

SAINTS *and* SACRAMENTS

Companion book to
The Sacraments Study Program

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Sacraments etchings:
Lorenzo Zucchi after Giuseppe Maria Crespi, 1765.

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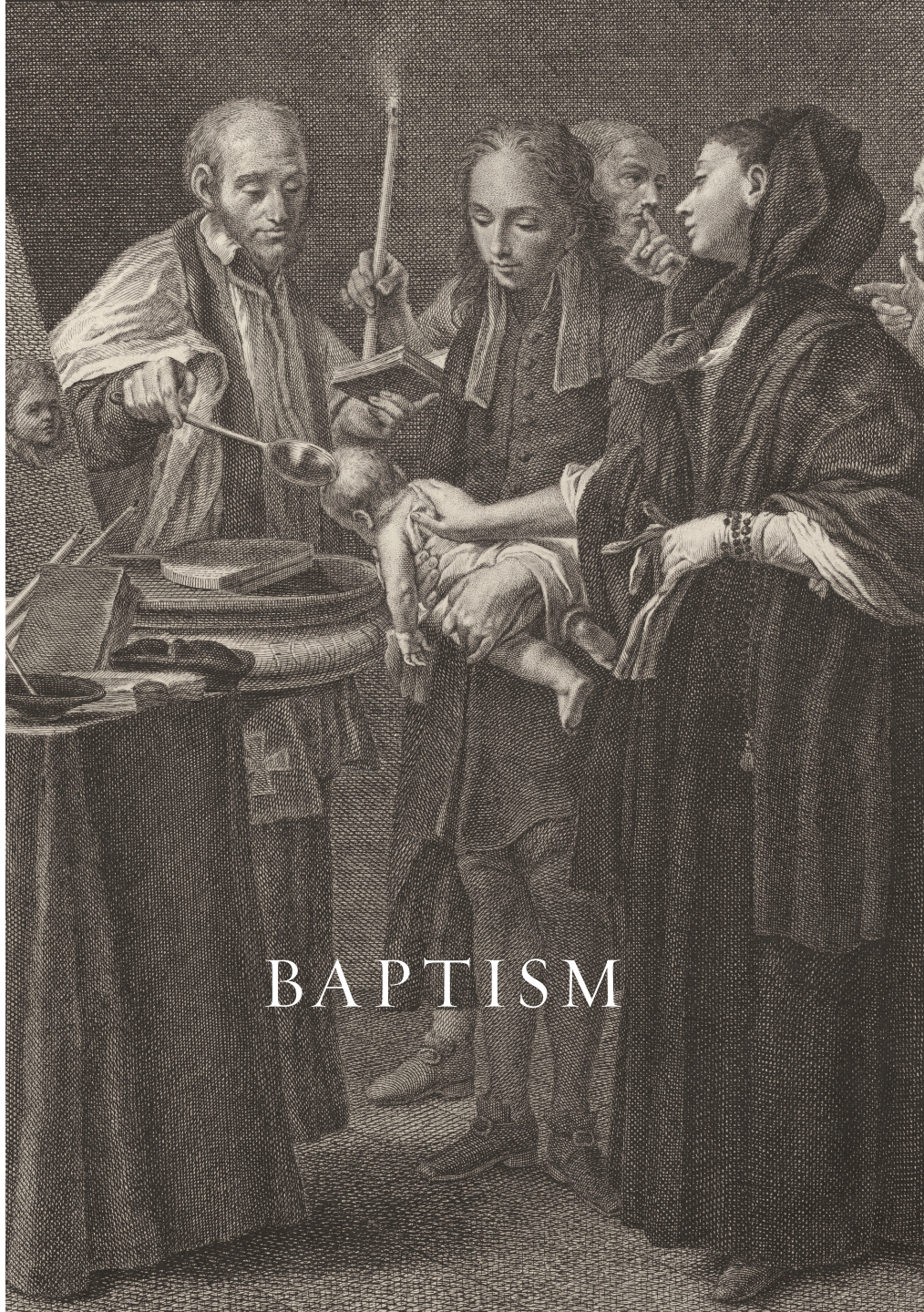
FOREWORD

When the Church canonizes someone, it declares that the person “practiced heroic virtue and lived in fidelity to God’s grace,” according to the *Catechism*.¹ We all receive a special and guaranteed outpouring of God’s grace each time we receive a sacrament in faith and love. The saints all cooperated with the grace of the Holy Spirit in order to follow and accomplish the unique mission that God entrusted to each one of them. Each one of us has a unique mission as well and needs the grace of the sacraments, along with all other forms of grace, to walk the path God has prepared especially for us and follow the universal call to holiness.

To bring life and depth to the discussion of the sacraments, this book highlights one saint for each sacrament. Each chosen saint personifies a certain sacrament by the words and deeds of their earthly lives. From St. Francis Xavier, the Jesuit who baptized more people than anyone in history, to St. Maximillian Kolbe, the Franciscan priest who offered his own life as a sacrifice to save a fellow prisoner in Auschwitz, these seven saints model surrender to Christ and a sure path to holiness. They truly are living signs of the power of God’s grace that flows through the sacraments.

1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 828





BAPTISM



BAPTISM

St. Francis Xavier

God chose St. Francis Xavier to baptize more people than possibly anyone in the history of the Church. St. Francis Xavier didn't plan to be a missionary, or even a Jesuit, but God led him to those roles because he had a very specific mission in mind for him. Francis Xavier brought tens of thousands of people on the distant continent of Asia to Christ and his Church. How many did he baptize? Estimates range anywhere between thirty thousand and seven hundred thousand—and his missionary work lasted only ten short years!

At the “mother church” of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), the Church of the Gesu in Rome, there is only one relic on display from Francis Xavier. His well-preserved right hand and forearm has been there for centuries, raised in testimony to the powerful sacrament that he conferred on countless Asians.

Growing up in a wealthy family in the Basque region of Spain, Francis Xavier had planned to devote his life to the Church as a theologian. In 1525, he left Spain to attend the University of Paris, the theological and intellectual center of Europe at the time, to begin his studies. Francis roomed with another Basque student, Ignatius of Loyola, who was fifteen years older and had experienced a life-changing religious conversion. Ignatius gathered a group of like-minded men who shared his faith and his ideals, gradually winning over the initially reluctant Francis Xavier. Each member of the group participated in a rudimentary version of what later became Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, a series of practices and meditations designed to strengthen the interior life and guide one to greater service of God. The *Exercises* inspired Francis Xavier to devote his life entirely to the Lord. In 1534, this band of seven men took vows of poverty and chastity. They initially desired to travel to the Holy Land and work for the conversion of the Muslims living there, but their plan was thwarted by the Turkish wars. They went instead to Rome, and six years later, in September 1540, Pope Paul III approved their request to establish a new religious order, the Society of Jesus. They pledged their obedience to the pope "for the good of souls," offering to go wherever he would send them.

Initially, the pope enlisted their services in Italy. They quickly attracted the attention of King John III of Portugal,

who sought priests to support the Christians and to evangelize the peoples in his new Asian territories, principally in India. Two priests were chosen to undertake the mission but when one fell ill, Francis Xavier was chosen to take his place.

In March 1540, Francis Xavier left Rome for Lisbon and, after a brief stint in Portuguese Mozambique, he then sailed to Goa, India. He carried the title of Papal Nuncio to the East, acting as a diplomat to the region for the Holy Father. During their thirteen-month voyage to India, Francis Xavier took all on board under his spiritual care. He preached on deck every Sunday, offered catechism to the crew, settled quarrels, and cared for the sick. The ship landed in Goa, the epicenter of Portuguese colonial activity, in May 1542.

The Portuguese had been in Goa for thirty years, but the practice of the Catholic faith had fallen off significantly. They did not live out their faith and set a poor moral example for the Indian people. One of the biggest scandals was the taking of concubines from among the native women. Francis Xavier sought to correct the situation with methods that were sensible, humane, and tactful, thereby earning the respect of all.

Francis Xavier was known to be very charismatic with a “dashing and robust personality” and was also described as “joyful,” “practical,” “prudent,” “creative,” “astounding,” and “decisive.” Francis Xavier understood people. He worked tire-

lessly to learn each native language where he ministered, wearing the indigenous dress and eating the food of the peoples to establish a closer connection.

A companion of Francis Xavier described him in this way: “I have never met anyone more filled with faith and hope, more open-minded than Francis. He never seems to lose his great joy and enthusiasm. He talks to both the good and the bad. Anything he is asked to do, Francis does willingly, simply because he loves everyone.”¹

Francis Xavier described his work in one of the many letters he sent back to the Jesuit headquarters in Rome:

In this region of Travancore, where I now am, God has drawn very many to the faith of His Son Jesus Christ. In the space of one month I made Christians of more than ten thousand. This is the method I have followed. As soon as I arrived in any heathen village where they had sent for me to give them baptism, I gave orders for all, men, women, and children, to be collected in one place. Then, beginning with the first elements of the Christian faith, I taught them there is one God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and at the same time, calling on the three divine persons and One God, I made them each make three times the sign of the Cross; then, putting on a surplice, I began to recite in a loud voice and in their own language the form of general

Confession, the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Ave Maria, and the Salve Regina. Two years ago I translated all these prayers into the language of the country, and learned them by heart. I recited them so that all of every age and condition followed me in them. Then I began to explain shortly the articles of the Creed and the Ten Commandments in the language of the country. Where the people appeared to me sufficiently instructed to receive baptism, I ordered them all to ask God's pardon publicly for the sins of their past life, and to do this with a loud voice and in the presence of their neighbors still hostile to the Christian religion, in order to touch the hearts of the heathen and confirm the faith of the good. They willingly hear about the mysteries and rules of the Christian religion, and treat me, poor sinner as I am, with the greatest respect. Many, however, put away from them with hardness of heart the truth which they well know. When I have done my instruction, I ask one by one all those who desire baptism if they believe without hesitation each of the articles of the faith. All immediately, holding their arms in the form of the Cross, declare with one voice that they believe all entirely. Then at last I baptize them in due form, and I give to each his name written on a ticket. After their baptism the new Christians go back to their houses and bring me their wives and families for baptism. When all are baptized, I order all the temples of their false gods to be destroyed and all the idols to be broken in pieces. I can give you no idea of the

joy I feel in seeing this done, witnessing the destruction of the idols by the very people who but lately adored them. In all the towns and villages I leave the Christian doctrine in writing in the language of the country, and I prescribe at the same time the manner in which it is to be taught in the morning and evening schools. When I have done all this in one place, I pass to another, and so on successively to the rest. In this way I go all round the country, bringing the natives into the fold of Jesus Christ, and the joy that I feel in this is far too great to be expressed in a letter, or even by word of mouth.²

In Travancore, where he penned the above letter, he established forty-five churches and was called “The Great Father.” Miracles of healing often occurred in the poor villages he visited. Unlike many missionaries over the centuries, Francis Xavier didn’t just baptize and move on. He ensured that there was someone left in each new Christian community to continue catechesis, even asking Rome for new recruits to come and staff the churches he had established. He wrote to Ignatius:

Many, many people hereabouts are not becoming Christians for one reason: there is nobody to make them Christians. Again and again I have thought of going round the universities of Europe, especially Paris, and everywhere crying out like a madman. Riveting the attention of those with more learning than charity: “What a tragedy: how

many souls are being shut out of heaven and falling into hell, thanks to you!” I wish they would work as hard at this as they do at their books, and so settle their account with God for their learning and the talents entrusted to them.³

Francis Xavier did well with the common people, even teaching key tenets of the faith to the children in rhyme and song, so that they could go home and sing them to their families. He did not fare as well with the officials, only converting one high-caste Brahmin in a year’s time. Often, he was violently opposed, and his enemies attempted to burn down his hut while he was inside. On another occasion, he saved his life only by hiding from his pursuers in the branches of a large tree.

After spending seven years in India and the Malay Peninsula, Francis Xavier learned of the existence of the islands of Japan. The fact that there were still new worlds without knowledge of Christ motivated him. He is quoted as saying, “I want to be where there are out-and-out pagans,” and one of his favorite prayers was “Give me souls!” Francis Xavier set about learning the Japanese language, which he said was the most difficult of all.

In Japan, Francis Xavier had to change his approach. The Emperor of the first province he visited would never receive or listen to someone dressed in the rags he usually wore, so

Francis Xavier changed into elegant clothing and brought gifts, thereby winning the Emperor's friendship and opening up a new opportunity to preach the Gospel. He was given free rein to preach in the province and even given residence at a deserted Buddhist temple.

He came to realize that the way to further conversion in Japan must proceed through China, since the Japanese looked to China for wisdom. The Chinese government prohibited entrance to their country by foreigners, but Francis Xavier worked creatively and tirelessly with local merchants and his companions to reach China anyway. Unfortunately, he died trying. St. Francis Xavier succumbed to fever on December 3, 1552, on an island just off the Chinese coast.

Not yet knowing of his death, Ignatius wrote to Francis Xavier a few weeks later to recall him to Europe as his successor as head of the Society of Jesus. This gives us a clear sense of the high esteem that Ignatius had for Francis Xavier. Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier were canonized together in 1622. In 1927, Pope Pius XI named St. Francis Xavier the official co-patron of foreign missions (along with St. Thérèse of Lisieux).

The areas the saint evangelized in India have remained Catholic to the present day. The missions he founded on the Malay Peninsula and in Japan were destroyed in the seventeenth

century through violent and prolonged persecution. But the faith there did not go quietly, as thousands who traced their faith to Francis Xavier and his companions were martyred for their devotion to Christ.

St. Francis Xavier's feast day is December 3.

St. Francis Xavier, pray for us that we may bring the love, truth, and goodness of Christ to all who do not know him.

