

*Francisco*



Praying with Saint Francis Xavier  
The Novena of Grace

# Praying with St Francis Xavier

## The Novena of Grace

The Church has always rejoiced in the “great cloud of witnesses”<sup>1</sup> who are the saints. These men and women, over the generations and in so many places, have shown what it is to live the Christian life, sometimes to the point of surrendering their own lives in martyrdom. Their earthly lives may have ended but their prayers continue in heaven.

The Church has long believed that the saints intercede on our behalf, asking God for the graces and blessings which we forget to ask for or for which we find no time to pray: “Their intercession is their most exalted service to God’s plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world.”<sup>2</sup>

Devotion to Francisco Xavier has always been immensely popular as he fires the imagination with his heroic travels to distant peoples and lands across the globe.

This novena is nine days of prayer, in the company of St Francis Xavier, through the letters he wrote. As a Jesuit, Francisco underwent and then, in turn, led others through the *Spiritual Exercises* of his great friend St Ignatius Loyola.

His writings reflect the spiritual insights and preoccupations of the *Spiritual Exercises*. We pray to know ourselves better, to discern the will of God for each of us in the daily unfolding of our lives, to hear and generously answer Christ’s call to follow him, whatever the cost, and to understand that everything is unmerited gift from God, poured out lavishly upon us “as rays from the sun or waters from the spring.”<sup>3</sup>

The present form of the Novena was begun in the seventeenth century by Fr Marcello Mastrilli SJ (1603-37). While working in Naples, he sustained serious head injuries

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 12:1

<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n.2683 (1992)

<sup>3</sup> Ignatius Loyola *Spiritual Exercises* n.237

in an accident. Prayers were offered to St Francis Xavier and Fr Mastrilli recovered.

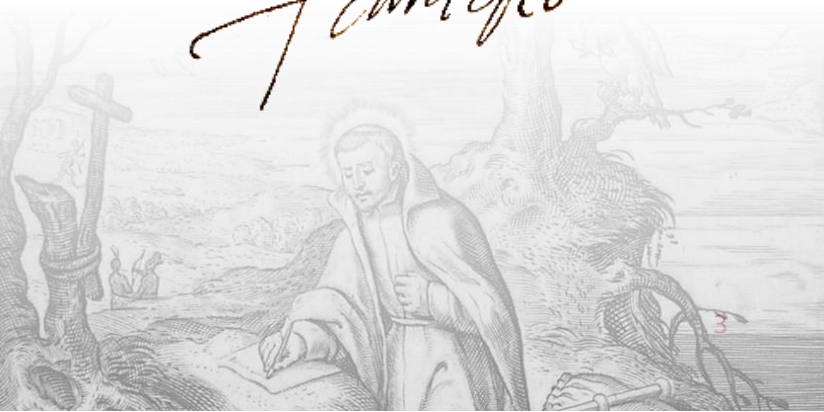
In his own prayer, Fr Mastrilli heard the promise that whoever took time each year to complete the nine days of the Novena would 'experience Francis's protection and might hope with great assurance that any grace they asked of God would be granted, provided it be for their good and the glory of God.'

Fr Mastrilli is credited with recovering the body of Francis Xavier from Sancian Island, off the coast of China, and taking it to Goa where it remains today.

Fr Mastrilli was himself martyred at Nagasaki in Japan on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1637 during the Tokugawa shogunate which had banned Christianity in 1614.

The Novena of Grace is traditionally prayed either from 4<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> March (the day Francis was declared a saint in 1622) or from 25<sup>th</sup> November to 3<sup>rd</sup> December (St Francis Xavier's feast day). But it is a devotion that may be prayed at any time.

*francisco*



# The Story of Francisco Xavier

## Apostle of the East

Francisco Xavier is one of the most exciting and adventurous figures of the sixteenth century. He travelled where few westerners had been: to India, to Malaysia, to Japan, and to China. He undertook long and arduous voyages, risking everything to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to farmer and fisherman, king and emperor.

Francisco was born in the castle at Javier, only a few miles from the birthplace of St Ignatius at Loyola. While students at the University of Paris, they became lifelong friends. Both were from noble and wealthy families, assured of comfort, success and fame. But Ignatius was already well on the road to being a pilgrim for God, devoting his life to helping souls.

At first this was not a calling Francisco shared. But Ignatius' persistent and gentle taunting, "What will it profit a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his life?"<sup>4</sup> eventually claimed Francisco as his 'friend in the Lord.'

Joined by others at Paris, these first companions formed what would soon become known as the Company (or Society) of Jesus, bound by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, ready to go wherever the need was greatest.

Formed by the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius' little book of exercises for the spirit, these first Jesuits were on fire with the love of God, a love which showed itself in deeds: begging alms, teaching catechism, tending to the poor, the sick, and prostitutes and to those rejected by society.

In 1539, King John III of Portugal asked Ignatius for two Jesuits to go to the flourishing Portuguese colony of Goa in India. Another man dropped out at the last moment and Francisco Xavier seized his opportunity to do greater things for God.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 8:36

Francisco worked among the Christians of Goa (whose faith, by tradition, was planted by St Thomas the Apostle in the first century) but he was soon attracted to more challenging work among the pearl fishers of Cape Comorin at the very southern tip of India. Francisco learnt Tamil, the local language, and translated the creed and prayers so that these people could hear Christ in their own tongue. This adaptation of the faith to the local language and customs was to become a hallmark of Jesuit missions.

Another characteristic Jesuit way of proceeding was to write frequent letters back and forth to each other and especially to Ignatius in Rome. These letters provide a fascinating insight into lost worlds, hard for us to imagine. Francisco wrote many such letters.

Francisco spent seven years on the coast of South India, constantly travelling, preaching the gospel, teaching, consoling, comforting, begging alms for the poor, and visiting the sick. During this time he sailed to Malacca in Malaysia and here met a Japanese man, Anjiro, who inspired him to travel further east to Japan.

Arriving in 1549, the Japanese made a deep impression on Francisco. In them he found a depth of spiritual awareness which, he believed, made them especially ready to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. He wrote to the Jesuits he had left behind in India, "May it please God our Lord to grant us a knowledge of the language so that we can speak to them of the things of God, for we shall then, by his grace, favour and assistance, produce much fruit."<sup>5</sup>

But the Japanese refused to believe what Francisco taught them if it was not known in China. Undaunted, Francisco set out for China, seeking audience at the imperial court. If converting the Japanese meant first converting the Chinese, this is what he would do. He landed on Sancian Island in 1552 but there contracted a severe fever from which he died a few weeks later, in sight of mainland China across a narrow stretch of sea.

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<sup>5</sup> Letter to the Jesuits of Goa in India, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1549

# Day 1

“May our Lord increase the days of [your] life for many years, and may he grant you to feel, in this present life, his most holy will and the spiritual strength to fulfil it, so that you do and accomplish that which, at the hour of your death, you will wish to have done.”

*Letter to King John III of Portugal from Malacca in Malaysia  
23<sup>rd</sup> June 1549*

## *Reflection*

- What are the things in my life of which I am most proud?
- Which of these things will I be most pleased to place before God at the close of my life?
- What do I need to do more of, or less of, if I am to present my best self to God my Lord?

## *Prayer*

**Lord,  
each day you give me new life,  
new graces,  
new opportunities to feel your presence.  
Give me the gift of attentiveness  
to notice you in the people  
and your creation  
which surround my life;  
that I may grow in faith,  
and hope,  
and love.  
Amen.**

## Day 2

“I therefore ask God our Lord to grant us to know and experience his most holy will and, once we have experienced it, great strength and much grace to fulfil it with charity in this life.”

*Letter to the Jesuits at Rome from Cochin in India  
27<sup>th</sup> January 1545*

### *Reflection*

- What does God ask of me in my day-to-day life?
- Ask God for the strength to do and to be this.
- Who or what do I find it most difficult to be charitable towards, even to love?

### *Prayer*

**Father,  
each day  
you show me the love of a parent  
for its child:  
watchful of my every step,  
eager for me to thrive;  
you delight in my happiness  
and console me in my sadness.  
May the constant love  
in which you enfold me  
give me the confidence  
to show that same love  
to friend and foe,  
family and stranger, alike.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.**

## Day 3

“May God our Lord grant us in time the gift to perceive his holy will. He wishes that we should always be ready to fulfil it whenever he manifests it to us and lets us feel it within our souls. To fare well in this life, we must be pilgrims, ready to go wherever we can serve God our Lord the more.”

*Letter to Francisco Mansilhas SJ from Negapatam in India  
7<sup>th</sup> April 1545*

### *Reflection*

- Do I look for signs of what God wants of me: in my prayer, in moments of silence, in what others say to me?
- Am I ready to follow where God leads?
- Or do I always set the agenda for everything I do?

### *Prayer*

**Father, you speak to me in the silence  
and in the empty spaces of my life.  
Give me ears to hear your voice in stillness  
and in the gentle breeze;  
eyes to see your presence in things  
that seem so insignificant at the time.  
Free me from the relentless whirl of activity,  
from the obsessions which limit me  
and snatch away my freedom to answer your call.  
Like St Francis, may I too become a pilgrim,  
called to walk the path you set before me,  
wherever it may lead  
but always safe in the knowledge  
that Christ walks beside me  
unseen.  
Amen.**



## Day 4

“I have decided to go to the Moro Islands to assist the Christians in spiritual matters, exposing myself to every danger of death, placing all my confidence and hope in God our Lord, desiring to conform myself, in keeping with my slight and feeble strength, to the saying of Christ our Redeemer and Lord that ‘whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.’”<sup>6</sup>

*Letter to the Jesuits of Europe from Amboina in India  
10<sup>th</sup> May 1546*

### *Reflection*

- What activities, pastimes, possessions, and relationships in my life are non-negotiable?
- Do any of these things get in the way of my relationship with God?
- What do I need to relinquish to be free to be my true self in following God’s calling?

### *Prayer*

**Lord,  
before I ever came into being  
you knew me and loved me.  
You have knit me together the way I am,  
and given me life and laughter,  
friends and the faces of kind strangers,  
and a world of wonder and new discovery.  
Grant me the freedom  
and the courage  
to discover you anew each day  
in the people I meet, in the places I go,  
in the sounds I hear and the things I see.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.**

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 8:35

## Day 5

“God our Lord gives to all sufficient grace to serve him and to preserve themselves from sin . . . all our good and evil consists in making good or evil use of his grace. We are much consoled in seeing that God our Lord sees our intentions, desires and motives for going to Japan.”

*Letter to the Jesuits of Europe from Malacca in Malaysia  
22<sup>nd</sup> June 1549*

### *Reflection*

- Reflect on the strengths of character with which God has blessed you.
- How do you use these strengths for the good?
- How do you sometimes use them for evil?

### *Prayer*

**Lord Jesus,  
it is so easy to be tempted  
as you were tempted in the desert;  
to make poor decisions  
for quick gains and satisfaction;  
to turn the wonderful gifts of your generosity  
towards unworthy and selfish ends.  
Give me, day by day,  
the same Spirit of strength  
with which you faced down  
those desert temptations  
of power, wealth and honour;  
that my desires and motives,  
my words and actions,  
may always be for the greater glory of God,  
my Lord.  
Amen.**

## Day 6

“At night before you go to sleep, you should retire to some place and examine the things which happened to you that day, your thoughts, words and actions, examining your conscience with great diligence . . . and at the end you should say an Our Father and a Hail Mary. After this has been finished, you should lie down, occupying yourself with the thought of how you are to amend yourself on the following day.”

*Letter to Jesuit Novice, João Bravo, from Malacca in Malaysia  
23<sup>rd</sup> June 1549*

### *Reflection*

- Take a few moments think back over your day.
- What were the thoughts, the words and the actions of which you were most proud?
- Were there any thoughts, or words or actions which you regret?

### *Prayer*

**Father,  
as I look back on this day,  
there are so many teeming thoughts,  
such a babble of words,  
and such a blur of activity,  
that it is difficult to see  
your gentle and faithful presence  
amid it all.  
Show yourself to me today,  
and every day.  
Amen.**

## Day 7

“There is reason for giving infinite praise and thanks to God at the sight of a king who is so well and piously inclined towards the things of God, and to such an extent that if I were not a witness of it all, as I am, I would not be able to believe what I have seen in him.”

*Letter to Ignatius Loyola SJ from Lisbon in Portugal  
18<sup>th</sup> March 1541*

### *Reflection*

- Do I look for the goodness in other people?
- Do I take the trouble to give credit where credit is due?
- Do I notice and copy the good example that others set for me?

### *Prayer*

**God our Father,  
praise to you!**

**I am surrounded by so many good people,  
if only I take the time to notice:**

**people who speak your word  
of compassion and kindness;**

**people who act**

**to give reality to your justice and reconciliation;**

**people whose lives are good seed  
growing in rich soil.**

**Give me, too, the grace to live in your Spirit,  
and to be your presence for those I meet  
as I go about the business of my day.**

**Amen.**

## Day 8

“O my God, almighty and merciful Father, creator of all things of the world: I firmly believe in you, my God and Lord, since you are my entire good. You, Lord, created me and you have given me body and soul and all that I have. And you, my God, have made me in your likeness. Thanks be to God!”

*From the Short Catechism written by St Francis Xavier  
for the people of Goa in India, May 1542*

### *Reflection*

- Take time to consider the gifts God has given you.
- Count the blessings he has poured out on you, today, and over the course of your life.
- Give thanks!

### *Prayer*

**Father,  
you are entire goodness  
and you are goodness for me.  
Creator of all things,  
who hold all things in being for me,  
give me faith in you  
and in myself,  
your creation.  
Amen.**

## Day 9

“I therefore ask you to base all that you do entirely upon God and not to trust your own abilities, knowledge or reputation; and, in this way, I shall know that you are ready for all the great trials, spiritual as well as worldly, which can afflict you. For God raises up and supports the humble, especially those who in small and lowly matters have seen, as in a polished mirror, their own weaknesses and have conquered them.”

*Letter to the Jesuits of Goa from Kagoshima in Japan  
5<sup>th</sup> November 1549*

### *Reflection*

- Do you trust your own abilities and judgements more than you trust God?
- Have you noticed God raising you up and supporting you?
- If you look at your life and your personality in the polished mirror, do you see a person who is loved and forgiven and completely accepted by God?

### *Prayer*

**God our Father,  
as St Francis Xavier travelled  
to the ends of the earth,  
impelled by love of Christ  
and afire with his good news,  
give me the trust and the grace  
to base all that I do entirely on you,  
safe in the knowledge that you raise up the lowly  
and fill them with good things.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.**

## Traditional Novena Prayer

O most kind and loving saint,  
in union with you I adore the most divine majesty.  
The memory of the favours  
with which God blessed you during life,  
and of your glory after death,  
fills me with joy.  
And I unite with you in offering to him  
my humble tribute of thanksgiving and praise.  
I implore of you to secure for me,  
through your powerful intercession,  
the all-important blessing of living and dying  
in a state of grace.  
I also ask you to obtain the favour  
I ask in this novena . . .

*(here pause to ask the favour you seek)*

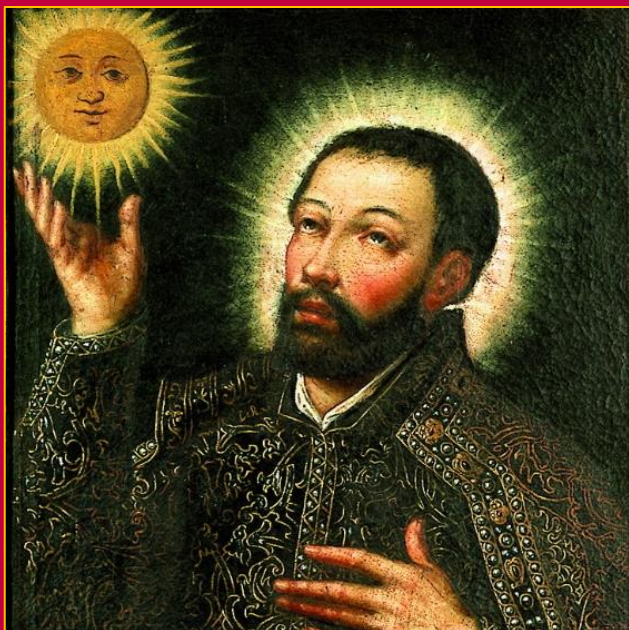
But if what I ask  
is not for the greater glory of God,  
or the good of my soul,  
obtain for me what is most conducive to both.  
Amen.

O God, who was pleased to gather to your Church  
the peoples of the East  
by the preaching and miracles of St Francis Xavier,  
mercifully grant that we,  
who honour his glorious merits,  
may also imitate the example of his virtues,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

Our Father . . .

Hail Mary . . .

Glory be to the Father . . .



Front cover: *St Francis Xavier in Ecstasy* (1670) by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-82)

Page 3: *St Francis Xavier writes to St Ignatius* by Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640)

Back cover: *San Francisco Xavier* (1640) by Manuel Henriques (1593-1653)

The '*Francisco*' signature is from Xavier's vows in the Society of Jesus of 15<sup>th</sup> March 1540

Extracts from *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, translated by M. Joseph Costelloe SJ (Institute of Jesuit Sources 1992)

Prayers and reflections by Adrian Porter SJ

The traditional prayer of the Novena is attributed to Marcello Mastrilli SJ (1603-37)

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