

## **“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”. Archbishop Savio HON Tai-Fai, SDB**

The word “perfect” in Greek, “teleios” has the sense of going right to the end, fulfilment. Here we are talking about love. The perfection of love means allowing ourselves to be filled to the fullest by God’s presence. Allowing ourselves to be loved is a gift that in the end implies the “radical nature of the Gospel” to which our confreres and especially Chapter members, are, called to follow and to explore.

With regard to this I would like to offer a reflection on St Francis Xavier, a great missionary who came from the west to the east. We find in him a great example of being loved to the fullest by God. He spent his whole life as a missionary preaching the Gospel, first in India, then in Japan and then finally, wanting to go to China, he went as far as the island of Sancian, where he died and was temporarily buried.

In 2006, for the fifth centenary of his birth, I went with a group of pilgrims to venerate his tomb. We were unexpectedly given permission to celebrate Mass there. It was an occasion for great emotion. From the hill where he died you could see the province of Canton in the distance, separated by the sea that Xavier had long wanted to cross to China in if he had boat.

Many thoughts came to me in that sacred spot that I would now like to share with you by condensing them into an single abbreviation SOS, meaning, '*sperare* (hope), *osare* (dare), *santificare* (sanctify) (SOS).

### ***Sperare* (Hope)**

Hope springs from a wise interpretation of the circumstances through which the Lord indicates his will for us and brings his plan for each one of us to completion. Xavier too had to follow this path. In fact his destination in India had not been envisaged: He was called to take the place of a Jesuit confrere who had suddenly fallen ill. St Ignatius made the request for Xavier to leave and then came his famous reply accepting his Superior’s command: "Pues, sus, hème aqui" (Well then, here I am).

On 15 March 1540 he left as the ambassador of King John III of Portugal, papal legate for Pope Paul III and superior of the missionary expedition. The farewell he gave his Father Ignatius allows us to understand how Xavier’s consecration to the mission would involve his entire life till the end. He wrote in a letter to St Ignatius: “I think we will not meet again in this world, except by letter; but in the other we will meet face to face with a great outpouring of friendship”. His certainty about the future, strengthened by his friendship with Ignatius, pervaded all of Xavier’s life and was a source of great hope for him.

Hope transformed him into a true missionary. He had to go through the stages of cultural and spiritual evolution which led him to alter his missionary approach. Amongst the Paraveri, the fishermen caste in India, he applied a social charitable welfare approach to the poor; while in Japan he carried out his role as ambassador and papal legate in order to deal with the heads and elite in the country. Here he had to make a cultural leap. The

Japanese asked him: "How could the religion of the Europeans be the true one if the Chinese know nothing about it?"

Even if he never succeeded in entering China, the seed bore fruit, hope was not disappointed. In 1552, the year the Saint died, Matteo Ricci was born, and thirty years later he reached China and was recognised as the "teacher from the West, Xitai" who taught not only science but also the Gospel.

### **Osare (Dare)**

Daring means having the courage to tackle something on your own, something that may be frightening, risky, difficult, or tough for whatever reason. Going on mission is always an adventure. The immense gap between the east and the west in all its aspects was insurmountable. St Francis, while knowing that, left for his mission in God's name. At the heart of his apostolic activity was a burning trust in God. It was his evangelical audacity that drive him to spend time with lepers, visit prisoners, build colleges where young people could be educated and formed. He was able to combine preaching the Gospel and charity to the poor, salvation of souls and attention to individuals and their life circumstances. His tenacious daring became a missionary virtue, one that Don Bosco would call "work and temperance".

As regards the mission in China, forbidden territory for foreigners, not all his confreres agreed with this crazy dream about China. It was almost an excessive bravery, but the Saint trusted in God, writing: "I hope in God that the result of our journey will be to increase our faith, whatever be the persecutions of the devil and his ministers. If God is with us, who can overcome us?"

*Mission always implies the courage to dare, to go beyond known limits announcing Jesus Christ bravely and kindly. Xavier wrote in 1545: "The Lord our God wants to try us with these dangers and get us to understand that we are worth something... hoping only in the Creator of all things, whose hand has the power to make us strong when dangers are faced out of love for him. Those who find themselves in danger find that it is only out of his love, they know for sure ... that at the moment when this man must end his days, consolation will be greater than the fear of death".*

### **Santificare (Sanctify)**

The perfection required of us by the heavenly Father is Christian holiness. Be perfect, be saints! These are God's words. It is a holiness that comes from a true and marvellous exchange, *commercium admirabile*, that runs between God and man: God became one like us to make us like him, holy and perfect. Christ came to sanctify us. This is the principle that sustains the profound reason for our holiness which gives origin to every synergy between faith and culture. What counts is grace not works. In evangelisation we make seen not only our good works but God's grace that works in each of us as signs and bearers of God's love for the young.

Xavier's work and the effort he made to adapt to the cultures he encountered consist precisely in manifesting God's mercy and grace in history. The Saint's missionary vision also pervaded the ideal and activity of Propaganda Fide. This missionary Congregation was founded in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV, and Francis was canonised a Saint in the

same year by the same Pope.

Proof of this, and it has value as an example, was the teaching drawn up about a hundred years after the Saint's death in the instruction to Vicars Apostolic coming from our Congregation in 1659. It is important today to recognise at least two essential passages:

*Missionaries "are formed according to the norms of evangelical charity, adapting themselves to other customs and characters, and not becoming too heavy for the companions they live with, are neither invisible nor poorly accepted by foreigners, but who with the Apostle Paul are all things to all people".*

"Do not use arguments to try to convince people to change their rites, habits and customs. What would be more absurd than transplanting France, Spain Italy or some other part of Europe into China? Do not bring these nations, but the faith, which does not reject or damage rites or habits of any people".

At dawn on 3 December 1552 St Francis died in peace "with Jesus' name on his lips". That peace reflected a holy inwardness which was consonant with a saying Confucius. "I do not complain to heaven, nor blame men. I learn the things of earth to achieve the will of Heaven. Here is what I am and do. Heaven knows it". 不怨天，不尤人。  
下學而上達。知我者其天乎

Dear confreres, be perfect and holy! Let not the enthusiasm for our mission be stolen from us. Continue to hope, dare and sanctify! I invite you to immerse yourself in the joy of the Gospel, and to nurture a love which is able to enlighten your vocation and *missio ad gentes*. I encourage you to recall, as an inner pilgrimage, the "first love" which the Lord Jesus warmed your heart with, not out of nostalgia, o to persevere in joy. It is for this that we need to remain with Him to reawaken the will and joy of sharing his life obedience of faith, the beatitude of the poor and the radical nature of the Gospel.

May Christ send you, the Church await you, Our Lady accompany you, youth embrace you. Amen.