

Novena of Grace of Saint Francis Xavier 2023
Saint Ignatius Loyola Parish, Portland, Oregon
Fr. Jack Krouse, S.J.
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As this beloved novena begins anew, we all know what a surprise and unexpected turn of events we just experienced here in Portland. The heaviest daily snowfall since 1943, which has brought our city largely to a hush, a quiet standstill. The last time this happened, it was halfway through World War II! And yet, despite the completely unexpected, the cold of the last two days, but also the many difficulties I think we all can remember from the last few years, which all of us have lived through, we are still united, together – bearing a flame of light, and of warmth – a flame that was lit long ago, and a flame that still burns brightly. A flame of faith, of hope, and of love. It’s a flame that Jesus revealed and entrusted to his very best friends, the disciples, into the very depths of their hearts, as he sent them out to bear this hope to all the world.

A flame, however, is also a very powerful force. We know the other side of fire – the side which carries with it risk, and danger – if it’s not respected or treated with care. I’m sure we’ve all heard before, somewhere along the way, that expression: “it spread like wildfire.” Just last September, we saw the skies here in Portland fill with smoke from real wildfires. We’ve seen this happen several times over the last few years. A conflagration that brings with it smoke that obscures the sky and hurts the lungs. A literal wildfire.

But what we are doing right now, here, in this sacred space and at the start of this Novena of Grace, is evidence that this good flame still burns brightly, bringing Christ’s light to this world so sorely in need of it.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the patron of this parish, and Saint Francis Xavier, that great friend of Ignatius ever since their days as students together in Paris – the saint to whom this Novena of Grace is devoted – they lived in a world that was often “on fire” – and not in a good way.

Let’s just imagine for a moment the world that Ignatius Loyola, and Francis Xavier, would have known back then, in the 1530s and 1540s. 1540: the very same year that the new Jesuit order was officially founded, a few months before Francis Xavier set out from Portugal, for India, on that great mission Ignatius that entrusted to him.

Europe – a continent which these two saints crisscrossed on foot many times – suffered, in 1540, the worst drought in all of recorded European history – an unbearable heatwave and massive drought that dried up rivers around the continent. Scientists have continued to study this extraordinary event, the many documentary reports and tree and soil records that exist about the weather that year. Not a drop of rain for more than 11 months. People could walk across the Seine river in Paris or the Rhine in parts of Germany on foot, the water was so low.

Farmers’ fields became so dry that giant cracks deep enough to swallow people’s legs appeared, and the dried-up earth reflected even more heat up into the atmosphere, leading to an unbearable heatwave. Wildfires out of control in Germany and elsewhere, crop failures, and despair that led to violence in cities and villages. The mega-drought of 1540 stands in the record books, to this

day, as the worst ever in Europe's recorded history. People didn't know what to do and begged and prayed for rain. The price of bread sky-rocketed because there wasn't enough water to power the grain mills. At the same time, conflicts and troubles existed elsewhere on the continent: King Henry VIII of England in his final years on the throne; various wars on the eastern edge of the continent continued to rage. And as if that weren't enough, the plague, as well as an epidemic of dysentery, continued to surface and cause widespread suffering.

Does any of this sound familiar?? The 1530s and 1540s, not the 2020s!

Faced with this reality, Ignatius and Xavier could have reacted in a couple of different ways. They could have turned away in despair, retreating to the out-of-the-way villages where they had grown up, abandoning the project they were just undertaking with such hope.

But what did he and his companions do, inspired as they were by this Jesus they wanted to serve on mission? They encouraged each other as great friends, great friends of Jesus and great friends of each other, and they kept going. Xavier walked across the continent, from northern Italy where he and Ignatius and the other first Jesuits had gone, back through France and Spain and ultimately to Portugal, where he was to catch the ship that would take him to the Far East as the greatest missionary for the next 10 years.

His most famous biographer, who dove into the archives and all the traces of his life and writings, wrote that Xavier had "**high hopes** for the future". A ripe and plenteous harvest was beckoning him to keep going. Writing from Lisbon, in Portugal, while waiting for the right moment to set sail for India in early 1541, he said to Ignatius and his other friends still in Rome, "we *hope* in God our Lord that we shall gain much fruit ... having placed *all* our *hopes* in God, we shall serve our Lord and help our neighbors."

"We beg and beseech you, again and again in the Lord, through our most intimate friendship in Christ Jesus, to advise us in writing on the means you think we should follow there so as to serve our Lord God better ... we ask you to add a special remembrance in your prayers over and above the usual one. The long sea voyage and our new dealings and our slight knowledge demand much more help than usual."

"We have nothing more to write to you from here except that we are ready to sail. We conclude with the request that our Lord Christ may give us the favor of seeing each other and of being physically united with each other again in the other life; for I do not know if we shall ever see each other again in this life."

In one last letter before departure, he begged his friends "When you write to India, write to us about *everything*, since this will be possible only once a year; and write in such great detail that we shall have to read the letter for eight days. We shall do the same."

The king and queen of Portugal had come to Lisbon to see the ship set sail, with a huge crowd gathered at the dock and a High Mass celebrated there. It was April 7, 1541, exactly 35 years to the day after Francis Xavier's birth at his father's castle in Navarra.

In spite of such an auspicious farewell from port, the euphoria and excitement would not last long. Remember what Jesus said to his disciples in this brief reading we just heard: the days *will come* when there is a fast. We know well the cycle of feast and famine, the different seasons of a life – in good times and in bad.

For those on that ship, a horrendous bout of seasickness struck the passengers on the open sea, including Xavier. Later, south of the Cape Verde islands, their ship, the *Santiago*, entered the doldrums – a sea of no winds, where ships could stay motionless for forty, fifty, even sixty days. Oppressive, tropical heat, unbearable in the steaming oven of the ship hold. Food spoiled, drinking water soured, fever and scurvy. The *Santiago* soon resembled a floating hospital. The records of that voyage describe how Xavier – himself still suffering from seasickness but spared the worst of the other ailments, visited the sick. He descended into the hold, washed and bound up their wounds, and tended to their needs.

He lived the invitation of the Lord that we heard just now from the prophet Isaiah – in our first reading: “This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless, clothe the naked when you see them, and **not turning your back on your own. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall quickly be healed.**”

Eventually, Xavier’s ship rounded the Cape of Good **Hope**, a way marker and major milestone on the journey. From there, he eventually reached India safely, before he felt the call to continue onward to Japan and ultimately the coast of China, where he would catch a fever from which he never recovered.

The last words Xavier spoke, before returning home to the Lord whom he loved, were noted down by one of his party: “In You, O Lord, have I *hoped*. Let me never be confounded.”

Faith communities just like ours, in the parishes and the schools that were built and flowed from that initial decision of Ignatius and Xavier to start something new, in reading the signs of the times back then, have carried this flame of hope for nearly five hundred years through many, many challenging times – war, famine, plague, revolution, and more. Events that have challenged intensely such communities of faith and education, to keep that flame alive.

You, and we – all of us – are invited to keep that flame burning and alive in a way that offers *warmth* and *light* to our world and to those with whom we share it and pass it on.

According to legend, Ignatius Loyola told Francis Xavier, before he boarded that ship and set off on his journey: *Ite inflammata omnia*. “Go, set the world alight.” Best of friends, they would never see each other again, since Xavier would ultimately serve the rest of his life in the far East and never return to Rome. But that light, that flame, was shared and entrusted, confident in the work of the Holy Spirit to keep the faith alive and those friends united.

All of us, then, are called and sent, to set all things alight with the love of God. We too are entrusted with a mission - sent forth to share our hope, our light and our love, for all the world.

Jesus promised his friends this: the Spirit of truth will guide you to all truth and will declare to you the things that are coming.

So, let's set our sights on that horizon, let's set sail, and let's carry that flame of hope that *we* hold in *our* hearts, toward all that awaits us with Jesus: friend to Xavier, friend to Ignatius, and friend to us today.