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— Saint Francis...
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THE
CATHOLIC
HOUR

No Sad Saints
"Saint Francis Xavier"

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Deacidified

Saint Francis Xavier

Francis Xavier is a Saint peculiarly difficult to present in fifteen minutes. The geography of his life alone is fantastically extensive, for he, born a landlubber in Spain in the year 1506, who never set eyes on salt water until he was thirty years old, experienced subsequently more of the rigours and perils of ocean travel than almost any of the great sea captains and merchant adventurers of the age of discovery. From Europe to India round the Cape, from India to Malacca and the perilous Islands of Indonesia, from Indonesia to an almost unknown and legendary Japan, from Japan to the shores of China, the Forbidden Kingdom, such was his trajectory in the space of ten meteoric years, and that on all sorts of ships, from majestic Portuguese galleons to Chinese junks, Indonesian rowboats and Indian catamarans. He has been called a Saint in a hurry, a divine hustler, and I must hustle too, if I am so much as to catch sight of him on his huge leaps across the world.



He was born a Basque, at an ancient castle called Xavier in the tiny, fiercely independent kingdom of Navarre, a stylized world, still full of feudal customs, and, though aristocratic to the core, dependent in its economy on these plebeian beasts, sheep. Francis, in his youth, had much to do with sheep. In fact, the only thing recorded of him during his first nineteen years of existence is that he helped his two brothers, soldiers both and much older, to round up an alien flock that had trespassed on the Xavier domain. Navarre had been ruled by a French dynasty from which sprang later one of the greatest French kings, until Ferdinand of Aragon destroyed its independence and incorporated it in Spain. It was natural, then, for Francis, who had plenty of ambition but only homespun experience, to feel the magnetic pull of Paris as still, though in decline, the foremost university of the world. To Paris he went, and in Paris he remained, for eleven penurious, high stepping years. Though devoutly bred, he was of a gay and clubbable disposition, determined to get the best fun he could out of life. He liked athletics and became one of the outstanding jumpers at the University, but his studies do not seem to have been

equally distinguished, though he had a brilliant mind and easily won through to a modest post as professor of Aristotle's lore.

All the while he kept his room at the College de Sainte-Barbe, the only one still in existence of the great swarm of colleges which once made the Latin Quarter of Paris a replica of Christendom. One day in 1528, destiny, for Francis, climbed the rickety stairs of Sainte-Barbe in the person of an elderly student, poorly clad, and still limping from a grave wound, acquired long before in the Spanish war against Navarre. His name was Inigo de Loyola, castle-born and a Basque like Francis, but with a background totally different, one of courtly breeding and then of intolerable suffering, followed by a visit from God in the midst of it which slowly transformed his dreams of human glory and renown into a passionate all-consuming love of Jesus Christ, and the Church His Bride. His love took him, penniless and through a thousand perils to Palestine, where he would so gladly have stayed for life, savouring with many loving tears the scenes and memories of the Gospels. But he was compelled to return, and after an appalling winter

voyage of three months at the mercy of Mediterranean gales, decided that he might be able to do more for the glory of God if he acquired a little book-learning. So he made his way across Italy from Venice to Genoa on his wounded foot, begging a crust when he felt near to starvation.

Back in Barcelona, now 33, he took his place in a class of boys in hopes of picking up the rudiments of Latin. That done, he tramped more than a thousand miles through Spain, and then on to the University of Paris, where he lived at a hospice for the poor and begged his daily bread till he was accepted as a student at Sainte-Barbe and assigned to the same room as Francis Xavier. Francis at first would have nothing to do with his elderly room-mate and even waxed sarcastic about his humble efforts to win souls to God. But Inigo, or Ignatius, as we may now call him by the name he adopted, was the most patient of anglers. The extraordinary thing is that he should have so greatly wanted to catch this particular wily fish which had shown so few signs of becoming a royal sturgeon. He admitted afterwards, in a homely kitchen metaphor, that Francis was the lumpiest, most

resistant dough that he had ever kneaded. The stages by which he won him over, the grandest prize of his existence, are known only to God.

It took him the best part of four years to achieve it. Before capturing Francis, Ignatius had gathered round him without any trouble at all, five other university graduates of the highest promise. On August 15, 1534, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary the Queen of all their hearts, the seven friends dedicated themselves by vow to poverty, chastity, and a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which, in the event, they could not make because war broke out between the Republic of Venice and the Turks. They therefore betook themselves to Rome to offer their services to the Pope for any task or mission he might choose to assign them.

Thus it was that Francis Xavier found himself on a great ship at Lisbon, bound for the king of Portugal's conquest in India. On board also was the new Governor, half pirate and half honest Christian, like so many of the officials Francis would encounter. It was this man who told him of an abandoned group of Christians at the Southern tip of

India and kindled in his heart a great longing to go to their rescue. Francis was always longing to rescue somebody, the more wretched and abandoned the better. He took heroic measures in Italy to overcome his Spanish gentleman's horror of the dirt and misery of the poor, and of the foul diseases to which he ministered in the primitive hospitals of Venice and other places. The characteristic of this man, once the fastidious dandy, sportsman, and seeker of fame, had become a limitless generosity in the service of God and his neighbor. One who saw him in Rome after his apostolate in Italy, felt certain that he would very soon occupy a Roman grave, for he had worked himself to a state of complete exhaustion. But no, there was some marvelous inner reserve of power in him, the power of an overwhelming love, which reanimated him, snatched him from the very jaws of death, to meet every challenge which the love of God and man might bring. So there he is on the great ship, *Santiago*, with 700 others: officials, soldiers, deported criminals, wretched African slaves, and a variety of happy-go-lucky adventurers who were staking their shirts, about the only clothing they

possessed on the dark horse India, as little known to them, or to St. Francis, either, as the other side of the moon. Francis sailed on his thirty-fifth birthday, and it was his first time ever on a ship. For the first two months he lay in his miserable, smelly bunk utterly incapacitated by seasickness. Then came the deadly calms off the Guinea Coast, during which time, another voyager recorded, "passengers almost sweat their souls out and suffer torments from the heat beyond the power of my pen to describe." This same man, a hardened seafarer, speaks too of another hardship incidental to ocean travel, in those days, the failure or foulness of the water during much of the voyage. "The water doled out only once a day is so foul and malodorous that it is impossible to bear the stench of it, and the passengers have to put a piece of cloth before their mouths to filter off the corruption." The water failed because little room was left to store it when merchandise, always the first consideration, had been duly accommodated. Sometimes half of the ship's complement died of thirst or disease on those ghastly annual voyages. But none died on the *Santiago*, at least

until it had rounded the Cape and anchored at the pestilence-ridden Portuguese conquest, Mozambique. The ship's surgeon of the *Santiago* bore the following sworn testimony four years after the death of St. Francis. "I came out from Portugal on the same ship as Father Francis, and often watched him at his charitable activities. He used to beg alms from other passengers for the poor and sick persons. He took personal charge of such as well ailing or prostrated by illness. From this work of mercy and from his hearing of confessions, he allowed himself never a moment of respite, but cheerfully accomplished it all. At Mozambique, the Father gave himself so completely to the service of those who were taken from the five ships already ill, and to those who fell ill afterwards during the winter spent on Mozambique, that only forty or forty-one of the sufferers died. Everybody regarded this as a marvelous thing, indeed as a real miracle, due under God to the devotedness and goodness of the Father. He felt sick himself in consequence of his crushing labours. I had to bleed him nine times, and for three whole days he was in delirium. As soon as he became convalescent he resumed his former

labours with all his old enthusiasm."

Another good man who had gone East with Francis begged him to moderate his activities in the hospital at Mozambique if he did not want to kill himself. "He answered me," this man testified on oath, "that through the following night he had a little business to do with a poor fellow, a deck-hand who was delirious and at death's door. Afterwards he promised to relax. Next morning, I went to the hospital again and visited the Father in the cell which he occupied. I found the sailor lying in his bed, an affair made of thongs, with nothing over them but a scrap of old cloth. On a block of wood beside the bed the Father himself lay, conversing with the sailor who had completely recovered his senses. He died that evening, after making his confession and receiving Holy Viaticum, and his good end caused the Father immense happiness. Indeed, he always looked happy no matter what his sufferings and burdens."

The favourite adjective which these and all other witnesses used of St. Francis, was *alegre* — cheerful, merry, gay. It was this and his unalterable friendliness that brought the sinners

and tough customers spontaneously to his feet. "May God be praised," he wrote back to the beloved companions in Rome, "Who was so good to me while we sailed through the realm of the fishes."

I could give a hundred more such cameos as the two cited, but for the merciless clock in the studio. — Francis snatching a little sleep on the floor at the foot of the bed of the sickest man in the hospital at Goa and springing up to comfort him or another at the slightest moan, Francis among the degraded prisoners in Goa's filthy gaols, Francis tending the lepers in their settlement with a mother's love, Francis ringing his bell in the streets to summon the brown Indian urchins to his classes of religious instruction which he made gay by teaching them to sing the Creed, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Commandments to catchy tunes, Francis at Cape Comorin, less than ten degrees from the Equator, tramping back and forward over the 50 miles of burning sands where lay the miserable huts of the abandoned Christians — simple folk, pearl divers, mulcted of all their pearls by Portuguese and Indian traders on the make.

But no European, except Francis, lived on that wild, scorched, devil-

haunted coast. He must have felt intolerably lonely at times and said that he would be forever the slave of any man who came out from Europe to help him.

The poor people of the villages, whose great enemy was the shark, spoke Tamil, a non-Aryan and very difficult language which beat Francis completely. But a few of the villagers had picked up a little Portuguese, a tongue he knew well, and with their frail help he managed to get the Creed, the common Catholic prayers and two little sermons on Heaven and Hell into the incomprehensible syllables, which he then learned brutally by heart and gave out with immense gusto and a wealth of gestures. At least the little children understood him, for they worshipped him, followed him about in crowds, and, as he said, often prevented him from saying his Breviary or snatching a mouthful of rice from morning to night. He could never find it in his heart to deny them.

After two years of crucified existence, he was sent relief by the Father of his soul and friend of all friends, St. Ignatius Loyola. Then he could move on to blaze that incredible trail through the Far East which electrified Europe when the news came of it, and sent speeding

in his footsteps through the centuries, thousands of men set aflame by his example. He was the first white man ever to penetrate, disguised as a merry juggler, into the heart of Japan, and he died completely burned out at forty-six on a lonely smuggler's island within sight of China, trying unavailingly to bring the love of Jesus Christ which devoured him, to that barred and bolted land.

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