

FRANCIS XAVIER

and the

JESUIT MISSIONS IN THE FAR EAST

AN ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION OF EARLY PRINTED WORKS

From the Jesuitana Collection of the

JOHN J. BURNS LIBRARY, BOSTON COLLEGE

Edited by

Franco Mormando

and

Jill G. Thomas



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INTRODUCTION

THE MAKING OF THE SECOND JESUIT SAINT: THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE CANONIZATION OF FRANCIS XAVIER, 1555-1622

Franco Mormando

Associate Professor of Italian Studies, Boston College

Francis Xavier died in a makeshift hut on the beach of the small, desolate island of Sancian (Shungchuan), fourteen kilometers off the coast of China, southwest of Hong Kong.¹ The date was December 3, 1552 and the saint died alone but for the company of his Chinese Christian interpreter, Antonio. It was to take over a year before certain word of the missionary's death reached the Jesuit Curia in Rome, but, as we learn from a letter dated November 21, 1555, written by Juan de Polanco, secretary of the Society, one of the immediate concerns of the Society of Jesus was the initiation of investigation into the cause of his canonization: eyewitness testimony of Xavier's "heroic virtue," apostolic zeal, holy death, and, above all, working of miracles, pre- or post-mortem, had to be gathered, scrutinized, and recorded for posterity.² To be sure, Xavier was a holy man who deserved the public recognition and veneration that came with canonization, but there was another unexpressed motivating factor in the Jesuits' eagerness to achieve this honor for one of their own. Although well established in Rome and other parts of Europe by this time, the Society of Jesus was still a relatively young order within the Catholic Church, viewed with suspicion or disdain by some co-religionists for its youth and at times novel "manner of proceeding:" to have one of its co-founders (Francis Xavier) – and of course, its founder as well (Ignatius Loyola, who was to die shortly thereafter in July, 1556) – officially canonized by Holy Mother the Church would represent a tremendous enhancement of its status in Rome and the universal church. The Society could then really take, with pride and full self-confidence, its place alongside the older, more venerable orders of the Benedictines, Franciscans, and Dominicans.

Again, that Francis Xavier was a holy man who deserved to be canonized, few really doubted, but canonizations do not come easy: virtue alone does not suffice. To achieve this end, it takes enormous time, money, and concerted effort, as well as, in early modern Europe, the support of powerful people in high places, both ecclesiastical and political. In the campaign for Francis Xavier's canonization, one of his most powerful and earliest political friends was John III, King of Portugal, under whose sponsorship the Jesuit missionary had first undertaken his apostolate in the Portuguese East Indian Empire. On March 28, 1556, the king sent a letter to his viceroy in the East Indies instructing him to begin interrogating witnesses to Xavier's apostolic

