



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 17 May 2023

[Multimedia]

Catechesis. The passion for evangelization: the apostolic zeal of the believer. 13. Witnesses: *Saint Francis Xavier*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Continuing our itinerary of the Catecheses with some exemplary models of apostolic zeal — let us recall that we are speaking about evangelization, about apostolic zeal, about bearing the name of Jesus, and that there are many women and men in history who have done this in an exemplary way. Today, for example, we choose as an example Saint Francis Xavier, who some say is considered the greatest missionary of modern times. But it is not possible to say who is the greatest, who is the least, because there are many hidden missionaries who, even today, do much more than Saint Francis Xavier. And Xavier is the patron of missions, like Saint Therese of the Child Jesus. And a missionary is great when he or she goes. And there are many, many priests, lay people, women religious who go to missions, also from Italy, and many of you. I see it, for example, when I am presented with the life history of a priest, as a candidate to be [appointed] bishop: he spent 10 years on mission in that place... This is great: to leave your own country to preach the Gospel. This is apostolic zeal. And we have to nurture this a great deal. And looking at these men, at these women, we learn.

And Saint Francis Xavier was born into a noble but impoverished family in Navarre, northern Spain, in 1506. He went to study in Paris — he was a worldly young man, intelligent, good. There,

he met Ignatius of Loyola, who made him do spiritual exercises and changed his life. And he left all his worldly career, to become a missionary. He became a Jesuit, took his vows. Then he became a priest and, sent to the East, he went to evangelize. At that time, the journeys of the missionaries to the East meant being sent to unknown worlds. And he went, because he was filled with apostolic zeal.

He was the first of a numerous band of passionate missionaries in modern times, to depart, ready to endure immense hardships and dangers, to reach lands and meet peoples from completely unknown cultures and languages, driven only by the powerful desire to make Jesus Christ and his Gospel known.

In just over 11 years, he accomplished an extraordinary task. He was a missionary for more or less 11 years. Voyages by ship were very harsh and they were perilous at the time. Many people died en route due to shipwrecks or disease. Today unfortunately, they die because we let them die in the Mediterranean. Francis Xavier spent more than three and a half years on ships, a third of the entire duration of his mission. He spent three and a half years on ships to get to India, then from India to Japan.

He arrived in Goa, India, the capital of the Portuguese East, the cultural and commercial capital. Francis Xavier set up his base there, but did not remain there. He went on to evangelize the poor fishermen of the southern coast of India, teaching catechism and prayers to children, baptizing and caring for the sick. Then, while praying one night at the tomb of the apostle Saint Bartholomew, he felt he needed to go beyond India. He left the work he had already initiated in good hands and courageously set sail for the Maluku Islands, the most distant islands of the Indonesian archipelago. There were no horizons for these people; they went beyond... What courage these holy missionaries had! And today's missionaries too, even if they do not spend three months on a ship, but go on a plane for 24 hours. But it is the same thing there. They need to settle there, and travel many kilometres and immerse themselves in forests. And in the Maluku Islands, Xavier translated the catechism into the local language and taught the [people] to sing the catechism, because it can be learned better by singing. He entered through song. We understand his feelings from his letters. He wrote: "All these dangers and discomforts, when borne for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, are treasures filled with heavenly consolations, so much so that [...] one might lose one's eyesight from weeping so abundantly the sweetest tears of joy" (*Letter to the Society at Rome*, 21 January 1548. In H.J. Coleridge (Ed.), *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, (Vol. I, p. 387). Burns and Oates). He cried for joy when beholding God's work.

One day, in India, he met someone from Japan who spoke to him about his distant country, where no European missionary had ever ventured. Francis Xavier felt the restlessness of the apostle, of going beyond, and decided to depart as soon as possible, and he arrived there after an adventurous journey on a junk belonging to a Chinese man. His three years in Japan were very difficult due to the climate, opposition and his ignorance of the language. Here too, however, the

seeds planted would bear great fruit.

In Japan, the great dreamer, Xavier, understood that the decisive country for his mission in Asia was another: China. With its culture, its history, its size, it exercised de facto dominance over that part of the world. Even today, China is a cultural centre with a vast history, a beautiful history. He thus returned to Goa, and shortly afterwards embarked again, hoping to enter China. But his plan failed: he died at the gates of China, on an island, the small island of Sancian (Shangchuan), in front of the Chinese shoreline, waiting in vain to be able to land on the mainland near Canton. On 3 December 1552, he died in total abandonment, with only a Chinese man standing beside to watch over him. Thus ended the earthly journey of Francis Xavier. He had aged, how old was he? Already 80? No.... He was only 46 years old. He had spent his life zealously in the missions. He left Spain, a highly developed country, and arrived in the most developed country at that time — China — and died at the threshold of great China, accompanied by a Chinese man. It was highly symbolic.

His intense activity was always joined with prayer, with the mystical and contemplative union with God. He never abandoned prayer because he knew that strength came from there. Wherever he went, he took great care of the sick, the poor and children. He was not an “aristocratic” missionary. He always went with the most in need, the children who were most in need of instruction, of catechesis. The poor, the sick... He specifically went to the boundaries of caring, where he grew in greatness. Christ’s love was the strength that drove him to the furthest frontiers, with constant toil and danger, overcoming setbacks, disappointments and discouragement; indeed, giving him consolation and joy in following and serving Him to the end.

May Saint Francis Xavier, who did all these great things, in much poverty and with such courage, give us some of this zeal, of this zeal to live the Gospel and to proclaim the Gospel. To the many young people who feel restless today and do not know what to do with that restlessness, I say: Look to Francis Xavier, look at the horizons of the world, look at the people who are in great need, look at the many people who are suffering, so many people who need Jesus. And have the courage to go. Today too, there are courageous young people. I am thinking of the many missionaries, for example, in Papua New Guinea. I am thinking of my friends, young people who are in the Diocese of Vanimo, of all those who went to evangelize in the wake of Francis Xavier. May the Lord grant us all the joy to evangelize, the joy to uphold this message, which is so beautiful, which makes us, and everyone, happy.

Special Greetings

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today’s Audience, especially the groups from England, Scotland, India, Indonesia, Korea, Taiwan, Canada

and the United States of America. In the joy of the Risen Christ, I invoke upon you and your families the loving mercy of God our Father. May the Lord bless you all!

Lastly, as usual I turn to young people, to the sick, to the elderly and to newlyweds. The Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord which we will celebrate tomorrow invites us to look at the moment in which before ascending into heaven, Jesus entrusts the Apostles with the mandate to bring his message of salvation to the ends of the world. Dear young people, especially you students from the many schools that are present here, welcoming Christ's missionary mandate, strive to put your enthusiasm at the service of the Gospel. You, dear people who are sick, and elderly people, live united to the Lord in the certainty of offering a precious contribution to the growth of the Kingdom of God on earth. And you, dear newlyweds, make your families be places where one learns to love God and to be his joyful witnesses.

And let us all pray to the Lord for beloved Ukraine. There is much suffering there, much suffering. Let us pray for the wounded, for the children, for those who have died, for the return of peace.

I offer my blessing to all of you.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on apostolic zeal, we now turn to Saint Francis Xavier, the patron of the Catholic missions. Born in Spain, Francis studied in Paris, where he met Saint Ignatius of Loyola and, together with a few companions, formed the Society of Jesus, placing themselves at the service of the Pope for the most urgent needs of the Church of their time. The sixteenth century, the age of discovery, called for a great missionary outreach. Francis set out for the East Indies, where, starting in Goa, he carried out an intense activity of preaching, baptizing, catechizing and caring for the sick. From India, he passed to the Maluku islands and from there to Japan. Unable to fulfil his dream of entering China, Francis died, at only forty-six years of age, on the nearby island of Shangchuan. His heroic zeal for evangelization was the fruit of a life of deep prayer and loving union with the person of Jesus Christ. May the example of Saint Francis Xavier inspire our own efforts to advance the Church's mission, as joyful witnesses to the risen Lord and his saving word.