

"Look at the people in need"

In his 17 May general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on apostolic zeal, speaking about St. Francis Xavier.

05/17/2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Continuing our itinerary of the Catecheses with some exemplary models of apostolic zeal, today we recall, we are speaking about

evangelization, about apostolic zeal, of bearing the name of Jesus. And 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. There are so many hidden missionaries who, even today, do much more than Saint Francis Xavier. And Saint Francis 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 the missions... even from Italy. Many of you, I see for example, when a story arrives about a priest who is a candidate to become a bishop, who spent ten years as a missionary in that place. This is incredible – to leave your own

country to preach the Gospel. This is apostolic zeal. This is what we really need to cultivate. And looking at these men and 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, 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. And he went, because he was filled with apostolic zeal.

He was the first of a numerous band of passionate missionaries to depart,

ardent missionaries of modern times, 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 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 en route, due to shipwrecks or disease. Today unfortunately, they die because they 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 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. 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 – this is good, organization – and courageously set sail for the Moluccas, the most distant islands of the Indonesian archipelago. There were no horizons for those people, they went beyond... What courage these holy missionaries had! And today's missionaries too. Of course, they do not spend three months on a ship, but go on a plane for twenty-four hours. But it is the same thing there. They need to settle there, and travel many kilometers and immerse themselves in forests. This is what it

is like.... And so, in the Moluccas, he translated the catechism into their local language and taught them how to sing the catechism, he entered through song. We understand his feelings from his letters. He wrote: “Dangers and sufferings, accepted voluntarily and solely for the love and service of God our Lord, are treasures rich in tremendous spiritual consolations. Here, in a few years, someone could lose their eyes from so many tears of joy” (20 January 1548). 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 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.

A great dreamer, in Japan, he 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 center with a vast history, a beautiful history.... So, 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 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. 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 “frontiers” when it came to care. And there, he grew in greatness. And the love of Christ 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.

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 Gospel. 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.

Thank you!

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