

I am having coffee on the terrace of a hotel overlooking a gigantic castle in a little village in the Spanish province of Navarra, Spain. Night has fallen but there is no moon.

Five hundred years ago, a man called Francisco was born in this place. He must have played in the fields that surround the castle. He must have swum in the river that runs close-by. The son of rich parents, he left the village to complete his studies at the Sorbonne in Paris.



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Francis is athletic, good-looking, intelligent and envied by all the other students— except one, who comes from the same distant Spanish province and whose name is Ignatius. Ignatius says to him, “Francis, you think too much about yourself. Why don’t you dedicate yourself to thinking about other things, like God, for instance?” I do not know why, but Francis is persuaded by Ignatius. They get together with other students and found a religious society that quickly becomes the laughing stock of the school. Other students write sarcastically on the door of the room where they meet: “Society of Jesus.” But instead of taking offence, they adopt the name.

Francis goes to Rome with Ignatius and asks the Pope to recognize their society. The Pontiff gives his consent. Francis—who is deathly afraid of ships and the sea—sets off alone to the Orient, seized by a mission. In the next 10 years, he visits Africa, India, Sumatra, the Moluccas and Japan. He learns new languages, visits cities and villages, hospitals and prisons.

He dies far from this Spanish village and is buried in Goa, India. At a time when distances are almost insurmountable and the world is torn with suspicion and war, Francis considers the Earth a global village. While travelling through the Orient, he does not know his journey

will never be forgotten; he is doing this because it is his spiritual quest.

Francis came from a small village, but he was a man of the world, and everyone he met considered him a part of their own people. As one of his first biographers says, “He was like the sun, which cannot move forward without spreading light and heat wherever it passes.”

I think of Francis leaving here, crossing to Asia, making the name of this little village known in so many places that most people believe it is his surname. Facing his fears, giving up everything on behalf of his dreams—may this inspire and serve as an example to me, who studied in a college run by the so-called “Society of Jesus”— now known far and wide as the Jesuits.

Here I am in the village of Xavier. Both Ignatius, who hailed from another small village called Loyola, and Francisco were canonized on the same day, March 12, 1622. On that morning, a banner hung from a wall of the Vatican: “Saint Francis Xavier worked many miracles. But the miracle of Saint Ignatius was even greater: Francis Xavier.”

“You think too much about yourself. Why don’t you dedicate yourself to God?”