



# St. Francis Xavier

BORN 1506; DIED 1552  
PRIEST AND MISSIONARY  
FEAST DAY: DECEMBER 3



**A**T ONE POINT in his public ministry, Jesus exclaimed: *"I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled!"* (Lk 12:49). That yearning was embodied in the great missionary to the Far East, St. Francis Xavier, a man on fire who was consumed by a kind of divine restlessness. He lived in the age of the great explorers, born in the year Christopher Columbus died. However, what drove Francis halfway around the world was not a desire to discover new continents but to proclaim far and wide the name of Jesus Christ.

The youngest of at least three sons and a daughter of Juan de Jassu, councilor to the King of Navarre (part of modern Spain), and Maria de Aznarez y Xavier, Francis was born in the Basque castle of Xavier near Sanguesa, not far from Pamplona, Spain. As a child, Francis was considered cheerful, charming, bright, and modest about himself. Warfare during his childhood between France and the Spanish kingdom of Aragon resulted in the defeat of Navarre and the exile and death of his father before he was ten.

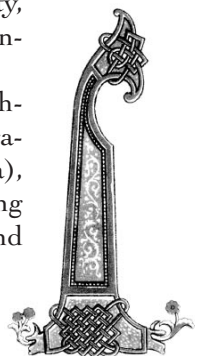
He was sent for his education first to minor seminary at Pamplona and then enrolled at the University of Paris at seventeen, receiving his first academic degree four years later. Up to this time, it seems as though he had no particular religious zeal. At the university, he and his roommate, Bl. Pierre Favre, met St. Ignatius of Loyola, and the three became fast friends. Francis had a promising academic career ahead of him as a teacher of philosophy at the University of Paris, but St. Ignatius kept repeating to him: *"For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?"* (Lk 9:25). Francis, set alight with zeal, became one of the seven founding members of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), which had its beginning in 1534 in Paris. Like his companions, he vowed not just poverty, chastity, and obedience, but also apostolic service under the direction of the Pope. For several months before his ordination as a priest he lived in Venice, where he cared for lepers. In 1537, he was ordained with the other

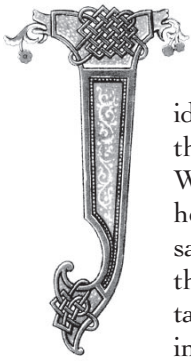
Jesuits in Venice. They went to Rome, preaching there for several more months while St. Ignatius worked to gain papal approval for the Jesuits.

In 1540, the King of Portugal asked the Pope for missionaries to preach the faith to the new Portuguese possessions in the East Indies — that is, the area comprising India, Indochina, and the vast number of islands south and east that now principally comprise modern Indonesia. Francis and another Jesuit, Simon Rodriguez, were given this mission, and in the same year Francis left Rome for Lisbon to join Rodriguez. During their stay in Lisbon, they took up residence in a hospital where they cared for the sick; they also taught and catechized there and in the city. On Sundays, they heard confessions at court, which resulted in the king asking Rodriguez to stay and only reluctantly allowing Francis to depart. (It is worth noting that Francis was appalled by Portugal's involvement in slave trading. He told the king of his fear that the king would lose his salvation because of this.)

Several months later, Francis and several Indian priests from the seminary at Goa went to the extreme southeastern coast of India opposite the island of Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka), the home of pearl fisheries. His purpose was to re-evangelize the low-caste Paravas, a people who had become Christian ten years earlier but at that time lacked a priest. He began by learning the language of the people, and taught both those who had been baptized and those who had not yet accepted the faith. He lived in the same way as the Paravas, and so many sought Baptism that, at times, he was almost too exhausted to lift his arms. This mission was one of intense joy for him. He went back to Goa to bring more help, and returned to continue the ministry he had begun, working against the terrible witness that the Portuguese traders gave of Christianity, who not only behaved unethically but also antagonized the local rulers.

Francis also began working on the southwestern tip of India, in the princely state of Travancore (part of the modern state of Kerala), there founding forty-five churches, baptizing whole villages and destroying the temples and





idols. Teaching in the local language, he taught the entire population the basics of the faith. When he had completed his task in one village, he left behind written doctrinal material in the same language and prescribed the way in which the morning and evening classes were to be taught. This was a period of enormous success; in one month he baptized more than ten thousand people. The opposition of the local rulers, some Hindu and some Islamic, rose to the level of outright violence. Several times they burned his hut while he was in it. His converts faced their own difficulties, being robbed, massacred, and carried off into slavery by their neighbors to the east. It was during his time in Travancore that he twice raised people from the dead. By request, he sent a missionary to the island of Manaar off the coast of Ceylon, which led to the martyrdom of about six hundred converts by the ruler of a city in northern Ceylon who feared a Portuguese conquest. In 1545, Francis sent a lengthy letter to the King of Portugal about the harm his subjects were doing in India and the eternal judgment the king would bear for not punishing the evildoers.

From India, Francis sailed eastward across the Bay of Bengal to the Malay peninsula, spending the last months of 1545 evangelizing the city of Malacca (modern Melaka, Malaysia). The next year, he continued eastward, between the islands of Borneo and Java, to the Molucca Islands (in modern Indonesia, between Sulawesi and New Guinea), where he spent a year and a half evangelizing on several islands. Again he wrote of his great joy in his work. It is possible, but not certain, that during this time he reached the southernmost Philippine island of Mindanao.

In 1547, he was back in Malacca, where he continued to evangelize and learned about yet another culture, Japan. He returned by way of Ceylon and the pearl fishery mission to Goa. By then, additional missionaries had arrived to consolidate his work, so he was able to attempt to evangelize Japan, where he arrived in 1549. He spent his first year learning Japanese and, with the help of his in-

terpreter, translating materials for use in preaching and catechizing. Beginning his missionary journeys through Japan, he experienced varying degrees of success, from virtually nothing at Kagoshima (the southernmost major port on the island of Kyushu), to tremendous success at Hirado (on the northwest coast of Kyushu), to only a few converts in Kyoto (on the main island of Honshu). During this period, he concluded that evangelical poverty did not have

the appeal in Japan that it had in India. In approaching the ruler of Nagate (off the southern coast of Kyushu), he dressed well, presented his companions as his attendants, claimed the status of representative of the King of Portugal, and gave gifts to Japanese dignitaries. He was honored and welcomed, housed by the authorities, and was able successfully to carry out his preaching. He followed up in the province of Bungo (part of modern Oita prefecture on

the northeast coast of Kyushu). Altogether, in the two and a half years he spent in Japan, he baptized over seven hundred people. The Christian communities that he planted in Japan were so strong that they survived, without clergy, for more than two hundred years following violent persecutions that drove the faith completely underground. In 1552 he returned to Goa, planning next to begin the conquest of China for the Lord. Traveling to China by way of Malacca, he encountered an epidemic of plague, and he helped to bring the sick to hospitals. His dream was not to be realized, for he fell ill and died on an island near the coast of China.

Francis passionately desired to spread the faith as a missionary. Like St. Paul the Apostle, to whom he is often compared in the intensity and universality of his missionary activities, he labored in many lands. His life was that of a missionary wonder. In only ten years of evangelization, energized by a boundless zeal to spread the faith, he visited countries spread over ten modern time zones, adapting his preaching to widely dissimilar cultures and baptizing over forty thousand people. Francis stirs the hearts and souls of Christians who are too often half-hearted, apathetic, and unconvincing in their witness to the faith.

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*St. Francis' missionary efforts in spreading the Gospel bore immense fruit*

