

Mass of St. Francis Xavier before His Relics

St. Francis Xavier Church

24 January 2018

Dear Father Joseph, pastor, brother priests, Deacon Ken, consecrated men and women, and dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Introduction

What a great joy it is for us as an archdiocesan community to gather on such a festive occasion! We are blessed to celebrate this Holy Mass in the presence of the relic and forearm of the great Saint, Francis Xavier, who with this very arm baptized more than 100,000 people in the countries where he proclaimed the saving Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is indeed a privilege and a great grace that our local Church is able to celebrate with tens of thousands of other Canadians the extraordinary apostolic zeal of this great missionary disciple who fulfilled the Lord's command to "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15).

I am especially grateful to the leadership of Catholic Christian Outreach and the Society of Jesus for making this St. Francis Xavier Relic Pilgrimage possible. But I am also very thankful for the enthusiasm of the local CCO volunteers and friends, the priests and parishioners of St. Francis Xavier Parish and All Saints Parish, and the countless others who have organized and supported this historic event in the Archdiocese of Vancouver.

My Hope and Prayer for the Pilgrimage of the Relic

Certainly it is my hope that this occasion will rekindle, or kindle for the first time, the flame of conversion to the living Person of Jesus Christ, the desire to be a missionary disciple in one's own environment, and the grace of healing from the burdens that threaten to overwhelm us. To venerate the relic of St. Francis Xavier is to honour him who lived what St. Paul proclaimed in the First Reading: "woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16).

But such veneration becomes fully authentic only if it leads us to imitate his holiness of life. That, surely, is the great legacy the Saint left us: to urge us on to become missionary disciples in love with the Lord Jesus and so captured by such great love that we are compelled to share that love with others.

What Does St. Francis Teach Us about Our Mission?

Now I would like to reflect with you on what St. Francis Xavier can teach us today about our vocation and mission as Catholic Christians living on the south coast of British Columbia in the still young years of the 21st century.

Young Francis Xavier was born in 1506 into a prominent, aristocratic Spanish family. He was an ambitious, popular and somewhat worldly student when he met Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society

of Jesus, at the University of Paris.

The Great Questions Begin the Quest

Ignatius posed to his younger companion the questions he had earlier asked himself: “What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ”? Just as answering these questions helped change his own life, so he put them to young Francis Xavier. “What does it profit you, Francis, to gain the whole world if you lose your soul?”

Stunning and urgent questions that are put to us today. What could be more important than living life to the full now (cf. Jn 10:10) as the entry point to eternal life with God? Time and again we – all of us – have to return to this simple, direct question first posed by the Lord himself. Where is my life leading me?

Eagerness and Availability

Francis Xavier answered that question by responding to God’s grace and offering himself for his service. After joining the newly formed Society of Jesus in 1534, and still as a young priest, he was asked by Father Ignatius, who was head of the fledgling group, with just one day’s notice, to go to India to evangelize, because the King of Portugal had requested it. Francis did not hesitate.

Those with a missionary heart are prepared to go wherever they are sent. And at a moment’s notice. They are available for a work greater

than one they would come up with on their own. While prudent discernment is a good thing, in our day we might do well to imitate Francis's eagerness, his availability to do God's will because he trusted in his providential guidance on his journey. This was his *fiat*. Fears of our own unworthiness, lack of training and unsuitability for the mission at hand should not paralyze us when the Lord calls, even if his is a "still, small voice" in the depths of the heart.

Everyone is an agent of evangelization. "Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus."¹

Simplicity of the Kerygma

In the mid-16th century, Portugal had many trading posts, small settlements protected by forts, sprinkled around the coasts of India and South East Asia across 6000 miles of ocean and islands. Francis was thirty-five years old on the day he set out for the sub-continent. Arriving in Goa in 1542, he plunged into his work of preaching the Gospel. For the next ten years, he led an extraordinarily intense life. He worked among the coastal village peoples of India. He visited settlements in India, Sri Lanka, modern Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan. Of those ten years, half were spent working inside India, half outside that country.

¹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120.

Upon reaching his destination, he learned the local language, even though he had no natural talent for learning languages; he ate the available local food, accepted the practices of the people, integrated to the local culture, and assimilated a new life style in order to bring the Gospel of Christ to them. He moved from place to place totally and completely relying on God and proclaimed his message to all with conviction and compassion.

Like St. Francis Xavier, each of us should find ways to communicate Jesus wherever we are. Being a missionary disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place: on the street, in a city square, at work, in the grocery store.

Francis's mission strategy was simple. He entered into the life of the people. He proclaimed the Gospel in ways they would understand. Sometimes we might think that we need a degree in theology to be an effective evangelizer. While certainly we need a firm grasp of the fundamentals of the Church's teaching, we can never forget that our message is the same as that of Jesus, just what we heard in last Sunday's Gospel: "the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mk 1:15) – and that good news is Jesus himself.

Pope Francis, another Jesuit, has reminded us that the message we bring has first "to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most

beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary.”² And what is the heart of the Gospel ? It is simply this: “In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead.”³

To share with others that God takes them by the hand despite all their struggles and difficulties, that Jesus died for their sins, that he never abandons us. This is how Francis began his evangelizing, and this is likewise where we should begin. We don’t need degrees, tricks or gimmicks to be missionary disciples, but hearts open to the other and an appreciation of their particular life situation. We are bearers of good news, “the joy of the Gospel,” not of an instruction book of unachievable demands. I very much like what Pope Benedict once wrote: “There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know him and to speak to others of our friendship with him.”⁴

Sense of Urgency

Father Francis Xavier was a man on the run. He was in a hurry to

² Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 35.

³ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 36; cf. n. 11: “The heart of its message will always be the same: the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ.”

⁴ Benedict XVI, Homily at the Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome (24 April 2005).

reach out to as many people as possible with the Good News of God's merciful love. Even though people often laughed and jeered at him because of his fumbling efforts to speak their language, his warm personality and genuineness drew many to Christ.

Xavier's great goal was to preach in China because he could see the influence it had on the rest of Asia. He never reached there, but died at only 46 years old, with only one companion present and without the Sacraments, on an almost deserted little island facing towards the Chinese mainland. It was finally from heaven that he could inspire other missionaries to go to China with the Gospel and win souls for Christ.

Francis keenly felt the need to bring others to Jesus. There was nothing indifferent or lackadaisical about him. Were he alive today, he would not respond to the call to evangelize with a bored "whatever." On the contrary, the fire of God's love burned within him. He exhausted himself trying to meet the needs of those whom he encountered and wished that other young people would abandon their own plans and join him on missions. On one occasion he wrote to Ignatius:

How many in these countries fail to become Christians, simply for the lack of a teacher of the Christian faith! Often I think of running throughout the universities of Europe, and principally Paris and the Sorbonne, there to shout at the top of my voice, like one who had lost his senses – to tell those

men . . . If all, who with so much labour, study letters, would pause to consider the account they must one day render God concerning the talents entrusted to them, I am sure they would come to say: “Here I am, Lord. Send me where you please, even to India.”⁵

Let us pray this evening that we, too, may feel that same urgency to proclaim the good news to others, to cast out into the deep and sometimes stormy waters (cf. Lk 5:5) and to be willing to take part in the new missionary effort of “going forth.” Each of us and every community in the Archdiocese is being called to discern the path that the Lord is pointing out, “but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.”⁶

Conclusion

As we turn now to the Table of the Eucharist, let us ask the good Lord to make us true missionary disciples after the heart of St. Francis Xavier whose relic we venerate with such enthusiasm and devotion. May he confirm our Archdiocese as an evangelizing community which experiences the closeness of Jesus, as he draws close to us now in this

⁵ Cited in Bert Ghezzi, *Voices of the Saints* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000), 477.

⁶ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 20.

Eucharist. Because he has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19), “we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy.”⁷

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver

⁷ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.