

How Christians Can Pray for Pope Francis' Prophetic Namesake

A lot of attention has been focused on St. Francis of Assisi after Cardinal Bergoglio took the name of Francis upon his election as Pope. As well we should, because St Francis taught his followers to share the Gospel more by what they do than what they say.

But this week, on April 8, we mark the life of another Francis who, it is believed, is also a role model for the new Pope. On that date in 1541, Francis Xavier began his extraordinary missionary journey to the East. Over the next 10 years, he traveled through 50 kingdoms and baptized over 1,000,000 people. He founded churches from India to Japan, earning the title "Apostle to the Indies."

Beyond his importance as an Asian missionary, Francis Xavier pioneered a return of Christian missions to its gospel roots. The medieval model of missions called for conquest and forced conversion, as exemplified by the Spanish conquests and failed conversions in the New World. Francis Xavier showed that heartfelt conversion won by the love of God was not only more scriptural, it was more effective. In that sense he is the father of all modern Christian missions.

Francis Xavier lived in an age of upheaval, when Europeans had begun challenging the pagan kingdoms of the East for commerce and, later, military supremacy. The European traders were interested in gold, not God, but they undermined the power of the pagan kings and the pagan gods they claimed to represent. The traders also curtailed the power of the Islamic merchants and stopped the Islamic expansion into the Far East. As a result, societies which had been closed to Christianity became

more open, and Christian missionaries were able to present the Gospel. For Francis Xavier, a million baptisms followed.

These European powers eventually spread their empires throughout the world, replacing pagan kingdoms in the Americas, Africa and Asia. While these nations were seldom, if ever, interested in spreading Christianity, many missionaries followed in the footsteps of Francis Xavier and brought God's love to the colonized peoples. Today there are thriving Christian communities in the Americas, Africa and Asia because of these missionary efforts.

Also, today, we find that it is Europe which has abandoned its Christian roots and fallen into darkness. So it seems somehow to be fitting that the new pope taking the name Francis would come from a place which was Christianized by missionaries like Francis Xavier and would now return to Europe to preach a new evangelism to the lost Europeans.

We pray for Pope Francis, a man of the Spirit and a uniter of Christians, that he will help lead the whole church to challenge the European societies and open them to the gospel as the Europeans did to the pagan world 500 years ago.

We pray also for the unity of the church and a spiritual awakening of the church to enable it to be faithful in our generation as Francis Xavier was in his. {eo}

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