

St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552)

—The most famous of them all

A founding member and the first great missionary of the Society of Jesus, Francis Xavier had a remarkable journey through life, preaching and baptizing across India Southeast Asia, and Japan, tending to lepers, clashing with Buddhists and harvesting souls. For the most part, he had basked in an infectious optimism; on occasion, weary, ill, and homesick, he had bordered on despair.

—Jonathan Wright

Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier are often considered co-founders of the Society of Jesus and they seemed themselves together to exemplify different and important aspects of Jesuit life, perhaps modeling Ignatius's most fundamental teaching that individuals have to find the way that suits them best—an echo of the “flexible, not rigid” constitutive element of “our way of proceeding” found in the Constitutions of 1558.

The Jesuits were founded as a missionary order with a fourth vow by which professed members of the Society obliged themselves to “special obedience to the pope regarding missions.” This was a central aspect of what they were about. The Jesuits’ fourth vow was in essence a vow of mobility, that is, a commitment to travel anywhere in the world for the “help of souls,” yet Francis was the only one of the original band of Ignatius’s companions to leave Europe.

Even before Pope Paul III granted final and official approval of the Society of Jesus in 1540, he sought Ignatius’s help in responding to a request Paul received from John III, King of Portugal. John wanted to send Jesuits to his colony of Goa on the west coast of India. Thus, the Jesuits were linked from their earliest days in service to both Church and state.

It was Francis Xavier whom Ignatius missioned to India in 1540. Xavier was granted the title of Apostolic Nuncio by the pope and therefore undertook his travels to Asia with the highest ecclesiastical credentials. He sent letters back to Europe that electrified his brethren and everyone else who read them with the extent of his travels and news of the strange places in which he labored. Xavier’s Letter from India, first published in 1545, was not only one of the earliest publications by a Jesuit but also the first letter from the East ever to be printed in Europe. It was read in the courts of Spain and Portugal and at the Council of Trent, giving rise to a popular image of him as the prototypical missionary, zealous and unreflective—an image that was belied by his growing awareness of the problems facing Europeans who sought to introduce Christianity into non-Western cultures, especially into one as proud and ancient as that of the Japanese.

Xavier arrived in India in 1542. For two years, he catechized poor pearl fishers on the eastern coast of Cape Comorin with basic Christian prayers he had translated into Tamil. As more Jesuits gradually joined him, he established Goa as the principal center for Jesuit ministry. For the next four years, he reconnoitered widely, eventually traveling as far as the Molucca Islands, four thousand miles beyond India. Within a time, some 10,000 converts were won.

Japan was crucial to Xavier’s missionary objectives in Asia. His enthusiasm was high when he and two other Jesuits became the first Catholic priests to land there in 1549: “We shall never find another race equal to the Japanese. They are a people of excellent morals—good in general and not malicious.” Xavier arrived at court with expensive gifts unknown in Japan: a grandfather clock that chimed the hours of the day; a music box; a glass mirror; muskets; spectacles; oil paintings; and port wine. This signaled the beginning of a remarkable cultural exchange. Xavier won permission to preach in Japan and he remained there for the next two and a half years winning converts to Catholicism.



This canvas, by the most important painter of the Spanish baroque, limns a scene of mystical ecstasy in which Xavier looks heavenward and indicates his burning love for God with his right hand. In the distance, a narrative scene in which he preaches at a seaport surrounded by figures in Asian dress.

Bartolomé Estéban Murillo
St. Francis Xavier as a Pilgrim, 1670
The Wadsworth Athletenrum,
Hartford, CT

Throughout his travels in Asia, Francis Xavier kept hearing about the Chinese and their high culture. In 1552, he set sail for China but fell mortally ill and died on the island of Sancian just a few miles from the Chinese mainland.

St. Francis Xavier was a figure of heroic proportions, indeed, the greatest missionary since the time of the Apostles. It is a matter of wonder that one man in the short space of ten years could have visited so many countries, traversed so many seas, preached the Gospel to so many nations and converted so many to Catholicism. By the time of his death, he had laid the groundwork for flourishing missions in India and Japan and left fellow Jesuits stationed in neatly organized patterns along the great seaways of Southeast Asia.

—John W. O’Malley, S.J., *The First Jesuits* (Harvard University Press, 1993)
—John W. O’Malley, S.J., *St. Ignatius Loyola and the Remarkable History of the First Jesuits* (Now You Know Media, 2007)



Though the Society of Jesus was barely twelve years old when Francis Xavier died, it was already emerging as the most vibrant, most provocative religious order the Catholic Church had yet produced. It would soon stake its claim as a potent force in the classroom, pulpit, and confessional, in the laboratory and the observatory, in the salon and the academy, in the loftiest bastions of political power; but Xavier’s outlandish evangelical career had been the first truly great Jesuit success story. His posthumous journey through history—a journey of mutilation, sainthood, and memory—would be more extraordinary still.

In 1554, so the story goes, a Portuguese noblewoman bit the fifth toe off the right foot of Francis Xavier’s corpse. It was an act of profound, if somewhat gruesome piety; Xavier’s much-traveled toe was a holy relic well worth having.

Xavier’s heroic status was already well in evidence when the ship carrying his body reached Goa on March 16, three months after his death. By viceregal command, every church bell in the city rang, and all the cannon in the city’s forts were fired. And then, almost inevitably, the miracle talk began. On March 17, an examination of the corpse was carried out, and the reports spoke of fleshiness, still-oozing blood, and not the slightest whiff of decay. Nor, the doctors were keen to stress, was there any

evidence of embalming. Rumors of such astounding incorruptibility began to spread, and the Catholic world began to clamor for its share of Xavier’s prodigious remains. Signs that God had blessed the Jesuit enterprise were rarely more spectacular.

In 1614, the superior general of the Jesuits had the lower part of Xavier’s right arm cut off and shipped to Rome—a mission almost ruined when Dutch pirates tried to capture the vessel transporting the precious limb. Five years later, the rest of Xavier’s right arm was divided in three, one part each for the Jesuit communities in Macao, Cochín, and Malacca. In the coming years, Xavier’s internal organs would be removed so that they might be scattered around the world as relics, and by the 18th century, Xavier water, in which relics or medals of the saint had been immersed, had become a popular central European cure for fevers, lame feet, and bad eyesight.

The incorruptibility was still in evidence in 1694. Four years later, Grand Duke Ferdinand II of Tuscany, one of the saint’s greatest fans, had a baroque mausoleum crafted from marble and bronze sent from Italy to the church of Bom Jesus in Goa, India, where the saint’s remains—at least most of them—can be found today.

—Jonathan Wright, *God’s Soldiers* (Doubleday, 2004)

This monumental canvas adorns the altar of St. Francis Xavier in the right transept of the Gesù.

Carlo Maratti,
Death of St. Francis Xavier, 1679
Church of the Gesù, Rome