

St Francis Xavier:

"There is no better rest in this restless world than to face imminent peril of death solely for the love and service of God our Lord."

The sixteenth century was a time of change in Europe. There were conflicting developments and striking contrasts such that it is difficult to simply characterize the age. On the one hand, many of Christendom's long-standing social arrangements were tottering, leading some to think that the end of the world was near. On the other, new arrangements and new conceptions of human life were emerging, leading others to speak of the age as a new dawn, a renaissance, filled with exciting new possibilities. Again, Christian Europe was under increasing military threat from a growing Ottoman Empire that was gobbling up territory and curtailing Europe's cultural influence, even posing a threat to its existence. At the same time, the Portuguese were wresting from the Muslims their monopoly on the lucrative spice trade and were opening up the whole of Asia to Europeans, while the Spanish were founding a new empire in the Americas that would turn the Atlantic Ocean from being the limit of the West to an internal European body of water. And again, the Catholic Church, the institution that had carried Europe's spirit for a thousand years, was in severe crisis, in great need of reform, under unprecedented attack, and losing lands and peoples to the new Protestant movements. Yet even as this was happening, fresh and energetic expressions of the Catholic Faith and spirit were springing to life, while new lands and new peoples were entering the Catholic fold, transforming the Church into an international society that stretched across the globe.

According to a myth of the ancient world, the Pillars of Hercules, marking the western end of the Mediterranean Sea at the Strait of Gibraltar, were inscribed with the words *Neplus ultra*: "Beyond this point, nothing." The words were meant as a warning to mariners that they had reached the limits of the habitable world. The name "Mediterranean" meant "in the middle of things," and from Roman times onward the "Roman lake" had marked a significant European boundary, both geographically and imaginatively. But at the turn of the sixteenth century, that self-understanding was undergoing a great change of perspective. With the development of new shipbuilding and navigation techniques producing ships that could brave the waves and winds of the open ocean, the eyes of Europeans were increasingly set on the horizons, east, west, and south. When Charles V became king of Spain in 1516, he changed that ancient warning into a new call for action. He took as his personal motto - adopted as the national motto of Spain - the words *Plus Ultra*: "Further Beyond!" The astonishing missionary adventure of Francis Xavier was among the most compelling examples of this new attitude.

Even during his lifetime, and yet more after his death, Xavier came to symbolize for Europe the explosive possibilities of the new age.

Francis Xavier Is Converted to Christ: It was sometimes said of the first two great men of the Jesuit order that Ignatius was the miracle of God, and Xavier was the miracle of Ignatius. A fellow Basque from a similar social background, Francis Xavier had been at the University of Paris for three years before Ignatius arrived, and they became involved with one another almost by accident. Xavier was a young man of strong personality, ardent and forceful emotion, and great charm of personality. He was also aimless and indolent, regularly out of money, and possessed of an unfocused ambition that left him ready to move with the current of life wherever it might take him. He happened to be rooming at the College of Sainte-Barbe with a young Frenchman named Peter Favre when Ignatius came to Paris in 1528 and lodged next door at College Montaigu. Favre was among the first of many students attracted to Ignatius and soon became one of his most fervent disciples. Xavier, on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with the strange and masterful vagabond who had captured his friend's imagination. But he found it impossible to avoid him. When Ignatius completed his Latin studies and was admitted to Sainte-Barbe, he was given lodgings—much to Xavier's disgust—with Favre and himself.

Ignatius took an immediate liking to his fellow countryman, perhaps perceiving what he might become if he were once converted to Christ, and he planned a careful campaign to win Xavier to the cause. It was a long and steady siege, lasting four years, about which we have little information. Ignatius later gave an inkling of what the time had required of him when he commented that Xavier "was the lumpiest dough he had ever kneaded."¹ The crisis point came when Favre was away for an extended period, and Xavier was left to face Ignatius alone. The master angler was rewarded for his patient labor: Xavier took the bait and underwent a powerful conversion. The effect was volcanic. From that point on, during the remaining nineteen years of his life, Xavier would be bound tightly to Ignatius in mind and spirit, bringing all his passion, his strength of will, his immense capacity for hard work, and his chivalric loyalty under the purpose and direction of his friend and spiritual father.

The next seven years after his conversion were for Xavier a time of preparation for a mission he had not yet fully glimpsed, during which he laid the foundations of a deep life of prayer and a pattern of tireless apostolic activity. At this period Xavier's life had the internally devout and externally haphazard quality of the band of men forming around Ignatius. He was one of the seven companions who made

vows at Montmartre in 1534. Then late in the next year, with Ignatius off on a visit to Spain, he and his companions set out for Venice traveling overland by foot, taking a roundabout way to avoid a zone of war. According to their vow they would then embark on their proposed mission to the Turks in the Holy Land. They found Ignatius in Venice ahead of them, and while waiting for their plans to ripen, they served in hospitals that had recently been established by Jerome Emiliani and Gaetano da Thiene, both of whom were founders of new religious orders and who would one day be canonized. Xavier was ordained a priest at this time, along with Ignatius and those among the other companions who were not yet in orders. Finding the door to the Holy Land closed due to war, the group scattered, converging on Rome to present themselves to the pope.

On the way to Rome, Xavier stopped for some months in Bologna along with Nicholas Bobadilla, another of the companions. It was in Bologna that Xavier's gift and zeal for missionary work began powerfully to show itself. His approach was direct and arresting. He would go to one of the city's crowded piazzas, wave his hat and call to the onlookers to gather their attention, and despite his serious lack of polished Italian, would hold them entranced by his force of personality and the potency of his faith. "After Mass," reported one who witnessed his activity there, "he would spend the entire day hearing confessions, visiting the sick in the hospitals and prisoners in the jails, serving the poor, preaching in the piazzas, and teaching children or other uninstructed person's Christian doctrine." Already at this early stage, Xavier's mind was moving toward the East. "He used to talk frequently and fervently," a priest friend from Bologna remembered, "about the affairs of India and the conversion to our holy faith of its great gentile population. He had his heart set on making the voyage and was all afire to accomplish it before he died."

Xavier traveled to Rome in the spring of 1538, the last of the group of companions to arrive. Now for the first time, the group began to consider together the possibility of establishing themselves as an order. After long discussions far into the night during the spring and summer of 1539, they wrote a short document outlining the structure and aims of their proposed society and presented it to Pope Paul III. The idea gained the pope's immediate approval, but due to powerful opposition from other members of the Curia, it was a year before the new order was formally instituted. Before that event came about, Xavier would already have departed from Rome on mission. It is a sign of the impressive depth and clarity of Ignatius's spiritual training that Xavier, who would never again live with Ignatius and his brothers but would be separated from them for many years and by thousands of miles, was so well able to incarnate and express the spirit of the new religious order.

The particular charism or ministry of the new Society, as it was expressed in that first document, was so broad as to include virtually all kinds of priestly ministry. They were to be a community founded "for the advancement of souls in Christian life and doctrine and for the propagation of the faith by the ministry of the word, by spiritual exercises, by works of charity, and expressly by the instruction in Christianity of children and the uneducated." Certain traditional practices usual among religious orders to help maintain unity and cohesion were explicitly absent, notably the duty of praying the Office together. With such a broad scope of apostolate and so little to bind them together in common life, how were they to keep their focus? What was to be their unifying principle? That principle was to be found in the famous "fourth vow" of the Jesuits, obedience to the pope. Here is how the document put the ideal:

"All the companions should know and daily bear in mind, not only when they first make their profession but as long as they live, that this entire Society and each one individually are soldiers of God under faithful obedience to our most holy lord Paul III and his successors and are thus under the command of the Vicar of Christ and his divine power not only as having the obligation to him which is common to all clerics, but also as being so bound by the bond of a vow that whatever His Holiness commands pertaining to the advancement of souls and the propagation of the faith we must immediately carry out, without any evasion or excuse as far as in us lies, whether he sends us to the Turks or to the New World or to the Lutherans or to others, be they infidel or faithful.

All aspects of the common life were to be subordinated to this readiness for immediate action in whatever direction was necessary under the orders of the pope. This was the "light infantry" model, under the eye of a commanding general, that Ignatius and his brothers placed at the service of the Church.

The men who founded the new Society of Jesus had made a strong impression in Rome and elsewhere, and there were increasing requests for their services. Among the most insistent came from the king of Portugal, whose overseas settlements and colonies were in desperate need of missionaries. Two of the companions had been promised for the Indian mission, neither of them Xavier. But one of the two, Bobadilla, got seriously ill, leaving only one among the companions still free. "Francis," Ignatius said to him, "you know that by order of his Holiness two of us have to go to India, and we chose Bobadilla as one of the two. He cannot go now owing to his illness, nor can the Ambassador wait until he gets better. This is your enterprise." Xavier's response was immediate: "Well, yes! Here I am!"⁵ The next day he left with the Portuguese ambassador for Lisbon. He was never to return.

Xavier's Missionary Journeys: Europe had long been isolated from the lands and markets of south and east Asia, due to Muslim control of the trade routes both overland and by sea. During the fifteenth century the Portuguese began to explore ever further afield. Columbus had first sailed westward because he wanted to get to "the Indies." He found instead a huge continent that proved to be its own theater of exploration and settlement, with the lure of silver and gold to make the venture worthwhile. To the east were the ancient and fabled lands of Asia with all their exoticism, their large populations, and their wealth. Of most interest to the European merchants were the spices so coveted in European kitchens. In 1498, the Portuguese mariner Vasco da Gama rounded the southern cape of Africa and arrived in India, bypassing the normal trade routes. In 1510, the city of Goa on India's west coast was conquered by Afonso de Albuquerque, and from there the Portuguese began to stretch out a mercantile empire that gave them access to the markets and materials of the whole of Asia. They established themselves in Malacca in what is now Malaysia, and then went further east to the Moluccas (the famous Spice Islands, now part of Indonesia) and to East Timor and New Guinea. They initiated relations with Thailand and Japan and eventually gained control of the island of Macau off the coast of China. As Xavier was serving under the patronage of the Portuguese crown, his missionary journeys followed the path staked out by the Portuguese.

To understand the great significance of Francis Xavier to his age, it is necessary to catch something of the excitement that was aroused in Europe by the opening up of the globe. Xavier spent only ten years as a missionary in Asia, but those years flamed like a comet above the skies of Europe. In the complex world of western Christendom, the allure of glory, gold, and immortal souls for Christ were smelted together in an alloy that we now find difficult to comprehend. Europe followed Xavier's missionary exploits through the letters he sent to his Jesuit brothers, some of which they circulated and published. Though he hardly knew it and would not have cared about it, Xavier was a famous man in Europe before he died. He seemed to be accomplishing on a spiritual plane the sort of conquests that other explorers and conquistadors were gaining in more worldly terms.

To briefly set out Xavier's missionary itinerary gives some sense of his remarkable labors. He set sail from Lisbon in 1541. Rounding the Cape of Good Hope, he put in at Mozambique on the southeast coast of Africa, where he worked among the locals for six months while he waited for favorable winds. He arrived at the Indian port city of Goa in the spring of 1542. After four months there, he traveled south to Cochin on the southern coast of India and spent more than a year as an Ion missionary among the pearl-diving population. He then returned to Goa for some

months and returned to Cochin for another year. In 1545 he took ship for Malacca in Malaysia. By this time he had become well known, and people there were awaiting him. In early 1546, he left Malacca and journeyed east to the Moluccas and the people of the Spice Islands. The next year he returned to Malacca, where he remained for another six months. He then journeyed back to Goa, visiting along the way all the groups among whom he had established missions. He then spent more than a year in Goa, where among other duties he attended to the growing Jesuit mission - by 1548 there were seventeen Jesuits in India. In 1549 he headed back east, arriving in Japan, where he opened a mission and stayed for two years. He then returned again to Goa. In 1552 he set out from Goa one last time, hoping to gain access to China. In December of that year, Francis Xavier died on the island of Shangchuan, waiting for a boat that would take him to the Chinese mainland.

The distance covered in all this travel is staggering. Xavier voyaged tens of thousands of miles by ship, at a time when it was not rare for half of the passengers to die on any given voyage. He walked many hundreds of miles, going from village to village among the peoples he was serving. He faced constant exposure to heat and storms, and was regularly sick with unnamed tropical diseases. Beyond his travels, he kept up a regimen of extraordinary missionary activity. He slept only two or three hours a night, spending the remaining hours in prayer. He ate little, paying no attention to his physical health. He preached and taught incessantly. According to best estimates, he baptized something like thirty thousand people. He heard confessions by the thousands, visited and anointed the sick, said masses for lepers, and presided at burials. He wrote songs for children and the illiterate with lyrics taken from the words of the Creed. Never a particularly brilliant student, he spent long tedious hours attempting to learn something of the languages of the various peoples among whom he served. He organized the mission work of the other Jesuits in his care.

One of his longtime associates who had known him in Portugal and in the Indian mission remembered his extraordinary energy: "No human being could have done what he did or have lived as he lived without being full of the Holy Spirit. ... If he could find time in the night, as he never could during the day, he gave himself completely to prayer and contemplation. Day and night, he consoled men, hearing their confessions, visiting them when sick, begging alms for them when they were poor. He had nothing of his own, and on himself never spent a penny. As much as one could dream of a man doing he did, and more. No wonder stories and legends sprouted around him like flowers. Those who watched his indefatigable activity and his unrelenting zeal were not surprised that Xavier died after a seemingly short

ten years of mission; they were amazed that he lasted half that time.

Xavier's Missionary Principles: Goa, Xavier's first Indian destination, was an immense and bustling city, many times as large as Rome or London. When he first landed there, Xavier was nearly overwhelmed by his sense of his own inadequacies. Soon after arriving he wrote to his brothers: "In God's name and for His glory, tell me fully and clearly what ought to be my method of approach to the pagans and Moors of the country to which I am now going. It is my hope that by means of you God will teach me how I must proceed in order to convert them to His holy faith. Your letters will show me the blunders to avoid, the wrong methods which I must change." He was also sobered by the great missionary need. "Dust and ashes as I am, and made to feel still more puny and despicable by witnessing with my own eyes the need of priests out here, I would be forever the slave of all who had the heart to come and labor in this vast vineyard of the Lord."

But Xavier was never one to moon over difficulties. His natural energetic optimism, deepened and purified by an intense confidence in God, soon saw him up and active. Here is how one of his missionary associates described his approach to bringing the Gospel to the Goans: "He went up and down the streets and squares with a bell in his hand, crying to the children and others to come to the instructions.

The novelty of the proceeding, never seen before in Goa, brought a large crowd around him which he then led to the church. He began by singing the lessons which he had rhymed and then made the children sing them so that they might become the better fixed in their memories. Afterwards he explained each point in the simplest way, using only such words as his young audience could readily understand. By this method, which has since been adopted everywhere in the Indies, he so deeply engrained the truths and precepts of the faith in the hearts of the people that men and women, children and old folk, took to singing the Ten Commandments while they walked the streets, as did the fisherman in his boat and the laborers in the fields, for their own entertainment and recreation.

Francis was a great heart rather than a profound analytical thinker; but his intuitive capacity for reaching people helped him to pioneer methods of evangelization that put an emphasis on finding points of contact between the Gospel and the local culture. He would then build his missionary enterprise around those areas of understanding, an approach that has since come to be called missionary enculturation. Xavier's instinctive sense of the principle of enculturation can be seen in his dealings with the Japanese. In India, and later in Malaysia and

Indonesia, Xavier worked largely among the poorest and least educated classes, adapting his method to their abilities. In coming to Japan, Xavier recognized that he was dealing with a highly sophisticated and well-educated populace. He abandoned his earlier method, giving more attention to the forms of Japanese life: manners of politeness, care in dress, and delicacy of communication. He knew that waving his hat and ringing a bell in the town square was no way to win a hearing for the Gospel among the Japanese. The point may seem obvious to us, but it was revolutionary in its time. Some years later the missionary principles pioneered by Xavier would be developed in a more systematic way by his successors in the Jesuit mission to Asia, Alessandro Valignano and Matteo Ricci.

The most powerful principle at work in Xavier's missionary activity, if it can be called a principle, was his evident love for those he was evangelizing. He genuinely cared for the people among whom he worked, and his warm-hearted concern for them broke down every barrier of language and culture. In this Xavier transcended his age. According to the biases of his birth and background, Xavier should have had every reason for despising these people. They were uneducated, poor, and, worst of all, pagan. Many Europeans of his time would have viewed them as little more than animals. But not Xavier. He wrote to one of his fellow missionaries: "I entreat you to bear yourself very lovingly towards those people. Learn to pardon and support their weaknesses very patiently, reflecting that if they are not good now, they will be some day." He fought against the typical attitude of disdain among the Portuguese for the native populations among whom they lived. To young Jesuit recruits who were just coming to the mission, he wrote: "Be careful never to criticize the native Christians in the presence of the Portuguese. Rather must you take their part and speak up in their defense, for they have been so short a time Christians and have so small a grasp of the faith that the Portuguese ought to be surprised to find them as good as they are. Try with all your might, Fathers, to win the love of your people, doing whatever you do for them with words of love." He had a special delight for the Japanese: "They are the best race yet discovered," he wrote, "and I think that among non-Christians their match will not easily be found." It was the strength of this heart of love, a reflection of the heart of Christ, that made Xavier so eager to win recruits to the mission. Two years after his arrival in India, he wrote a letter to his Jesuit brothers that was widely circulated and that created a storm in Europe, inspiring many young men to sign up for missionary work.

Multitudes out here fail to become Christians only because there is nobody prepared for the holy task of instructing them. I have often felt strongly moved to descend on the universities of Europe, especially Paris and its Sorbonne, and to cry

aloud like a madman to those who have more learning than good will to employ it advantageously, telling them how many souls miss Heaven and fall into Hell through their negligence! I fear many university men pursue their studies and conform to regulations purely in order to attain to dignities, benefices, bishoprics, which gained, they say, it will be time enough to serve God. ... What multitudes of gentiles would become Christians if only there were priests to help them!... Out here, people flock into the Church in such numbers that my arms are often almost paralyzed with baptizing, and my voice gives out completely through repeating endlessly in their tongue the Creed, the commandments, and the prayers.

Xavier's love for those he was evangelizing could provoke a stern reproof from him toward the Portuguese who maltreated them and gave a poor example of the Christian Faith. He regularly chided government officials who turned their eyes from illegal and unjust practices for the sake of personal gain. Six years into his mission he wrote a letter to King John of Portugal, who was interested in the spread of the Faith and had originally sought Jesuits for the Indian mission. Xavier was angry about the depredations of his appointed governors:

Should he [the governor in question] neglect to carry out your Highness's intentions of greatly promoting the growth of our holy Faith, assure him that you are determined to punish him and tell him with a solemn oath that, when he returns to Portugal, you will declare all his property forfeit, and besides put him in irons for several years ... If the Governor is brought to understand that you certainly mean what you say, the whole island of Ceylon will be Christian in a year, and so also will be many kings, as those of Malabar, Cape Comorin, and several other places.

But if not, "your Highness need not count on any increase of our holy Faith nor on the perseverance of those at present Christians, no matter how many appointments and dispositions you make." A bold letter to send to a king.

Xavier's love for his people was more than repaid in their love for him. His engaging personality and his tireless service won their hearts and drew them to him. Whenever he was about to leave one of the missions, the people would gather around him and beg him to stay. Xavier wrote of one such experience, "When the time came to leave, I embarked about midnight so as to avoid the weeping and mourning of my devoted friends, men and women. But my friends found me out and I could not hide from them. The night and the parting from these my spiritual sons and daughters helped me to feel my unworthiness." A Japanese man who had first sought Xavier out about the possibility of coming to his people said of him: "I

would lay down my life a hundred times for the love I bear him."

Xavier's Last Journey: Xavier had been in the Indian mission for ten years, and away from Rome for twelve, when Ignatius, his friend and superior, thought the time had come for him to return to Europe. No doubt Ignatius would delight in seeing him again, but more to the point was his conviction that Xavier could do more than anyone else to speak to European authorities about the needs and possibilities of the overseas missions. He therefore sent him the directive:

"Looking always to the greater service of God and the help of souls in those parts and considering how much their good depends on Portugal, I have determined to order you in virtue of holy obedience to take the first opportunity of a good passage to Portugal, in the name of Christ our Lord." But by the time the letter arrived in Goa, Francis had been dead for seven months.

During his time in Japan, Xavier had heard about China. He knew nothing of its language and little of its customs; but he knew that it was a large and civilized country, ruled by law, and highly respected by the Japanese. With that little bit of knowledge, but with a great desire to spread the Gospel, he set out to conquer the Middle Kingdom for Christ. "I am in great hope," he wrote to Ignatius, "that by the labors of the Society of Jesus both Chinese and Japanese will abandon their idolatries and adore God and Jesus Christ." He took four men with him. The prospects of their getting into China were not high, but Xavier was not easily daunted. They made their long way from Goa to the island of Shangchuan, not far from Canton. There they waited, Xavier looking out day after day upon the sea for the merchant vessel that would take them across to the mainland. The promised ship never came, and Xavier took ill. After a few weeks of sickness, the seemingly unstoppable dynamo of missionary energy died a quiet death, calling on the names of Jesus and Mary.

There might seem something akin to the hopeless exploits of Cervantes's Don Quixote in Xavier's attempt to master the Chinese Empire in such a fashion. But his unlikely missionary initiative toward that great civilization can better be read in the realm of the Spirit than by its immediate practical possibilities. The Jesuit who did eventually found a Chinese mission, Matteo Ricci, noted Xavier's achievement: "All the Blessed Father's stratagems for entering China fell to the ground, but we may well believe that if he could not obtain from God the privilege for himself, he obtained it in Heaven for us his companions who, against all human hope, succeeded when he was thirty years dead."

Xavier's remains slowly made their way back to Goa. When his body finally

reached the city, there was a spontaneous upsurge of emotion. Bells rang, thousands of people gathered, and the whole city was stirred to its depths. For four days crowds thronged into the church where the great missionary lay, for the chance to touch or kiss the body, which, though almost a year dead, was un-decayed and fresh. A year and a half later, the body was exhumed and attested by an attending physician to be both un-embalmed and still preserved. A century and a half later the shrine was opened yet again, and the body was found still to be in a remarkable state of preservation. Like his body, Xavier's memory has remained fresh. And though he was never able to return to Rome, his right hand and forearm, the one with which he performed so many baptisms, was brought back to the Church of the Gesu, where it lies in close proximity to Loyola's remains. There is a fittingness in this final union of the two friends. Ignatius had kneaded more of his own missionary spirit into that lumpy dough of Francis Xavier than into any other, and Xavier had carried that spirit with him, united to his own indomitable will and deep faith, even to the ends of the earth.