

Around the World in More Than Eighty Days

Let's take a glance around the globe to see some of the missionary efforts that began during the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries.

China

The Franciscan John of Monte Corvino arrived in China in 1294 and worked alone for eleven years before any other missionaries reached him. He baptized thousands, but not long after his death in 1330, the missionaries were expelled from the country and Christianity died out. In 1583, a Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), arrived on the scene. Dressing as a Confucian scholar and speaking Mandarin, he interested the local intellectuals in Christianity by talking about mathematics, physics, and astronomy and by filling his home with all sorts of mathematical and astronomical instruments, clocks, musical instruments, and printed books and maps. He figured these things would lead people to ask him about his life and work—just the opening he needed to tell them about his beliefs. Eventually, the emperor summoned Ricci to Peking, where for nine years he spent his time lecturing on scientific topics and writing Chinese texts about the Catholic faith. By the time he died in 1610, he had made more than two thousand converts. He had also opened the door for others to come, and his Jesuit brethren carried on his work.

The number of Christians in China had grown to more than 800,000 by 1724, but trouble was brewing. The Jesuits had made the gospel accessible to the Chinese by adopting many of their customs and using Confucian words to talk about Christian concepts. The problem was that the Confucian understanding of these terms differed significantly from what Christians usually meant by them. Later missionaries from other Orders, especially the Franciscans and Dominicans, thought the Jesuits had gone halfway to being pagans, and the two groups started fighting. In 1700, the Chinese emperor declared that all missionaries had to follow the Jesuit model or leave the country. Many were expelled, and by the 1720s, the Church in China was being persecuted.

Japan

Jesuits made it to Japan almost as soon as they came into being as an Order. Francis Xavier, one of Ignatius's closest companions, headed to Japan in 1549 with two other Jesuits and a translator. By 1581, the Jesuits had set up 200 churches in the country and baptized 150,000 Christians. That number reached half a million by the turn of the century, but Japanese leaders became suspicious that the missionaries were really there to act as spies for Spain and Portugal and started persecuting Christians. Eventually, all the missionaries were either killed or banished, and the Christian communities were destroyed. Japan closed its borders and would not allow missionaries back into the country for almost two centuries. However, in 1865, when the French were allowed to build a church in Nagasaki, they discovered that a small number of Japanese Christians had kept the faith alive through all that time.



India

Franciscan priests were on the ship with the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama as he made his way to India in 1500, but hanging out with the Portuguese turned out to be a problem: The Portuguese merchants and traders acted so badly that it seemed ridiculous to Indians when the missionaries spoke of Christians as people of love and integrity. Francis Xavier stopped in India in 1542 before heading to Japan, but it was another man from his Order, Robert de Nobili, who had the most success. De Nobili went the Ricci route: From the time he arrived in 1605, he ate, dressed, and lived like an Indian and studied the Hindu scriptures. De Nobili presented Christianity in a way that made sense to Indians, and he and the Jesuits who followed him made thousands of converts. However, the Indian Catholic Church ran into hard times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Priests were in short supply, conflicts between Portugal and Rome made life hard for the missionaries in Portuguese colonies, Dutch and English Protestants worked to keep Catholicism out of the colonies they had set up, and many colleges and mission houses were destroyed when the Jesuits were disbanded.

These Age of Exploration missionaries were not the first to bring Christianity to India, though. Legend tells us that the apostle Thomas traveled to India in 52 BCE and founded Christian communities there. When the Catholic missionaries arrived fourteen centuries later, they discovered that these communities of “Thomas Christians” were still around. The Thomas Christians had their own church structures and worship services, which did not sit well with the Portuguese explorers who first encountered them. There was lots of tension and outright hostility at times, but the Thomas Christians considered themselves then, and remain today, in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

Africa

Eight years after missionaries arrived in the Congo in 1483, they had the spectacular success of converting the king and his family. The king returned to his old beliefs after a while, but his son remained Christian and helped the missionaries when he came to the throne. The Congo was not the only region where missionaries worked, but by the mid-eighteenth century, you could barely find a trace of the Catholic missions anywhere in Africa. Many missionaries died due to the difficult climate and lack of medical care, and the Church did a poor job of training priests from among the locals. Sometimes missionaries used the promise of food or other forms of help as a way to get people to agree to baptism, which is not a recipe for lasting conversion. The unstable political situation in many areas of the continent did not help, but the greatest disadvantage for the missionaries was simply that they were all Portuguese—just like the slave traders whom they accompanied. The combined efforts of slave traders and missionaries gave the native peoples good reason to associate Christianity with slavery.

The Americas

Conquest and mission went hand in hand as Spanish and Portuguese explorers and missionaries fanned out all over the Americas. By 1555, you could find missionaries in the West Indies, Mexico, Central America, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Brazil. They founded mission settlements, churches and cathedrals, hospitals, and schools. Religious orders set up universities in Mexico City and Lima, Peru, almost a century before Harvard opened its doors. While the missionaries usually did bring their own culture to the indigenous peoples, they did not stop there: Books in twelve Indian languages were being printed in Mexico by 1575. It took longer for missionaries to make their



way through North America, but by the end of the sixteenth century, you could find missions in many areas of the continent.

There is no denying the dark side to the mission work in the Americas. Missionaries often urged on the early conquistadors as they destroyed native temples and massacred their priests. They worked with civil authorities to resettle the natives and force them to accept Christianity, but many missionaries were horrified at the treatment of the natives. They thundered from the pulpits and tried to get the soldiers and settlers to treat the natives more humanely but with mixed success at best; the European settlement of Central and South America was so devastating for the peoples who were already there that the natives were killed or died off by the millions.

One of the most beautiful and most tragic stories from the South American missions comes from the region of Paraguay and Argentina. Jesuit missionaries converted whole tribes of the Guaraní natives there and helped protect them from European slave hunters. The Jesuits set up *reducciones*, communal settings where the Guaraní practiced agriculture, architecture, metallurgy, farming, ranching, and even music and printing. The *reducciones* lasted for a hundred years but were destroyed in the 1750s when a land treaty between Spain and Portugal changed everything. The Portuguese demanded that the *reducciones* be evacuated, leaving the Guaraní once again open to the slave hunters. The Guaraní rebelled, and many Jesuits joined them in fighting, but the rebellion was crushed in 1767 by a joint Spanish-Portuguese army. This act of defiance was one of the strongest reasons given for the disbanding of the Jesuits in 1773.

(This article is excerpted from *The Catholic Church: A Brief Popular History*, by Cynthia Stewart [Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2008]. Copyright © 2008 by Anselm Academic. Used with permission of Anselm Academic.)

