

Homily

As a boy, Francis Xavier could always get people to like him. He was very popular and had a great gift for friendship that endured throughout his life. Francis was born in Spain just over five hundred years ago, the youngest of six children. His parents were excellent Catholics and brought their children up in the faith. When he was 19, Xavier went to the most famous university in Europe, the University of Paris. There he was popular with the other young students, and did well at his studies and at sports. He also joined in with the wilder students who were interested in having a good time at uni – drinking, fighting, gambling. He shared rooms with two other students. One was Pierre Favre, a sensitive, likeable Frenchman, who had grown up as a shepherd boy. His other room-mate, though, Xavier did get on so well with at first. This was another Spanish nobleman, Ignatius Loyola. Xavier thought that he was a disgrace to the nobility. He would spend his holidays begging money so that he could keep studying. Also, he was much older – he was already in his mid-thirties but still at Uni – surely he wasn't very bright!

Still, as Xavier got to know Ignatius, he found that he was a good listener, and Xavier would pour out all his ambitions to him. He also helped Xavier to find students to tutor so that he could make some money and become better known. Ignatius began to talk to Xavier about spiritual matters, sharing his own conversion story and how he had given his life over completely to Christ. He recognised that Xavier had big ambitions, big desires – to do well in his career, to be famous and well-liked. But were these desires and ambitions really big enough? Were they going to satisfy his heart? Ignatius led Xavier, over some years, to face Christ's question: "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world, but to lose his soul? So he led Xavier to make Christ the centre of his heart's desire, and to see that being part of Christ's plan was the only thing big enough to really fill his heart.

In 1534, when Xavier was 28, he, Ignatius, Faber, and four other companions took the religious vows of poverty and chastity. In this way, the religious order called the Society of Jesus or the Jesuits was born, with Xavier as one of the first members. They went to Rome and offered themselves to the Pope to do whatever work he wanted them to. While other companions were sent on various missions throughout Europe, Xavier worked in Rome as secretary to Ignatius who was busy organising this new religious order which kept attracting vocations.

And now the story turns East. Portugal at this time had created a vast empire in India and further East, and Goa was the centre of this empire, known as Goa the Golden. But while the churches may have been golden, the practice of the faith was not - many of the Portuguese who went there to get rich soon stopped practising their faith. And the local people, who were made slaves, saw little to attract them to the Catholic faith in the lives of the Portuguese. So Ignatius was happy to agree to the request of the King of Portugal to send two Jesuits to Goa. One of his choices got very sick, and so Ignatius asked his secretary and dear friend, Francis Xavier. Immediately, and with enormous generosity, Xavier said yes, and left for Portugal on a day's notice! He would not see Ignatius again. Famously, Ignatius missioned him by saying, "Go and set the world on fire." He certainly did.

After a year's delay in Lisbon, Xavier finally set sail on his 35th birthday in 1541. As he left, he wrote to his fellow Jesuits in Rome: "You will not be able to write more than once a year. But when you do write, give me news of everybody by name. Make your letters so long that I shall have a week's reading in each. And, above all, pray that we all may meet again in heaven." The sea journey would take over a year, with all the hardships of life at sea in those days – hardly a holiday cruise. Once in Goa, the governor pressured him to stay in palatial quarters befitting someone who was the Pope's official ambassador, as Francis was. But that was not his way. He went to live beside the hospital, and took up working there, amongst his other labours. Now these were nothing like modern hospitals – one writer describes them as "places to which the poorest of the poor, who had no one to care for them, dragged themselves when sick – generally to die there, unattended. They were places of horror and filth and unimaginable human misery and suffering." He also lived very simply. His one cloak had so often been mended and patched that someone joked it could be

used as a chessboard. Xavier asked the man for money to get a new cloak. Then he immediately gave the money to some beggars.

His ministry in Goa was much the same as the many places he would visit – a tireless round of preaching, catechising Portuguese and Indians in the faith, working in the hospital, visiting prisons, tending the lepers - all the corporal and spiritual works of mercy to which we are called. His gentle charm and patience made him a welcome guest in people's homes, where he would gently urge people to mend their ways and live their faith more fully.

After a time, Xavier felt drawn in prayer to go to the Paravas on the Fishery Coast on the south-eastern side of India. Here he worked among the pearl-divers who were exploited by their chiefs and lived in great poverty. They were further exploited by wild pirates who came to raid the villages. If Xavier was there, he would stride out to meet the pirates, with his crucifix held high, and command them to leave. And they did! That same crucifix features in one of the most famous stories of Xavier. While at sea one time, there was a huge storm. Francis tried to calm it by holding his crucifix in the water and praying, but he dropped the crucifix. A few days later, though, as he was walking along the shore, he saw a crab approaching with the crucifix in its claws. The Fisheries Coast was the scene of the huge numbers of baptisms for which Xavier is famous. He patiently taught people the faith, making use of an interpreter. He would make up catechetical songs for people to sing in their own language, and had the common Catholic prayers translated as well. When he decided they were ready for baptism, he would baptize them. It was here, it seems that he baptized some 10,000 people in all.

But still Xavier desired more - to plant the seed in more and more places. He went to Sri Lanka, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Japan, ever ready to speak of Christ – to pass on freely the treasure that he had freely received. All of this meant many adventures and dangers. One writer wrote: “He had been twice shipwrecked; and once had floated on a plank in the sea for three days. He had said Mass on a volcanic island during an earthquake so violent that he thought the altar would collapse. He had travelled in rough seas in frail native boats. He had been threatened with violence, and with death by poison and the knife. He had stilled storms at sea, cured the sick and, even, raised a dead child to life. He had not been without enemies, but had shown himself unafraid in every danger.”

In all this, it was his prayer and faith in Jesus that sustained him. When he was about to go to a native tribe renowned for their skills with poison, his friends tried to stop him. He refused to be deterred, and would not take the antidotes they offered him. Instead, he said, he wished his hope to be in God alone. This had been his way all along. On his way to India, he had written of his lack of any of the gifts needed to preach the gospel in these foreign lands. For many of us, knowing we had no talents for a task might lead us to despair. For Xavier, though, this knowledge gave him “much consolation”. Why? Because he knew he was doing what God had called him to, and so had a sure hope that God would give him all he needed for his service.

Working in Japan, Xavier realised the great respect the Japanese had for China as the source of culture. He found the educated people questioning how the Gospel could be true if the Chinese were not Christians. It seemed the best way to convert Japan would be to convert China first! Before going there, though, he needed to return to Goa and attend to various matters under his care as superior for the Jesuits in the region. Before he left Goa for the journey to China, he called his friends together, and prophesied what would happen: “Live on earth in such a way that we may meet in heaven. The end has come for me on earth. I shall not return alive to Goa; but my body will be brought here.” So it was. He got as close to mainland China as Shengchuan, an island about 14 km from the coast, but was stranded there until someone would dare to take him to the mainland where those landing risked death by torture. Xavier lived alone on the island with a young Chinese man he had converted, while the crew of the ship he had come on lived on board. After a couple of months of waiting for a ship, he caught a very serious fever. After being wracked by this fever for nearly two weeks, he breathed his last about two in the morning on 3rd December. He was only 46. To the end, his heart was on fire with desire to fulfil the mission he'd been given, to set the world on fire with the love of Christ.

Next morning the crew of the ship took his body and put it in a coffin filled with quick lime so that his flesh would be consumed and they could transfer his bones back to Goa. They buried the coffin until the storm season was over. After two months, they were ready to try sailing and dug up the coffin, only to find that his body had not decomposed, and his face was bright and smiling. So they took the body back to Malacca. There, plague had been raging. But the plague stopped suddenly when the ship arrived there with Xavier's body. Miraculous cures were also reported by those who went to pray at his body in the Church before it was buried again. Nine months later, when they were ready to take his body to Goa, it was still perfectly whole. In Goa, miracles were also reported with the arrival of his body.

In 1614, the Jesuit Superior General decided they should have a relic of this famous Jesuit saint and co-founder of the Order in Rome. So he arranged for the right forearm to be brought to Rome. This is the relic we have before us today, giving us a direct physical connection to this amazing saint – missionary, adventurer, preacher, baptiser, miracle-worker, friend, man of prayer and of the Church, man of faith, hope, and love, disciple of Jesus, former patron of Australia and patron of Goa, India, Japan, missionaries, and navigators.

It *is* a blessing to be here in the presence of this sacred relic, and after Mass, we'll all have a chance to come up close and pray before the relic – closer, in fact, than anyone can get to it in the Church in Rome where it normally resides. But let's not forget what this is about, and where Xavier would want us to focus during this Mass. In images of Xavier, we often see this arm holding a crucifix. That's where Xavier's always pointed us – to Christ, the one to whom he gave his whole life, heart and soul and mind, the one treasure he wanted to share with others. If we are rightly excited about being so close to something so tangible that connects us with this great saint, let us not fail to be excited about the miracle that will happen on this altar and on every altar when Mass is celebrated. Here we connect, in a real tangible way, not simply with part of the dead body of a saint. Here we connect with and receive the living body and blood, soul and divinity of the one whom Xavier called Lord and Master – our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is the source of all grace. Let us not forget that any grace we receive by our veneration of this relic has its source in the One we receive today, and can receive every week and every day if we wish – the Word made flesh, eternal Son of the Father, Light from Light, true God from true God, to whom be all praise, glory and honour, forever and ever. Amen.

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