

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Francis Xavier

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: December 3

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IN BRIEF

Saint Francis Xavier

Jesuit priest from Navarre, companion of Ignatius of Loyola, missionary in India and Japan, patron saint of the missions.

Feast day	December 3
Born	April 7, 1506, Castle of Javier, Navarre (Spain)
Died	December 3, 1552, Sancian Island (Shangchuan, China)
Canonized	March 12, 1622, by Pope Gregory XV
Era	16th century
Patron saint of	missions, missionaries, Navarre

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Francis Xavier for the Missions

Novena to Saint Francis Xavier

Basilica of Bom Jesus in Goa, Tomb of Saint Francis Xavier

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LIFE

Saint Francis Xavier

Saint Francis Xavier was a priest from Navarre, one of the first companions of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and a co-founder of the Society of Jesus. Sent to Asia in 1541, he preached the Gospel for ten years in India, Malaysia, the Moluccas and Japan, before dying on an island off the coast of China on December 3, 1552. Canonized in 1622, he is celebrated on December 3 and was proclaimed patron of the missions, together with Saint Thérèse of Lisieux.

Who was Saint Francis Xavier?

Francisco de Jasso y Azpilicueta was born on April 7, 1506, at the castle of Javier in Navarre, into a noble family. His father was a high magistrate of the Kingdom of Navarre. When Castile annexed the kingdom, from 1512 onward, the family sided with the defeated party, and the castle was partly dismantled. Young Francis, a younger son, was headed for a respectable career in the Church and left to study in Paris in 1525.

At the Collège Sainte-Barbe he shared a room with Peter Faber, from Savoy, and from 1529 with an older Basque student, Ignatius of Loyola. Brilliant, athletic and ambitious, Francis resisted Ignatius's influence for a long time. According to a Jesuit tradition, Ignatius kept repeating to him the words of the Gospel: "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Francis finally made the Spiritual Exercises and joined the small group.



The castle of Javier, in Navarre, where Saint Francis Xavier was born.

Key dates

- **April 7, 1506**: Born at the castle of Javier, Navarre.
- **1525**: Arrives in Paris, at the Collège Sainte-Barbe.
- **August 15, 1534**: The Montmartre vows with Ignatius of Loyola and his first companions.
- **June 24, 1537**: Ordained a priest in Venice.
- **1540**: Pope Paul III approves the Society of Jesus; Francis is chosen for the Portuguese Indies.
- **April 7, 1541**: Sails from Lisbon, on his thirty-fifth birthday.
- **May 1542**: Arrives in Goa.
- **1542-1544**: Mission among the Parava fishermen of the Fishery Coast, in southern India.
- **1545-1547**: Malacca, then the Moluccas.
- **August 15, 1549**: Lands at Kagoshima, Japan.
- **1552**: Returns to India, then sets out for China.

- **December 3, 1552**: Dies on the island of Sancian (Shangchuan), off Canton.
- **March 12, 1622**: Canonized by Pope Gregory XV, on the same day as Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Ávila, Philip Neri and Isidore the Farmer.
- **1927**: Pope Pius XI proclaims him patron of the missions with Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus.

Companion of Ignatius

On August 15, 1534, in a chapel on Montmartre, Francis vowed with Ignatius and five other companions to live in poverty and to go to Jerusalem. The pilgrimage to the Holy Land proved impossible, so the companions placed themselves at the disposal of the pope. Francis was ordained a priest in Venice in 1537 and devoted himself to the sick in the hospitals.

In 1540, King John III of Portugal asked for priests for his possessions in Asia. The Jesuit first chosen fell ill. Ignatius turned to Francis, who accepted at once. This readiness, saying yes without delay to an unexpected call, became the mark of his whole life.

Apostle of the Indies

After more than a year at sea, Francis reached Goa in May 1542 with the title of apostolic nuncio. He lodged at the hospital, visited the sick and the prisoners, and gathered the children by ringing a little bell in the streets so that he could teach them the catechism.

He then went to the Fishery Coast, at the southern tip of India, to the Parava pearl fishermen, who had been baptized a few years earlier but had received no instruction. He had the prayers translated into Tamil, learned them by heart and walked barefoot from village to village.

From Malacca, the great port of the Malay Peninsula, he sailed to the Moluccas, the Spice Islands, where he stayed at Ambon and Ternate. His letters to his companions in Europe were read with passion in Rome, Lisbon and Paris, and inspired many missionary vocations.

Japan and China

In Malacca, in 1547, Francis met a Japanese man, Anjirō, who told him about his country. He landed at Kagoshima on August 15, 1549. He discovered a refined culture and understood that he had to adapt: after first appearing in poor clothing, he presented himself as an ambassador before the lord of Yamaguchi, bearing gifts. He founded small Christian communities at Kagoshima, Hirado, Yamaguchi and Bungo, but never managed to meet the emperor in Kyoto.

Convinced that Japan would follow China, he decided to enter the Middle Kingdom, then closed to foreigners. In 1552 he reached the island of Sancian, off Canton, and waited for a smuggler who never came. Sick, exhausted and almost alone, he died in a hut on December 3, 1552, at the age of forty-six, his eyes turned toward the Chinese coast.

Buried on the spot in quicklime, his body was found intact a few months later. It was carried to Malacca, then to Goa, where the whole city welcomed it in March 1554.

Why is Saint Francis Xavier the patron saint of the missions?

Few missionaries have traveled so far: Francis covered tens of thousands of miles to proclaim Christ, from India to Japan, and never separated preaching from caring for the sick and the poor. His letters made the mission known throughout Catholic Europe and awakened generations of vocations. In 1927

Pope Pius XI named him patron of the missions alongside Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: the missionary who crossed the world, and the Carmelite who never left her convent but offered her prayer for those who went.

A man of his time, he sometimes shared the prejudices and limits of the colonial era, but he gradually learned to respect the cultures he encountered. He remains the patron of those who go out, and of everyone who supports the mission by prayer. He is also the patron saint of his native Navarre.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Francis Xavier in art

- **The black Jesuit cassock**, often with a white surplice and a stole, the dress of a priest administering the sacraments.
- **A crucifix** held up in his hand, the sign of his preaching.
- **Hands on his chest and eyes raised to heaven**, as in the old Japanese portrait in Kobe, recalling his ardent love of God.
- **Scenes of baptism**, since tradition says he baptized thousands of people.
- **His death on the shore of Sancian**, alone in a hut or on the beach, a favorite subject of Baroque painters.

How to pray with Saint Francis Xavier

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Francis Xavier, or follow the novena to Saint Francis Xavier from November 24 to December 2, so that it ends on the eve of his feast. Another tradition, the "Novena of Grace," is prayed from March 4 to 12, the anniversary of his canonization.

Where to pray to Saint Francis Xavier

- **Old Goa** (India): the Basilica of Bom Jesus, a UNESCO World Heritage site, keeps his body in a silver casket on a marble mausoleum. About every

ten years the body is exposed for the veneration of the faithful, drawing hundreds of thousands of pilgrims.

- **Rome**: the Church of the Gesù, mother church of the Jesuits, where the relic of his right forearm, the arm with which he baptized, has been venerated since 1614.
- **Javier** (Navarre, Spain): his restored birthplace castle and the nearby basilica, the goal of the "Javierada" walking pilgrimage every March.
- **Paris**: the Chapel of the Martyrium in Montmartre, on the traditional site of the 1534 vows.
- **Malacca** (Malaysia): the ruins of Saint Paul's Church, where his body rested for a short time.
- **Shangchuan Island** (China): the chapel built on the traditional site of his death.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Francis Xavier for the Missions

Saint Francis Xavier left no collection of prayers, but his many letters to his companions in Europe burn with missionary zeal. One of them, written from Cochin in 1544, is read every December 3 in the Liturgy of the Hours. This page offers an excerpt from it, followed by an original prayer to Saint Francis Xavier.

"Shouting like a madman": the letter from Cochin (1544)

Francis wrote to his companions in Rome from southern India, where he was baptizing and teaching without rest. English translation by Saintspedia; the original 16th-century text is in the public domain.

> *A great many people in these lands do not become Christians because there is no one to take care of such holy and devout work.*
>
> *Many times the thought comes to me to go to the universities of your countries, and to shout here and there like a man who has lost his mind, above all at the University of Paris, telling those who have more learning than the will to put it to use: how many souls miss glory and are lost through your neglect!*

Source: Saint Francis Xavier, letter to his companions in Rome, written from Cochin on January 15, 1544. An excerpt is read in the Office of Readings for his feast on December 3.

Prayer to Saint Francis Xavier for the Missions

Saint Francis Xavier, you left everything to make Christ known to the ends of the earth: pray for me and for all who proclaim the Gospel.

You were won over by the friendship of Ignatius and by the question, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Help me to choose what truly matters and not to lose myself in ambition.

You taught the children, cared for the sick and learned the languages of the peoples you met: give me a missionary heart where I live, attentive to the little ones and respectful of everyone.

I entrust to you the missionaries, the young Churches, those who do not yet know Christ, and my own intention (name it in silence). You died at the gates of China without entering it: teach me to hand over to God what I cannot finish myself. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Francis Xavier's feast is December 3, the anniversary of his death. As patron of the missions, he is also prayed to during October, the Church's missionary month, and on World Mission Sunday. Many Catholics, especially in Jesuit parishes and schools, pray to him during the traditional Novena of Grace, from March 4 to 12.

You can pray this prayer for a missionary you know, for a young person discerning a vocation, for the Church in Asia, or simply when you feel called to share your faith and do not know how.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Francis Xavier, and read the life of Saint Francis Xavier.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Francis Xavier

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia that follows the stages of Saint Francis Xavier's life, from Navarre to the gates of China. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast on December 3, begin it on November 24; it ends on December 2. It is different from the traditional "Novena of Grace," prayed from March 4 to 12.

You can pray it for a personal intention, for a missionary or a family member far away, for someone who has drifted from the faith, or for the Church in Asia, where Francis spent the last ten years of his life. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The small act suggested for each day helps you live the mission in ordinary life. You may pray alone, as a family or with a parish group.

Day 1: Javier, an ambitious heart

The young nobleman from Navarre dreamed of glory and honors. God did not destroy his talents: he turned them toward a greater love. Our ambitions, too, can be purified rather than crushed. The energy Francis once put into his career, he later put into carrying the Gospel across oceans.

Prayer: Lord, purify my ambitions and make them serve your glory and the good of my brothers and sisters.

Today: Write down what you desire most, and offer it to God.

Day 2: Paris, a friendship that converts

At the Collège Sainte-Barbe, Ignatius of Loyola kept reminding Francis of what matters most. It took time, patience and friendship for his heart to open. Conversion often comes through a faithful friend who does not give up on us.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for the friends who have brought me closer to you. Make me patient with those I would like to see change.

Today: Meditate on these words: "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

Day 3: Montmartre, a commitment

On August 15, 1534, Francis and his companions committed themselves together to God. A vocation is a gift we receive, but it also asks for a firm answer.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to commit myself to you without holding back any part of myself.

Today: Silently renew the promises of your baptism.

Day 4: "Here I am, send me"

When Ignatius asked him to leave for the Indies in place of a sick companion, Francis said yes on the spot. Readiness was the secret of his life: he let God change his plans. He sailed from Lisbon on his thirty-fifth birthday and never saw Europe again.

Prayer: Lord, make me ready for whatever you ask of me today, even if I did not plan for it.

Today: Accept an interruption or a request for help with a good heart.

Day 5: The little bell of Goa

In Goa, Francis walked the streets ringing a little bell to gather the children and teach them the catechism. The greatest missions begin with very simple gestures. He also visited the sick and the prisoners: no one was too small for his attention.

Prayer: Lord, bless catechists, parents and all who pass on the faith to children.

Today: Learn a prayer with a child, or teach one.

Day 6: Speaking the other's language

Francis had the prayers translated into Tamil, then into Japanese. Proclaiming Christ means entering into the language and the culture of the people we meet, and learning to love them as they are.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, teach me to listen before I speak, and to respect what is beautiful in others.

Today: Take time to truly listen to someone from another culture.

Day 7: Japan, learning to adapt

In Japan, Francis realized that his poor clothing shocked a society deeply attached to rank. He changed his manner without changing his message. Humility also means recognizing our mistakes.

Prayer: Lord, give me the flexibility to change my methods when necessary, while staying faithful to the Gospel.

Today: Admit a mistake, and look for a better way to do things.

Day 8: Letters that set hearts on fire

The letters of Francis, read in Europe, inspired generations of missionaries. The prayer and support of those who stay at home are also part of the mission.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you missionaries all over the world. Sustain them in fatigue and loneliness.

Today: Write to a missionary, or support a missionary work.

Day 9: Sancian, at the gates of China

Francis died alone on an island, without being able to enter China. His work seemed unfinished, yet it has never stopped bearing fruit. God completes what we begin, often in ways we will never see.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Francis Xavier, teach me to entrust everything to you, even what I will not see fulfilled. Amen.

Today: Pray for the Church in China and throughout Asia.

Closing prayer

Saint Francis Xavier, apostle of the Indies and of Japan, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Obtain for me a heart that is ardent and ready, pray for missionaries and for all the peoples who are waiting for the Gospel. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Francis Xavier and the prayer to Saint Francis Xavier.

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Bom Jesus in Goa, Tomb of Saint Francis Xavier

The Basilica of Bom Jesus, in Old Goa on India's west coast, has housed the body of Saint Francis Xavier since the 17th century. It is the main pilgrimage site dedicated to the Apostle of the Indies, at the heart of a group of churches and convents listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The body's return to Goa

After his death on the island of Sancian on December 3, 1552, Francis Xavier was buried there in quicklime. A few months later his body was found intact; it was carried to Malacca, then to Goa, where it arrived in March 1554 and was welcomed by the whole city. First kept at the Jesuit College of Saint Paul, it was placed in the 17th century in the Church of Bom Jesus, "the Good Jesus," completed in 1605 and later raised to the rank of minor basilica.



The Basilica of Bom Jesus in Old Goa, India.

The mausoleum of Saint Francis Xavier

The body rests in a silver casket placed atop a mausoleum of marble and jasper, given in the late 17th century by Cosimo III de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, and made in Florence by the sculptor Giovanni Battista Foggini. The bronze panels tell episodes from the saint's life. Over the centuries relics have been removed: the right forearm, with which he baptized thousands of people, has been venerated since 1614 in the Church of the Gesù in Rome.

The expositions

About every ten years, the body of Saint Francis Xavier is brought down from the mausoleum and displayed for the veneration of the faithful for several weeks in the nearby Sé Cathedral. These expositions draw hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from all over India and the world. Every year the feast on December 3 is preceded by a novena and gathers a very large crowd in Old Goa.

Praying at the tomb of Saint Francis Xavier

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Francis Xavier or a passage from his letters. On site, a time of silence before the mausoleum is a chance to entrust an intention, especially for missionaries and the Churches of Asia. The prayer to Saint Francis Xavier can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Francis Xavier

- **Javier** (Navarre, Spain): the restored castle where he was born, and the nearby basilica; every year in March, the "Javierada" brings thousands of pilgrims here on foot.
- **Rome**: the Church of the Gesù, the mother church of the Jesuits, where his right arm is venerated in the chapel dedicated to him.
- **Paris**: the Chapel of the Martyrium, on Rue Yvonne-Le-Tac in Montmartre, the traditional site of the vows of 1534.
- **Malacca** (Malaysia): the ruins of Saint Paul's Church, where his body briefly rested.
- **Shangchuan Island** (China): a chapel marks the traditional site of his death.

Practical information

Old Goa is about six miles from Panaji, the capital of the state of Goa, and is easy to reach by bus or taxi. The basilica is an active place of worship: modest dress is requested. The dates of the expositions are announced well in advance by the Archdiocese of Goa and Daman. Check Mass and visiting times before you come.

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