

GROWTHS OF LEGENDS OF HEALING THE LIFE OF XAVIER AS A TYPICAL EXAMPLE ¹

by A.D.White



“St. Francis Xavier
Raising the Dead”

oil on canvas

by Peter Paul Rubens

1617

Born a Spanish noble, [Saint Francis] Xavier [1506-1552] at an early age cast aside all ordinary aims, devoted himself to study, was rapidly advanced to a professorship at Paris, and in this position was rapidly winning a commanding influence, when he came under the sway of another Spaniard even greater, though less brilliantly endowed, than himself - Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus. The result was that the young professor sacrificed the brilliant career on which he had entered at the French capital, went to the far East as a simple missionary, and there devoted his remaining years to redeeming the lowest and most wretched of our race.

¹ *A History of the Warfare of Science With Theology in Christendom* (1896), chapter 13.2.

Among the various tribes, first in lower India and afterward in Japan, he wrought untiringly - toiling through village after village, collecting the natives by the sound of a hand-bell, trying to teach them the simplest Christian formulas; and thus he brought myriads of them to a nominal Confession of the Christian faith. After twelve years of such efforts, seeking new conquests for religion, he sacrificed his life on the desert island of San Chan.

During his career as a missionary he wrote great numbers of letters, which were preserved and have since been published; and these, with the letters of his contemporaries, exhibit clearly all the features of his life. His own writings are very minute, and enable us to follow him fully. No account of a miracle wrought by him appears either in his own letters or in any contemporary document. At the outside, but two or three things occurred in his whole life, as exhibited so fully by himself and his contemporaries, for which the most earnest devotee could claim anything like Divine interposition; and these are such as may be read in the letters of very many fervent missionaries, Protestant as well as Catholic. For example, in the beginning of his career, during a journey in Europe with an ambassador, one of the servants in fording a stream got into deep water and was in danger of drowning. Xavier tells us that the ambassador prayed very earnestly, and that the man finally struggled out of the stream. But within sixty years after his death, at his canonization, and by various biographers, this had been magnified into a miracle, and appears in the various histories dressed out in glowing colours. Xavier tells us that the ambassador prayed for the safety of the young man; but his biographers tell us that it was Xavier who prayed, and finally, by the later writers, Xavier is represented as lifting horse and rider out of the stream by a clearly supernatural act.

Still another claim to miracle is based upon his arriving at Lisbon and finding his great colleague, Simon Rodriguez, ill of fever. Xavier informs us in a very simple way that Rodriguez was so overjoyed to see him that the fever did not return. This is entirely similar to the cure which Martin Luther wrought upon Melanchthon. Melanchthon had broken down and was supposed to be dying, when his joy at the long-delayed visit of Luther brought him to his feet again, after which he lived for many years.

Again, it is related that Xavier, finding a poor native woman very ill, baptized her, saying over her the prayers of the Church, and she recovered.

Two or three occurrences like these form the whole basis for the miraculous account, so far as Xavier's own writings are concerned.

Of miracles in the ordinary sense of the word there is in these letters of his no mention. Though he writes of his doings with especial detail, taking evident pains to note everything which he thought a sign of Divine encouragement, he says nothing of his performing miracles, and evidently knows nothing of them. This is clearly not due to his unwillingness to make known any token of Divine favour. As we have seen, he is very prompt to report anything which may be considered an answer to prayer or an evidence of the power of religious means to improve the bodily or spiritual health of those to whom he was sent.

Nor do the letters of his associates show knowledge of any miracles wrought by him. His brother missionaries, who were in constant and loyal fellowship with him, make no allusions to them in their communications with each other or with their brethren in Europe.

Of this fact we have many striking evidences. Various collections of letters from the Jesuit missionaries in India and the East generally, during the years of Xavier's activity, were published, and in not one of these letters written during Xavier's lifetime appears any account of a miracle wrought by him. As typical of these collections we may take perhaps the most noted of all, that which was published about twenty years after Xavier's death by a Jesuit father, Emanuel Acosta.

The letters given in it were written by Xavier and his associates not only from Goa, which was the focus of all missionary effort and the centre of all knowledge regarding their work in the East, but from all other important points in the great field. The first of them were written during the saint's lifetime, but, though filled with every sort of detail regarding missionary life and work, they say nothing regarding any miracles by Xavier.

The same is true of various other similar collections published during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In not one of them does any mention of a miracle by Xavier appear in a letter from India or the East contemporary with him.

This silence regarding his miracles was clearly not due to any "evil heart of unbelief." On the contrary, these good missionary fathers were prompt to record the slightest occurrence which they thought evidence of the Divine favour: it is indeed touching to see how eagerly they grasp at the most trivial things which could be thus construed.

Their ample faith was fully shown. One of them, in Acosta's collection, sends a report that an illuminated cross had been recently seen in the heavens; another, that devils had been cast out of the

natives by the use of holy water; another, that various cases of disease had been helped and even healed by baptism; and sundry others sent reports that the blind and dumb had been restored, and that even lepers had been cleansed by the proper use of the rites of the Church; but to Xavier no miracles are imputed by his associates during his life or during several years after his death.

On the contrary, we find his own statements as to his personal limitations, and the difficulties arising from them, fully confirmed by his brother workers. It is interesting, for example, in view of the claim afterward made that the saint was divinely endowed for his mission with the "gift of tongues," to note in these letters confirmation of Xavier's own statement utterly disproving the existence of any such Divine gift, and detailing the difficulties which he encountered from his want of knowing various languages, and the hard labour which he underwent in learning the elements of the Japanese tongue.

Until about ten years after Xavier's death, then, as Emanuel Acosta's publication shows, the letters of the missionaries continued without any indication of miracles performed by the saint. Though, as we shall see presently, abundant legends had already begun to grow elsewhere, not one word regarding these miracles came as yet from the country which, according to later accounts accepted and sanctioned by the Church, was at this very period filled with miracles; not the slightest indication of them from the men who were supposed to be in the very thick of these miraculous manifestations.

But this negative evidence is by no means all. There is also positive evidence - direct testimony from the Jesuit order itself - that Xavier wrought no miracles.

For not only did neither Xavier nor his co-workers know anything of the mighty works afterward attributed to him, but the highest contemporary authority on the whole subject, a man in the closest correspondence with those who knew most about the saint, a member of the Society of Jesus in the highest standing and one of its accepted historians, not only expressly tells us that Xavier wrought no miracles, but gives the reasons why he wrought none.

This man was Joseph Acosta, a provincial of the Jesuit order, its visitor in Aragon, superior at Valladolid, and finally rector of the University of Salamanca. In 1571, nineteen years after Xavier's death, Acosta devoted himself to writing a work mainly concerning the conversion of the Indies, and in this he refers especially and with the greatest reverence to Xavier, holding him up as an ideal and his work as an example.

But on the same page with this tribute to the great missionary Acosta goes on to discuss the reasons why progress in the world's conversion is not so rapid as in the early apostolic times, and says that an especial cause why apostolic preaching could no longer produce apostolic results "lies in the missionaries themselves, because there is now no power of working miracles." He then asks, "Why should our age be so completely destitute of them?" This question he answers at great length, and one of his main contentions is that in early apostolic times illiterate men had to convert the learned of the world, whereas in modern times the case is reversed, learned men being sent to convert the illiterate; and hence that "in the early times miracles were necessary, but in our time they are not."

This statement and argument refer, as we have seen, directly to Xavier by name, and to the period covered by his activity and that of the other great missionaries of his time. That the Jesuit order and the Church at large thought this work of Acosta trustworthy is proved by the fact that it was published at Salamanca a few years after it was written, and republished afterward with ecclesiastical sanction in France. Nothing shows better than the sequel how completely the evolution of miraculous accounts depends upon the intellectual atmosphere of any land and time, and how independent it is of fact.

For, shortly after Xavier's heroic and beautiful death in 1552, stories of miracles wrought by him began to appear. At first they were few and feeble; and two years later Melchior Nunez, Provincial of the Jesuits in the Portuguese dominions, with all the means at his command, and a correspondence extending throughout Eastern Asia, had been able to hear of but three. These were entirely from hearsay. First, John Deyro said he knew that Xavier had the gift of prophecy; but, unfortunately, Xavier himself had reprimanded and cast off Deyro for untruthfulness and cheatery. Secondly, it was reported vaguely that at Cape Comorin many persons affirmed that Xavier had raised a man from the dead. Thirdly, Father Pablo de Santa Fe had heard that in Japan Xavier had restored sight to a blind man. This seems a feeble beginning, but little by little the stories grew, and in 1555 De Quadros, Provincial of the Jesuits in Ethiopia, had heard of nine miracles, and asserted that Xavier had healed the sick and cast out devils. The next year, being four years after Xavier's death, King John III of Portugal, a very devout man, directed his viceroy Barreto to draw up and transmit to him an authentic account of Xavier's miracles, urging him especially to do the work "with zeal and speedily." We can well imagine what treasures of grace an obsequious viceroy, only too anxious to please a devout king, could bring together by means of the hearsay of ignorant, compliant natives through all the little towns of Portuguese India.

But the letters of the missionaries who had been co-workers or immediate successors of Xavier in his Eastern field were still silent as regards any miracles by him, and they remained silent for nearly ten years. In the collection of letters published by Emanuel Acosta and others no hint at any miracles by him is given, until at last, in 1562, fully ten years after Xavier's death, the first faint beginnings of these legends appear in them.

At that time the Jesuit Almeida, writing at great length to the brethren, stated that he had found a pious woman who believed that a book left behind by Xavier had healed sick folk when it was laid upon them, and that he had met an old man who preserved a whip left by the saint which, when properly applied to the sick, had been found good both for their bodies and their souls. From these and other small beginnings grew, always luxuriant and sometimes beautiful, the vast mass of legends which we shall see hereafter.

This growth was affectionately garnered by the more zealous and less critical brethren in Europe until it had become enormous; but it appears to have been thought of little value by those best able to judge.

For when, in 1562, Julius Gabriel Eugubinus delivered a solemn oration on the condition and glory of the Church, before the papal legates and other fathers assembled at the Council of Trent, while he alluded to a multitude of things showing the Divine favour, there was not the remotest allusion to the vast multitude of miracles which, according to the legends, had been so profusely lavished on the faithful during many years, and which, if they had actually occurred, formed an argument of prodigious value in behalf of the special claims of the Church.

The same complete absence of knowledge of any such favours vouchsafed to the Church, or at least of any belief in them, appears in that great Council of Trent among the fathers themselves. Certainly there, if anywhere, one might on the Roman theory expect Divine illumination in a matter of this kind. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of it was especially claimed, and yet its members, with all their spiritual as well as material advantages for knowing what had been going on in the Church during the previous thirty years, and with Xavier's own friend and colleague, Laynez, present to inform them, show not the slightest sign of any suspicion of Xavier's miracles. We have the letters of Julius Gabriel to the foremost of these fathers assembled at Trent, from 1557 onward for a considerable time, and we have also a multitude of letters written from the Council by bishops, cardinals, and even by the Pope himself, discussing all sorts of Church affairs, and in not one of these

is there evidence of the remotest suspicion that any of these reports, which they must have heard, regarding Xavier's miracles, were worthy of mention.

Here, too, comes additional supplementary testimony of much significance. With these orations and letters, Eugubinus gives a Latin translation of a letter, "on religious affairs in the Indies," written by a Jesuit father twenty years after Xavier's death. Though the letter came from a field very distant from that in which Xavier laboured, it was sure, among the general tokens of Divine favour to the Church and to the order, on which it dwelt, to have alluded to miracles wrought by Xavier had there been the slightest ground for believing in them; but no such allusion appears.

So, too, when in 1588, thirty-six years after Xavier's death, the Jesuit father Maffei, who had been especially conversant with Xavier's career in the East, published his *History of India*, though he gave a biography of Xavier which shows fervent admiration for his subject, he dwelt very lightly on the alleged miracles. But the evolution of miraculous legends still went on. Six years later, in 1594, Father Tursellinus published his *Life of Xavier*, and in this appears to have made the first large use of the information collected by the Portuguese viceroy and the more zealous brethren. This work shows a vast increase in the number of miracles over those given by all sources together up to that time. Xavier is represented as not only curing the sick, but casting out devils, stilling the tempest, raising the dead, and performing miracles of every sort.

In 1622 came the canonization proceedings at Rome. Among the speeches made in the presence of Pope Gregory XV, supporting the claims of Xavier to saintship, the most important was by Cardinal Monte. In this the orator selects out ten great miracles from those performed by Xavier during his lifetime and describes them minutely. He insists that on a certain occasion Xavier, by the sign of the cross, made sea-water fresh, so that his fellow-passengers and the crew could drink it; that he healed the sick and raised the dead in various places; brought back a lost boat to his ship; was on one occasion lifted from the earth bodily and transfigured before the bystanders; and that, to punish a blaspheming town, he caused an earthquake and buried the offenders in cinders from a volcano: this was afterward still more highly developed, and the saint was represented in engravings as calling down fire from heaven and thus destroying the town.

The most curious miracle of all is the eighth on the cardinal's list. Regarding this he states that, Xavier having during one of his voyages lost overboard a crucifix, it was restored to him after he had reached the shore by a crab.

The cardinal also dwelt on miracles performed by Xavier's relics after his death, the most original being that sundry lamps placed before the image of the saint and filled with holy water burned as if filled with oil.

This latter account appears to have deeply impressed the Pope, for in the Bull of Canonization issued by virtue of his power of teaching the universal Church infallibly in all matters pertaining to faith and morals, His Holiness dwells especially upon the miracle of the lamp filled with holy water and burning before Xavier's image.

Xavier having been made a saint, many other *Lives* of him appeared, and, as a rule, each surpassed its predecessor in the multitude of miracles. In 1622 appeared that compiled and published under the sanction of Father Vitelleschi, and in it not only are new miracles increased, but some old ones are greatly improved. One example will suffice to show the process. In his edition of 1596, Tursellinus had told how, Xavier one day needing money, and having asked Vellio, one of his friends, to let him have some, Vellio gave him the key of a safe containing thirty thousand gold pieces. Xavier took three hundred and returned the key to Vellio; whereupon Vellio, finding only three hundred pieces gone, reproached Xavier for not taking more, saying that he had expected to give him half of all that the strong box contained. Xavier, touched by this generosity, told Vellio that the time of his death should be made known to him, that he might have opportunity to repent of his sins and prepare for eternity. But twenty-six years later the *Life of Xavier* published under the sanction of Vitelleschi, giving the story, says that Vellio on opening the safe found that *all his money* remained as he had left it, and that *none at all* had disappeared; in fact, that there had been a miraculous restitution. On his blaming Xavier for not taking the money, Xavier declares to Vellio that not only shall he be apprised of the moment of his death, but that the box shall always be full of money. Still later biographers improved the account further, declaring that Xavier promised Vellio that the strong box should always contain money sufficient for all his needs. In that warm and uncritical atmosphere this and other legends grew rapidly, obedient to much the same laws which govern the evolution of fairy tales.

In 1682, one hundred and thirty years after Xavier's death, appeared his biography by Father Bouhours; and this became a classic. In it the old miracles of all kinds were enormously multiplied, and many

new ones given. Miracles few and small in Tursellinus became many and great in Bouhours. In Tursellinus, Xavier during his life saves one person from drowning, in Bouhours he saves during his life three; in Tursellinus, Xavier during his life raises four persons from the dead, in Bouhours fourteen; in Tursellinus there is one miraculous supply of water, in Bouhours three; in Tursellinus there is no miraculous draught of fishes, in Bouhours there is one; in Tursellinus, Xavier is transfigured twice, in Bouhours five times: and so through a long series of miracles which, in the earlier lives appearing either not at all or in very moderate form, are greatly increased and enlarged by Tursellinus, and finally enormously amplified and multiplied by Father Bouhours.

And here it must be borne in mind that Bouhours, writing ninety years after Tursellinus, could not have had access to any new sources. Xavier had been dead one hundred and thirty years, and of course all the natives upon whom he had wrought his miracles, and their children and grandchildren, were gone. It can not then be claimed that Bouhours had the advantage of any new witnesses, nor could he have had anything new in the way of contemporary writings; for, as we have seen, the missionaries of Xavier's time wrote nothing regarding his miracles, and certainly the ignorant natives of India and Japan did not commit any account of his miracles to writing. Nevertheless, the miracles of healing given in Bouhours were more numerous and brilliant than ever. But there was far more than this. Although during the lifetime of Xavier there is neither in his own writings nor in any contemporary account any assertion of a resurrection from the dead wrought by him, we find that shortly after his death stories of such resurrections began to appear. A simple statement of the growth of these may throw some light on the evolution of miraculous accounts generally. At first it was affirmed that some people at Cape Comorin said that he had raised one person; then it was said that there were two persons; then in various authors - Emanuel Acosta, in his commentaries written as an afterthought nearly twenty years after Xavier's death, De Quadros, and others - the story wavers between one and two cases; finally, in the time of Tursellinus, four cases had been developed. In 1622, at the canonization proceedings, three were mentioned; but by the time of Father Bouhours there were fourteen - all raised from the dead by Xavier himself during his lifetime - and the name, place, and circumstances are given with much detail in each case.

It seems to have been felt as somewhat strange at first that Xavier had never alluded to any of these wonderful miracles; but ere long a subsidiary legend was developed, to the effect that one of the brethren asked him one day if he had raised the dead, whereat he blushed deeply and cried out against the idea, saying: "And so I am

said to have raised the dead! What a misleading man I am! Some men brought a youth to me just as if he were dead, who, when I commanded him to arise in the name of Christ, straightway arose.”

Noteworthy is the evolution of other miracles. Tursellinus, writing in 1594, tells us that on the voyage from Goa to Malacca, Xavier having left the ship and gone upon an island, was afterward found by the persons sent in search of him so deeply absorbed in prayer as to be unmindful of all things about him. But in the next century Father Bouhours develops the story as follows: “The servants found the man of God raised from the ground into the air, his eyes fixed upon heaven, and rays of light about his countenance.”

Instructive, also, is a comparison between the successive accounts of his noted miracle among the Badages at Travancore, in 1544. Xavier in his letters makes no reference to anything extraordinary; and Emanuel Acosta, in 1571, declares simply that “Xavier threw himself into the midst of the Christians, that reverencing him they might spare the rest.” The inevitable evolution of the miraculous goes on; and twenty years later Tursellinus tells us that, at the onslaught of the Badages, “they could not endure the majesty of his countenance and the splendour and rays which issued from his eyes, and out of reverence for him they spared the others.” The process of incubation still goes on during ninety years more, and then comes Father Bouhours's account. Having given Xavier's prayer on the battlefield, Bouhours goes on to say that the saint, crucifix in hand, rushed at the head of the people toward the plain where the enemy was marching, and “said to them in a threatening voice, ‘I forbid you in the name of the living God to advance farther, and on His part command you to return in the way you came.’ These few words cast a terror into the minds of those soldiers who were at the head of the army; they remained confounded and without motion. They who marched afterward, seeing that the foremost did not advance, asked the reason of it. The answer was returned from the front ranks that they had before their eyes an unknown person habited in black, of more than human stature, of terrible aspect, and darting fire from his eyes.... They were seized with amazement at the sight, and all of them fled in precipitate confusion.”

Curious, too, is the after-growth of the miracle of the crab restoring the crucifix. In its first form Xavier lost the crucifix in the sea, and the earlier biographers dwell on the sorrow which he showed in consequence; but the later historians declare that the saint threw the crucifix into the sea in order to still a tempest, and that, after his safe getting to land, a crab brought it to him on the shore. In this form we find it among illustrations of books of devotion in the next century.

But perhaps the best illustration of this evolution of Xavier's miracles is to be found in the growth of another legend; and it is especially instructive because it grew luxuriantly despite the fact that it was utterly contradicted in all parts of Xavier's writings as well as in the letters of his associates and in the work of the Jesuit father, Joseph Acosta.

Throughout his letters, from first to last, Xavier constantly dwells upon his difficulties with the various languages of the different tribes among whom he went. He tells us how he surmounted these difficulties: sometimes by learning just enough of a language to translate into it some of the main Church formulas; sometimes by getting the help of others to patch together some pious teachings to be learned by rote; sometimes by employing interpreters; and sometimes by a mixture of various dialects, and even by signs. On one occasion he tells us that a very serious difficulty arose, and that his voyage to China was delayed because, among other things, the interpreter he had engaged had failed to meet him.

In various *Lives* which appeared between the time of his death and his canonization this difficulty is much dwelt upon; but during the canonization proceedings at Rome, in the speeches then made, and finally in the papal bull, great stress was laid upon the fact that Xavier possessed *the gift of tongues*. It was declared that he spoke to the various tribes with ease in their own languages. This legend of Xavier's miraculous gift of tongues was especially mentioned in the papal bull, and was solemnly given forth by the pontiff as an infallible statement to be believed by the universal Church. Gregory XV having been prevented by death from issuing the *Bull of Canonization*, it was finally issued by Urban VIII; and there is much food for reflection in the fact that the same Pope who punished Galileo, and was determined that the Inquisition should not allow the world to believe that the earth revolves about the sun, thus solemnly ordered the world, under pain of damnation, to believe in Xavier's miracles, including his "gift of tongues," and the return of the crucifix by the pious crab. But the legend was developed still further: Father Bouhours tells us, "The holy man spoke very well the language of those barbarians without having learned it, and had no need of an interpreter when he instructed." And, finally, in our own time, the Rev. Father Coleridge, speaking of the saint among the natives, says, "He could speak the language excellently, though he had never learned it."

In the early biography, Tursellinus writes. "Nothing was a greater impediment to him than his ignorance of the Japanese tongues; for, ever and anon, when some uncouth expression offended their fastidious and delicate ears, the awkward speech of Francis was a

cause of laughter.” But Father Bouhours, a century later, writing of Xavier at the same period, says, “He preached in the afternoon to the Japanese in their language, but so naturally and with so much ease that he could not be taken for a foreigner.”

And finally, in 1872, Father Coleridge, of the Society of Jesus, speaking of Xavier at this time, says, “He spoke freely, flowingly, elegantly, as if he had lived in Japan all his life.”

Nor was even this sufficient: to make the legend complete, it was finally declared that, when Xavier addressed the natives of various tribes, each heard the sermon in his own language in which he was born.

All this, as we have seen, directly contradicts not only the plain statements of Xavier himself, and various incidental testimonies in the letters of his associates, but the explicit declaration of Father Joseph Acosta. The latter historian dwells especially on the labour which Xavier was obliged to bestow on the study of the Japanese and other languages, and says, “Even if he had been endowed with the apostolic gift of tongues, he could not have spread more widely the glory of Christ.”

It is hardly necessary to attribute to the orators and biographers generally a conscious attempt to deceive. The simple fact is, that as a rule they thought, spoke, and wrote in obedience to the natural laws which govern the luxuriant growth of myth and legend in the warm atmosphere of love and devotion which constantly arises about great religious leaders in times when men have little or no knowledge of natural law, when there is little care for scientific evidence, and when he who believes most is thought most meritorious.

These examples will serve to illustrate the process which in thousands of cases has gone on from the earliest days of the Church until a very recent period. Everywhere miraculous cures became the rule rather than the exception throughout Christendom.