

Praying with St. Francis Xavier

The Church has always acknowledged the “great cloud of witnesses.”¹ who are the saints. These men and women, over the generations and in so many places, have shown what it is to live the Christian life, sometimes to the point of surrendering their own lives in martyrdom. Their earthly lives may have finished, their prayers continue in heaven. The Church has long believed that the saints intercede on our behalf, asking God for the graces and blessings for which we forget to ask or for which we find no time to pray: “Their intercession is their most exalted service to God’s plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world.”²

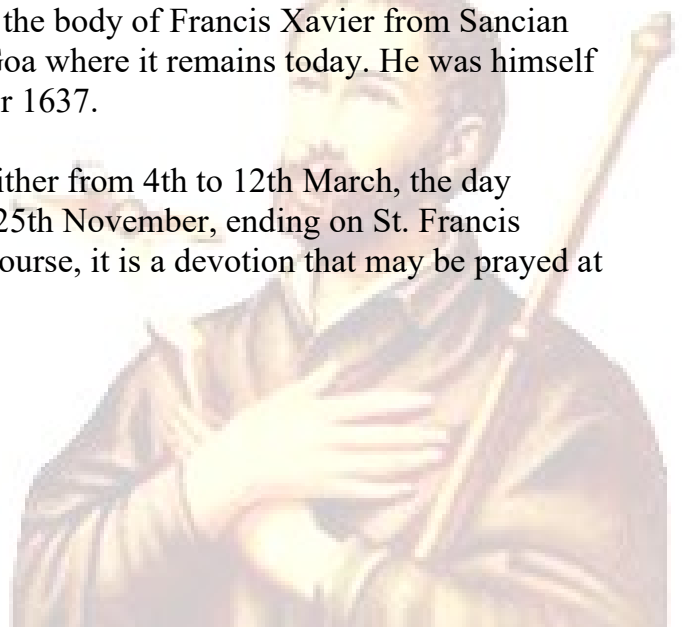
Devotion to Francisco Xavier has always been immensely popular as he fires the imagination with his heroic travels to peoples and lands across the globe.

This novena is nine days of prayer, in the company of St Francis Xavier, through the letters he wrote. As a Jesuit, Francisco underwent and then, in turn, led others through the Spiritual Exercises of his great friend St Ignatius Loyola. His writings reflect the spiritual insights and preoccupations of the Spiritual Exercises. We pray to know ourselves better, to discern the will of God for each of us in the daily unfolding of our lives, to hear and generously answer Christ’s call to follow him, whatever the cost, and to understand that everything is an unmerited gift from God, poured out lavishly upon us “as rays from the sun or waters from the spring.”³

The present form of the Novena was begun in the 17th century by Fr. Marcello Mastrilli SJ (1603 – 37). While working in Naples, he sustained serious head injuries. Prayers were offered to St. Francis Xavier and Fr. Mastrilli recovered. In his prayer, Fr. Mastrilli heard the promise that whoever took time each year to complete the nine days of prayer would ‘experience Francis’s protection and might hope with great assurance that any grace they asked of God would be granted, provided it be for their good and the glory of God.’ Fr. Mastrilli is credited with recovering the body of Francis Xavier from Sancian Island off the coast of China and taking it to Goa where it remains today. He was himself martyred at Nagasaki in Japan on 17th October 1637.

The Novena of Grace is traditionally prayed either from 4th to 12th March, the day Francis was declared a saint in 1622, or from 25th November, ending on St. Francis Xavier’s feast day on 3rd December. But, of course, it is a devotion that may be prayed at any time.

1. Hebrews 12:1
2. Catechism of the Catholic Church n.2683 (1992)
3. Ignatius Loyola Spiritual Exercises n.237



The Story of Francisco Xavier

Francisco Xavier is one of the most exciting and adventurous figures of the 16th century. He travelled where few westerners had been: to India, to Malaysia, to Japan and to China. He undertook long and arduous voyages, risking everything to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to fisherman and farmer, emperor and king.

Francisco was born only a few miles from the birthplace of St Ignatius at Loyola. While students at the University of Paris, they became lifelong friends. Both were from noble and wealthy families, assured of comfort, success and fame. But Ignatius was already well on the road to being a pilgrim for God, devoting his life to helping souls.

At first this was not a calling Francisco shared. But Ignatius' persistent and gentle taunting, "What will it profit a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his life?", eventually claimed Francisco as his 'friend in the Lord.'

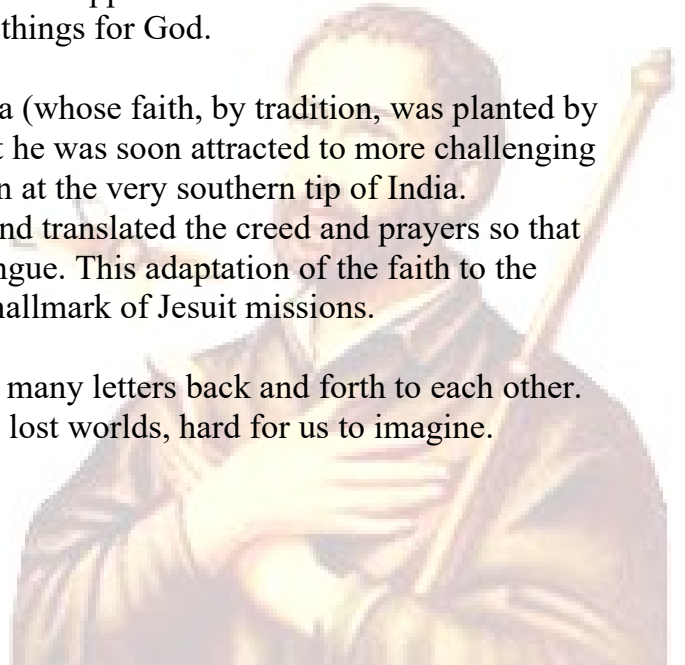
Joined by others at Paris, these first companions formed what would soon become known as the Society of Jesus, bound by vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, ready to go wherever the need was greatest.

Formed by the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius' little book of exercises for the spirit, these first Jesuits were on fire with the love of God, a love which showed itself in deeds: begging alms, teaching catechism, tending to the poor, the sick, and prostitutes and to those rejected by society.

In 1539, King John III of Portugal asked Ignatius for two Jesuits to go to the flourishing Portuguese colony of Goa in India. Another man dropped out at the last moment and Francisco seized his opportunity to do greater things for God.

Francisco worked among the Christians of Goa (whose faith, by tradition, was planted by St Thomas the Apostle in the first century) but he was soon attracted to more challenging work among the pearl fishers of Cape Comorin at the very southern tip of India. Francisco learned Tamil, the local language, and translated the creed and prayers so that these people could hear Christ in their own tongue. This adaptation of the faith to the local language and customs was to become a hallmark of Jesuit missions.

Another characteristic Jesuit way was to write many letters back and forth to each other. These letters provide a fascinating insight into lost worlds, hard for us to imagine. Francisco wrote many such letters.



The Story of Francisco Xavier (continued)

Francisco spent seven years on the South India coast, constantly travelling, preaching the gospel, teaching, consoling, comforting, begging alms for the poor, and visiting the sick. During this time, he sailed to Malacca in Malaysia and here met Anjiro, a Japanese man, who inspired him to forge further east to Japan, arriving in 1549.

The Japanese made a deep impression on Francisco. In them he found a spiritual awareness which, he believed, made them especially ready to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. He wrote to the Jesuits he had left behind in India, “May it please God our Lord to grant us a knowledge of the language so that we can speak to them of the things of God, for we shall then, by his grace, favour and assistance, produce much fruit.”¹

The Japanese could not believe what Francisco taught them if it was not known in China. Undaunted, Francisco set out for China, seeking audience at the Imperial Court. If converting the Japanese meant first converting the Chinese, this is what he would do. He landed on Sancian Island in 1552 and there contracted a severe fever from which he died a few weeks later in sight of mainland China across a narrow stretch of sea

Francisco Xavier was declared a saint with Ignatius, his great friend and fellow founder of the Society of Jesus, in 1622.

1. Letter to the Jesuits of Goa in India, 5th November 1549





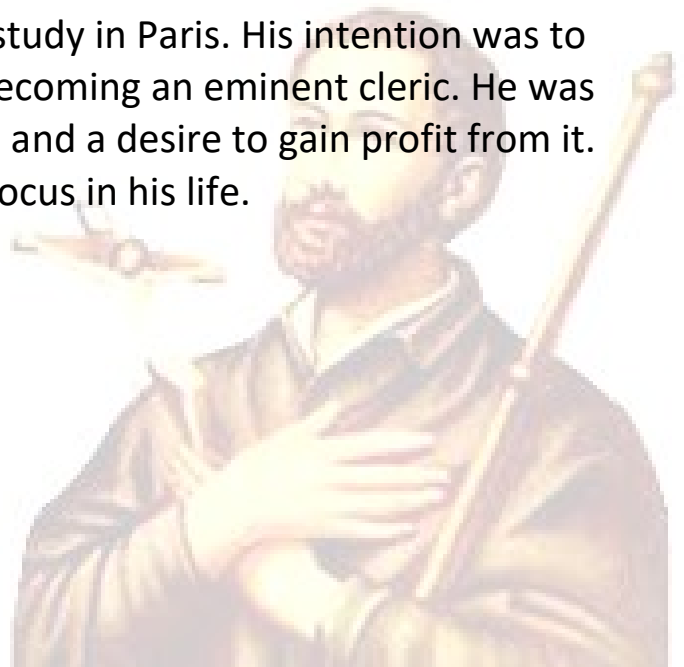
November 24th

Day One

The Early Years (1506-1525)

Francis was born in 1506, in Javier, a small village in the province of Navarre to the north of Spain. He was a Basque, the fifth and last child of local landowners. His two brothers and two sisters were in their teens when Francis was born. Their family home was a castle. They had their own private chapel, where Mass would be said by a local priest. Sadly, his father died when he was very young, and the family lost their land and home in a war with Spain. His mother, a very devout Catholic, with the help of the local priests, made sure that he received a good education.

At the age of 19, Francis went off to study in Paris. His intention was to revive the fortunes of his family by becoming an eminent cleric. He was bright and vibrant, with a zest for life and a desire to gain profit from it. The one thing he lacked was a clear focus in his life.





November 25th

Day Two

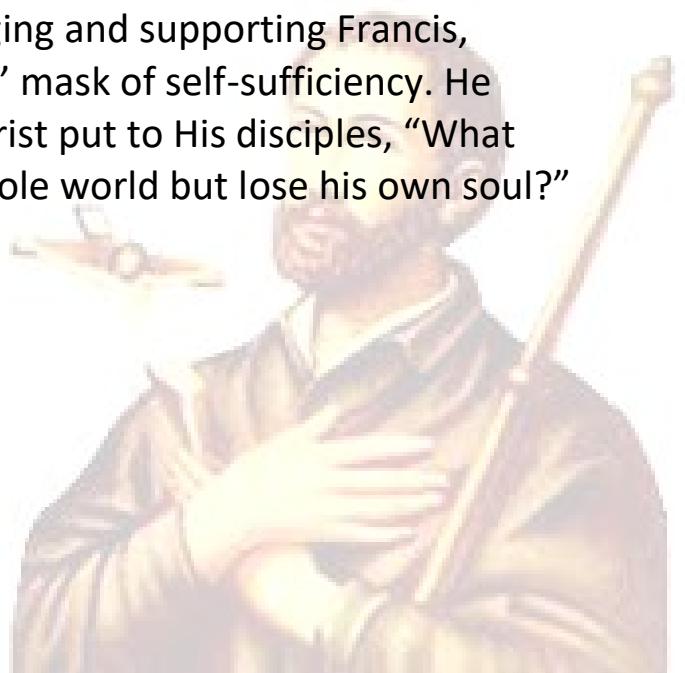
Francis meets Ignatius Loyola in Paris (1529-1534)

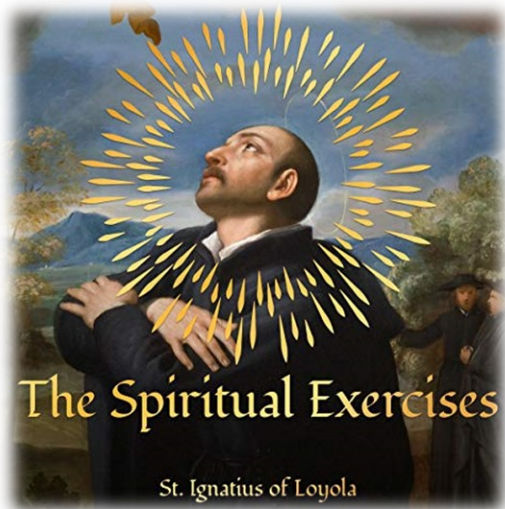
Do I recognise the need for God in my life?

In his early years in the University of Paris, Francis tended to put more effort into sports and the night life of the city than into his studies.

A turning point in his life was his encounter with a fellow Basque, Ignatius of Loyola. As a mature student of 38 years, Ignatius was beginning his studies at the University of Paris. He was assigned to the same student quarters as Francis and Peter Faber. At first Francis was not attracted to Ignatius. He saw him as a middle-aged religious enthusiast. He even made fun of him in public.

After five years of patiently encouraging and supporting Francis, Ignatius finally broke through Francis' mask of self-sufficiency. He challenged him with the question Christ put to His disciples, "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36).





November 26th

Day Three

Francis & Ignatius gather a "group of friends" *(1534-1536)*

Ignatius Loyola directed Francis and some others through his 'Spiritual Exercises' - 30 days of prayer and reflection on life and its purpose.

After a period of reflection on the call of Christ to His disciples, and time spent in consideration of his own response to the love of God, Francis decided to join Ignatius and some others to form a "group of friends" who would offer themselves to God for service in the Catholic Church.





November 27th

Day Four

Francis and his companions in Rome (1536-1539)

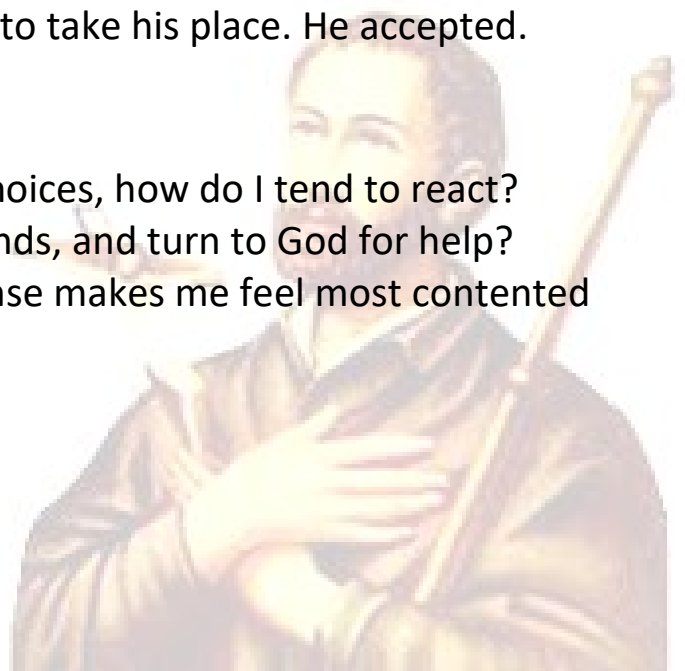
After Paris, Ignatius and his companions decided to travel to Rome to be at the service of the Pope. In Rome, they worked in hospitals, looking after the sick. They begged for alms and preached about the love of God.

On June 24, 1537, Francis, Ignatius, and four other companions were ordained priests. As the group grew, the work entailed correspondence with a vast number of people. Francis became secretary to Ignatius. This cannot have been an appealing work an outgoing person like Francis.

In 1539 King John of Portugal asked the Pope for two Jesuits to go to India. Two others were chosen, but at the last minute one of them fell ill, and Francis was asked by Ignatius to take his place. He accepted.

Reflection

Faced with challenges and difficult choices, how do I tend to react? Do I seek advice from family and friends, and turn to God for help? At these times, what kind of a response makes me feel most contented





November 28th

Day Five

The mission of Francis in South Asia 1542-1549 (part 1)

Travelling from Rome to Lisbon and then on to Goa took Francis almost two years. (In 1540, the Pope established the “Companions of Jesus” as a religious order in the Catholic Church. They were later to be called the 'Society of Jesus', and to become more popularly known as the Jesuits.)

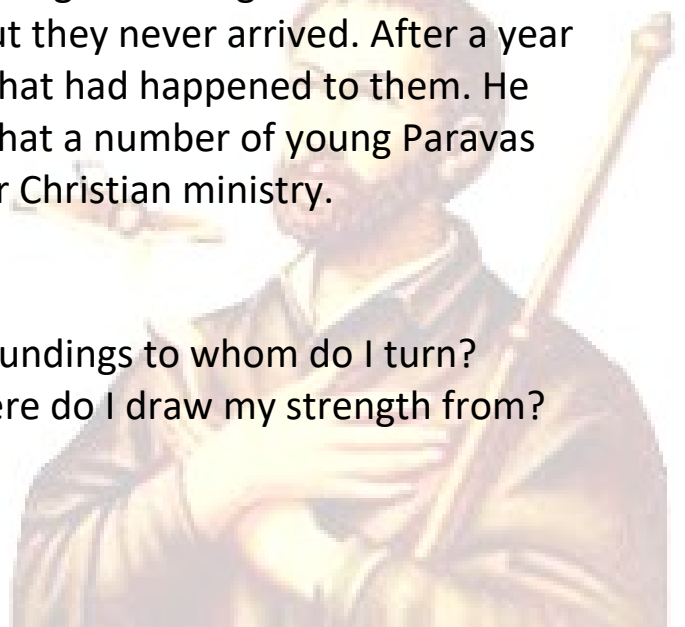
When Francis arrived in Goa in 1542, he had a reputation for helping the poor and the sick, and zealously seeking to encourage people to live a good life. It was recorded that Francis always looked happy, despite two months of continual seasickness, and other illnesses along the way.

In 1542 the Portuguese Governor of Goa asked Francis to teach the pearl fishers (Paravas) of Cape Comorin in South India. They were nominal Christians but had received no formal instructions on their new faith, because no priest had ever learned their language. He set about learning Tamil, the local language, and managed to translate the Creed.

He experienced the loneliness of working in a foreign culture. He had been promised two Jesuit helpers, but they never arrived. After a year he decided to return to Goa to see what had happened to them. He was so well accepted by the people that a number of young Paravas went along with him to be trained for Christian ministry.

Reflection

When I feel alienated from my surroundings to whom do I turn?
When things get difficult for me, where do I draw my strength from?





November 29th

Day Six

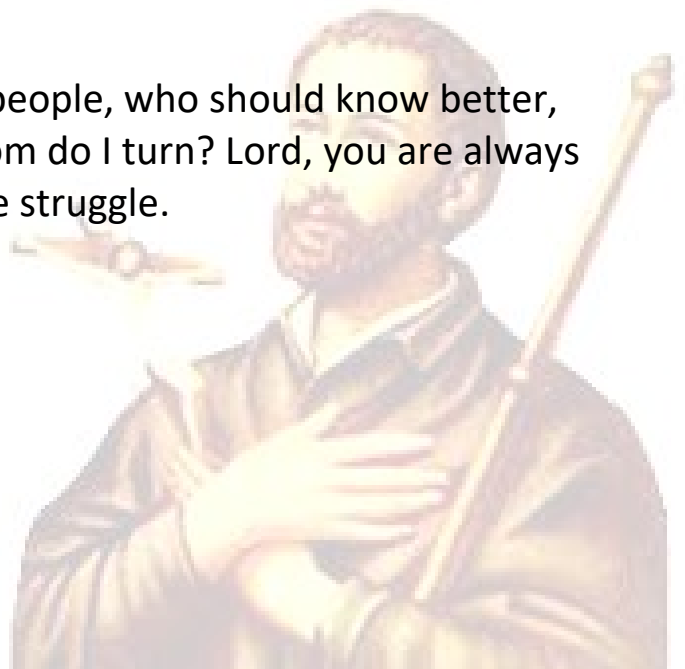
The mission of Francis in South Asia 1542-1549 (part 2)

Francis found the behaviour of Europeans in India difficult to bear. Too many of the Portuguese officials and traders were determined not to let his pursuit of souls interfere with their pursuit of riches.

At one point Francis writes: "I am so sick of life that the best thing for me would be to die for the defence of our faith. It is difficult to see so many sins committed and to be able to do nothing." Despite these negative feelings, Francis continued his missionary efforts with enthusiasm.

Reflection

When life seems pointless, or when people, who should know better, let me down, how do I react? To whom do I turn? Lord, you are always there, ready to strengthen me for the struggle.





November 30th

Day Seven

The mission of Francis in South Asia 1542-1549 (part 3)

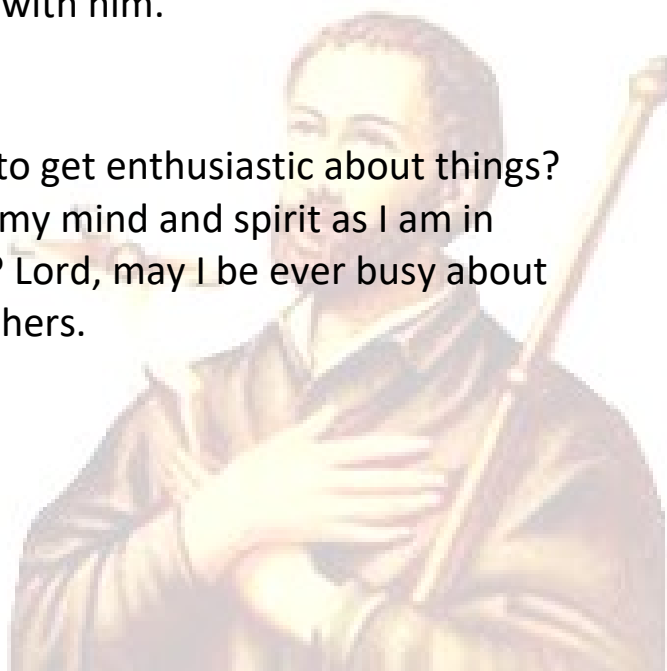
Francis Xavier spent seven years on the South India coast, constantly travelling up and down, preaching, teaching, consoling, comforting, begging for the poor, visiting the sick.

Francis believed that those who were not baptised were destined never to share the delights of heaven. But he also wanted to share the love of Christ with others. His journeys became part of his urgent task to baptise as many people as possible. He baptised thousands of people. Francis always saw a person as a whole, body, mind and spirit. He was concerned about material needs as well as spiritual ones.

As the extent of the continent of Asia, with the populous nations of India, Japan and China, became apparent to him, Francis appealed to Ignatius for others to share the work with him.

Reflection

What animates me? When do I start to get enthusiastic about things? Am I as concerned about developing my mind and spirit as I am in taking care of the health of my body? Lord, may I be ever busy about sharing the news of your love with others.





December 1st

Day Eight

Francis, First Missionary to Japan (1549-1551)

Do I find strength in my prayer and in my relationship with Jesus?

During his years in South Asia, Francis visited Malacca in Malaysia on a number of occasions. It was there he met and converted his first Japanese. Anjiro made a deep impression on him. Francis wrote to Ignatius, "If all the Japanese are as keen to learn as Anjiro... they must have the most enquiring minds of any people in the lands hitherto discovered."

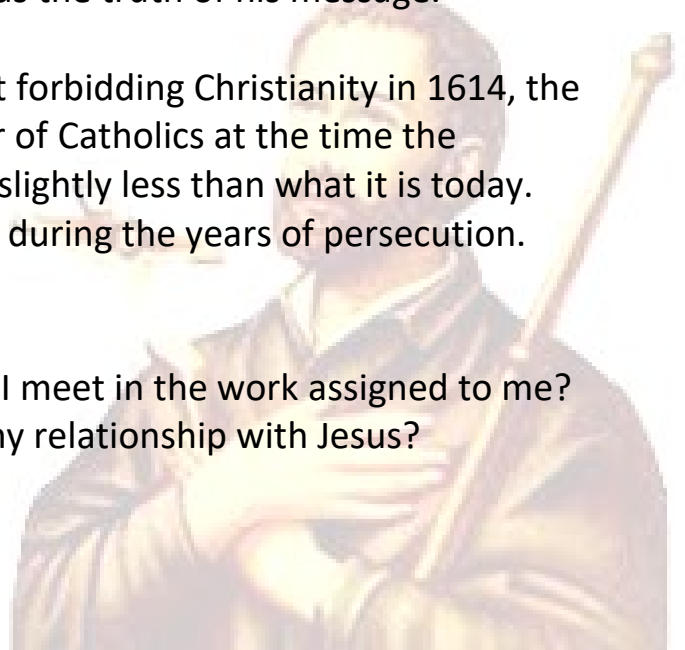
Francis arrived in Japan on August 15, 1549, the Feast of the Assumption. After some months working there and living with the family of Anjiro, he wrote to the Jesuits in Goa: "They are the best race yet discovered and I think that among non-Christians their match will not easily be found."

In comparison with the effects of his mission in South Asia, progress in Japan was slow. Francis had great difficulty with the Japanese language. Much of the time he was alone, suffering the isolation of living in a country, without knowing the local language. The Abbot of a Zen monastery told a later missionary that Francis was unable to explain the Christian teaching, owing to his ignorance of Japanese, but his mere presence, face, character, obvious sanctity, preached better than any words the truth of his message.

After his death, however, until the edict forbidding Christianity in 1614, the Church in Japan flourished. The number of Catholics at the time the persecution began was about 300,000, slightly less than what it is today. Many, too, died as martyrs for the faith during the years of persecution.

Reflection

How do I cope with the challenges that I meet in the work assigned to me?
Do I find strength in my prayer and in my relationship with Jesus?





December 2nd

Day Nine

Death of Francis off the coast of China (December 3, 1552)

What can I, personally, learn from reflecting on the life of St. Francis?

Francis died of fever at the age of 46 on the island of Sanchian, within sight of China. He did not achieve his ambition to reach the mainland. That was to be the privilege of a fellow Jesuit, Matteo Ricci. His hope was that if China accepted Christianity, all Asia would be open to the faith. His ambition was greater than one person could ever achieve.

St. Francis Xavier is the patron saint of the missions. He has always been exceptionally popular not only with Catholics, but with many non-Catholics, too. He is probably the most famous of all Jesuits. He was canonised as a Saint in 1622, together with St. Ignatius Loyola.

Reflection

What can I, personally, learn from reflecting on the life of St. Francis?
As I consider the goals in my life, is love of God and His people central?

