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A person touches Pope Francis' cheek as he rides in his wheelchair past a line of people

Pope Francis greets visitors at the end of his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican May 17, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

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St. Francis Xavier offers the faithful, especially young people who are itching to make a difference in the world, a wonderful example of how to find courage in prayer and spread the joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis said.

"Look at Francis Xavier, look at the world's horizon, look at people in so much need, look at so many people suffering, so many people in need of Jesus, and go, be courageous," he told people at his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square May 17.

As part of his series of talks about "zeal" for evangelization, Francis spoke about the Spanish Jesuit missionary, St. Francis Xavier, who is the patron saint of missions together with St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

St. Francis Xavier is sometimes considered to be "the greatest missionary of modern times," the pope said. "But you cannot say who is the greatest, who is the least, because there are so many hidden missionaries who, even today, do so much more than St. Francis Xavier."

What makes a missionary great is the act of going, of leaving one's homeland to preach the Gospel, the pope said.

This is what apostolic zeal looks like, he said. "We have to nurture this so much and we learn by looking at these men, these women" who have been missionaries.

The pope detailed the life of St. Francis Xavier, who was born into a noble family in Spain in 1506 and then met St. Ignatius Loyola, another Spanish nobleman, while studying in Paris.

He became one of the first members of the new Society of Jesus founded by St. Ignatius, and he wanted to become a missionary.

He was sent to still unfamiliar lands in Asia, embarking on a voyage full of hardship and danger, and encountering new languages and cultures, the pope said.

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St. Francis Xavier spent 11 years in mission, spending more than three and a half of those years just traveling by boat, reaching India, Sri Lanka, Malacca in modern-day Malaysia, the Maluku Islands of Indonesia and Japan.

He baptized and cared for the sick and he taught prayers and the catechism to children; in the Maluku Islands, he translated the catechism into the local language and put it into verse so it would be easier to learn through song, Francis said. The saint planted in Asia the seeds of Christianity that would bear great fruit.

"Francis Xavier had the apostle's restlessness to keep going further," and he dreamed of going to China, "with its culture, its history, its greatness," he said. "Even today China is such a cultural center, with a great history, a very beautiful history."

But the saint got sick and died at age 46 on an island off the coast of China in 1552.

His very intense missionary activity always was "combined with prayer, in union with God," because he knew that was where he drew his strength, the pope said. Also, "he was not an 'aristocratic' missionary: he always went with the neediest, the children who were the most in need of education, catechesis, the poor, the sick."

"The love of Christ was the strength that drove him to the farthest frontiers, (facing) hardships and constant danger, overcoming setbacks, disappointments and discouragement, indeed, giving him consolation and joy in following and serving (Christ) to the end," he said.

Francis asked that the faithful to look to the saint for inspiration to experience the same zeal for living and proclaiming the Gospel.

"To the many young people today who have some restlessness and don't know what to do with that restlessness, I say, look at Francis Xavier" and the many people in the world who need Jesus, he said.

"May the Lord give us all the joy of evangelization, the joy of carrying this very beautiful message that makes us, and everyone, happy," he said.