



SOPHIA 100th ANNIVERSARY
SOPHIA JUNIOR COLLEGE 40th ANNIVERSARY
SOPHIA SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WELFARE 50th ANNIVERSARY



Xavier and Sophia University

No. 37

1. Xavier and Sophia University

Sophia University traces its origins to the hope attributed to the sixteenth-century Catholic missionary St. Francis Xavier to establish “a university in the capital!” What sort of a person was Xavier, who has become so much a part of the university’s identity? What are the actual links between him and Sophia?



Statue of Xavier at the Ichigaya Campus

The phrase “a university in the capital!” cannot in fact be found as such in Xavier’s letters. His hope, rather, was to visit the capital, Kyoto, so as to engage in intellectual exchanges and debates about religion with Buddhist priests and other Japanese scholars at educational institutions equivalent to the European “universities” of the time (in effect, Buddhist temples). Xavier, who had been trained at the University of Paris, was a highly educated man. He believed that to be effective in countries such as Japan and China, which had developed their own particular forms of high culture, missionaries should initially direct their activities at the intellectual class. Indeed Xavier’s fellow Jesuit missionaries’ knowledge of astronomy and mathematics enabled them to gain the respect of

the Japanese and Chinese elite. In China, for instance, the Jesuits’ ability to predict accurately the time of eclipses caught the attention of the emperor and the imperial bureaucracy.

Xavier thus emphasized the importance of the “capital” and of a “university” in the sense of a site for pursuing higher learning as the basis for meaningful proselytization. The founding of Sophia University in Tokyo over three centuries later in 1913 clearly reflected these ideas.

2. Xavier’s Conversion

What sort of person was Francis Xavier? He was born in 1506 as the youngest child of a noble family based at Xavier Castle in the Basque region located between Spain and France. France and Spain had long fought over this region, and the Xavier family, which sided with France, went into decline after being defeated in battle. Francis's father died when he was seven, and thereafter his brothers struggled to revive the family's fortunes. Thinking to win a place for himself as a priest or scholar, Francis went to study at the University of Paris, which stood at the top of Catholic centers of learning. He was at the time a quite ordinary, ambitious young man, dreaming of success and fame.

In Paris Xavier indulged in a dissipated lifestyle, but he also came to know Ignatius of Loyola. Fourteen years older than Xavier, Loyola came from the same region as Xavier, but had fought in the opposite camp from Xavier's brothers. He began to live in the same dormitory room as Xavier and sought to convince him of the importance of "helping souls" for the greater glory of God rather than worldly success.

At first Xavier did not listen, but the shock of the news of the death of his beloved mother, Maria, and elder sister, Magdalena, led him to rethink his ways. Magdalena, who had entered a convent, had continued to pray that he would achieve great things on behalf of the kingdom of God. She had written to him frequently and had opposed his brothers' attempt to call him home from his studies in Paris because of financial constraints. She must have been an important source of emotional support, and her loss became the occasion for Xavier to change the direction of his life.

In 1534, shortly after his sister's death, he took vows together with Loyola and several others at a chapel in Montmartre, Paris, to follow a life of poverty and chastity.

3. Xavier's Activities in Asia

Undertaking to aid the poor and sick while supporting themselves through alms, the young members of the Montmartre group gained such renown that in 1540 Pope Paul III granted them recognition as a Catholic order, the Society of Jesus. They also came to the attention of the king of Portugal, João III, who was troubled by reports of the rowdy and immoral behavior of Christians in the Portuguese colony of Goa (India). He had been seeking a disciplined and outstanding missionary to send there to try to improve the situation. Xavier was not initially selected as the person to send, but when the one who was supposed to go suddenly fell ill, it was decided to dispatch Xavier instead.

The Portuguese in India indeed proved to be beyond control. Xavier dug a large well next to the seminary and began to preach to the native people of the area who gathered there. Exasperated by the recalcitrant attitude of the Portuguese, after only five months Xavier moved



Portrait of Xavier in the Sophia University Archives
(artist and date unknown)

away from the center where they were based and took up residence in a poor fishing village in Southern India; there he preached for over a year.

Xavier subsequently went on to Malacca where he happened to meet a Japanese named Yajirō (Anjirō) whose curiosity and intelligence impressed him. This encounter led Xavier to conceive of the dream of engaging in missionary activity in Japan, something that had not been part of his original plan, and in 1549 he landed at Kagoshima. He traveled to Kyoto in hopes of gaining an audience with the emperor and shogun, but that proved impossible in the war-torn capital, and he left after spending only ten days there. He established a base for missionary activities in Yamaguchi, but probably progress was more modest than he had anticipated. He decided that in order to win converts in Japan it would be wise to begin from proselytizing China, which had had great influence on Japanese culture. He set out for China, but died on Shangchuan Island off the coast of southern China while waiting a boat to take him to the mainland. He was forty-six.

Seen from one angle, Xavier's life may appear to have ended in failure. But in deciding to abandon the path that would have led to a comfortable life in his native land as a priest of noble background and to undertake instead the challenges of a missionary in distant lands, he left an impact on Japanese history. His commitment to serving God and his fellow human beings rather than seeking immediate, visible success is an important inspiration for Sophia University's motto of "Men and Women for Others, with Others."