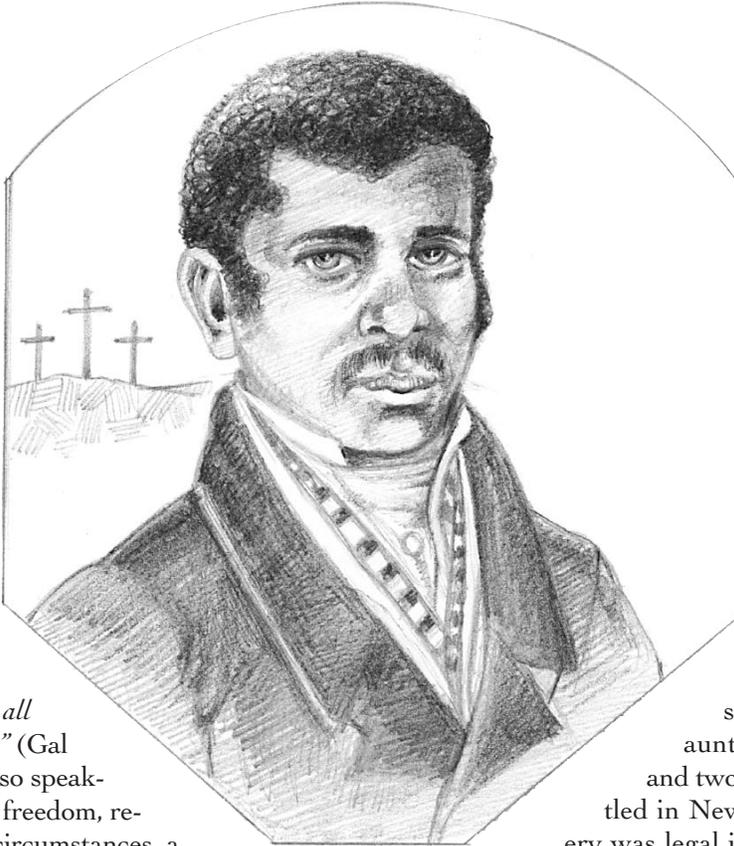


Ven. Pierre Toussaint

BORN 1766;
DIED 1853
CONFESSOR
FEAST DAY:
JUNE 20

IN WRITING of the equality of the baptized, St. Paul said: *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Gal 3:28). He was also speaking of an interior freedom, regardless of life’s circumstances, a freedom to love as Jesus loved. Venerable Pierre Toussaint freely gave his heart in service for the forty-one years of his enslavement and for the forty-six years of his legal freedom.

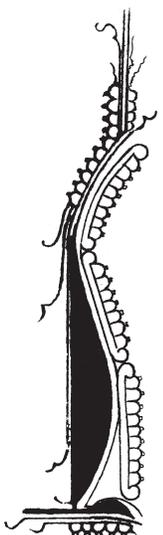
Pierre was born into slavery in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (modern Haiti, on the western third of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola). Both his mother Ursule and his maternal grandmother Zenobe Julien were house slaves on a plantation near the port of Saint-Marc owned by the wealthy Bérard family, who were devout Catholics. Although harsh treatment of slaves was usual (eventually causing the slave revolt that created modern Haiti), the Bérards treated their slaves humanely (Zenobe, for example, was emancipated during the lifetime of her owner). Pierre, a gentle and playful child talented in music, was also employed as a domestic slave rather than as a field hand. Most unusually, the Bérards taught him to read and write, and he was allowed to use the family library. He became fluent in French by reading



books of sermons, which also instilled in him a deep Catholic faith.

In 1787, Jean-Jacques Bérard and his wife Marie fled the increasing unrest in Saint-Domingue, taking with them five slaves — twenty-one-year-old Pierre, his sister Rosalie, their aunt Marie Boucman, and two others — and settled in New York City (slavery was legal in New York until 1827). Now a gracious and charming adult, Pierre did the family’s shopping and sang and played a violin when the Bérards entertained. Shortly after his arrival, he was apprenticed to a hairdresser, in an age when women who moved in the most fashionable social circles desired fanciful creations and some wished daily attention.

The following year, Jean-Jacques returned to Saint-Domingue to recover his property. This effort failed, and he died suddenly of pneumonia. Simultaneously, the New York investment firm chosen by the Bérards failed, leaving Marie Bérard penniless and stranded in New York. She offered Pierre his freedom, but he refused, instead supporting her and the entire household from his earnings as a hairdresser. Realizing how bereft she was, and feeling called to help her as a suffering sister in Christ, Pierre worked to help her maintain a social life, persuading her to accept invitations and give little dinner parties. In an effort to lift her spirits, he would dress her hair before a party and add,





as a surprise, a beautiful flower he had bought while shopping. He also brought her a variety of tropical delicacies. In 1802, she married another refugee from Saint-Domingue, Gabriel Nicolas, but she survived only another five years, dying at the age of thirty-two. Before her death, she insisted on emancipating Pierre, then forty-one, who stayed on to serve Gabriel another four years.

Averse to pride and vanity, Pierre lived frugally and invested well. His hairdressing business paid enough for him to purchase the freedom of his sister Rosalie in 1811, allowing her to marry, and of fifteen-year-old Juliette Noel, also a native of Saint-Domingue, the same year, whom he then married at the age of forty-five. Rosalie died of tuberculosis several months after the birth of her only child, Euphemia, whom the childless Pierre and Juliette adopted (Euphemia's

father could not care for her) as a frail infant and nursed back to health. Pierre and Juliette raised Euphemia with love and devotion, teaching her the faith, inculcating in her a love of charity, and educating her in reading, writing, music, and French. (Tragically, she too died of tuberculosis, at about age fourteen.) Pierre remained a lifelong resident of Manhattan, in 1817 renting his own home, and about twenty years later buying one.

Pierre's work as a hairdresser meant sixteen-hour days on his feet. It was usual for him to go to the homes of his clients, and this required walking, because black men were not allowed to use New York City's horse-cars. He became one of the city's best-known hairdressers, and his clients were among its wealthiest women, including the wife of Alexander Hamilton, and other daughters of Philip Schuyler (the victor of the Revolutionary War Battle of Saratoga), women in the prominent Livingston family, and

well-born French women. To his skill Pierre wedded good conversation, tact, complete discretion, and spiritual advice. When a customer would mention a problem, he would urge her to pray and trust in God, counsel her to look to the Gospels in dealing with her problem, and offer to pray for her.

Able to make others laugh and to tell good anecdotes and stories, Pierre's playfulness and gaiety hid a quick temper that, he once admitted, he was "obliged to bear about with him." More than most men, he had reason for anger. He had a multitude of admirers and friendships among

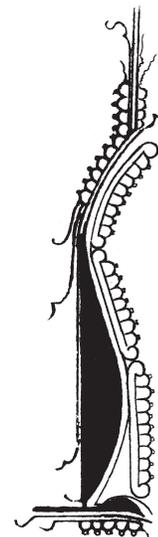
his clients, but these were never friendships among social equals. None of the white families who made up the vast majority of the parishioners of St. Peter's (the oldest Catholic parish in New York), where he was a member, eventually a pewholder, and daily communicant for over sixty years,

offered him a ride on his way to Mass. Although by no means the only free black man in New York, he was far better off than most, but as a wealthy black Catholic among poor black Protestants, he did not fit in any better than he did as a wealthy black Catholic among poor Irish Catholics. Once, when he attended Mass at Old St. Patrick's Cathedral (today a parish church), an usher objected to a black man in the congregation. The parish trustees learned of the incident and sent a letter of apology that was almost worse than the original insult, writing: "If God by his will has created you and your good wife with black skin by his grace he has also made your heart and soul white as snow."

All his life, Pierre wanted to be an "apostle of goodness" to everyone. He was always sympathetic to the misfortune of others. For years, he and Juliette sheltered orphans, refugees, and other unfortunates. They brought up homeless children, sending them to school until



African-American altar servers of St. Peter Claver Church in Philadelphia at the beginning of the 20th century





they learned a useful trade. Some who came to Pierre's attention did chores for him, while for others he searched out jobs. He even gave violin lessons to two boys who came into his care. He stayed in New York to nurse those sick of yellow fever during one of the city's many epidemics. Once, hearing of an impoverished elderly French gentlemen, Pierre anonymously cooked fine French meals and sent them to him. When fire destroyed his investments in insurance companies, he wouldn't let his wealthy acquaintances replace them, asking them instead to give the money to people who needed it. As he approached old age, he was asked why he didn't retire; he replied that he would not then have money to give to the poor.

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Pierre's wealth allowed him to become a philanthropist as well. Among the organizations that benefited were one of New York City's first Catholic orphanages, which he co-founded along with St. Elizabeth Ann Seton (and which was staffed by three of her Daughters of Charity from the Emmitsburg, Maryland motherhouse); New York City's first Catholic school for black children; and the first religious order for black women in the United States, the Oblates of Divine Providence in Baltimore. He also donated money directly to build up the Catholic Church in New York City. In addition to his support of his own parish, he contributed funds to erect the first French parish, St. Vincent de Paul, and helped raise funds to build the current St. Patrick's Cathedral from his wealthy clients.

Pierre not only reached far and wide in his charity, but he also did everything well, com-

pletely, and thoroughly. Yet he puzzled others by never speaking out against slavery, and did not involve himself in the growing movement to abolish slavery in the United States. Part of the reason was that abolitionists were also anti-Catholic. It was clear that he prized freedom, for he had purchased it for his sister and wife. But he also feared violent change, having seen the first stages of the revolution in Saint-Domingue, and once explained his silence by remarking: “They have never seen blood flow as I have.”

Brought up speaking French, Pierre all his life prayed, wrote, and read the Scriptures in

French. He kept a prayer book always in his pocket, and often quoted from the Sermon on the

Mount and the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas á Kempis.

To Pierre's great shock, Juliette died of cancer in 1851, only fifty-five years old. By then eighty-five, he never recovered and gradually grew more frail. Nevertheless, he continued to walk, slowly and painfully, to daily Mass, and then go off on some mission of charity, until he was bedridden.

Pierre was a serene man, unencumbered with bitterness. He once said: “I am a Catholic. I receive the Eucharist. I receive the Divine Lord. I am not bitter toward anyone. I recognize what has been done to me. I recognize how I am treated here. But that is not enough to make me bitter any more than Christ was bitter on the cross. Indeed it was Christ who cried out, *‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do’*” (Lk 23:34).

