

St Francis Xavier

Pope Francis remembers St Francis Xavier, co-founder of the Jesuits, in his audience for the feast day, 3 December.

St 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, wonderful, worldly. There, he met Ignatius of Loyola. He made the spiritual exercises and changed his life. And he left everything, his worldly career, to become a missionary. He became a Jesuit, took his vows. Then he became a priest, and went to evangelize, sent to the Orient. At that time, the journeys of the missionaries to the Orient meant they were sent to unknown worlds.

In just under eleven years, he accomplished an extraordinary task. He was a missionary for more or less eleven years. Journeys at that time were harsh and perilous. Many people died enroute, 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. To get to India, he spent

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three and a half years on ships; then from India to Japan. How touching.

He arrived in Goa, India, the capital of the Portuguese East, the cultural and commercial capital. And Francis Xavier set up his base but did not stop there. While praying one night at the tomb of the apostle Saint Bartholomew, he felt he needed to go beyond India.

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 a restlessness for the apostolate, to go elsewhere, beyond, and he decided to depart as soon as possible, and arrived there after an adventurous journey on a junk belonging to a Chinese man. His three years in Japan were quite difficult, due to the climate, opposition and his ignorance of the language. Here too, however, the seeds planted would bear great fruit. He 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, in front of the Chinese shoreline, waiting in vain 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 spent his life zealously in the missions. He left



Fresco of St Francis on the ceiling of the Jesuit church of St Francis Xavier in Lucerne, Switzerland

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 is highly symbolic, highly symbolic.

His intense activity was always joined with prayer, the union with God, mystical and contemplative. He never abandoned prayer because he knew that is where he drew his strength. And the love of Christ was the strength that drove him to the furthest frontiers, giving him consolation and joy in following and serving him to the end.

It is Saint Francis Xavier, who did all these great things, in such poverty, with such courage, who can give us a little bit of this zeal, of this zeal to live for the Gospel, to proclaim the Gos-

pel. So many young people, so many young people today have something ... a restlessness ... and they do not know what to do with that restlessness. Look to Francis Xavier, look at the horizons of the world, look at the people who are in such need, look at how many people 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, of my own young friends who are in the diocese of Vanimo, and many others who have gone – young people – to evangelize in the steps of Francis Xavier. May the Lord grant us the joy to evangelize, the joy to bear this message, which is so beautiful, which makes us, and everyone, happy.