

mid-thirties, a spiritual experience prompted him to seek ordination as a priest. Yet outwardly he changed little, enjoying the lavish lifestyle that characterized most of the clergy. Gradually, however, his heart changed—particularly through the influence of Dominicans who decried the cruel enslavement of Indians.

In 1514, at age forty, Las Casas, now a priest in Cuba, was preparing a sermon for Pentecost Sunday. As he read the Scripture, he suffered “pangs of conscience,” realizing that there can be no true prayer and public worship without the outward exercise of justice. In that transforming moment he truly began to “consider the misery and servitude that those people suffer.” After several days of meditation, he vowed that his life would take a different course. “In that Pentecost,” writes Gustavo Gutierrez, “the feast that recalls the presence of the Holy Spirit, Las Casas recognized his own responsibility.”<sup>38</sup>

Las Casas joined the Dominicans, and in the years that followed would become the New World’s most vocal advocate for the Indians. In that role he traveled to and from Spain, pleading their cause with government officials and anyone who would listen, sometimes presenting a naïve and oversimplified case:

God created these simple people without evil and without guile. They are most obedient and faithful to their natural lords, and to the Christians whom they serve. They are most submissive, patient, peaceful, and virtuous. Nor are they quarrelsome, rancorous, querulous, or vengeful. They neither possess nor desire to possess worldly wealth. Surely these people would be the most blessed in the world if only they worshipped the true God.<sup>39</sup>

Las Casas’s ministry was more than mere humanitarianism, however. Evangelism was a priority, and for a number of years he traveled in Central America doing pioneer work. In one instance he convinced a native chief who had been terrorizing the colonists to lay down his weapons and to let all his tribe be baptized. Due to colonial opposition, however, most of his conversions did not come that easily.

At the age of seventy, Las Casas was appointed Bishop of Chiapas, an utterly impoverished area in southern Mexico that he chose above another far more prosperous diocese, even though, according to Latourette, “He must have known [it] would be one of the most trying tasks of his career.”<sup>40</sup> Most of the Spanish planters there blamed him for the New Laws enacted by the Spanish crown that were designed to give the Indians protection and liberty. The enforcement of these laws would ruin the plantation economy—so said the Spanish landowners—and they simply ignored them. Las Casas, in turn, ordered his priests to deny absolution to any such lawbreakers, and the battle lines were drawn. Many of Las Casas’s own priests defied him, and after three years he gave up his bishopric, discouraged and defeated. In 1547, at the age of seventy-three, he sailed from the New World, never to return. His battle for human rights continued on in Spain until his death almost two decades later, however, and he is still remembered as one of Christendom’s greatest humanitarian missionaries.

Not all Dominicans were known for social justice and humanitarian outreach. They, along with Franciscans and other religious orders, played an active role in the Inquisition—a “mission” to keep the church free from heresy. All these were a significant part of what could be termed “home missions” in Europe. But the age of discovery would see the Catholic Church planted far beyond the boundaries of Europe and the New World.

---

## Francis Xavier

The sixteenth century, which often seems dominated by the events of the Protestant Reformation, was also marked by a Catholic Reformation—a reformation to counteract the

gains of the Protestants, to shore up the crumbling walls of the medieval church, and to expand the church to distant lands. This expansion was aimed not only to the West, but also toward India and the Far East, where lucrative trade routes were being established. The Catholic Church was anxious to cash in on this new wave of overseas travel, and adventurous missionary monks and friars eagerly volunteered for duty. The late-medieval religious orders, the Dominicans and Franciscans, supplied many of these courageous volunteers, but it was the Jesuits (the Society of Jesus), founded in 1535, who became the Counter-Reformation's most active participants. The founding of that organization, writes Stephen Neill, "is perhaps the most important event in the missionary history of the Roman Catholic Church."<sup>41</sup>

Ignatius of Loyola, a Spanish nobleman, was the founder of the Jesuits, and under his control the little band of dedicated disciples grew into a highly centralized, military-like organization that viewed loyalty to the pope and the Roman Catholic Church as its highest ideal. The order expanded rapidly: by the time of Loyola's death in 1556 there were over a thousand members, and in less than a century after its founding there were more than fifteen thousand members spread all over the globe. The most renowned of these early Jesuit missionaries was Francis Xavier, one of Loyola's inner circle of six and a charter member of the order. In 1541 he sailed for India, representing both the pope and the king of Portugal, to begin his short but extraordinary missionary career.

Xavier was born in 1506 to a Spanish noble family and grew up in a castle in the Basque countryside. As a youth he attended the University of Paris, where his interests leaned toward philosophy and theology. There he began spending time with a group of Protestants—dedicated young Christians who were risking their lives in the Catholic stronghold of Paris. But then Xavier met Loyola, a man fiercely devoted to the Roman Catholic Church, whose dynamic personal magnetism had a powerful effect on the spiritually unsettled young student. It was not long before Xavier joined with Loyola, turning his back both on the Protestants and on the lucrative career he might have had in the Catholic Church. Instead, he took a vow of poverty and celibacy, and committed himself wholly to spreading the Catholic faith.

Xavier's call to overseas missions came suddenly and without visions or voices. Two other Jesuits had been chosen to go to India as missionaries, and when one of them became ill, Xavier was assigned to take his place. With less than twenty-four hours warning, he was on his way. He arrived at the port city of Goa in 1542, where he found a morally corrupt society influenced far more by European culture than by religion. Xavier was frustrated, wondering how such people could be brought to Christ. He soon discovered that a ministry focused on children was more effective than one focused on adults. Children were more easily swayed than their parents, and it was his hope that he and the priests who would follow him could train them from early childhood to become effective Christian leaders in their own communities. This strategy was one he would follow during most of his missionary career.

Xavier did not remain in Goa long. The westernized society with its mixture of Jews and Muslims was not to his liking. When his exhortations failed to make an impact on the city, he pled with the king of Portugal to introduce the Inquisition and force the people to adhere to Catholic dogma and morality. But before that could be arranged, he left, seeking a more fruitful vineyard. "I want to be where there are ... out-and-out pagans," he wrote, believing that in such an environment conversions would come more easily.<sup>42</sup>

From Goa, Xavier moved farther south in India to work among the impoverished pearl fishermen along the coast. The people were Hindus, and their response to Christianity depended largely on caste. The high-caste Brahmans were antagonistic, but the low-caste Paravas were much more open to change, realizing their status in society could not be worsened by such a move. Great crowds came out to learn and recite creeds, and baptisms

were plentiful—so many that on some days Xavier was so tired from performing the sacrament that he could hardly move his arms. Yet baptism was to him the most important aspect of the ministry, and he would not deny anyone, no matter how tired he was. Appealing to Loyola for more workers, he wrote, “In these heathen places the only education necessary is to be able to teach the prayers and to go about baptizing little ones who now die in great numbers without the Sacrament because we cannot be everywhere at once to succor them.”<sup>43</sup>

Xavier’s emphasis on baptism and his concentration on children went hand in hand. To a fellow worker he wrote, “I earnestly recommend to you the teaching of the children, and be very diligent about the baptism of newly born babies. Since the grownups have no hankering for Paradise, whether to escape the evils of life or to attain their happiness, at least let the little ones go there by baptizing them before they die.”<sup>44</sup> But Xavier’s emphasis on children was not just to ensure them a place in Paradise. His child converts became evangelists:

>



*Francis Xavier, missionary to India and Japan.*

As it was impossible for me to meet personally the ever growing volume of calls ... I resorted to the following expedient. I told the children who memorized the Christian doctrine to betake themselves to the homes of the sick, there to collect as many of the family and neighbors as possible, and to say the Creed with them several times, assuring the sick persons that if they believed they would be cured.... In this way I managed to satisfy all my callers, and at the same time secured that the Creed, the Commandments, and the prayers were taught in the people’s homes and abroad in the streets.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps far more exciting for the youngsters than visiting the sick and reciting creeds were the other types of religious activities in which Xavier encouraged them to become involved. “They detest the idolatries of their people, and get into fights with them on the subject,” he wrote with pride. “They tackle even their own parents if they find them going to the idols, and come to tell me about it. When I hear from them of some idolatrous

ceremonies in the villages ... I collect all the boys I can, and off we go together.... The little fellows seize the small clay idols, smash them, grind them to dust, spit on them and trample them underfoot.”<sup>46</sup>

Xavier’s evangelism in India was superficial at best. Whether the children and adults who were baptized even knew the most fundamental truths of Christianity is doubtful. After three years of working among the pearl fishermen along the coast, he still had not begun to master the very difficult Tamil language, and even the simple prayers and creeds he taught the people were later found to be very poorly translated. Church services were ritualistic and repetitious, as Xavier’s own account would indicate:

On Sundays I assemble all the people, men and women, young and old, and get them to repeat the prayers in their language. They take much pleasure in doing so, and come to the meetings gladly.... I give out the First Commandment, which they repeat, and then we all say together, Jesus Christ, Son of God, grant us grace to love thee above all things. When we have asked for this grace, we recite the Pater Noster together, and then cry with one accord, Holy Mary, Mother of Jesus Christ, obtain for us grace from thy Son to enable us to keep the First Commandment. Next we say Ave Maria, and proceed in the same manner through each of the remaining nine Commandments. And just as we say twelve Paters and Aves in honour of the twelve articles of the Creed, so we say ten Paters and Aves in honour of the Ten Commandments, asking God to give us grace to keep them well.<sup>47</sup>

Xavier had not come to India to settle down in one area and establish a long-term ministry. He considered himself a trailblazer and was anxious to move on and lay the groundwork for Jesuit missions elsewhere. When he left India in 1545 for the Far East, his place was quickly filled by others, and within a few decades there were more than a dozen Christian villages.

Whether encountering children or adults, Xavier was always prepared to offer an evangelistic witness. He writes of one such incident before he left India: “I encountered a merchant who had a ship with wares. I spoke to him about the things of God, and God gave him to realize within himself that there are other wares in which he had not traded.” The man left behind his ship and wares and became Xavier’s companion evangelist. “He is thirty-five years old. A soldier of the world for all his life, he is now a soldier of Christ. He heartily commends himself to your prayers. His name is Joao d’Eiro.”<sup>48</sup>

From India, Xavier went to Malacca on the Malay peninsula, where he ministered for a time; but his dream was to visit Japan and bring the gospel there. While in Goa in 1548 he met Anjiro, a Japanese man who convinced him that with proper conduct and logical reasoning a missionary could expect great results in Japan: “The king, the nobility, and all other people of discretion would become Christians, for the Japanese, he said, are entirely guided by the law of reason.”<sup>49</sup>

Xavier arrived in Japan in 1549 and quickly realized that his ministry there would be much more difficult than the glowing predictions had indicated. The language barrier stymied any attempt at evangelism: “We are like so many statues amongst them, for they speak and talk to us about many things, whilst we, not understanding the language, hold our peace.” Nevertheless, Xavier could write only months after he arrived that the people were very fond of hearing about the things of God, “chiefly when they understand them.”<sup>50</sup> Some apparently did understand, for when Xavier left the country after two years he left behind some one hundred converts.

The freedom they encountered was a result of Japan’s unstable political environment. There was no centralized government, and Buddhism was on the decline. That situation

continued after Xavier departed, and the Jesuit missionaries who followed him witnessed impressive results. In the 1570s large numbers of Japanese began turning to Catholicism. Some fifty thousand in one region alone were baptized, and it is estimated that by the close of the sixteenth century there were some three hundred thousand professing Christians. This occurred despite a dramatic change in the Japanese political scene. Foreign missionaries were no longer welcome, and Japanese Christians faced severe persecution, sometimes resulting in death by crucifixion. In 1638 several thousand Christians took part in the Shimabara Rebellion, protesting persecution and exorbitant taxes. They finally took refuge in a castle where, after weeks of holding their own, they were defeated and slaughtered. But despite such setbacks, Catholicism continued to have an influence in Japan for more than two centuries.

Xavier returned to Goa following his departure from Japan, and from there he made plans to go to China, hoping to penetrate that land with the gospel. But it would be left to another Jesuit to pioneer the work there. For while Xavier was arranging entry, he contracted a fever and died on an island just off the coast of China, only ten years after his missionary career had begun.

---

## Matthew Ricci

“Barbarians Not Welcome.” This slogan, more than any other, spoke for China during much of its history. China was a proud and isolationist region that opposed the planting of Christianity on its soil. Attempts were made, but without success. Nestorians who traveled overland from Syria during the sixth century were the first known Christian missionaries to China. Their influence began to decrease by the thirteenth century when the first Roman Catholic missionary, Friar John, arrived. He found considerable freedom to preach under the protection of the Mongols who were then ruling China, and thousands were baptized. During the fourteenth century, when the Ming Dynasty came to power, however, missionaries were expelled. Not until the end of the sixteenth century did Christianity actually gain a permanent foothold in China, and it was an Italian Jesuit, Matthew Ricci, who “became and has ever remained the most respected foreign figure in Chinese literature who was most responsible for that breakthrough.”<sup>51</sup>

Ricci was born in 1522, the year of Xavier’s death. His father was an Italian aristocrat who sent him to Rome to study law. While there, however, young Ricci fell under the influence of the Jesuits, and after three years he turned away from his pursuit of a secular career and entered the Jesuit order. So distressed was his father when he heard the news that he left immediately for Rome to rescue his son. On the way, he became violently ill and was unable to go on. Fearing this was a sign of God’s anger, he returned home. Ricci’s acceptance into the Society of Jesus did not signal an end to his secular studies. He went on to study under a leading mathematician of his day, acquiring an education that later opened a door for him among the *literati* of China.

Accompanied by thirteen other missionaries, Ricci was assigned first to Goa, where Xavier had begun his missionary career. Like Xavier, they baptized and trained children, a ministry to which Ricci did not feel uniquely called. But after four years in India, he “received the marching orders for which he had been praying so long.”<sup>52</sup> He was soon on his way to the Portuguese port city of Macao on the coast of China. His friend Ruggieri had gone there earlier; and even though he was depressed and hopelessly bogged down in language study, Ricci sailed for his new post with anticipation.

His arrival in China signaled the breakthrough that had long been awaited. Though missionaries had for some time resided in Macao, entering China proper had not been permitted. But when word of his expertise in such fields as mathematics, astronomy, and