

Xavier the Mystic

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(An article from Francis Britto's [All About Francis Xavier](#))

When I was a small boy I attended a Jesuit school in Liverpool and the school was called "St Francis Xavier's" or simply "S. F. X." I recall the huge inscription A. M. D. G. over the entrance and in various places in the school. These were the first letters of the Latin *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* and they signified *For the Greater Glory of God*. Later I learned that this was the motto of St Francis Xavier, which he learned from his friend and master Ignatius. Throughout his extraordinary life and in his journeys in Asia Xavier was always searching not just for *the glory of God* but for *the greater glory of God*. And this is the secret of his mysticism.

At school I also learned about the life of Xavier. As a student at the University of Paris this young Basque was intelligent and ambitious. He wanted worldly glory. And then he met an older Basque, Ignatius of Loyola; and the two became friends. As a soldier, wounded in battle, Ignatius had undergone a profound conversion; and now he wanted to devote his life to Jesus Christ, making disciples who would work with him for the



glory of God. When they were together Ignatius would constantly say to his friend: "What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul." (Luke 9:25) "Francis, of what use is all this glory and renown? Is it not better to fix your attention on things that do not pass?"

For a long time Xavier resisted. But finally he surrendered and gave himself totally to God. The next step in his spiritual journey was the Spiritual Exercises which he made in September 1534 under the direction of Ignatius. For thirty days he lived in solitude, alone with God, being visited only by Ignatius who came to teach him how to pray and

how to discern about his future life. Xavier's biographer Georg Schurhammer tells us how Xavier gave himself to the Spiritual Exercises with all the generosity of his fiery, knightly soul. He abstained completely from food and drink for four days. As a penance for his vanity in sports he tied his arms, hips, and feet so tightly that his limbs swelled up and the thin cords could hardly be seen, and it seemed impossible to remove them. Two days he spent in the most grievous pain and it looked as if one of his arms might have to be amputated. Yet he recovered in what appeared to be a miracle. Schurhammer goes on:

What Master Francis saw and experienced during these holy Exercises he was never to forget. When he returned again to his companions after thirty days he was another man. Though he was the same cheerful and lovable companion as before, a holy fire illuminated his countenance. His heart was burning with an earnest longing and a holy love for the crucified Christ, his King and Lord. He desired to serve him henceforth with all the strength of his soul; he wanted to follow Him in life and death, wherever the greater service of God might indicate; and he wished to serve Him alone.¹

In this short paragraph Schurhammer puts his finger on the principal characteristics of Xavier's mysticism.

There is the holy fire that illuminated Xavier's countenance and his heart burning with love for the crucified Jesus. In the Christian mystics the inner fire of love is the center of all. St John of the Cross speaks of "the living flame of love" and of the "lamps of fire" which burn at the core of his being. Moreover, the fire in both Xavier and St John of the Cross is directed towards the crucified.

Yet the inner fire of the two saints is also different. The fire that drove the contemplative John of the Cross to solitude and silence drove Xavier to serve Jesus Christ actively in the hurly-burly of human life! The mystical fire that drives one mystic to solitude drives the other mystic to travel throughout Asia spreading the Good News of the Gospel. Both saints are seeking God's greater glory but with different vocations.

Schurhammer further emphasises that, in Ignatius, Xavier found a master and a "guru" who directed him all through his life. From henceforth Inigo was for -2- Master Francis the highly revered and beloved "father of his soul," his "only father in the love of Christ," through whom God had spoken to his soul. Later, when he was in Asia, Xavier read the letters of Ignatius on his knees.

The mysticism of Xavier, then, is focused on Jesus Christ. This he learned from the Spiritual Exercises which are extremely Christocentric. Later Ignatius was to call his religious order "The Company of Jesus." And for him the name was extremely important. When the frustrated Roman cardinals complained: "Why do we have to remove our birettas whenever this company is mentioned?" and when they demanded that the name be changed, Ignatius was adamant. No change. It must be "The Company of Jesus" and nothing else.

Indeed, the mysticism of the Exercises is summed up in the mystical prayer "Anima Christi" which Ignatius loved and taught to Xavier and others. This prayer is translated into the languages of countries throughout the world. The Japanese translation is a hymn that is frequently used in the liturgy. A word about this prayer may not be out of place.



Soul of Christ, sanctify me
Body of Christ, save me
Blood of Christ, inebriate me

This is a Eucharistic prayer. The body of Christ is present throughout the world. "I am the bread of life", said Jesus. And these words are taken in a very real sense by Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran and Catholic Christians, for whom the body of Christ(Corpus Christi)is the central mystery of faith. From the earliest days the assembled Christians chanted, "Christ has died; Christ has risen; Christ will come again." "Body of Christ save me" is a truly mystical prayer.

But even more startling are the words, "Blood of Christ, inebriate me." Some commentators have tried to tone these words down; but they must be taken very realistically. It is as though we were praying, "Blood of Christ, make me drunk." If these words are shocking, let us reflect that the mystics often speak of wine and inebriation. They are influenced by *The Song of Songs* which speaks poetically of "your kisses like the best wine that goes down smoothly, gliding over lips and teeth"(Song 7 :9). And the sacred text calls out to all the world:

Eat, friends, drink
and be drunk with love (Song 5:1)

When we see Xavier's travels by land and sea and when we think of his tireless activity, it is easy to believe that he was drunk with love.

The *Anima Christi* goes on:

Water flowing from the side of Christ, purify me
Passion of Christ, comfort me.

"One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out." (Jn 19:14.). This is the water flowing from the side of Christ which purifies Xavier and all who kneel before the Cross. The passion of Christ strengthens Xavier. His biographers speak of his great love for the crucified Saviour.

The prayer continues with startling words :

O good Jesus, hear me
Within thy wounds hide me

These are the wounds of the risen Jesus who said to Thomas: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side..." (Jn 19:20). The mystics speak frequently of the "secrecy" of contemplative prayer. "Hide me within thy wounds."

The *Anima Christi* ends with a prayer to Jesus who is divine:

At the hour of my death call me
And cause me to come to Thee
Where with thy saints and angels
I may praise thee for everlasting ages.

Now the Jesus who was crucified in weakness has a name that is above all names "so that at the name of Jesus...every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil 2:11). Jesus is at the same time human and divine.

The Spiritual Exercises end with a meditation known as "The Contemplation for Obtaining Divine Love." Now the exercitant opens his or her heart to the grace of "seeing God in all things." God is present everywhere and in every incident that occurs in human life. Not only is God present, God is giving Himself to me in love. And in reply I am asked to give myself to him in love with the words: "Take, O Lord, and receive my whole liberty, my mind, my memory, my understanding and my whole will, whatever I have and possess these I give entirely to Thee." Sometimes, however, the exercitant may offer himself or herself totally to God in silence, without any words.

This is the *silentium mysticum*, the mystical silence. It leads to the spiritual marriage, though Ignatius does not use that terminology.

This "seeing God in all things" and "meeting God in all circumstances" has been at the core of Jesuit activity from the time of Ignatius. It was the key experience in the life of Xavier as he travelled to India, to Malacca and to Japan. Everywhere he saw God. Everywhere he met God. Like St Paul he became identified with Jesus and cried out, "Abba, Father."

Xavier's love of the-crucified Jesus was not just a key element in his prayer. He found the Crucified in the sick and suffering wherever he went. During the voyage to India he could have lived in comfort with the Portuguese captain and his crew; but he preferred to be with the sick and suffering. Schurhammer tells how Xavier himself became sick but "he had not made his novitiate experiment in the hospital of the incurables in Venice in vain; he had learned how to -5- overcome his repugnance"; and Schurhammer gives us a graphic description of the compassionate Xavier:



From morning till evening he visited the sick. He went down into the dimly lit steerage, where the stench poisoned the air, and his head was heavy as lead when he came out again into the fresh air. He emptied and cleaned their containers, washed their sweaty, dirty, pus-covered bodies, and their clothes and dishes at the side of the boat. He bound up their wounds, pared their nails, checked the bandages around their arteries where they had been bled, gave them enemas, and with great affection tended their every need without fear of contagion, as if he were the least boatsman or slave.²

In this way Xavier put into practice what his father Ignatius called "the third degree of humility." Or can we not say that he put into practice what is written in the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Xavier died far from his companions on the island of Sancian. Several artists have drawn imaginary paintings of this tiny, broken man, lying on the shore, clothed in a Jesuit cassock, clutching a crucifix and looking out towards China. A Chinese Christian

who befriended Xavier at the end writes of how he constantly called on the name of Jesus. He repeated the words: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" and again, "O Virgin Mother of God, remember me!"

And so he died.

As we enter the third millennium, we see Christianity locked in a new dialogue with Asia. No longer do we believe that there is no salvation outside the Church; we have come to recognize the truth and goodness in Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism. In our dialogue with Asian mysticism great importance is given to Meister Eckhart, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and St John of the Cross. The "emptiness", the "nothingness" and the nada, nada, nada of these authors might seem more relevant in Asia than the "Jesus mysticism" of Xavier and the early missionaries. What, then, are to say of the spirituality of Xavier in today's Asia?

It seems to me that the "Jesus mysticism" of Xavier and the early missionaries is not only relevant but necessary for Asia.

First it must be remembered that the spirituality of these early missionaries went very deeply into the soul of Asia, as is clear from the thousands of martyrs who shed their blood precisely for love of Jesus Christ. Furthermore this spirituality is vitally alive in the Philippines, Nagasaki, Macau, Malacca, Goa and other parts of Asia. There is the additional fact that thousands, perhaps millions, of Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims have the greatest respect for Jesus Christ even when they do not believe in his divinity. Here in Japan, Shusaku Endo, a best-selling novelist, spent his life struggling with Jesus, fascinated by the Gospel. It is clear, then, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has a great future in Asia.

At the same time we must pay close attention to the Second Vatican Council. We invite people to receive baptism not because they will be lost through their faith in Buddhism but because God so loved the world as to give his only Son. The key to all is the love of God. This approach is true of Xavier. Though he was convinced that outside the Catholic Church there was no salvation (this was the theology he learned at the University of Paris) he could make the prayer: "My God, I love you, not because I hope for heaven thereby, nor because those who love thee not must burn eternally". His love does not stem from a fear of punishment or a desire for reward. It is a response to the

love of Jesus, and his prayer goes on: "Thou, O my Jesus, thou didst me upon the cross embrace..." This is the spirituality he learned from the Spiritual Exercises. It echoes the first Epistle of St John, "We love because he first loved us." (1 Jn 4:19)

Xavier continues to be loved and revered in Asia. His mysticism will not die.

¹Francis Xavier: His Life and Times by Georg Schurhammer, The Jesuit Historical Institute, Rome 1973 Vol 1 p.222

²Ibid. Vol2,p.20 -7



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Suggested citation: Johnston, William. (2014). "Xavier the Mystic." In Francis Britto's *All About Francis Xavier*. Retrieved from <http://pweb.cc.sophia.ac.jp/britto/xavier>