



A Life-Changing Meeting

December 3rd marks the feast of St Francis Xavier, often called the co-founder of the Jesuits.

Pat Corkery, a Jesuit scholastic teaching in Gonzaga College, gives us a take on his life from a contemporary point of view.

Can you think of a time when one person entering your life changed it completely? It can be a good thing, and at other times the consequences might be unwanted. In the lives of the saints, we have many examples of times when such an encounter transformed the saint's life. This is especially true of St Francis Xavier: his friendship with St Ignatius of Loyola would turn his whole world upside-down.

The contrast between the beginning and end of St Francis Xavier's life could not have been greater. He was born in a castle in the Basque region of Spain and died in a makeshift hut a few miles off the southern coast of China. His journey took him across the world, carried continually by his desire to bring God's word to people who did not know God. St Francis Xavier's encounter with St Ignatius at the University of Paris transformed him into the greatest missionary the world has known since apostolic times.



Birthplace of St Francis Xavier

St Francis Xavier was twenty-three when he first met Ignatius at the University of Paris in 1529. At this stage, Xavier and Pierre Favre had been roommates for four years. Xavier was friendly, jovial, outgoing, energetic, and an exceptional athlete. He came to Paris with dreams of compensating for the personal loss his family had experienced. When he was twelve, he watched the towers of his family castle being torn down at the King of Spain's orders. As it happens, Ignatius had been an enemy of the Xavier family at the Battle of Pamplona in 1521.



By the time Ignatius arrived in Paris, Xavier had his whole life planned out. He had already received his licentiate, would shortly become a master and member of the Faculty of Arts, and had also taken the necessary steps to secure his appointment as a canon in Pamplona Cathedral. He would restore his family name. Ignatius, however, had other plans. He likely saw something of himself in Francis: the obsession with making his way in the world and as such becoming bogged down with the trappings of prestige and glory.

Ignatius's conversion had involved

a rejection of worldly aspiration, the only glory he wanted thereafter was the greater glory of God. At first, Ignatius's simplicity and style of living repulsed Xavier. He thought Ignatius was a joke and laughed at him regularly. This did not deter Ignatius, who had been working hard to encourage Xavier to undertake the Spiritual Exercises. Xavier did his best to brush off Ignatius' attempts to convert him. He even went as far as avoiding being alone with Ignatius. The opportune moment came when Pierre Favre was away from the university, visiting his family.

Tradition has it that Ignatius put this question to Xavier; 'what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' This broke down Xavier's resistance, and he completed the Spiritual Exercises. This was a life-changing experience for Xavier. He even went so far as to dismiss his servant and embrace Ignatius's poverty. This would set him on a path of putting aside his ambitions and turning instead to providence.

Each of us can become attentive to the people God puts in our lives. Sometimes God puts people into our lives to help us redirect how we live and focus on where we might direct our energies. Perhaps we have our life all planned out, or maybe we have no idea where we are going. Either way, the lesson of these saintly encounters should encourage us to keep our eyes peeled. We might never know when we may meet our own St Ignatius and be led toward greater intimacy with God. 