in Ireland he visited the Christian Brothers, the Presentation Brothers, the Brothers of St Patrick and the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Everywhere, he wrote, he was made very welcome, but none of the Congregations had any personnel to spare. Finally he met in London the Superior General of the Brothers of Christian Instruction (F.I.C.) of Ploermel, who thought that the Bishop should approach his Brothers in Canada.

When he arrived in Canada therefore one of Bishop Forbes' first visits was to Laprairie to see the Brothers of Christian Instruction. He made a deep impression, and the Brother Provincial would later write:

“When I think of this white Bishop from Africa, I feel once again the sentiments of veneration with which he inspired me.. Long after his visit, our novices and professed Brothers could talk of nothing else but the good Bishop Forbes, the saintly Bishop Forbes.”

The Bishop had simply put before his hearers the pressing needs of the White Fathers in Uganda. They needed a High School to train future chiefs and a Teachers' Training College to provide staff for the 832 schools in the Vicariate. He also promised the Brothers that they would be able to find vocations in Uganda for their own Congregation.

It was however some years before this project bore fruit, for the Canadian Province of the F.I.C. had first to send personnel to help their communities in England. In autumn 1922 Bishop Forbes approached the Clerics of St Viateur of Joliette, but they had no one either. In 1926 the Brothers of Christian Instruction arrived in Uganda and did splendid work. Bishop Forbes wrote to their Superior General that the news of their impending arrival made him jump for joy. He had in fact gone to a great

deal of trouble to secure the help of this Congregation of Teaching Brothers.

Visitor to the Postulate and Begging Tours

In November 1922 John received the news of the death of the Superior General, Bishop Livinhac, who had been for him a father and a friend. He was saddened by the news. In October of the following year Bishop Forbes was commissioned by the General Council of the Society to make a “canonical visitation” of the postulate, or philosophy seminary, of Quebec. Father Joseph Filion was the Superior of this community, which meant that he was responsible not only for the formation of the young students but also for the various activities which were based in the house. Bishop Forbes spent ten days looking at the situation and talking with all the parties concerned. At the end of the visit he left a “Note” which began:

“I thank God for the blessings he has showered on this house since it first opened twenty-two years ago. The development of the project, the sympathy gained for our missions, the 20,000 subscriptions for the Bulletin, and above all the many vocations recruited for the Society, are evidence that this house has been blessed by God. I congratulate the Fathers and Brothers who make up the community, and I pray that they will continue to attract God’s blessing by their interior life, their fidelity to the Rule, their family spirit, and the generous accomplishment of their ministries.”

He then makes a number of recommendations to help the smooth running of the house, as is the custom after an official “visitation” of this kind. The preamble is perhaps more to the point here for it brings out attitudes we have often found in the life of John Forbes: a generous appreciation of the work carried out and of the persons who do it, the concern to emphasize and encourage what is going well, all impregnated with a spirituality rooted in trust and optimism.

Bishop Forbes now began his tour of Canada and the United States. His brother, the Bishop of Joliette, was a great help to him. They visited a number of parishes together, which was a rather unusual spectacle, as his biographer Auclair notes: “It is far from common to see two brother-Bishops going into our parishes, the one (Guillaume) acting as celebrant, and the other (John) as preacher and collector of alms.” (p. 292) The Catholics of North America responded generously to these eloquent appeals from the attractive Coadjutor Bishop from Uganda.

John Forbes expressed himself with equal facility in both French and English, and this was a most useful talent in America. He was not a great orator, but he was able to speak in a living and convincing fashion of the immense needs of the mission. He had planned to collect \$100,000 during this tour, but he apparently exceeded this total and went back with \$113,000. Most of the people he met at this time were not rich but they were generous and warm-hearted in making gifts for the mission, bursaries for seminarians, gifts for building the cathedral, for catechists, Mass intentions.

John would later say that he attributed his success as a collector of alms to “the Little Sister of Missionaries”. When he went to Europe on his way back to Uganda, he stopped in Lisieux to say Thank You to St Theresa of the Child Jesus, whom Pius XI was to canonize two years later (17 May 1925), and to entrust to her care his family and benefactors and his mission in Uganda.

In addition to his preaching and alms-collecting, Bishop Forbes also gave conferences in colleges, seminaries and other institutions. He presided at confirmations and ordinations and was present at the blessing of the first stone of the Seminary of the Foreign Missions of Pont-Viau in Quebec, “such a beautiful project,” as he described it.

As 1923 drew to a close, it was time for Bishop Forbes to return to Uganda, and on 15 December he went to Halifax to take ship for Europe. He was accompanied by Brother John of God, of the community of Quebec, who was returning to his native Holland to visit his family whom he had not seen for twenty-four years.

There is no doubt that this long period which Bishop Forbes spent in North America was an important phase in the history of the Society of Missionaries of Africa and its development on that continent. Twenty years earlier Father Forbes had won the esteem and the trust of the Catholics in his home-country. This further tour strengthened the already-existing relationships. Moreover his exceptional personality attracted vocations and won new sympathy and support for the developing mission in Africa from a distant population which had few historical or geographical links with that continent.



The two Forbes Bishops



Adveniat Regnum tuum

VII - RETURN TO UGANDA AND LAST YEARS (1924-1926)

Bishop John Forbes left the port of Halifax in December 1923, but he was once more to make his journey in several stages. He spent first a good month in France, going to Lisieux, making his annual retreat, meeting the Superior General of the Teaching Brothers of Christian Instruction, and going on pilgrimage to Lourdes. He then proceeded to Marseilles and took the boat for North Africa to greet the Superiors of the Society and the confrères whom he knew, and to give to the Canadian students in Maison-Carrée and Carthage news of their country and families.

On his return to Marseilles, he went to Lerins to see a former teacher in Montreal College, Father Schlickling, who was now a Cistercian and Prior of the Abbey. Finally he left Marseilles on 10 March and arrived in Mombasa on 29 March. The General Council of the Society had asked him to make the canonical visitation of the White Fathers' Procure in Mombasa, thinking no doubt that this would be easier than sending someone else out specially. Bishop Forbes therefore spent ten days in this community and then proceeded by train, road and another boat to Entebbe, on the shores of the Lake, arriving on 7 April 1924.



The old Rubaga church

As one can easily imagine, he received the warmest of welcomes, especially on Rubaga Hill, “thick with people”. He was welcomed at Entebbe by the Vicar Apostolic himself and a good number of confrères. The King of Buganda, Daudi Chwa, a Protestant, wrote to him: “Bishop Forbes, congratulations on your journey.. May the Lord God be thanked for bringing you safely and peacefully back to Uganda. I am suffering at the moment from stomach trouble, otherwise I would have come to meet you. I am sending the Minister of Justice to greet you instead. I am, your friend, Daudi Chwa, King.”

Resumption of Pastoral Activities. Failing Health

Back in his Vicariate, Bishop Forbes took up again his Episcopal duties. On 12 April he was at Villa Maria, in consultation with Bishop Streicher and some Fathers. On 24 May he blessed the new Kisubi site of the old St Mary's School, Rubaga. On 3 June, after a Pontifical Mass in honour of the Martyrs of Uganda, he blessed the first stone of the chapel of Nalukolongo, the first “mission” of Uganda. He then made his retreat and presided at

the retreat of the Fathers and Brothers in Bukalasa. On 18 July he returned to Rubaga to inspect the building of the new church, which had already begun. He wrote to his brother Guillaume: “You have finished your buildings in Joliette. Such is not the case with our cathedral. Our workers are like those of the Middle Ages. It will take a hundred years to put up our beloved church.”

In fact the building of the cathedral was finished in 1925. Bishop Forbes however was not destined to rejoice in this achievement, because he was soon obliged to leave the country on account of his health. On 28 July 1924 he wrote:

“I am back from the hospital to which I went for treatment for a strange condition in the foot. Two weeks ago, while I was in Buddu, I was bitten on the left foot, without noticing it, by a spider or some other insect. It caused a swelling, but it was not very painful and I carried on walking. The swelling however got bigger, and I called the doctor. He forbade me to walk, and said that if I wanted to get better quickly I should go to the hospital. I have just spent five days there, and I am completely cured. It is the first time in my life that I have been in hospital.”

In fact what caused the swelling in the foot was a heart condition which was to prove fatal. Bishop Forbes had no idea that such was the case, and he carried on with his normal duties for several months as if there was nothing wrong. He presided at the Brothers’ retreat in Entebbe in the month of August, and shortly afterwards he went by car to Toro to discuss some schools questions with the local authorities. He was happy to obtain school subsidies for Toro and Ankole. He continued to write letters. In a letter of 18 October 1924 he admitted that he was aware of diminishing strength, but in the seven or eight letters which he wrote to his family between November and January he never mentions his health. The family however had received disquieting news from elsewhere and was worried.



The new Rubaga Cathedral

Finally, in early January 1925 Bishop Forbes wrote a long letter in which he tells the history of his illness from the beginning. When he was in hospital in August, he had an attack of giddiness, and his pulse dropped to 40, instead of the normal 72. In October he had consulted the very competent Doctor Cook of the Protestant Mengo Hospital. He was no doubt aware of the seriousness of his condition, but he made the effort to tell his story with humour.

“This doctor knew what I was suffering from. It is called Heart Block Disease. It seems that the French call it mitral insufficiency... And when you think that I have four mitres lying in my cupboard at home! Doctor Cook prescribed medicine, and now I am much better. It seem that the Emperor Napoleon I

suffered from the same condition, so I am in good company... There have been so many prayers and so many novenas, to our Blessed Martyrs and to Blessed Little Theresa that I am sure to recover completely.”

He remained the joyful, gay and confident man he had always been, and he would remain optimistic to the end, but he was in fact deceiving himself. His strength diminished and his pulse was very low. Before long he could hardly do anything except say his Mass and write letters. On 17 February 1925 he wrote to his brother in Joliet: “I have to tell you that in a week’s time I am leaving for a holiday in Mombasa. Dr Cook has advised me to stay there for two or three months. So that is where I shall be, on the coast, almost at sea-level instead of being 4,000 ft up. My pulse will no doubt soon return to normal. I insist on telling everyone that my condition must not be exaggerated.”

On 24 February therefore, after long hesitation, Bishop John Forbes resigned himself to leaving Rubaga, promising himself to return soon. In fact however he would never again see the country he loved so well. His departure signalled in a way the end of a chapter in the history of the mission in Uganda. Bishop Forbes had never had to carry the principal responsibility, and Bishop Streicher was now to have the sorrow of seeing his designated successor disappearing before him. Nevertheless there can be no doubt that John Forbes made a great impact on the Vicariate and on the population.

It is not necessary to repeat features of his personality which have already been emphasised in earlier pages of this work. One may however mention some points of the work which he accomplished. His knowledge of English and the ease of his personal relations made him the natural intermediary between the Church and the British authorities. In 1918 he joined the local Anglican Bishop and the Vicar Apostolic of the Mill Hill Fathers in drawing up a memorandum to ask the government to give the Missions more facilities in obtaining plots of land and to emphasize the responsibility of the civil authorities in the domain of public morality. He was not afraid to challenge the civil power, and he found it normal to join forces for this purpose with other Christian pastors.

He also made representations to the British Protectorate government concerning the appointment of chiefs, pointing out that it was not normal that in the Kingdoms of Bunyoro, Toro and Ankole Catholics were systematically excluded from these positions. He demanded the establishment of a “Fair Play Policy”, based on the relative proportion of Catholics and Anglicans. He was a man who knew how to preserve good relations but he was also a courageous man who was not afraid to remind the authorities of their responsibilities. (note 7)

Education was another field which Bishop Forbes regarded as very important and in which he was personally active. He served as Headmaster of St Mary’s School, Rubaga, and he made great efforts to obtain the services of a Congregation of Teaching Brothers. In 1919 the colonial government was making plans for founding a school to train future civil servants, and Bishop Forbes once more joined forces with the Anglican Bishop and the Vicar Apostolic of Mill Hill to demand that the projected school be not denominational but national. During this same period he initiated a vast research project to examine the functioning of schools, and from the results obtained he introduced a number of reforms.

We may also think finally of his work for the financial support of the Vicariate. When Bishop Forbes died, Bishop Streicher spoke of this aspect of his colleague’s work: “He had just put the finances of the Vicariate on a sound footing, and that was in itself a major achievement.”

False Hopes

Bishop Forbes went to Mombasa with Father Robillard, the treasurer of the Vicariate. They arrived on 1 March 1925. Bishop Forbes was under the care of Dr Jewell and he seemed to be getting better. He had no pain and was eating and sleeping well. Physical effort exhausted him, but he carried on writing as usual. He found in correspondence an excellent way of maintaining the interest and sympathy in the Missions which he had fostered especially during his long stay in Canada and the United States. It was also an interesting occupation which

helped him to forget his illness. Many letters to his family are dated from these three months in Mombasa. In a letter to his mother he says that his strength is coming back and that he is beginning to count the days before he can return to his Vicariate. He was always a man easily awakened to wonder and gratitude, and he speaks of his circumstances in Mombasa. "I am not in the least bored, for everything here is charming... The community in the first place, the house and its situation, the climate, especially at this time of year... Mombasa is a real earthly paradise."

We find in the family letters of these weeks traces of the humour which was part of the bond between its members. There had always been a pleasant, joking relationship between the two brothers John and Willie, and sometimes they enter into a frivolous argument about which of them was the more handsome. In a letter to his mother, John signs himself: Your P.B., which means not only Père Blanc but also Plus Beau." In another letter he signs himself "Your most beautiful. It is certain, don't listen to the others. John." The elderly mother entered into the fun, and on a festive programme from Rigaud College which she sent him, she wrote: "To my most beautiful, from your mother Octavie Léger who no longer sees very well."

Behind these somewhat childish pleasantries, there was no doubt the worry of declining health and of what the future might hold. We have already spoken of the deep affection between the two Bishop-brothers. In a letter dated 20 May 1925 John wrote: "We celebrate today, Willie and I, the Golden Jubilee of our First Communion."

Departure for France

The slowness of his recovery led John to speak in this same letter of 20 May of the possibility of going to see specialists in France. Bishop Streicher supported the idea, and on 1 June 1925 he left Mombasa, accompanied by three confrères. They had a pleasant journey and were able to say Mass every day. They arrived at Marseilles on 19 June and on 24 John entered the Pasteur Hospital in Paris where he spent three weeks, "cared for and treated like a prince".

The Hospital was run by the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny, and he was able to say Mass every day in his room. His confrères from Paris visited him every day, and he also received visits from passing Canadian priests and bishops. This stay in the hospital did him a great deal of good, and he wrote to his brother Willie: "Of course I would like to increase my speed and become again what I was, if that is what God wants. I would like especially to resume my missionary tours. Nevertheless, I want in the first place to be obedient to the will of God, whatever it may be." When he was allowed to leave the hospital, he went to Lisieux to ask St Theresa for a cure. "I want to ask her for my cure, or at least for a state of health which will allow me to return very quickly to Uganda." He then went to Billère, near the town of Pau, where the Society of Missionaries of Africa have a house where missionaries can go for treatment and rest.

Billère, his Last Mission Post

To the end John Forbes never lost his capacity for wonderment, and he was happy in the community of Billère, where he also appreciated the pleasant climate. He found everything "delicious: the community life, the park full of trees and flowers, everything." Pau was beautiful, although he could not help remarking that it was not Uganda.

He left Paris for Billère on 17 July. Some days later he learned of the death of Archbishop Bégin of Quebec, which took place on 19 July. The news saddened him, and, speaking in the name of all Canadian White Fathers, he said how much they owed him. He himself would still very much have liked to go back to work in Uganda, but he wrote in a letter to his sister: "In the end, I am not wasting my time, because in resting and doing nothing in particular I am carrying out the will of God."

During this difficult period, he received the enormous consolation of a visit from his brother Willie, who was on his way to Rome. He came to John on 14 October, and again on his way back from Rome. During all this time,

John kept deceiving himself about his future, or perhaps he only pretended to do so for the sake of others. He was always talking about going back to Uganda and the same refrain is repeated in the numerous letters he wrote. In fact for a while he did seem to be getting better, but the confrères of Pau knew very well that he was seriously ill and they were always afraid of some sudden collapse.

Rubaga Cathedral was consecrated by Bishop Streicher on 31 October 1925, and Bishop John Forbes was very much there in spirit. In Pau he continued to receive alms from North America, and this enabled him to arrange for the purchase of a good harmonium for Rubaga Cathedral. In November 1925 he took part in Billère in the celebrations marking the centenary of the birth of the Founder of the White Fathers, Cardinal Lavigerie.

On Christmas Eve 1925 he suffered a heart attack during thanksgiving after Mass. The Superior of the community administered the Sacrament of the Sick, but John recovered quite quickly. He had already had a similar attack at the beginning of August. On 27 December, feast of his Patron Saint, St John the Apostle, he wrote: "The confrères have offered many prayers for me so that I may realize my dearest desire, which is to celebrate Easter 1926 in Rubaga." On 16 January 1926 his mother died at the age of eighty-four. John received the news by telegram and responded by the words of the Preface for the Dead: *Vita mutatur, non tollitur*, Life is changed, not extinguished. On 2 February he wrote to his brother Willie and told him of his heart attack of Christmas Eve, saying that after this little incident he was keeping well. "I have not been cured of my famous slow pulse, but I feel stronger."

"Life Changed, not Extinguished". 13 March 1926

During February and March John continued to write and to repeat that he felt stronger. "I am seriously thinking about going back to Uganda, if it is God's good pleasure." A last letter to his sister is dated 9 March. Four days later all would be consummated. His brother Willie received a telegram from the Fathers in Billère announcing the sudden death of the brother to whom he was so close on the afternoon of Saturday 13 March 1926, at about 4.40. The message said: "He was with us in the refectory for our usual afternoon tea and was talking very cheerfully when he said suddenly: 'I feel dizzy,' and collapsed on the table." The doctor was called, John was given absolution and "Extreme Unction", every effort was made to revive him, but in vain. He had died. He was only sixty-two years of age. The letter from Billère continued: "We were all dumbfounded by the suddenness of it all... We cannot however say that we were exactly surprised, for the doctors who had treated Bishop Forbes warned us that such a conclusion was not unlikely. Our consolation is that he too knew it and was ready."

During one of his stays in Canada, Bishop Forbes had belonged to an Association of the Perpetual Cult of St Joseph in Otterburne, Manitoba. St Joseph was often invoked in those days as the patron of a happy death, and we may think that he welcomed John Forbes, his pious friend, in Heaven. There was great emotion and sadness in France, Canada and Uganda over the death of Bishop John Forbes, the first Canadian White Father, Coadjutor Bishop of the Vicariate Apostolic of Uganda.

Last Testimonies

The funeral was celebrated on 16 March in the big church of St Martin, in Pau. It was presided over by Bishop Gieure of Bayonne, and there were some forty priests present and a big crowd. A journalist wrote: "Bishop John Forbes died far from his own people, far from his beloved people of Equatorial Africa, his children by grace, far from his brother-Bishop and his beloved family in Canada. When we consider how deeply he loved all these persons, and how much he was loved by them, we cannot doubt that for them all his death was an occasion of great sadness... As for the deceased himself, was it not the crowning of a life filled with sacrifices for God and for souls?" (Auclair, p. 292)

The White Fathers of Billère had come to love their confrère John Forbes, and on the day after his death the Superior of the community, Father Arrighi, wrote to the Bishop of Joliette: "What sadness must fill your heart! Your suffering, my Lord Bishop, is also mine. I know the affection you had for your revered brother. I love him greatly myself, and I believe that I can measure the depth of your sorrow by my own. I shall never forget his

edifying piety, his gentle goodness, his affectionate charity, his paternal simplicity, his apostolic zeal.. I consider it a great grace to have lived on intimate terms with him for nine months...The little cemetery will always henceforth be a place of pilgrimage for us.. From the height of Heaven now he will look down on our missions in Africa, in the company of our Martyrs, our late Cardinal Lavigerie, our dear Bishop Livinhac..."

Another confrère, Father Philippe, wrote: "Our house in Billère seems now quite changed. Our dear Bishop Forbes is no longer there to enliven us with his joy and gaiety, to edify us with his supernatural spirit, and his amiable and infectious piety." Another confrere from Billère, Brother Agathon, who nursed the deceased, wrote to Mr Joseph Forbes, brother of the two Bishops: "This death has left an immense gap. I can still not believe it and I have shed many tears for our beloved Bishop. He was goodness itself. His simplicity and piety were exemplary. We can be sure that the Lord will give him the crown promised to the good and faithful servant...I allowed myself to cut off a few locks of his hair, and I am sending half of them to you in a little envelope."

One of John Forbes' first students in Quebec, Father Oscar Morin, now Regional Superior of the White Fathers in West Africa, happened to be in France at the moment of the death and he was the only Canadian who could attend the funeral. He gives some details to the Bishop of Joliette: "Our dear deceased had been much better lately. On the very day of his death his medical adviser, Doctor Cornet, had given him permission to go to Paris to consult a specialist. And in the evening it was the final attack. He made several novenas to Theresa of the Infant Jesus, and the intention of the last of them was that he might know the will of God."

In Canada

John Forbes was very well known and greatly esteemed in his native country. His death was a heavy blow for his family, and it was felt in the press and in many parts of the country. His brother, Bishop Guillaume Forbes, organized a solemn sung service in his cathedral, assisted by seven Bishops, several prelates, more than two hundred priests and practically the whole population of the town of Joliette. In some fifty parishes of the diocese and in many others, in the United States as well as in Canada, Masses were offered for the repose of the soul of the deceased missionary Bishop, and hundreds of messages of sympathy arrived in Joliette.

The Bishop of Joliette wrote to the White Fathers of Billère to thank them, and also to the Vicar Apostolic of Uganda, Bishop Streicher, to express his sympathy. "I weep and pray with you," said the first telegram. There were also very generous tributes in the Canadian press, especially the French-language press: *L'Action Populaire* of Joliette, *L'Action Catholique* of Quebec, *Le Devoir*, *La Presse*. Here are some extracts from what was written in these publications:

"All who knew Bishop Forbes recall his affability, his gentle gaiety, his anxiety to be of service. His great passion was to bring happiness to everyone. Those who had the joy of living in his company could never forget his natural and complete abandonment to Divine Providence. That may be considered his prime virtue. If he met with success, he attributed it to God, as he also received with joy trials as coming from God." (*L'Action Catholique*)

"Bishop John Forbes was a worthy son of the celebrated Cardinal Lavigerie. He had much of his vast intelligence and also, towards the end of his life, something of his venerable patriarchal mien. The most modest of men, Bishop Forbes did great things and his name will live on." (*La Presse*)

Father Forbes was the founder of the review, *Les Missions d'Afrique*, and in its number of May 1926 it paid him a fervent tribute: "Father Forbes passed through here as a man of God. He was so humble, gentle, good and joyful, but also so reserved. He knew how to generate enthusiasm for the souls of black people and to make people love the missions of Africa to which he had consecrated his life. The same word of praise sprang from the lips of all: He was so good!"

In Uganda

Uganda, John Forbes' mission country, wept sincerely at the death of their Coadjutor Bishop. A Requiem Mass was celebrated in the chapel of Kisubi, that school of which Father Forbes had been the first Superior in Rubaga, and the Vicar Apostolic, Bishop Streicher, asked that a solemn service be celebrated in each of the churches of the thirty-one mission posts of the Vicariate.

The *Uganda Herald*, a Protestant Kampala newspaper, wrote on 19 March:

“It is with the most profound regret that we learn of the death of his Lordship Bishop Forbes... All will lament his passing... He was the best and the kindest of men, and the Catholic mission has lost a good spiritual guide, while the whole country laments the disappearance of a strong support and a wise counsellor. So passes from this world one of the great men of our Africa. Bishop John Forbes, a man with a great heart and a powerful personality, lived a noble life.”

The Protestant Bishop Willis of Namirembe wrote to the White Fathers of Rubaga:

“I thank you for telling me the sad news of the death of Bishop Forbes. I hasten to offer you my deep sympathy. Bishop Forbes was one of the most sympathetic, disinterested and large-hearted persons I have ever known. He was a man for whom I always had the greatest admiration and the most sincere affection. His death is not just a loss for our mission but for the whole country of Uganda.”

Doctor Cook had cared for Bishop Forbes in the early stage of his illness and he wrote:

“It was with the greatest regret that I learned of the death of our dear friend and patient, Bishop Forbes. You had only to know him to love him! I respected and revered him with all my heart.”

Bishop Henri Streicher, the Vicar Apostolic of Uganda, was the man most qualified to speak in the name of Catholic Uganda. He wrote two letters to Bishop Guillaume Forbes of Joliette, saying notably:

“The death of my dear coadjutor, brother and friend, saddens and distresses me beyond words. I had placed so much hope in him. He had just succeeded in putting the finances of the Vicariate for the moment on a sound footing, and that was a major achievement. He was admirably gifted for the apostolate, and he was beginning to show his administrative gifts as well. I was only waiting for the Providential moment to hand over to him my shepherd's crook. His disappearance just at the moment when I most needed his help has put an end to all my projects and extinguished my hopes. But what can any of us say? The Lord God is the master, and I can only submit to his adorable will.”



The tomb of John Forbes in Billère, France

CONCLUSION

John Forbes rests now in the cemetery of Billère, in France, awaiting the day of the Resurrection. In the archives of the Missionaries of Africa in Montreal there is the following note:

“Bishop John Forbes, first Canadian White Father, died in 1926 in our house in Billère and was buried in the White Fathers’ plot in the cemetery of the town of Pau. In 1936 his remains, together with those of other White Fathers, were transferred to the White Fathers’ plot in the parish and communal cemetery of Billère. In 1969 all these remains of deceased White Fathers were gathered together and placed in a vault, where they now rest.”

The various testimonies received on the occasion of his death, from which we have taken extracts, make it abundantly clear that John Forbes was a remarkable man, right from the time of the founding of the house in Quebec in 1900. He was a man of human relations, a gifted organizer, very anxious to submit his projects to his Superiors but knowing when to take initiatives when necessary: all these qualities led to the establishment of a solid network of friendships and relationships which gave an enduring impetus to the work of missionary vocations.

He was a man open to others, joyful and optimistic, but also a man of deep spiritual quality. Many of those who knew him emphasized how beneath the joviality of his exterior there was a deep spiritual inspiration, nourished by prayer and a great sense of what God expected from him. He was wholly committed to the will of God, of which he speaks so often in his correspondence.

Throughout his life John Forbes had a deep love for Africa and the mission. His years in Uganda, in spite of the various fatigues which finally overcame him, certainly brought him great joy. He was completely dedicated to this country, he loved it without reserve. All this makes this Missionary of Africa, founder of the Canadian Province and first White Father Canadian missionary Bishop, a most sympathetic figure whose attraction we can still feel.

Summary of the Life of John Forbes

1864, 10 January	Born at l’Ile Perrot, the eldest in a family of sixteen children.
1869.	His parents move to Montreal.
1876-1884.	Classical studies in the Collège de Montréal.
1884-1886.	Montreal Senior Seminary
1886.	Novitiate of the Missionaries of Africa, Maison-Carrée, Algiers.
1887-8.	Scholasticate in Carthage, Tunisia.
1888, 25 September.	Missionary oath.
1888, 6 October,	ordained priest.
1888-1993.	Professor in Jerusalem; Director, Propagation of the Faith.
1893-1895.	Assistant to the Novice Master in Maison-Carrée.
1895.	Canada.
1896-1900.	Assistant to the Novice Master in Maison-Carrée.
1900, 2 July.	Arrival in Canada to found a White Fathers’ house.
1900, 28 August.	Opening of the Postulate in Quebec, with Forbes as Superior.

1911, Feb. - Oct. Long Retreat, journey in Algeria and Uganda.
 1914. Appointed to Uganda.
 1914-15. At The Priory, Bishop's Waltham, England.
 1915. Superior of St Mary's School, Rubaga, Uganda.
 1917, 21 November. Appointed Coadjutor Bishop of Uganda.
 1918, 19 May. Ordained Bishop in Rubaga.
 1921-24. Journey in Europe and North America.
 1924. Rubaga.
 1925. Rest and treatment in Mombasa, Kenya and Billère, France.
 1926, 13 March. Death at Billère, France.

Sources and Bibliography

Relevant documents concerning both the mission in Uganda and the person of Bishop Forbes are in the General Archives of the Missionaries of Africa, Via Aurelia 269, Rome. Also there are the Annual Reports and collections of the Pastoral Instructions of Bishop Streicher.

The second principal source used in this work has already been mentioned. These are the Archives of the Provincial House of the Missionaries of Africa in Montreal, which contain, among other things, a large part of Bishop Forbes' correspondence.

One may also consult:

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