


St. Francis Xavier: Guide to the 21st-Century Missionary

Francis Mathy, S.J.

An article from Francis Britto's *All About Francis Xavier*

 <p>1. Heart burning with zeal</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Introduction2. Francis's Encounter with Christ3. The Call of Christ the King4. Francis's Missionary Activity5. Led by the Holy Spirit6. Living the Mystery of Christ7. Love of the Cross8. Zeal for Souls9. Betrayal and Death10. The Harvest11. A Challenge to the Young
---	--

1. Introduction

In his 1990 encyclical letter *Mission of the Redeemer*, Pope John Paul II calls these final years of the 20th century a new Advent leading to a new time of evangelization and a new springtime of the Church. He writes:

I see the dawning of a new missionary age, which will become a radiant day bearing an abundant harvest, if all Christians . . . respond with generosity and holiness to the calls and challenges of our time. Like the apostles after Christ's Ascension, the Church must gather in the Upper Room "together with Mary, the Mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14), in order to pray for the Spirit and to gain strength and courage to carry out the missionary mandate. We too, like the apostles, need to be transformed and guided by the Spirit (92).

Pope John Paul II urges that in preparing for this new age of missionary activity, the witness of the great apostles of the past should be recalled and their example followed. In 1999, we celebrate the 450th anniversary of the arrival in Japan of St. Francis Xavier, whose missionary

achievements are second only to those of the apostle Paul. In this short pamphlet we would like to show how Francis followed in the footsteps of the first apostles, especially Paul, and how he points out the way for us to respond to Pope John Paul's call and become evangelists ourselves. Just as St. Paul played a dominant role in establishing the Church in the Graeco-Roman world of his day, so Francis Xavier, in a world that had become greatly expanded as a result of the globe-circling navigations of the 15th and 16th centuries, played a dominant role in bringing the faith to the peoples of the newly discovered countries of the East, to the peoples of India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan.

2. Francis's Encounter with Christ



2. Xavier preaching

Francis was born in Holy Week in 1506 in the family castle of Javier in the Basque kingdom of Navarre, now part of Spain. He was the fifth and youngest child of pious parents who instructed him well in the faith and gave him excellent example in the living of it. When he went to study at the University of Paris at the age of 19, he was undoubtedly a committed Christian determined to live a genuinely Christian life. But Francis also had worldly ambitions. After completing his study in Paris, he hoped to return to his homeland and, as a scholar-priest of noble blood with influential connections, find a well-paying position that would help to relieve the failing finances of his family. He was a Christian, but Christ was not yet at the center of his life.

The experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit, which the apostles received at Pentecost (Acts 2:4) and Paul at the hands of Ananias after his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:17), Francis received in the course of his association with Ignatius of Loyola, who had come to share his dormitory room at the University of Paris. Many biographies of Francis state that Ignatius won Francis over by asking him again and again the question asked by Christ: "What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself?" (Lk 9:25). This question may have initiated the process of Francis's conversion, but he quickly moved beyond such a self-centered motive, especially when Ignatius directed him through thirty days of meditation and prayer. It is most likely that it was in the course of that month that the fire of the Holy Spirit fell upon him, the fire that was to inflame him for the rest of his life.

3. The Call of Christ the King

In one of the meditations of his Spiritual Exercises Ignatius had Francis imagine Jesus as issuing the following call:

It is my will to win over the entire world . . . to conquer sin, hatred, and death--all the enemies between mankind and God. Whoever wishes to join me in this mission must be willing to labor with me, so that by following me in suffering, he may follow me in glory (Spiritual Exercises 95).

Ignatius indicated to Francis what kind of response such an invitation should evoke in the heart of a generous man who had fallen in love with Christ:

Persons who are of great heart and are set on fire with zeal to follow Jesus Christ, eternal King and Lord of all, will offer themselves entirely for such a mission . . . in some such words as these: "Eternal Lord and King of all creation, . . . I am moved by your grace to offer myself to you and to your work. I deeply desire to be with you in accepting all wrongs and abuse and all poverty . . . for your greater service and praise"(97-98).

Francis did make that offering of himself, and the fervor of his later apostolic life attests to the fact that he also aspired to become what Ignatius, in a later meditation, called a person of "the third kind of humility," one who patterns his life upon the life of Jesus:

I so much want the truth of Christ's life to be fully the truth of my own that I find myself, moved by grace, with a love and desire for poverty in order to be with the poor Christ; a love and a desire for insults in order to be closer to Christ in his own rejection by people; a love and desire to be considered worthless and a fool for Christ, rather than to be esteemed as wise and prudent according to the standards of the world. [I desire] to follow Jesus Christ in the most intimate union possible (167).

Francis did follow his Lord, Jesus Christ, "in the most intimate union possible" from the time when, together with Ignatius, his other roommate Peter Faber, and four other young men, he made his first vows of poverty and chastity in a small chapel in Paris on July 22, 1534, until he died--like Christ, abandoned and betrayed--on the island gateway to China, Shangchuan, on December 3, 1552, eighteen years later.

The first plan of the seven young men, who were soon to call themselves the Society of Jesus, was to go to the Holy Land as missionaries, but when this proved impossible, they decided to place themselves at the disposition of the pope. Francis went first to Bologna and later to Rome; in both cities he preached and ministered to the poor and the sick. When the pope asked Ignatius to respond to the request of King John of Portugal and send two men to the newly settled Portuguese colony of Goa, one of the two that had been chosen fell ill and Ignatius sent Francis, the only other Jesuit available at the time. In the end Francis's companion, Simon Rodriguez, was retained by the King in Lisbon and Francis went alone.



3. Ignatius missions Xavier

4. Francis's Missionary Activity

Francis spent ten years as a missionary, years full of adventure and rich in anecdote. But the scope of this pamphlet does not allow us to go into great detail. Here we will merely give a summary of the activity of those ten years as a background for what we want to say about



4. Xavier with a crucifix

Francis as a model missionary in the light of Pope John Paul's statements concerning missionary spirituality. Francis sailed for India on his 35th birthday, April 7, 1541, and arrived in Goa in May of 1542. (Six months were spent in Mozambique waiting for favorable winds.) He spent the next five months preaching to the Portuguese and ministering to the sick, among them the lepers, whom others avoided. Then he spent two years among the Paravas, pearl fishers on the southeastern coast of India, who had been baptized but not instructed in the faith. From there he went to Travancore on the western coast of India, then northward to Cochin. His next missionary journey took him first to Malacca on the Malay peninsula and then to the Molucca Islands and Morotai, deep in what is now Indonesia, to the "isles of the Moors." Anjiro, a Japanese he met in Malacca, first turned his eyes to Japan; and after much prayer, he decided to go there. Returning first to Goa to make provisions for that mission during his absence, he finally set sail for Japan on June 24, 1549, and landed in Kagoshima on

August 15.

In Kagoshima he and his two Jesuit companions had little success in making converts, so they went to Hirado, which the Portuguese were using as a port. There, too, they made few converts, and they moved on to Yamaguchi. When, on this first visit to that city, they again failed to bring more than a handful of Japanese to Christ, Francis decided to follow his original plan and travel to Kyoto to enlist the Emperor's support for his mission. After a long, difficult, and dangerous journey, mostly across bandit-infested mountains and on foot in cold December, they reached Kyoto, but the Emperor would not see them. They learned, moreover, that the Emperor had no power and that the daimyo of Yamaguchi, from which they had just come, was at that time the most powerful lord in Japan. So they returned to Yamaguchi and changed their strategy. Francis requested an audience with Lord Ouchi. When it was granted, he made his appearance before the great lord dressed in his finest silk vestments and presented to him his credentials, letters from King John III of Portugal and Pope Paul III, as well as from the governor and bishop of Goa; and he offered Lord Ouchi a dazzling array of gifts from the West. The daimyo granted all of Francis's requests and not only authorized the priests to preach Christianity in his realm but even gave them a temple where they could live and receive visitors. There they were visited day and night by a multitude of Japanese, eager to listen and ask questions. This, together with their street preaching, won them some 500 converts in six months. Francis returned to Goa in September of 1551, expecting to come back to Japan the following year. A storm blew them a thousand miles off course and their ship dropped anchor at the island of Shangchuan. It was at this time that Francis, like Paul experiencing a call to carry the Word of God to

Macedonia (Acts 16, 9), felt a strong urging by the Holy Spirit to take the gospel to China. But when they reached Malacca, there was waiting for him a letter from Ignatius appointing him Superior of all the territories under the rule of Portugal "and beyond," which included Japan. He remained in Goa only long enough to transact necessary business as Superior, and then set out again for Shangchuan in April, 1552, hoping to enter China from there. But the Chinese merchant who had agreed to take him to the mainland never made his appearance. On November 21 Francis came down with a fever. It grew progressively worse, and he died in the early morning of December 3, 1552.

5. Led by the Holy Spirit

In the encyclical letter referred to above, Pope John Paul II writes:

Xavier with Crucifix Missionary activity demands a specific spirituality . . . [characterized] first of all by a life of complete docility to the Holy Spirit, so that we become ever more like Christ. It commits us to being molded from within by the Spirit, so that we become ever more like Christ (87).

Francis's entire life after his conversion was literally "a life of complete docility to the Holy Spirit." He manifested this docility in his prompt obedience to Ignatius's request that he go to India, despite the fact that he had a tender love not only for Ignatius, but for all of his Jesuit companions, and could hardly bear the thought of being separated from them for the rest of his life. In his travels nothing gave him greater pleasure than a letter from or even news of his brothers in Europe. He went so far as to cut off the signatures on their letters and wear them on his person.

In every detail of his life as a missionary, Francis followed the leading of the Holy Spirit. He has been criticized for moving from one mission area to another without staying on to complete the work in any one. This criticism is not justified. He prayed long and carefully over every decision to move on, including the decision to go to Japan, and undertook the journey only when he was certain that it was the will of God that he do so. It was because of this certainty that he was being "sent" that he could be so fearless in undertaking long voyages in which his life was in constant danger. He had no fear of death. When friends tried to dissuade him from going to the dangerous islands of Morotai, Francis answered their objections by saying, "If I die, it is because God wills it, and he will send other laborers." In a letter after his visit he wrote:

Abundant spiritual consolations . . . are to be found on these islands; for all the toils and dangers that are willingly encountered here for the love and service of God our Lord alone are treasures abounding in great spiritual consolations, so

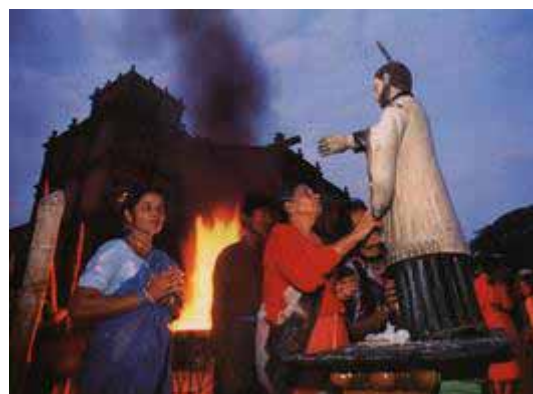


5. Xavier mausoleum in Goa

much so in fact, that here on these islands a man might well lose the sight of his bodily eyes within a few years from the abundance of his consoling tears . . . It would be better if they were called "Islands of Hope in God" rather than "Islands of Moro" (59.4).

Moreover, Francis, like Paul, saw the Church well established in one place before he moved to another. When he arrived in a new mission area, one of the first things he did was to compose a catechism, centered on the twelve articles of the Creed, in the language of that area: Malabar, Tamil, Malayan, Japanese. Before he left for another mission area, he would appoint someone to replace him, and he would give him specific instructions of what he was to do and communicate with him frequently.

Under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit, Francis was also a good teacher, and like all good teachers he adapted his teaching methods to the people he was teaching. When dealing with simple natives like the Paravas, he appealed to their senses and made much of repetition. In Goa he went through the streets with a handbell inviting people to follow him, and then taught them catechism in rhyming verses set to popular tunes. He also set a number of prayers to music. In Japan, in addition to his other methods, he made use of the method of philosophical and theological discussion, a method in which, with his agile intellect and great learning, he excelled.



6. Indian women praying

Bernardo, the convert who became the first Japanese Jesuit, reports that Francis would invite visitors to their house in Yamaguchi to ask him questions. " Ten or twelve each presented an objection to what he had said, and with one answer, Father satisfied them all That did not happen only once but continually. Without doubt it was a special gift of God." It is clear, then, that Francis was led by the Holy Spirit not only in his choice of mission area but also in his missionary methods. It could be said of him what Pope John Paul says of the apostles: "The Spirit

transformed them into courageous witnesses to Christ and enlightened heralds of his word. It was the Spirit himself who guided them along the difficult and new paths of mission" (87).

6. Living the Mystery of Christ, "the One Who Was Sent"

Pope John Paul continues: "An essential characteristic of missionary spirituality is intimate communion with Christ" (88). The missionary must imitate Christ by totally emptying himself. "This is an emptying of self which is permeated by love and expresses love" (88).

More effective than any of Francis's missionary methods mentioned above--or, rather, what made those methods effective--was his constant communion with Christ, which was sustained by the long hours he spent in prayer each night after the hard day's work. This communion continued unbroken in the midst of exterior occupations, troubles, and dangers. When on the voyage back to Goa from Japan, their ship was caught in a violent storm and seemed in danger of sinking. Francis heard confessions, encouraged everyone, and then

disappeared. Later he was seen kneeling in his cabin in an ecstasy of prayer before his crucifix. After another such storm at sea, Francis wrote: "I found such great consolation . . . during the storm that it was perhaps many times greater than what I experienced after I had been freed from the peril" (Letters 59.21).

An ardent love of Christ lighted up his entire being. A fellow Jesuit, Melchior Nunes Barreto, wrote to his confreres in Portugal:

My brothers, what virtues I saw in him . . . ! What a heart, so afire with the love of God! With what flames it is burning with love for his neighbor! What zeal for helping souls . . . ! What affability he has, always smiling with a calm and cheerful face . . . because he always has spiritual joy.

This was the impression he made upon all the people he met. All were attracted by his charm, his holiness, his burning love, combined with his sympathy, enthusiasm, and piety--in other words, his Christlikeness. One of his first biographers, Horatio Tursellinus, writes:

It is almost impossible to imagine the charm of his face, his gestures, his talk, his words. His natural gifts, perfected by the grace of God, attracted and held hearts. A smile always gay, a freedom without reserve, sympathetic conversation--it was enough for a sick man to see him to feel better, a healthy one to be exhilarated and joyous. Many went to him to stimulate their souls with his heavenly force, to excite in themselves the desire for a good life, to set their souls on fire.

7. Love of the Cross

"The mission follows the path of Christ and leads to the foot of the cross," (88) continues Pope John Paul. All through his ten years of missionary life Francis rejoiced to be able to suffer with his crucified Lord. When one day in prayer he was given a vision of the sufferings he would endure in the service of his King, he cried out, "More! More! More!" In one of his letters to Rome he wrote that one who has once tasted the sweetness of the cross of Christ finds his relief in pains and difficulties and dies of grief when the cross is absent. Francis was so much in love with his crucified King that he even longed to be a martyr.

In addition to all the sufferings he underwent in the natural course of his missionary labors, Francis imposed additional penances upon himself. He lived the life of a poor man: he chose to live in the poorest of quarters; he ate and dressed like a poor man. He fasted and scourged himself. The few hours of sleep he allowed himself he spent on bare boards or on the bare ground. In everything he wished to be like the suffering Christ with whom he was so greatly in love.



7. Stamp honoring Xavier

8. Zeal for Souls

The true missionary, Pope John Paul goes on to say, must have a great zeal for souls:

The missionary is required to . . . make himself everything to everyone . . . , so that he may become a brother to those to whom he is sent and thus bring them Christ the Savior. This is the goal of missionary spirituality: "To the weak I became weak . . . I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22-23)(88).

Francis loved and was loved by all ranks of society, European and Asian. He was equally at home with sailors, soldiers, merchants, simple people, and sophisticated intellectuals. He could begin the conversation at their level and take it up to God's. A Portuguese soldier who had heard much about Francis saw him for the first time when he was enthusiastically playing dice with a soldier noted for his immorality. He was scandalized until some time later when he came across that same Francis in a little grove of palm trees in an ecstasy of prayer. Francis had a genuine love for everyone he met and he urged his fellow missionaries to have the same. To one of them he wrote:

I earnestly ask you to treat . . . the leaders and all the people . . . with great love; for if you are on good terms with your people and are loved by them, you will render great service to God. Learn how to endure their frailties with great patience, remembering that if they are not yet good, they will be so in time(23.2).

He was greatly grieved to see how the Portuguese treated the natives, even the Christians, and he made a strong protest against this treatment, especially in his letters to the king of Portugal.

9. Betrayal and Death

In the end, Francis was not granted the grace of dying a martyr. But he did suffer a final betrayal and abandonment like his Master. He was betrayed, first of all, by the Portuguese commandant in Malacca who would not allow the embassy to the Chinese sovereign that he had so carefully planned to leave Malacca. Francis had to go alone, without the ambassador. He was betrayed also by the Cantonese merchant who had promised to take him to the Chinese mainland but never showed up. Almost all the Portuguese had left the harbor. Francis was alone with his two servants, Antonio and Christovao, in a little hut made of straw that was little protection against the cold. He died a little before dawn on December 3, 1552, and was buried on Shangchuan the following day.

Some two months later, the grave and the coffin were opened, and Francis's body was found to be uncorrupted and fresh. It was taken to Malacca and then to Goa, where it is still enshrined. Francis was beatified in 1619 and canonized in 1622. In 1748 he was declared patron saint of the Orient, and in 1927, together with St. Therese de Lisieux, of all missions.

10. The Harvest

In the epilogue to his four-volume study of St. Francis Xavier, Fr. Georg Schurhammer assesses the results of Xavier's missionary endeavors as follows:

Only ten years had been granted to Xavier for his labors in the East, and he was able to work specifically among the pagans and newly-converted Christians in only a little more than half of these But during this short period of time he accomplished wonders Xavier was, moreover, careful to secure the continuation of the work which he had begun by sending priests, brothers, and lay assistants to the places which he had himself visited so that they might strengthen the people in their faith. He was thus not only the pioneer but also the true founder of the Jesuit missions in Asia. He moreover founded numerous colleges in the more important Portuguese settlements so that boys and young men might have the opportunity of receiving both a secular and a religious education. He placed great importance upon the learning of native languages and the translation of the basic truths of Christianity into them. His own life was for all a shining example, so much so that he everywhere became known simply as "o Padre santo" [the holy Father].

11. A Challenge to the Young

In many of his writings Pope John Paul has stated that there is a powerful new wave of the Holy Spirit at work in the Church. It began with Vatican Council II and will continue to grow until it culminates in a new Pentecost, in a new springtime of Christian life, "if Christians are docile to the action of the Holy Spirit" (Tertio Millennio Adveniente 18).

Throughout the history of Christianity, it has been the young that the Holy Spirit has chosen to be his special instruments of action. Francis Xavier was 28 when he made his vows at Montmartre and 35 when he set sail for India. The other Francis, Francis of Assisi, was even younger when he founded the Franciscan Order. And so, to lead the Church into this new Pentecost, into this new age of missionary activity, Pope John Paul makes an impassioned plea to the young. In his World Youth Day message in 1992 he said:

I hope that many young men and women, inspired by sincere, apostolic zeal, will consecrate their own lives to Christ and the Church as priests and religious, or as lay people who are also ready to . . . rush to those places where workers in Christ's vineyard are scarce. Listen attentively, then, to the voice of the Lord, who today does not cease calling you, as he called Peter and Andrew: "Come after me and I will make you fishers of men" (Mt 4:19). As the year 2000 approaches, the Church feels the need for a renewed missionary effort and she puts her hope in you, dear young people, precisely for this task. Do not forget to thank the Holy Spirit each day for continuing to light so many fires of apostolic commitment in the Church today This is the new inspiration which the Holy Spirit is giving to our times. How I wish it would penetrate each of your lives!

As we celebrate the 450th anniversary of St. Francis Xavier's coming to Japan, let us, young and old, ask Christ the King, whom Francis served so faithfully, to send his Spirit upon us anew so that we may be as much in love with Jesus as Francis was, and also as docile to his Spirit.

Assisi was even younger when he founded the Franciscan Order. And so, to lead the Church into this new Pentecost, into this new age of missionary activity, Pope John Paul makes an impassioned plea to the young. At the end of his apostolic letter Tertio Millennio Adveniente he writes:

The future of the world and the Church belongs to the younger generation. . . . Christ expects great things from young people, as he did from the young man who asked him: "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Mt 19:16) . . . Young people in every situation, in every region of the world, do not cease to put questions to Christ: they meet him and they keep searching for him in order to question him further. If they succeed in following the road which he points out to them, they will have the joy of making their own contribution to his presence in the next century and in the centuries to come, until the end of time: "Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever"(58).

As we celebrate the 450th anniversary of St. Francis's coming to Japan, let us, young and old, ask Christ the King, whom Francis served so faithfully, to send his Spirit upon us anew so that we may be as much in love with Jesus as he was, and also as docile to his Spirit.



© Francis Mathy & Jesuits of Japan, 1999. Text composed for PDF by Francis Britto. All Rights Reserved. Not to be edited or altered without permission. Not to be reproduced for any commercial purpose whatsoever. Free distribution is permitted. Contact <francisbritto[At]hotmail.com> for details.

A Jesuit Priest, translator of Japanese books, charismatic preacher, and retired Professor of Sophia University, Fr. Francis Mathy, S.J. wrote this article in 1999, on the occasion of the 450th anniversary of St. Francis Xavier's arrival in Japan. Questions, comments, or queries about this article? Contact Fr. Mathy at: <h-fmathy@hoffman.cc.sophia.ac.jp> URL:<http://pweb.sophia.ac.jp/~d-mccoy/xavier/>



On the Web since April 17, 1999

[Brittonia](#)

[SJ Europe](#)

[Francis Xavier](#)

[SJWeb](#)

[SJ Japan](#)

[Top](#)