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Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“**X**AVIER, *what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?* (Mt. 16 :26). This warning of Our Lord’s was given to Francis Xavier by Ignatius of Loyola, who added these words : “ Consider well that the world is a master who does not keep its promises. And even if it were to keep its promises to you, your heart would never be satisfied. But suppose that it were satisfied, how long would your happiness last ? In any case, could it last longer than your life ? And when you die, what will you take to eternity ? *What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?*” Little by little, this maxim entered Francis Xavier’s heart and deeply marked it. Thus began a process that would make him one of the greatest saints in the history of the Church.

More than a passion

Francis was born on April 7, 1506, at Xavier Castle in Navarre, in northwest Spain. In 1512, his father had all his goods confiscated in punishment for having fought alongside the king of Navarre in a war against the Castilian throne ; he died of grief in 1515. The next year, the Xavier fortress was dismantled and the family’s land taken. When Xavier came of age, the family was ruined. Under such circumstances, a military career did not attract him. Leaving his mother and his brothers in September 1525, never to see them again in this world, he went to the University of Paris, where he stayed at the College of Saint Barbara in the company of fellow students who, for the most part, had given themselves up to less than edifying lives. Nevertheless, among them were two men of exceptional piety, Pierre Le Fèvre and Ignatius of Loyola. The latter, originally from the Basque country bordering Navarre, for some time had been considering founding a holy work for the good of the Church. Having recognized the qualities of Pierre and Xavier’s souls, he tried to get them to share his spiritual ambition. So Ignatius led Pierre Le Fèvre in the Spiritual Exercises for thirty days. At the end of this retreat, Pierre was completely won over to the cause. Xavier was a more difficult case. It is true that, thanks to Ignatius’ and Pierre’s advice, he had already distanced himself from questionable friends and had rejected the unwholesome doctrines that followers of Calvin had introduced in Paris. But Xavier’s heart, proud and open to the appeal of worldly ambition, felt only disgust for the hidden life of renunciation that Ignatius advocated. Ignatius, a fine judge of souls, first catered to Xavier’s feelings, who had become a professor of philosophy and aspired to a brilliant career and a large following. Ignatius found him so many disciples that Xavier saw him as a true friend in whom he could confide. Ignatius took advantage of this

friendship to remind him of the vanity of the glories and benefits of this world, and their uselessness for eternal life. *What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?* Xavier, touched by the grace of God, made the Spiritual Exercises in his turn, during which he asked for “ intimate knowledge of Our Lord, who has become man for me, that I may love Him more and follow Him more closely ” (*Sp. Ex.* 104). From then on, he had only one passion : loving JESUS CHRIST and making Him loved by others.

Soon, the little group was joined by four other students. Ignatius then proposed to his six companions that they give themselves to God more completely and unite themselves to each other through the bonds of religious vows. On August 15, 1534, in Our Lady’s chapel at Montmartre, Pierre Le Fèvre, at the time the only priest in the group, celebrated the Holy Mass, during which all made perpetual vows of poverty and chastity with the promise that they would go to the Holy Land or commit themselves to the will of the Supreme Pontiff. As they waited to know the holy will of God, they gathered often to pray and encourage one another in the practice of virtue.

Straight to the heart

On January 25, 1537, the first members of the Society of JESUS found themselves in Venice, but since the political situation made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land impossible, they decided to go to Rome to ask for the blessing of Pope Paul III. The pope welcomed them warmly and authorized them to be ordained priests ; that ceremony took place on June 24, 1537. The little group then scattered to several cities in Italy. Father Xavier was sent to Bologna, where he devoted himself to teaching the poor, the sick, and prisoners. Not knowing

Italian well, he spoke little, but with such conviction that his words went straight to the hearts of his listeners. At the end of 1538, the king of Portugal, John III, asked Ignatius to lend him some religious to evangelize India. Ignatius, with the Pope's agreement, placed two religious at his disposal, one of whom was Francis Xavier, who was not given the news until the day before his departure, March 15, 1540. All he took with him was the habit on his back, his crucifix, a breviary, and another book.

After a journey of three months, Father Xavier arrived in Lisbon in the company of Simon Rodriguez. Both were received by John III, a truly pious man concerned for the salvation of souls. While waiting to leave for India, they devoted themselves to the care of souls in the capital of Portugal. Their apostolic devotion aroused such admiration in Lisbon that the king was asked to keep them in the country. Ignatius decided that Rodriguez would stay in Lisbon; as for Father Xavier, he would leave for India. He left, in the company of three young confreres, on April 7, 1541.

At the time, the voyage from Portugal to India by the Cape of Good Hope was an adventure from which no one could be sure of coming out alive. If the ship didn't sink, epidemics, cold, hunger, and thirst often decimated the passengers. On January 1, 1542, Father Xavier wrote to his brothers in Rome: "I have been seasick for two months; and all have suffered much for forty days off the coast of Guinea... The nature of the difficulties and labors is such that I would not have dared confront them for a single day, not for the whole world. Our comfort and hope in God's mercy is growing continually, in the conviction that we lack the talent necessary to preach the faith of JESUS CHRIST in a pagan land." On May 6, 1542, they reached Goa, on the western coast of India.

First method of prayer

Having received from the Pope full spiritual authority over the subjects of the Portuguese colonial empire, Francis Xavier arrived in India equipped with the title of "Apostolic Nuncio." In Goa he found a Christianity confronted with the unedifying example of certain Europeans. Thanks to his zeal, even before the end of the year, Goa appeared quite changed. A good many souls were already walking in the way of perfection. Father Xavier encouraged them in the practice of meditation, according to the method that Saint Ignatius called the "first method of prayer" (*Sp. Ex.* 238-248). This way to meditate consists of examining oneself with respect to the Ten Commandments, the seven capital sins, the three powers of the soul (memory, intelligence, will) and the five bodily senses. One asks God for the grace of knowing in what ways one has observed or transgressed

His commandments, and for the help needed to correct oneself in the future. The bishop of Goa wished for Father Xavier to continue the great good that he was doing in the city, but the latter, driven by the Spirit of God, aspired to even greater conquests. Like the apostles, he burned with the desire to face dangers, sufferings, and persecutions to win as many souls as possible for JESUS CHRIST. The governor of Goa, who knew his zeal, was sympathetic and suggested to him the twenty thousand men in the Paravers tribe, hastily baptized eight years before on the shore of the Fishery, and who had since returned to their ignorance and superstitions.

Father Xavier wrote in a letter to Saint Ignatius: "I am happy to go: enduring the strain of a long voyage, taking upon myself the sins of others, when I have quite enough of my own, living in the midst of pagans, suffering the heat of a burning sun, and all this for God; surely these are great consolations and cause for heavenly joys. For in the end, the blessed life for friends of the cross of JESUS CHRIST is, it seems to me, a life sown with such crosses. ... What happiness can equal that of living by dying each day, by crushing our wills to seek and find not that which will profit us, but that which will profit JESUS CHRIST?" The Christians he found on the shore of the Fishery knew nothing of their religion. Father Xavier thus began with the rudiments of the faith: the sign of the cross accompanied by the invocation of the three Persons in God, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, the *Our Father*, the *Hail Mary*, the *Salve Regina*, the *Confiteor*.

This concern for passing on the rudiments of the faith is shared by the Church. In fact, in today's world, marked by an overabundance of information and specialization in higher education, we see that the most simple truths, those that lead to eternal salvation, are not passed on. This is why the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, promulgated the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which, "with its brevity, clarity and comprehensiveness, is directed to every human being, who, in a world of distractions and multifarious messages, desires to know the Way of Life, the Truth, entrusted by God to His Son's Church" (*Motu proprio* for the approval of the *Compendium*, June 28, 2005).

"If the laborers were not lacking..."

Before this rich harvest of souls, and thinking of the immense good that could be done with the help of numerous workers, Francis Xavier turned to Europe, where many intelligent men were wasting their energies in occupations of little use. "Many times," he wrote, "the thought occurs to me to go to the universities of Europe and shout there, like a man who has taken leave of his senses, to tell men richer in knowledge than in the desire to make good use of it, how many souls are,

through their neglect, denied the glory of Heaven and are going to Hell! If, in studying the humanities, they also considered the account that God will ask of them, many of them, moved by these thoughts, would turn to the means, to spiritual exercises designed to give them true understanding and an intimate sense of the divine will, to which they would conform more than to their own inclinations, and they would say, 'Here I am, Lord: what would You have me do? Send me where You will; if necessary, even to India...' I almost wrote to the University of Paris that millions and millions of pagans would become Christians, if the laborers were not lacking..”

Caring about the soul

On April 7, 2006, Cardinal Antonio María Rouco Varela, archbishop of Madrid, during a Mass celebrating the fifth centenary of Saint Francis Xavier's birth, explained the saint's passion in these words: "Xavier cared about the soul: his soul and those of everyone, the soul of each human being. He cared about the 'soul,' because he cared about life: life in its fullness, life in happiness, eternal life. ... He cared about the salvation of man and because of that, his life consisted in using himself up so that every creature he met might know and make his own the truth that *God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life* (Jn. 3:16). Precisely because of the love he had for man, he desired that the greatest possible number of peoples and individuals come to the Christian faith. This explains his tireless search for souls in the most remote places where the Good News of JESUS had not yet penetrated.”

So many did Francis Xavier bring to the faith each day that often his arms would be tired from baptizing. Overwhelmed with work, he was alone only during the night, much of which he would devote to his religious exercises and studying the local language. But God never abandons His servants. He flooded the missionary's soul with heavenly consolations and gave him to a large extent the gift of miracles. At the end of October 1543, Father Xavier decided to return to Goa to look for reinforcements. There he learned – three years after the fact – that Paul III had approved the Society of JESUS and that Ignatius had been elected General. So he made his solemn profession, using the formula his Brothers in Rome had used.

Yet he knew that other countries were waiting for the Good News. He was perplexed—should he push on toward these distant lands, where the name of Christ was unknown to so many? He went to the tomb of Saint Thomas the Apostle to ask God to enlighten him. He stayed there four months (April-August 1545), helping the local parish priest, who would say of him: "In all things he led the life of the apostles." "In the

holy house of Saint Thomas," wrote the missionary to the Fathers of Goa, "I have employed myself in praying continuously that God Our Lord might grant me to feel in my soul His most holy will, with the firm resolution to accomplish it. ... I have felt with great interior consolation, that it was the will of God that I go to Malacca, where several recently became Christians.”

After several months spent on the Malaysian peninsula of Malacca, where he did not fear to search out sinners where they lived—in the gambling houses and brothels—to put them on the right path, on January 1, 1546, he began a cruise of more than 2,000 km, in the course of which he evangelized a number of islands, in particular the isle of Morotai, where he risked his life amidst cannibal tribes. In a letter to his confreres in Europe who were worried about this adventure, he replied, "The souls of the isle of Morotai must be instructed and someone must baptize them for their salvation. I for my part have the obligation to lose the life of the body to provide my neighbor with the life of the soul. Therefore I will go to the isle of Morotai to help the Christians there spiritually, and I will face every danger, entrusting myself to God Our Lord and placing all my hope in Him. I wish, to the full extent of my small and miserable abilities, to experience in myself these words of JESUS CHRIST, our Redeemer and Lord: *He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it* (Mt. 10:39) ”.

Full salvation

The zeal of Saint Francis Xavier, who spent himself without counting the cost to proclaim the Gospel to thousands of souls, is a lesson and an example for our generation. It reminds us of the urgency and necessity of mission, in accordance with the teaching of John Paul II: "The temptation today is to reduce Christianity to merely human wisdom, a pseudo-science of well-being. In our heavily secularized world a 'gradual secularization of salvation' has taken place, so that people strive for the good of man, but man who is truncated, reduced to his merely horizontal dimension. We know, however, that JESUS came to bring integral salvation, one which embraces the whole person and all mankind, and opens up the wondrous prospect of divine filiation. Why mission? Because to us, as to St. Paul, *this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ* (Eph 3:8). Newness of life in Him is the 'Good News' for men and women of every age: all are called to it and destined for it. ... The Church, and every individual Christian within her, may not keep hidden or monopolize this newness and richness which has been received from God's bounty in order to be communicated to all mankind" (Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, December 7, 1990, no. 11).

Japan ... and China

In December 1547, Father Xavier made the acquaintance of a Japanese nobleman named Anjiro, who had wandered for five years in search of a spiritual master who could give peace to his soul. "We discovered Father Francis," Anjiro would relate, "in the church of Our Lady of the Mountain, where he was performing a wedding. I fell completely under his charm and gave him a long account of my life. He embraced me and appeared so delighted to see me that it was evident that God Himself had arranged our meeting." In the course of their conversations, Father Xavier learned about Japan. When he found out that "the king, the nobility, and all the people of distinction would become Christians, for the Japanese are completely guided by the law of reason," it was enough for him; he left for Japan.

Nevertheless, aware of his duties as Apostolic Nuncio, he resumed contact with India and returned to Goa, which he would leave on April 15, 1549 for Japan. The following August 15, he landed on Kagoshima, where he spent more than a year learning the Japanese language and customs. Toward the end of 1550, he left for the residence of the most powerful prince of Japan, then for the capital. There, a great disappointment awaited him—the king, who in fact was only a puppet, would not even receive him. Father Xavier nevertheless obtained permission from the prince to preach the Christian faith, and had the joy of welcoming several hundred conversions. But soon a revolution broke out, and the missionary had to leave. Having had no news from India for two years, he decided to return to Malacca, where he arrived at the end of 1551. It was there that he received a letter from Saint Ignatius written more than two years before, naming him "Provincial of the East," that is, for all the missions of

the Society of JESUS from Cape Comorin, in southern India, all the way to Japan.

On April 17, 1552, the missionary took to the sea once more, this time headed for China. This voyage, the last one of his life, would strip him utterly and conform him to the suffering Christ. At the beginning of September 1552, he reached the island of Sancian, ten kilometers from the Chinese coast. The handful of Portuguese who had put into port there at the time greeted him with joy, building him a wooden hut and a little chapel made out of branches. Father Xavier immediately began to tend to the children and the sick, to preach, catechize, and hear confessions. Nevertheless, he sought to find a Chinese "smuggler" who would secretly lead him to Canton. Access to the shore of China was strictly forbidden. Anyone who dared to violate this prohibition was, if caught, doomed to torture and death. On at least two occasions, the missionary found a man who agreed to lead him there in exchange for a large sum of money. Each time, once the money had been received, the "smuggler" disappeared.

On November 21, Father Xavier celebrated his last Mass. As he came down from the altar, he felt himself weaken. He tried to return to the sea, but the rolling of the ship was unbearable for him. Taken back to Sancian, he spent the last days of his life half-conscious. Without medicine, and certain of his imminent death, he raised his eyes to Heaven and spoke with Our Lord or Our Lady: "JESUS, Son of David, have pity on me. — O Virgin, Mother of God, remember me." As he was saying the name of JESUS, he breathed his last, at dawn on December 2, 1552. He was only forty-six years old. His body was taken back to Goa where it is still venerated by the faithful. Francis Xavier, canonized along with Ignatius of Loyola on March 12, 1622, is the heavenly patron of Catholic missions.

When one considers the life of this giant of holiness, one is struck by the number of travails and sufferings he had to endure. His secret was a boundless love for JESUS. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius had taught him to listen for the call of Christ: "It is My will to conquer the whole world and all my enemies, and thus to enter into the glory of My Father. Therefore, whoever wishes to join Me in this enterprise must be willing to labor with Me, that by following Me in suffering, he may follow Me in glory" (*Sp. Ex.*, 95). In his obedience, Francis Xavier was "prompt and diligent to accomplish [JESUS'] most Holy Will" (*ibid.* 91). In turn, he gave himself fully, without counting the cost, to extend God's kingdom on earth. May he obtain for us the grace to be like him filled with zeal for the eternal salvation of our neighbor.

Dom Antoine Paric O.S.B.

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