ST. FRANCIS XAVIER

IV CENTENARY SOUVENIR

1553 — MARCH 22nd — 1953
MALACCA.
ST. FRANCIS XAVIER IN MALACCA.

(By Rev. Fr. Joy)

FIRST VISIT

When Francis Xavier landed in Malacca at the end of September, 1545, he received what, as far as I know, was his first public ovation. News spread like wildfire that the “Holy Father” had arrived, and crowds gathered on the waterfront to greet him. Everyone offered him hospitality but he chose first a little house near the hospital and later moved to the hospital itself so as to be at the service of the sick night and day.

Nothing is more certain than that Francis had become almost a legendary hero even during his lifetime. One is tempted to speculate just how much did Malacca know about him at the time of this reception. One can safely say not as much of his early life as we know now. For Francis Xavier has become a labourer of love for countless scholars so that nothing in his life is too small to escape scholarly research.

It is certain they would have had the story of his voyage from Lisbon to Mozambique, April 7th, 1541, to September of the same year; of his winter in Mozambique serving the sick, preaching, and hearing confessions; and of the voyage from Mozambique to Goa from February, 1542 to May 6th, 1542. Malacca was the Singapore of those days and every Portuguese ship going east to the “Spice Islands” called there and, in the days before telegraph and wireless, brought whatever news was going in the outside world. Now Francis was “news” from the very beginning. Appointed Apostolic Nuncio by the Pope, carrying letters to all the kings of the East, confirmed in his powers by the King of Portugal who had personally handed him the Papal brief and letters, Francis had outraged the sense of decorum of the officials preparing for the voyage by refusing even a servant. Once on board he became the servant of all, and his stateroom was always occupied by the sick while Francis slept on the floor beside them. In this first voyage he already displayed that amazing power — surely more than human — for winning the hearts and souls of men.

The sailors coming into Malacca in the three years since Francis had landed in Goa would have told of meetings with him along the Indian coast, for no man traversed the 700 to 800 miles between Goa and South India as often as he — thirteen times in his brief missionary career. Other Portuguese had told the story of his astounding missionary success among the poor of the Fishery Coast, and of the impression made by his all-too-brief visits to Goa. Emphatically all the Portuguese ports of the East must have heard from sailors of that amazing voyage.
Going back into his earlier life, they would certainly have heard something of that small group of University Students (of which he was one) who had (nothing new in this) discussed among themselves how to reform a world that was badly in need of reform, but, unlike the ordinary schemes of university students, had the advantage of being inspired by that most powerful of all influences, a practical mystic! They would have heard of this small student’s group putting themselves at the disposal of the Pope as a sort of “Flying Column” — a “Commando Regiment” — to go anywhere in the world and man the posts of danger to the Church. The King of Portugal had been one of the first to appreciate them, and it was from his interest that the East had received the gift of Francis Xavier.

One hesitates as to whether they knew much of the earlier life of Francis, of his worldliness and his ambition, and the resounding victory of St. Ignatius in winning him for God when he might easily have been won for the forces then massing in Europe against the Church. “I have heard that great moulder of men, Ignatius, say (Polanco, Ignatius’s secretary reported years later) that the stiffest clay he ever moulded was, at first, Francis Xavier”. It is unlikely they would have all the stories of that early life which we have. But surely they would have known that Francis was a nobleman of Navarre, who had cast aside all that this life had to offer so abundantly, for the poverty of Christ, of which his poor patched habit and shoes were the outward symbol. Every inch a noble he looked, as he stepped ashore, tall, smiling, handsome, winning all hearts by those wonderful eyes and that spiritual face.

He remained in Malacca during October, November and December, 1545, living in the hospital always at the service of the sick, daily teaching the children who could never resist his charm, preaching each Sunday in the Church up on the hill, so overwhelmed by the number seeking his ministrations in the confessional that even he himself bears testimony to it saying “it is impossible to satisfy all who come”. Yet all this was subordinate to his principal work in Malacca, which was to have translated into Malay the prayers and brief instructions on the faith with a view to the evangelization of what he calls the “Macassars” and what we call the “Moluccas”, for he had discovered at Malacca that while the confusion of languages in those islands was great, all could understand a little of Malay.

On New Year’s Day, 1546, he bade farewell to Malacca and set out on the 1,700 sea-mile voyage that was to bring him to Amboina, to Ternate, to the “Isles of the Moors” (Morotai to us) where he engaged in the same missionary work that he had done in India and Malacca, of which it is impossible to enter into details in a short sketch.
Drawing of Malacca about the year 1520, taken from the book "Lendas da India". The drawing was made by Gaspar Correia, secretary of Afonso de Albuquerque. The "Famosa" is clearly visible close to the bridge at the mouth of the river.
Ancient drawing of Malacca, taken from the Portuguese Chronicler, Bocarro. Notice the number of Churches. (11).
SECOND VISIT

Eighteen months after he left it, Francis arrived back in Malacca again in June, 1547. This time he remained six months that were full of missionary activity as usual, his confessional besieged daily by those seeking his help. But this second visit is chiefly noteworthy as being the occasion of his plans for the preaching of the Gospel in Japan. Some four years earlier the Portuguese ships had reached Japan. Early in December, 1547, one of them had brought and presented to Francis a young man whom Francis called “Angero”, but whose real name was Yajiro (Francis had the lovable weakness of getting names wrongly very often).

From Yajiro and from the Portuguese sailors he learned much of Japan and, full of enthusiasm at what seemed to him the bright prospects for the faith in this wonderful land, Francis sent a glowing description of it to the Fathers in Europe. At once Yajiro and his two Japanese servants were put under instructions in the faith and in December, 1547 they sailed out of Malacca with him, bound for Goa. They did not reach Goa till February, 1548, for Francis the Superior had his duties to the priests he had left in the Indian missions, and this occasioned a stop at Cochín for a visit to some of these missions. Yajiro and his two companions were baptised at Goa in April, 1548. But again Francis’ duties as Superior demanded a stay of over one year so that he does not set off on his new mission until Holy Week, 1549.

THIRD VISIT

Malacca was reached at the end of May, 1549; once more his reception was a delirious triumph the whole town turning out to greet him, to get his blessing, accompanying him from the waterfront, the children singing hymns on the way.

The Captain of Malacca at the time was Don Pedro da Silva de Gama, one of the six sons of the celebrated Vasco. He was most generous to Francis, gave him the means of supporting himself and his fellow-missionaries in the first stages of the Japanese mission, as well as the means of building a Chapel there, and gifts to be presented to the “King” of Japan.

But the Captain’s efforts to find a Portuguese ship failed because none of them could make Japan as quickly as Francis’ zeal required; all those in harbour would be spending the winter at Sancian Island. So Francis with his companions accepted passages in a Chinese junk and sailed out of Malacca on June 24th 1549, after a stay there of only six weeks.
He reached Japan in August, 1549 after an appalling journey and there followed two and a half years spent in preaching the Gospel in Japan, of which again we must omit the details. Francis became convinced that it would help greatly to the conversion of Japan if the learned men of China were won for the faith. So, leaving his companions to continue the work begun in Japan, Francis starts back again on the long journey from Japan to Goa to organise a missionary expedition to China.

FOURTH VISIT

Reaching Malacca early in January, 1552, in a hurry as usual, Francis and his companions observed a ship with sails set for departure for India. There was just time to persuade the Captain to delay sailing for Francis and his companions. So this visit was a matter of one or two days. Francis with five Japanese companions — four Christians and the Ambassador from Bungo — arrived in Cochin on January 24th, 1552, went into all the problems and reports from his Indian missions, got the consoling news that Cape Comorin now had 40,000 Christians, and finally set off on the last leg of his voyage reaching Goa in the middle of February, 1552.

At Goa a host of problems, associated with the name of Antonio Gomez, awaited solutions from Francis. These, and his preparations for China, left him little leisure in the months that followed, and on Easter Day, April 17th, 1552, he set out on his last great venture, the conversion of China. In a letter to St. Ignatius he foreshadows the line of missionary work to be followed later by Ricci and his companions at the Court of Peking. “As far as I have been able to find out”, he writes, “education and study are held in high honour there, and the most learned men hold the highest post and have the greatest authority”.

FIFTH VISIT

Malacca was reached by the end of May, 1552. There was plague in the city and Francis was quickly working among the sick; the hospital being overcrowded, he turned the Jesuit house over to the sick and even hulks of abandoned ships in the harbour became emergency hospitals.

During the voyage from Goa, Francis was troubled with forebodings of disaster in Malacca, and these were now realised. He brought with him a diploma from the Viceroy constituting Diogo Pereira Ambassador of Portugal to the Court of China. By some means or other one of the Portuguese languishing in the prison of Canton for attempting to enter China had smuggled a letter out to Diogo Pereira at Sancian begging Diogo to get himself appointed officially as Portuguese Minister to the Court of Peking, for only by some such move could the prisoners, suffering so cruelly in Canton, be saved from their terrible fate. Francis had acted on that letter and had succeeded in getting the Viceroy
Specimen of the handwriting, and of the signature of St. Francis Xavier.  
(Taken from the “Life of St. Francis Xavier”, by the Rev. Broderick, S.J.)
The Silver Coffin which contains the still incorrupt body of St. Francis Xavier, in Goa, Portuguese India.
to make the appointment which, it was hoped, would open China to the Gospel also. But Francis had not reckoned with the changes that had taken place in Malacca. Though his good friend Pedro da Silva de Gama was still Captain of the Fortress of Malacca, his younger brother Alvaro da Ataide de Gama had arrived from Goa to share his authority in the capacity of Grand Captain of the Malacca seas, a post which gave him authority over the harbour and the ships in it. Furthermore, he was to succeed his brother in command of the Fortress in a few months, and hence already had a following of prudent men of business with an eye on the future.

Consumed with jealousy that a mere merchant was chosen rather than himself for the post of Ambassador, Alvaro upset all the plans so carefully laid by Francis, by refusing to allow the ship to sail. Nor did the remonstrances of his brother, Francis' friend and still Captain of the Fortress, make any impression, nor those of a deputation consisting of the Judge, the Vicar-General, and the Jesuit Father Peres. "That's what I think of the Viceroy and his appointment", he shouted in a rage as he spat on the ground and stamped his foot on it.

Francis' argument, based on the fact that he was Apostolic Nuncio and that the brief constituting him Nuncio had the approval and confirmation of the King of Portugal, from whose own hands he had received it before leaving Lisbon, — this argument had as little weight. To his threat of Excommunication from resisting a Nuncio in the performance of his business, Alvaro replied by accusing Francis of being a forger of Papal documents, and poor Francis had left the Brief in Goa and could merely fall back on a letter to the King of China given him by the Bishop before he left Goa.

Nevertheless, of the two threats hurled at him — that of a possible charge of high treason for resisting orders of the Viceroy (made by the judge) and of excommunication (made by Francis), Alvaro seems to have had more respect for the latter — or was it merely that he saw he could foil the plans by merely preventing the Ambassador from sailing? Which be the explanation (perhaps as Fr. Broderick suggests, he was moved merely by the desire to be rid of the powerful presence of Francis in Malacca) — Don Alvaro finally agreed to let the Santa Cruz to sail for China, provided its owner and the appointed Ambassador did not travel with it.

It was a sad day for Francis, because it meant the end of all his hopes for entering China openly. He was also torn with self-reproach because it meant temporal ruin, so he thought, of his friend Diogo Pereira. Diogo had expended four or five thousand crowns — a very considerable sum for a rich man — on gifts to be presented to the Emperor of China. "I am responsible for the loss of this money" Francis said in a note to him, "and now for the loss of your ship and your whole fortune. Please do not come to visit me, for the