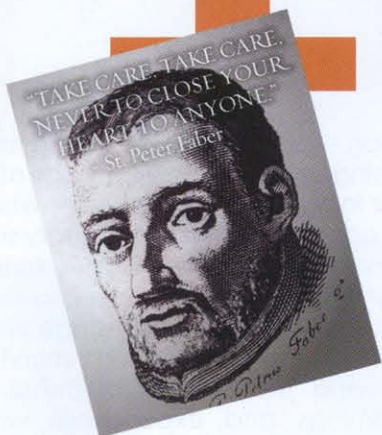


PIERRE FAVRE

FR. ROGER CHAMPOUX, SJ



LAST DECEMBER 17, 2013, POPE FRANCIS CANONIZED PIERRE FAVRE. OUR NEWEST JESUIT SAINT IS LITTLE KNOWN TO MANY OF THE FAITHFUL, BUT IS BELOVED TO ALL JESUITS. THROUGH THIS HOMILY DELIVERED LAST JANUARY 23, 2014 AT THE LOYOLA HOUSE OF STUDIES, GET TO KNOW WHY ST. FAVRE INSPIRES SO MANY OF US WHO SEEK TO FOLLOW THIS PATH LAID OUT BY THE FIRST COMPANIONS.

When we celebrated the Year of the First Companions some years back, I was struck by the lower grade of Pierre Favre in comparison with Ignatius and Xavier: he was then only “blessed.” There was something not right there. Thank God for Pope Francis who decided to correct something wrong.

I was not too sure why Favre was not yet a saint. He was like the “Great Forgotten One...” and could well have become the patron saint of the neglected and the abandoned. Today, we even have difficulty agreeing on his name, whether he is Pierre Favre, Pietro Favre, Peter Faber or Pedro Favre. Of course, I like him as Pierre Favre, no doubt about it. And so here, I would like to share three main points in his honor: first, that Pierre Favre was truly a co-founder of the Society; second, that which we see important and admirable in him; third, simply to raise the question: what does his canonization mean for us today?

FAVRE AS CO-FOUNDER

When we speak about the “First Companions,” we can see them as forming three circles: of three, then seven, then ten. The first circle, the “core-circle,” is made of Ignatius, Xavier and Favre. This is undoubtedly the original team. The second circle has four more companions: Diego Laynez, Alfonso Salmeron and Nicolas Bobadilla from Spain, and Simao Rodriguez from Portugal. These two circles are the seven companions who made their vows together in Paris in August 1534. Favre, ordained about three weeks earlier, was the one to say the mass as the first priest of the group.

The third circle adds three more companions: Jean Codure (who would eventually be the first to die in the group), Paschase Broet and Claude Jay. They were older, they all came from France (and Savoie), and two of them were already priests. They all made the Spiritual Exercises with Favre, not with Ignatius. They “jelled” with the rest of the group in Venice before going to Rome and the ten of them became there the “Jesuits.”

The first three belong together and are like the pillars of the Society. Xavier and Favre were younger—not yet twenty—and arrived in Paris before Ignatius. By “coincidence,” they ended up sharing a room in the College of Sainte-Barbe. As Favre wrote, “We lived in common, we had the same lodgings, the



**Welcome to
the club Peter!**

**How'd you
finally
get in?**

**I know the
new bouncer.**

GO FORTH AND SET
THE WORLD ON FIRE

first, and then Ignatius became "my master in spiritual things." There grew a very deep friendship between the three of them.

See how they complemented each other: they all shared the same basic ideals, the core-charism of the Society, but each one had also his own charism. Ignatius was the founder, the organizer, the one who provided the initial spirit and then "the body for the mission," the structure for the charism. Xavier was the man of passion and action, the man on mission to the ends of the world. And so, Pierre Favre... what does he give us? Something essential--he is a man of the heart, a man of amazing depth and interiority, a man with a great pastoral touch. He was really the man of the Spiritual Exercises, as recognized by Ignatius himself. He may not have looked like a man of great deeds, especially when compared to Xavier, but he was surely a true bearer of the heart of the Jesuit vocation.

Simao Rodriguez recognized this "co-foundation" and named the three of them as the first on the list of the ten companions. In 1535, when Ignatius made a strange trip to Spain for health reasons and "to amend some follies of his youth," Pierre Favre was made the leader of the group in Ignatius' absence.

A QUICK LOOK AT FAVRE

We know that Pierre Favre was praised by Ignatius as the best at giving the Spiritual Exercises who said "Peter makes water gush forth from the rock". The Exercises were at the heart of his ministry, and it was through them that he got Peter Canisius to join the Society (another one who became a saint before him!).

Favre's assessment of the situation of the Church in those days is interesting: "If there

were one or two priests in every town, living neither in concubinage nor in any other sinful state known by everybody here, priests who would show pastoral zeal, I have no doubt that with the help of the Lord the ordinary and simple people would soon come back to the Church." One may wonder whether such an assessment would not be valid in every age of the Church, including today.

We may not realize how much of a pilgrim he was, but it is dizzying to think of how he travelled throughout Europe for almost ten years. The problem is that he was so effective with all sorts of people that he was never allowed to stay for long in one place. Favre was so good that he was given the most difficult missions and had to move on, leaving behind whatever he had started, but always with much fruit.

And what made him so effective in his ministry? Two things stand out clearly.

First of all, his intimacy with God: "May my most intimate self, and above all my heart, be surrendered to Christ who has entered into me, and may he occupy the center of my heart." And also: "May my soul be recalled to itself by what lies in its depths, if ever it comes near to losing its peace." If this is not true holiness, I wonder what it is!

Second, his way of dealing with people. This is what the other first companion, Simao Rodriguez, had to say about him: "This father, if I may omit his many other virtues, was especially endowed with charming grace in dealing with people, which up to now I must confess I have not seen in anyone else. Somehow he entered into friendship in such a way, bit by bit coming to influence others in such a manner that his very way of living and his gracious conversation powerfully drew to the love of God all those with whom he dealt."

This is confirmed by what a prior, who wanted to make the Exercises with him, said about him in 1543: "With utter amiability, he could touch even the hardest of hearts and rekindle faith where it was almost extinguished, by his words and deeds which bore witness to the love and mercy of God for sinful man." (Reading such a text, one can see right away why Pope Francis wanted to canonize him!)

Remarkably, Favre acted this way even with people he did not so much like. Here is how, in prayer, he handled his spontaneous dislikes: "If

Christ communicates himself each day to you in the Eucharist, should you not also communicate yourself to Christ, and not only to him but on his behalf, to all, good or bad, with whom you speak and work, in making yourself open to everyone?" And he adds this truth about people and also situations we encounter: "If only you take things as you find them and set out to improve and develop them, there will be an abundant harvest."

Some people frown when I refer to Pierre Favre as our "neurotic saint," but this is an important aspect of his holiness and of his gift for discernment. For about four years, Favre was kept waiting before Ignatius guided him in the Exercises. This was due to his depressiveness and his scruples. But through the exercises, he acquired, with the help of Ignatius and his strong sense of God, the ability to deal with his negative tendencies which unfortunately remained present in him to the end of his life. Favre's Memorial ends with the following words, and we can see that he was still fighting against his feelings of misery and weakness, as he tried to keep in front of his eyes the greater glory of God:

"During the first few days of the new year (1546), I felt my old failures rising up again and that I had to fight them with a new understanding. I felt that I had to adopt a different exterior attitude in order to remain more recollected so as to find and be able to hold on to the spirit of God which sanctifies, trims and anoints. Most of all, I realized that I need more silence and solitude. I also felt, taught by temptations, that I need much grace to master the feelings of my wretchedness or the temptation to worry about and fear the lack of it" (No 443).

WHAT IS THE MESSAGE OF HIS CANONIZATION FOR US TODAY?

One meaning, for sure, is that our Society does not consist only of travelling giants like Francis Xavier or creative geniuses like Ignatius, but of humble and simple servants, even if neurotic, who seek God in prayer and approach people with kindness.


In fact, I think that both Pope Francis and Saint Pierre Favre are speaking to us. Perhaps Pope Francis, by giving Pierre Favre to us as a saint, is not only revealing to us that he loves him very much and takes him as a model, but is also challenging us to the same sort of

PIERRE FAVRE

**WHAT DOES
FAVRE GIVE US?**

**SOMETHING
ESSENTIAL--- HE
IS A MAN OF
THE HEART, A
MAN OF AMAZING
DEPTH AND
INTERIORITY.**

humble, kind and compassionate presence to people. Let us listen to them.

In conclusion, I am tempted to add, with both humor and admiration, how our three co-founders have remained human and even limited in the midst of their holiness. Xavier was known and described as a man of passion whose "caritas" was sometimes lacking in "discretion," and this has also been noted about his generous (and sometimes impetuous) missionary zeal. Ignatius himself, holy and great as he was, retained his fiery (and sometimes hurtful) temper. And Pierre Favre, with his closeness to God and compassion for people, continued to struggle, till the very end, with a lack of kindness toward himself. This is probably part of the message we receive through this canonization—that God uses not only our talents but also our wounds and our limitations for the mission that is entrusted to us. 

FR. CHAMPOUX is a French-Canadian Jesuit who has been a formator and consultor of the Loyola House of Studies for over twenty years. He was formerly Tertianship Master for the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific, and has been the Philippine Province's resident psychologist and psychometrician, specializing in personality testing, counseling and spiritual direction. He is also part of the team of counselors of the Our Lady of Peace Guidance Center in Quezon City.

