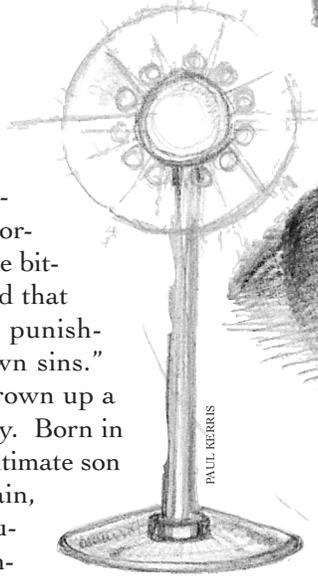


St. Martin de Porres

BORN 1579; DIED 1639
RELIGIOUS
FEAST DAY: NOVEMBER 3

THOPE BL. JOHN XXIII described St. Martin de Porres thus: "He forgave the bitterest injuries, convinced that he deserved much severer punishments on account of his own sins." Martin could have easily grown up a social misfit, angry at society. Born in Lima, Peru, he was the illegitimate son of a noble knight from Spain, John de Porres, who eventually became governor of Panama, and Anna Velasquez, a freed mulatto from Panama. He was dark-skinned and greatly resembled his mother. His father left his mother when Martin was just a boy and his sister Joan just an infant. The result was a childhood of poverty, except for a brief period when the children lived with their father in Ecuador. Anna raised her children alone and saw to the Christian education of her children. Even in Martin's youth, he had a deep devotion to the Passion of our Lord, full of gratitude for his own redemption. He also sometimes would give his family's meager food money to the poor, causing his mother to protest that she and Joan had not volunteered to starve along with him. When Martin was twelve, Anna used funds provided by his father to apprentice him to a barber-surgeon (these professions were at that time combined). It was during this period that he began caring for the sick poor, at no charge.

When he was fifteen, despite his father's objections, Martin chose the lowliest possible station in the Dominican order, becoming a humble lay tertiary (servant). In addition to gardening, housekeeping, and barbering, he acted as



wardrobe-keeper and infirmarian. Nine years later, at the command of his superior, he became a professed Dominican lay brother, although he believed he was unworthy.

Martin devoted himself completely to a life of charity. He nursed the sick, without regard to color, race, or status. He gave out food, clothing, blankets, and other necessities to those in need, becoming known as "Martin the Charitable." He helped found an orphanage and a hospital for abandoned children. Sometimes Martin's charity was blessed by miraculous help from God. One of his tasks was to distribute the daily bread and soup to the poor in the Dominican refectory (dining room). The meager supply of food was often miraculously multiplied. He was also known for miraculous cures and even raising the dead. He felt especially drawn to the suffering of enslaved Africans, and caring for them in illness was a significant part of his work. He was also good at managing money and became a first-rate fund-raiser, providing dowries for poor girls. He raised a dowry for his niece while collecting even more for the poor during a three-day period.

Martin cared for all sorts of animals. At his sister's home, he sheltered stray cats and dogs.

“Martin devoted himself completely to a life of charity.”

On one occasion, his superior instructed him to poison the rodents infesting the Dominican house. Instead, he went out to the garden, called the rats and mice, explained the problem they caused and told them about the poison, and promised to feed them every day in the garden if they would leave the house. That ended the problem. He is among those rare saints who offer a glimpse of an Eden lost, of the original harmony between man and the rest of creation.

Martin’s humility was sometimes ridiculed by those who did not know him well. It prompted him to turn insults to jokes, and to return unkindness with special attention. He was deeply drawn and devoted to the Eucharist. He received Communion as often as he could and, as often as he contemplated Jesus’ Passion and death, tears would flow from his eyes. He prayed at length in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, and often spent entire nights in prayer. He received in abundance the gifts God bestows on those exemplars of contemplative prayer, the



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mystics. He experienced ecstasies that lifted him high in the air (levitation), and received visions. He was known to pass through locked doors to care for the sick. Once, he and a group of Dominican novices, out on a picnic and due home momentarily for prayers, traveled several miles back home instantly. He also had the astonishing gift of bi-location, being seen in Mexico, Central America, Turkey, China, and Japan by people who knew him well, teaching those who had never heard of Jesus and caring for prisoners, despite never leaving Lima in his life.

Martin lived a life of great austerity, wearing a sackcloth habit and never sleeping on a mattress. His superiors permitted these only

because they saw how close to the Lord he was. He lived entirely for others. Jesus teaches the astonishing paradox that “[*b*]e who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 10:39). Grasping loses it all; letting go gains everything. Martin knew how to let go, and became the glorious saint God intended him to be.