

SAINT FRANCIS XAVIER (1506-1552)

St. Francis Xavier is known as the greatest missionary saint of the modern age, so much so that Benedict XV, in his Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* (1919), compared him to the apostles. Francis Xavier was born on April 7, 1506, in the castle of Xavier in Navarre, Spain, and died on December 3, 1552, on Shangchuan Island, 14 kilometers off of mainland China. He was one of the first companions of St. Ignatius of Loyola, and together with Ignatius, Teresa of Avila, and Philip Neri, he was canonized by Gregory XV in 1622, the same year the Pope created the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*de Propaganda Fide*), known today as the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. In 1748 Pope Benedict XIV declared him *Patron of the East* and in 1904, Pius X named him *Patron of the Propagation of the Faith*. Finally, in 1927, with St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, Pius XI proclaimed him *Patron of the Missions* (*San Francesco Saverio: Le lettere e altri documenti*, edited by A. Caboni, Città Nuova, Rome 1991, 35). He is therefore one of the most significant figures of the Tridentine Church, sometimes defined as “a Church for souls.”

The life and work of Francis Xavier are situated in a time marked by the reform of the Church, the struggle against Protestantism, and the mission *ad gentes* that began in the wake of the great oceanic journeys by Europeans of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These resulted in a new understanding of world geography and a missionary springtime on the threshold of the modern age. In this context, Francis Xavier carried out a gargantuan evangelizing effort that garnered him the title of *Apostle of*

India and Japan, which can only be adequately understood and appreciated in the light of the living and travel conditions of that period. In fact, from 1541 to 1552, this great missionary saint traveled over 63,000 kilometers by sea and on land in the countries he evangelized.

The life of Francis Xavier unfolded in two stages. The first was the European stage from 1506 to 1541, which was marked by his encounter in Paris with Ignatius, who would often repeat Jesus' words: "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his life?" (Mt 16:26). Ignatius soon convinced Francis to be among his first companions of the great adventure that became the Society of Jesus. The second stage, from 1541 to 1552, consisted of his Asian missionary journeys characterized by an apostolate that was totally devoted to the mission *ad gentes*. He passed through India (1541-1545), then the Moluccan Islands (1545-1549), and Japan (1549-1552), until his death on the island of Shangchuan, not far from the coast of mainland China, worn out by his relentless and tireless efforts in bearing witness to Christ. Through him the "spectacle of holiness" reached lands and peoples who were not yet known to the Church, where the proclamation of the Gospel would be heard for the first time, and the peoples could welcome the gift of universal salvation that comes from faith in the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Xavier's relationship with Ignatius and the experience of friendship in Christ among the first members of the Society of Jesus are the two first and permanent elements that marked Francis' spiritual continence. In fact, the permanent centrality of the Person of Jesus Christ is foundational for the Society of Jesus, so called because there was no one to direct its members, except the Person of Jesus Christ whom they wanted to serve exclusively. It follows, therefore, that the living presence of the Risen Christ among those who live in friendship with him and with each other – a reality that marked the Society of Jesus in a particular manner – is indissolubly linked to belonging to the Body of Christ in history, which as a whole is the Church guided by the Pope as successor of Peter.

Francis' spirituality and missionary activity were, in fact, based on what St. Paul experienced in his missionary journeys: "For the love of Christ impels us, once we have come to the conviction that one died for all; therefore, all have died. He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. Consequently, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh; even if we once knew Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him so no longer" (2 Cor 5: 14-16).

Naturally, all this happened in the concrete context in which Francis lived and carried out his apostolate. From his letters, it is possible to glean important details. For example, in a letter dated October 28, 1542, Francis writes to Ignatius saying: "When I arrived in these places, I baptized all the children not yet baptized, imparting the sacrament to a great multitude of babies too young to know the difference between their right and left. As soon as I arrived in the villages, the children would not let me recite the office, eat, or sleep until I first taught them some prayers. Then I began to understand why the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.... I have seen great talents among them and if someone taught them the Holy Faith, I am sure they would be good Christians" (Caboni, *San Francesco Saverio*, 102-103).

"Here, where I am, many neglect to become Christians because there is practically no one concerned with taking care of godly matters. And so I am often tempted to go to universities in your part of the world, especially to the University of Paris, and cry out like a man that has lost his senses to the members of the Sorbonne, who have so much knowledge but don't seem to want to make it flower: 'How many souls are prevented from entering paradise and are condemned to hell because of your negligence!'" (Caboni, *San Francesco Saverio*, 110-111).

Such texts make clear that the spirituality of this saint is inseparable from his apostolate for the salvation of souls, an apostolate made up of itinerant journeys, kerygmatic preaching, basic catechetical instruction,

and acquiring knowledge of the place and sharing in its conditions of life, even where there was extreme poverty. His apostolate was characterized by an “affable manner, full of understanding and respect for all the people who approached him, [which] was certainly one of its most beautiful and attractive human gifts, but it certainly served to hide, under a veil of reserve and in the best of ways, that intense spiritual life and that intimate union with God that burned in his heart” (Caboni, *San Francesco Saverio*, 38).

One should also add to his missionary experience moments of suffering and trial. In a letter dated April 9, 1552, Francis wrote to Ignatius about his experience in Japan. “As for the experience I have of Japan, for the Fathers who will go there to fructify souls, especially those who go to the University, two things are necessary beforehand: the first is that they have been put to the test and have been persecuted in the world, and that they have a lot of experience and a lot of interior knowledge of themselves, since in Japan they will be persecuted more than they may have ever been in Europe. It is a cold land with there are few garments. They will not sleep in beds because there are none. Food is scarce. They despise foreigners, especially those who go to preach the law of God, until they come to taste God themselves. The priests of the local religion in Japan will persecute them continuously. I also don’t think that those who will go to the University will be able to bring the things necessary to celebrate Mass because of the many thieves present in the places where they will go. Among the many pains and tribulations they will have to face is the lack of consolation from the celebration of the Mass and of the spiritual strength given to those who receive the Lord. In fact the virtue that is required by the Fathers who will go the Universities of Japan is CHARITY!” (Caboni, *San Francesco Saverio*, 422).

Notwithstanding all of these challenges, Xavier lived through the hardships, pain, suffering and trials in peace with trust and joy that came from the grace of God, which he often refers to in his writings. He was also greatly helped by the witness of authentic and faithful friendship he experienced in the letters he received from Ignatius and his friends. The

love of Christ, which was manifested to him in Paris in the encounter with Ignatius, was the experience that accompanied Francis and expressed itself through his person and his life dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel and to the salvation of the men and women that he met in the Far East in the first half of the sixteenth century.

