Saint Francis Xavier, 1506-1552

Francis Xavier had planned to devote himself to the intellectual life, but at a strategic moment he surrendered to God, who had long and patiently pursued him. That surrender changed the course of his life—and the course of history as well. Even Ignatius of Loyola, the leader of the new Jesuit community, had planned to deploy Francis as a scholar. But India beckoned, and Ignatius reluctantly sent Francis to preach the gospel there. Thus, the man who had planned on a leisurely intellectual life became a missionary apostle, perhaps second only to St. Paul.

In 1525, Francis left Xavier, his mother's castle near Pamplona in Navarre, to study at the University of Paris. He enrolled at the College of St. Barbara, where he pursued an unwaveringly successful academic career. Within three short years he had earned his degree and was lecturing in philosophy. At St. Barbara, circumstances put Xavier's spiritual career on course. Through his roommate, St. Peter Faber, Francis became a friend of Ignatius of Loyola. This relationship gradually revolutionized his life.

Ignatius had experienced a radical conversion to Christ and had devoted his life to helping others in their spiritual quests. He challenged his friends to yield their lives to Christ, abandon their own plans, and follow the Lord’s design for their lives. Although Francis felt drawn to Ignatius's ideals, he was reluctant to make them his own. He resisted Ignatius's magnetic influence for six years because it threatened the comfortable life he wanted as a church-supported scholar.

As Francis reached his decision, the text of Genesis 12:1 crossed his mind: “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.” That verse gave him a prophetic inkling of the unanticipated direction his life would take.

In 1534, Francis Xavier was among the first seven men to decide to formally join Ignatius of Loyola's community. They were the first Jesuits, and Francis was ordained a priest three years later. Loyola had long-term plans to deploy Xavier as a scholar and teacher, but circumstances derailed them. From the beginning, the Jesuits were in high demand, and Ignatius had to scramble to meet all the requests. King John III of Portugal asked for six men to do missionary work in the Portuguese territories in India. Ignatius said he could spare two: Simon Rodriguez and Nicholas Bobadilla, who were to sail to Goa in 1541. At the last moment, however, Bobadilla became seriously ill. With some
hesitance and uneasiness, Ignatius asked Francis to go in Bobadilla’s place. Thus, Xavier accidentally began his life as an apostle to the East.

Francis Xavier believed no one was more ill-equipped than he to take the gospel overseas. But he was wrong. En route from Lisbon to Goa, Francis already displayed the cheerfulness and generosity that would become the trademarks of his work. Through his personal charm, he made friends with the toughest seamen on the ship. Then he engaged them in “apostolic conversations,” seeking to win them for Christ.

Francis’s missionary methods were primitive. When he arrived in a village, he rang a bell to summon the children and the idle. He taught them the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Our Father, and other common prayers. Using little songs that the children loved to sing, he instructed them in Christian doctrine. These songs caught on with other villagers, spreading Francis’s message. Then, when people expressed simple faith in the creed, he baptized them.

Some believe that Francis Xavier had a miraculous gift of languages, which enabled him to communicate fluently with everyone, but that was not the case. Francis struggled with foreign languages and was barely able to express the creed, commandments, and prayers in Tamil and other native languages. He had to rely on impromptu interpreters and translators, so he was never completely sure he had accurately communicated his message. The real miracle of tongues was that Xavier spread the gospel so far and to so many with such little grasp of their languages.

Miracles of healing, however, occurred frequently in his ministry to poor villages. Once, while traveling through a pagan territory, Francis learned of a woman who had been in labor for three days and was probably near death. Midwives and sorcerers were treating her with superstitious incantations. Xavier went to the woman’s home and called on the name of Christ to heal her. “I began with the Creed,” he wrote to Ignatius, “which my companion translated into Tamil. By the mercy of God, the woman came to believe in the articles of faith. I asked whether she desired to become a Christian, and she replied that she would most willingly become one. Then I read excerpts from the Gospels in that house where, I think, they were never heard before. I then baptized the woman.” As soon as Francis baptized the woman, she was healed and gave birth to a healthy baby.

The woman’s family was so touched by this divine intervention that they invited Francis to instruct and baptize all of them, including the newborn. News then traveled quickly throughout the village. A representative of the raja, the overlord, gave the village elders clearance to allow Francis to proclaim Christ there. “First, I baptized the
chief men of the place and their families," he wrote, “and afterwards the rest of the people, young and old.”

In another village, crowds besieged Francis, begging him to pray for ailing family members. Missionary and teaching duties overwhelmed him, so he enlisted some enthusiastic children to minister to the sick. He sent the children to the homes of the ill and had them gather the family and neighbors. He trained them to proclaim the creed and to assure the sick that if they believed, they would be cured. Thus, Xavier not only responded to requests for prayer, but he managed to spread Christian doctrine throughout the village. Because the sick and their families had faith, he said, “God has shown great mercy to them, healing them in both body and soul.” The children of the village had become little miracle workers.

In his passion for spreading the gospel, in his simple obedience, in his humble disregard for himself, the saint was a near perfect imitation of Christ. His feast day is December 3rd, the day he died.