

Francis Xavier

Founder of the Jesuit Mission in Asia, Our Inspiration today

450 years ago, one of the first companions of Ignatius, Francis Xavier, died alone in China, on the small island of Shang Chuan from which he wrote his last eight letters. Francis Xavier was first buried in Shang Chuan, then moved to Malacca and finally to Goa, with one of his arms venerated at the Church of the Gesu in Rome. Jesuits in Asia and the Pacific are his followers, his dear companions in that Society he loved so much.

In Malacca in 1554, the then Provincial of India, Fr. Melchor Nunes Barreto, wrote "My brethren, a grain of wheat - our blessed Francisco - has fallen and died at the gateway of China. This is proof that God our Lord will grant us bountiful harvest if we go out into the field to reap it.

Geographical congruence

When we look at the map of Asia after reading the last letters of Francis Xavier, we are struck by the fact that he moved mainly in four centres, now four vital units for the Jesuits in our region. They are Malacca, Amboina and Ternate, Japan and China, now the Jesuit Region of Malaysia-Singapore, the Province of Indonesia, the Province of Japan, and the Province of China. He moved from one area to another with a very deep, internal apostolic logic. His growing information about new places indicated to him that he had to go to what he understood were centres of influence for the whole region, now called Asia. For him, these areas were interconnected; they could not be evangelized separately. This is also our apostolic *raison d'être* for working as a Conference.

His vision

Francis Xavier's vision was based on the Spiritual Exercises he made in Paris under Ignatius' guidance: the Trinitarian vision of the whole world to be saved. His correspondence shows that his moving beyond boundaries was prompted by information received about the places both of need and influence. China loomed large from his days in India. Japan was particularly attractive because of its culture. From Amboina, he wrote to his companions in Europe:

"I asked a Portuguese merchant, ... who had been for many days in Anjirô's country of Japan, to give me ... some information on that land and its people from what he had seen and heard All the Portuguese merchants coming from Japan tell me that if I go there I shall do great service for God our Lord, more than with the pagans of India, for they are a very reasonable people. From what I have experienced in my soul, it seems to me that either I or another of the Society will go within two years to Japan, even if the voyage there is full of dangers." (To His Companions Residing in Rome, From Cochin, January 20, 1548, no. 18, p. 178)

"After we had come to this city of Malacca, we learned much about Japan from the letters of Portuguese merchants who had written to me from there, informing me that the great lord of those islands of Japan wished to become a Christian." (To the Society of Jesus in Europe, From Malacca, June 22, 1549, no. 5, p.278)

"Six days from now, with the help and favour of God our Lord, three of us of the Society, two priests and one lay brother, are going to the court of the king of China, which is near Japan, a land that is extremely large and inhabited by a very gifted race and by many scholars. From the information that I received, they are greatly devoted to learning; and the more learned one is, the more noble and esteemed he is. All the paganism of the sects in Japan has come from China. We are going with great confidence in God our Lord that his name will be manifested in China." (To Father Ignatius of Loyola, in Rome, From Goa, April 9, 1552, no. 2, p. 384)

The mission

The mission of Francis Xavier was not for him alone; it was a corporate mission of the Society of Jesus. As solitary as Francis Xavier may at first appear, he was clearly acting with others, and in many cases preparing the way for fellow Jesuits. He was constantly thinking, planning, active in recruiting, assigning Jesuits to the various fields. In his correspondence, he returned again and again to the thought of members of the Society taking over the development of the fields he was opening. Francis Xavier lived his apostolate together with his Jesuit companions.

“Above all, dearest brothers, I ask you, for the love of God, to send every year many of our Society, since they are lacking here.” (To His Companions in Europe, From Malacca, November 10, 1545, no. 4, p.131)

“If there were a house of our Society in Maluco, a large number of people would become Christians. I have decided that a house should be founded in this corner of the world of Maluco for the great service which it will render to God our Lord.” (To His Companions in Europe, From Amboina, May 10, 1546, no. 7, p. 141)

“Know one thing for certain and have no doubts about it: the demon is greatly upset that those of the Society of the name of Jesus may be entering into China. I must let you know this is a definite fact from this harbour of Sancian. Have no doubt about it, since I would never come to an end if I wrote to you about the obstacles which he has placed and is placing every day against me. Of one thing be certain: with the assistance, grace, and favour of God, our Lord will confound the demon in this region; and that it will be to the great glory of God for something as vile as I am to confound so great an arrogance as is the demon.” (To Father Francisco Pérez, in Malacca, and Gaspar Barzaeus, in Goa, From Sancian, November 13, 1552, n.7, p. 454)

In union of hearts and minds

His 10 years of work all over Asia were often spent either alone or in travel with unknown persons, but the presence of his fellow Jesuits, the first companions and others, was always deeply felt by Francis Xavier. We all know about his keeping the names of his original companions close to his heart. Reading his letters, two things become extremely clear: the intense desire for news about his fellow Jesuits and the overwhelming joy he received when reading their letters.

“Later, in Malacca, I was given many letters from Rome and Portugal, and I received, and am receiving, so much consolation from them whenever I read them, and I read them frequently, that it seems to me that though I am here, my dearest brothers, I am there with you, and if not in body, at least in spirit.” (To His Companions in Europe, From Malacca, November 10, 1545, no. 2, p. 130)

“Write to me the news about all the priests, our brothers, and about Father Francisco de Mansilhas by means of the ship which is sailing for Maluco, and see to it that you write to me at great length, since I shall be delighted with your letters. I ask you, dearest brothers, to ever petition God for me in your devout prayers and holy sacrifices, since I am in lands where I have great need of your prayers.” (To His Companions Residing in Goa, From Malacca, December 16, 1545, no. 4, p. 135)

Francis Xavier lived the ideal of the Constitutions, which is to keep all members, wherever they are, united in one body especially through information sharing. We are many today and we grow in unity through all means of communication.

Evolving missionary approach

Francis Xavier was affected by his culture but was not tied to it. He learned to be open and grow into a man who was God’s varied presence to all peoples. The Francis who arrived in India and started to baptize people was very different from the Xavier quietly learning the Japanese language and culture. More than that, he saw so much good reflected in that totally different culture.

The immediate followers of Francis Xavier, Valignano, Ricci and others understood this policy. It led to the acceptance of Chinese rites. Their condemnation set back the evangelization of China. Today, our general congregations encourage us to pursue wholeheartedly this dialogue with cultures. Perhaps it is what is most needed for Asia to nurture fully the faith that is fully Catholic and fully Asian. It is certainly a special call for the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific.

Total trust in Christ

From his days in Xavier Castle with the image of the smiling Crucified Jesus to his deathbed in Shang Chuan, Christ was central to Francis Xavier. After making the Spiritual Exercises and giving his commitment to God in the Society, Christ was the Lord. It was for him that he lived. Francis Xavier was driven by the spirit of Jesus. What is still more amazing and perhaps more necessary for us today is his great trust in God.

"If it should happen - and may God avert it - that this merchant falls to come for me and I do not sail this year for China, I do not know what I shall do, whether I shall go to India or to Siam, so that I may go next year with the embassy of the king of Siam to China. And if I shall sail for India, I shall not go with the hope that anything worth remembering will be done in China during the time of Dom Alvaro de Gama, unless God provides for it in some way. I am not writing what I feel about this. I fear that God will give him greater punishment than what he thinks, if he has not already given it to him." (To Doigo Pereira, in Malacca, From Sancian, October 22, 1552, no. 4, p. 444)

"We are confused when we reflect upon this great grace which our Lord is giving us along with many others and perceive the manifest mercy that he is employing in our regard. We formerly thought that we would render him some service in coming to these regions for the increase of his holy faith; but now, through his goodness, he has made us clearly understand and feel the immense grace which he has conferred upon us by bringing us to Japan and by freeing us from the love of many creatures, which has hindered us from having greater faith, hope, and confidence in him. Judge now for yourselves how calm, consoled, and completely filled with joy our lives would be if we were what we should be, having all our hopes in him from whom all good comes. He does not deceive those who trust in him, but is, instead, more generous with his gifts than men are in their requests and hopes. For the love of our Lord, help us to give thanks for such great favours, so that we do not fall into the sin of ingratitude, for in those who wish to serve God this sin is the reason why God our Lord ceases to grant greater favours than he does, since they fail to recognize and profit by so great a good" (To His companions Living in Goa, From Kagoshima, November 5, 1549)

"My friends and those who are devoted to me are appalled by my undertaking such a long and dangerous voyage. But I am more terrified than they at seeing what little faith they have, since God our Lord has power and dominion over the tempests of the seas of China and Japan, which are the greatest that have yet been seen; and power over all the winds and shallows, which are said to be numerous

and are the cause of a loss of many ships. God our Lord has power and dominion over all the pirates of the sea, who are so numerous that it is terrifying. And these pirates are extremely cruel, for they inflict all kinds of pains and torments upon those whom they capture, and especially upon the Portuguese. Since God our Lord has power over all these, I do not have the least fear except of God, that he might inflict some punishment upon me for being negligent in his service, unfit and useless for spreading the name of Jesus Christ among peoples who do not know him. All the other fears, dangers, and tribulations told me by my friends I count as naught. All that remains to me is the fear of God, for the fear of his creatures extends no further than to what is permitted by their Creator. (To Father Simão Rodrigues, in Portugal, From Cochin, February 1, 1549)

Humanly speaking, his daring enterprise was to be considered proper of a reckless man. The more difficult and impossible the enterprise, the more Francis Xavier was impelled to trust; to doubt His assistance was a greater sin. Dangers for him became moments of hope.

May all of us in East Asia and Oceania share in his spirit.

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18th November 2002

Fr Zuloaga was president of the Jesuit Conference of East Asia and Oceania (now known as the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific) from 1992 to 2004.