

The Spiritual Legacy of Bogdan Janski



**Bogdan Janski
(1807-1840)**

Founder of the Congregation of the Resurrection

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Most religious organizations or religious communities owe their origin or founding to an individual or individuals who underwent a religious transformation that significantly changed their value system and deepened their faith and trust in God. Subsequently, as that vision or mission begins to take shape, others begin to share in that vision and mission joining together to form a community in order to better live and practice the gospel call.

The year 2007 is the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Bogdan Janski the founder of the Congregation of the Resurrection. Hence, it is timely to reflect on the spiritual heritage that he handed on to other like-minded individuals who joined with him in promoting his vision of a transformed (resurrected) society.

Who was Bogdan Janski?

Bogdan Janski was born in 1807 in Poland to parents who belonged to the lower nobility. His father was in the Napoleonic army. Young Janski early on manifested traits that would be honed throughout his life; he was intellectually acute, persevering, tenacious, wholly dedicated to a cause.

In 1823 he entered the Royal University of Warsaw where he studied law and administration. While at University he was attracted by the French materialist philosopher Baron de Holbach who expounded a deterministic type of Materialism in the light of evidence from contemporary science, reducing everything to matter and to the energy inherent in matter. He also propounded a hedonistic ethics as well as an uncompromising atheism. Not surprisingly, Janski gravitated toward an anti-Christian world view which he actively espoused and propagated along with other like-minded students. However, a fellow student, Królikowski, though a materialist, was a passionate reader of the scriptures and felt that the only solution to the social ills of the day was the teachings of Jesus Christ. Janski was impressed by Królikowski's novel attempt to synthesize materialism and religion.

Having completed his studies at the University of Warsaw in 1827, he took employment as a lawyer but he was anxious to join his university friends in Paris and so, in 1828, at age 21, he was given permission and a stipend by the government to pursue studies in Paris.

The Setting

Paris in the 19th century was a cosmopolitan metropolis teeming with people of all stripes, from philosophers, thinkers, politicians, writers, artists, to those espousing a socialist society as a remedy for social upheavals stemming from industrialization and economic changes effected by it. It was also a time of the Catholic revival spearheaded by such outstanding orators, preachers and writers as Lamennais, the founder of L'Avenir movement. Many flocked to listen to faith presentations by the Dominican preacher, Lacordaire. Living in Paris at this time was the great Catholic Polish author Mickiewicz who, as a practicing Catholic, would have a profound impact on Janski's thinking.

It was mostly among the Polish emigres that Janski found himself most engaged intellectually as they debated the religious and secular past, present and future of Poland. Being of keen mind and intellectually driven he threw himself into the intellectual cross currents of Parisian society attracted by the amazing flux of ideas. Humanism, socialism, secularism, and Christian history appealed to him at every level. Not to be overlooked was Janski's personal attraction toward the more seamier side of Parisian society. For a time he was attracted by the ideas of the Saint-Simonists and Robert Owen, the Scottish Utopian socialist. Both movements seemed to offer an alternative approach to social unrest. Moreover, the Saint-Simonists proclaimed a new era for humankind, a new morality, and a new Christianity. Attracted by their ideas he joined the movement and became an enthusiastic promoter. Although Janski did not remain with the movement for long, his association with Saint-Simonism would spark the beginnings of his personal spiritual journey.

The Change

Throughout history, many founders of religious communities and/or religious innovators underwent a transforming experience that so impacted on them that it totally changed their intellectual, moral, and religious horizon. For St. Francis of Assisi it was a serious illness that triggered his spiritual search and led to his transformation into a dedicated preacher of the Gospel. Francis' life changed forever on February 24, 1209 when he heard a sermon in the local church. The sermon was about Matthew 10:9, in which Christ tells his followers that they should go forth and proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven was upon them, that they should take no money with them, nor even a walking stick or shoes for the road. Francis was inspired to devote himself wholly to a life of apostolic poverty. Francis interpreted the passage quite literally and from thenceforth dedicated himself completely to the radical following of Jesus. A wound received in battle

forced St. Ignatius Loyola to spend much time recuperating and to while away the time he resorted to reading the lives of the saints and the life of Christ. He was so moved by the challenge of Christ and the gospel that he decided to change his lifestyle and dedicate himself to living and preaching the good news. Mother Teresa, of recent memory, speaks about hearing a voice calling her to a “vocation in a vocation” which gradually drew her to spend more and more time dedicating herself to caring for the poorest of the poor and ensuring that the dying and abandoned people would be shown compassion and loving care expressive of the compassion and love of God.

Bogdan makes no mention of having a particular illuminating experience that significantly changed his life and set him on the road to whole-hearted commitment to God. However, three things can be noted that influenced his religious change. One was Polish nationalism and the failed 1830 revolution which set him and others to think deeply of the relationship between Christianity and Polish historical experience. The other factor was his association with the Saint Simonists and their emphasis on neo-Christianity with its vision of human perfectibility and moral probity. Though he broke away from the movement he was affected by their views and begins to pay attention to his own personal religious and moral life and begins to keep a “diary” of his struggles for holiness. His association with Adam Mickiewicz, the great Polish literary giant and practicing Christian likewise played a role in Janski’s turning back to God. Adam demonstrated to him that it was possible to be an advocate of causes and be a Christian at the same time. This deeply impressed Janski. Finally, his exposure to the writings and contact with the promoters of the French religious renewal also affected his intellectual views and stimulated his desire to seek an authentic relationship with God. Collectively these factors compelled Janski to reflect deeply about himself and his future and laid the groundwork for his moral conversion and growing desire for union with God.

The new Janski begins to emerge

During the years 1830-1840 Bogdan underwent an unrelenting process of personal self-examination in which he scrupulously analyzed his former life with a view of attaining a firm purpose of amendment. In his struggle to discover the “true self” he began to espouse two important truths, *viz.*, that personal holiness and fidelity to the Church are absolutely essential for any social renewal and that this verity must be anchored in the Truth that God loves each one of us unconditionally.

Genuine conversion involves self-transcendence such that there is a radical change in that person's life and goals. It is nothing less than total personal surrender to the God of love. This was eminently true of Bogdan Janski. His conversion from a life away from God (sin) to life with God becomes the dynamic departure point for continued spiritual growth and the discovery of the true self.

Without doubt the peak moment of Janski's journey to self-actualization and fulfillment was the occasion of his general confession. It was the culmination of a journey that led to his return to the faith of the Catholic Church which he had abandoned in his youth. Paradoxically, Janski may have abandoned the Church and faith in God, but he never abandoned his desire to dedicate himself to the service of others and effect a change in society.

The Parisian suburb of St. Mande was the place where this young, restless, Polish national, at the age of 28 made his peace with God. The year was 1834. It took five sessions to complete his confession before the parish priest, Father Chausette. The reason for this protracted confession was the desire of Janski to make a complete break with the past. He reviewed his life in stages carefully noting his infidelities, his carousing, his godlessness, and his adherence to the Saint Simonist sect of utopian socialism. The entry in his "diary" for November 24, 1834, at the time of his general confession, is suggestive of his desire to become a new person:

I have already confessed sins of apostasy, sacrilege, depravity, pride and the scandal I gave to many.... I was a bad son, bad brother, bad friend, bad citizen.

These words reveal a sincere sorrow and a strong sense of moral responsibility for his actions. He attributes his conversion to the gratuitous grace of God. It was this gracious gift which ultimately led to his change of heart and to his return to the Faith: "your grace —not any merit, labour or reasoning of mine —was responsible." God's goodness is contrasted with Janski's misery, (unworthiness). It is seen as a gift of a gracious and loving God. He prays, "I thank you, Lord, because you deigned to consider my misery and suffering, my yearning and groaning for the truth and for all that is good."

He acknowledges that his return to the Faith is an unmerited gift and part of the divine plan. He exclaims rhetorically, "Why did I return to the Catholic faith? Because you wished it O Most Merciful God!"

That Janski underwent an intellectual, moral, and religious conversion is evident from his expressions of rapture at having "come home." From this moment forward he strove to make God the unconditional horizon of his life. He was captivated by the goodness and love of God. He accepted responsibility for his

godlessness. His diary entry for January 10, 1835, the day he received absolution, asserts: “But now at least I am cleansed of my sins and united with God. Thank you O Most Merciful God.” He symbolizes his unconditional surrender to God as a type of covenant between himself and God. The keeping of this pledge will depend on cooperation with divine grace. He prays: “Give me the grace necessary to ensure that my covenant with You and your Church will be eternal. Throughout the rest of my life may I show myself worthy of your mercy.”

This “about face” testifies to Bogdan Janski’s conversion and re-direction of his life. He has found the One who would be the normative guide for his life in the future. It should be noted that subsequent entries in his “diary” highlight his constant struggle to remain faithful to this commitment.

What human experience influenced him to make this change in his life and commit himself so completely to God? Part of the answer is to be found in Janski’s personal search for transcendence. In a letter written to his brother Stephen in February 1838 he alludes to his search for transcendence:

The principal change in my life, the dominant feature of my present state, is this: after constant search and research, study and experience, I have finally come to recognize the eternal and perfect truth in the teaching of Jesus Christ, and in the universal, i.e., Catholic church he founded.

Thus, choosing to make Jesus Christ the determining horizon of his life was reached only after many years of personal struggle and introspection. For example, in 1823, when he began his studies in law and business at the University of Warsaw he was attracted by the materialist philosophy of de Holbach while a fellow student introduced him to, “drinking parties, sex orgies, and the brothels of Warsaw.” Until he confronted his sensuality and atheism, they were the determinants of his intellectual, moral, and religious horizon. His religious conversion and general confession in 1834 was a critical stage in his journey toward transcendence. As late as June 1834 he writes in his “diary”:

O Lord, give me the ability to believe in you and in your love; humble within me the spirit of pride, quench my sensuality. Let a ray of your grace descend into my thoughts, seeing that the one truth with which I am penetrated is my impotence and my misery.

He was coming closer to the realization that without grace and surrender to God self-transcendence and overcoming his moral weakness was the gratuitous gift of a gracious and loving God. It was a conversion from satisfaction to values. The power to make this transition would originate not from himself because he was

impotent and corrupt but due to God's unconditional love mediated partly but not exclusively through the circle of friends he had come to know in Parisian society.

The Vision of Janski

Having experienced a significant transformation, actually, a resurrection, Bogdan turned his attention to his co-nationalists to convince them that true patriotism could not be separated from religious faith. He realized that if Poland and the Polish exiles were to achieve their goals it would have to be by way of conversion to gospel values and an authentic Catholicism.

Here is how he described his mission (1834):

“My social work among my countrymen must begin after my first confession. And so, 1) I have to think of organizing a community of common prayer with a commitment of living a practical Christianity; 2) I have to plan to organize, in the name of Christ, some sort of Brotherhood, which will define the faith of our nation Today I had the idea that our goal in the immigration and in our country should be to strive to be an example of Christian living in all our thoughts, words, and deeds.”

Through personal zeal and urging Bogdan was able to convince Peter Semenenko and Jerome Kajsiewicz of his ideas and convert them to change their values and theological horizon and return to the practice of the Catholic faith. Peter and Jerome, having gone through their own personal rebirth, embraced Bogdan as their leader, teacher and adviser. Collectively they began to consider how they could promote a Christian Social vision of society founded on the unconditional love of God solidly grounded in steadfast hope.

Those aspirations began to take shape in 1836 when they decided to come together and form a brotherhood for the purpose of preserving and enhancing their religious conversion in order to promote a vision of a renewed society. In a letter to Wielogłowski written in 1836 Janski clearly states the underlying reasons for establishing the brotherhood:

“From the very beginning we were convinced that, if our own personal conversion and that of other brothers who were on the way to closer union with God were to be effective, it was proper and necessary that we withdraw from the social circles in which we lived and gather together to form a community. This was to be a community in which each member would support the others,

strengthening them in spirit through common exercises -- a community in which members would be led to the way of truth, recognizing their serious obligations to themselves, to God and to people. Thus we decided to begin a common life, and founded a small house at the beginning of 1836." (Bogdan Janski to V. Wieloglowski)

In August of 1839, the year before he died, Janski rhetorically asked in his personal notes: "[Perhaps] the time has come to work directly toward uniting all humanity in one family?" Since Janski died in 1840 he did not live to see the full flowering of this venture, yet, his insights and vision were sufficient to sustain his followers as they worked to complete the project which came to fruition on Easter Sunday, in 1842, when six men made their first vows and formed the Brothers of the Resurrection.

Through his human struggle to find meaning and purpose coupled with his personal battle to overcome the sins of the flesh Jansk discovered the merciful and compassionate God who loves each one unconditionally. Because of his own personal struggles for wholeness Bogdan was firmly convinced that an individual cannot save himself/herself without the unmerited gift of God's redeeming grace. Moreover, human beings left to themselves can only produce misery and suffering and that what is most important and significant for people, that which defines them, is the call to self-transcendence (going beyond themselves, Christian altruism). Thus, as St. Augustine discovered, so also Janski, that the human being can find its fullest self-identity only in the heart of God. Consequently, the person's intellectual, moral, and religious horizon is now defined by the transcendent God and God's unconditional love.

What then is the spiritual legacy of Bogdan Janski?

Janski, as the visionary and founding spirit of the Congregation of the Resurrection, inspired his followers with three important spiritual insights which continue to animate the membership today.

The fundamental truth which shaped Janski's search for meaning was the insight that the cornerstone of genuine conversion was to embrace fully and surrender oneself to the merciful and unconditional love of God; and at the same time to acknowledge our nothingness, misery, and corruption. These are the two indispensable pillars for a personal relationship with God for Janski; from this awareness arises the gift of hope.

The second truth which shaped Janski's spiritual development and which he passed on was the insight derived from his interaction with the social movement of

the age. These aspired to address the social ills of the world by proposing a more just and equitable social order. Though Janski identified with the spirit of these movements he felt that no society or national movement which ignored the spiritual dimension could adequately meet the aspirations of its members.

As the vision of a renewed Christian society began to evolve and attract others, Janski was convinced of a third truth, namely, that it was necessary to form a community or brotherhood, who would reinforce each other in their determination to live a life of closer union with God and through positive example promote the renewal or resurrection of society in general. Thus, living a common life whereby members offer each other mutual support is a fundamental keystone of community life.

In short, we may summarize Bogdan's spiritual legacy as a vision of a resurrected society that would live and proclaim Christian hope to the world.

That spirit continues to animate and inspire the members of the Congregation today as the Charism statement (1981) declares:

“We believe that God's love for us is merciful and unfailing.... We believe that God calls us to work together for the resurrection of society, bringing his life and love to all.... This also requires that we build, and teach others to build, a Christian community in which all can experience the hope, joy and peace of Christ's Resurrection.”

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