



Francis Xavier 1506-1552

Born in Spain in 1506, Francis Xavier was the youngest in a noble family who might have expected to live a comfortable life in court. War, however, destroyed much of the family wealth and he went to study at the University of Paris to prepare for service in the church. Here he was attracted to the young Protestant faith, but soon fell under the strong influence of Ignatius Loyola and was among the first to associate with him in forming the Society of Jesus to reform the Roman Catholic Church of his day. In 1539 Pope Paul III approved the religious order of Jesuits, and within six months Francis was preparing to leave Portugal and go to India. The trip took thirteen months.

When he landed in Goa, a region controlled by the Portuguese, Xavier was welcomed by a crowd of civil and ecclesiastical officials, but he was not impressed with worldly pomp. Barefoot and in rags he walked to the hospital where he began washing the sores of the lepers. Xavier wanted to minister among the lower classes of society, not just among the elite leaders.

He spent his first year in India learning the language, ministering to the sick, preaching, and translating a catechism he had written. Walking up and down village streets, Xavier would ring a bell and call children and others to listen. He especially loved to be with the children, teaching them the Apostle's Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. Within one month, over 10,000 were baptized. He established a college in Goa so that the native young people could be trained to minister to their fellow countrymen.

After three years in India, Xavier went to Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam while overseeing the growing missions throughout India. In 1549 he set out to bring Christianity to Japan. The first Europeans had come to Japan by accident in 1542 when merchants involved in illegal trade with China were blown off course. They had brought the concept of Christianity to Japan, but Xavier was the first formal missionary. The Japanese were very much interested in teachings about the Creator, since Buddhism had no concept of a purposeful creation. The love and concern Xavier showed for the individual Japanese were as influential as his words in bringing many to accept Christianity. Hundreds were

baptized, including many of the samurai class and some Buddhist priests. After Xavier had been in Japan two years, the Christian community numbered about 2,000.

In Japan Xavier noticed how the Japanese looked to China as the mother of all civilization. So he returned to Goa and prepared for a mission to China. The authorities there tried to dissuade him because of the hostility of the Chinese to Europeans, but in April 1552 he sailed for China. In August he reached an island near the trade city of Canton and began negotiating to enter China. However, Xavier was seized by a fever and died before he could enter China. In 1622 he was canonized a saint by the Roman Catholic Church; he is known as the Patron of the Orient, Missions and Navigators. Some have estimated he converted 700,000 to Christianity during a little over a decade in Asia.

Xavier's devotion to God through Christ was magnificently expressed in a hymn he wrote:

My God, I love Thee: not because I hope for heaven thereby,
Nor yet because who love Thee not are lost eternally.
Thou, O my Jesus, Thou didst me upon the cross embrace;
For me didst bear the nails, the spear and manifold disgrace,
And griefs and torments numberless, and seat of agony –
Yea death itself: and all for me, who was Thine enemy.
Then why, O blessed Jesus Christ, should I not love Thee well?
Not for the sake of winning heaven nor of escaping hell!
Not from the hope of gaining aught, not seeking a reward
But as Thyself has loved me, O ever loving Lord!
So would I love Thee, dearest Lord, and in Thy praise will sing:
Solely because Thou art my God, and my most loving King.