



St. Peter Claver



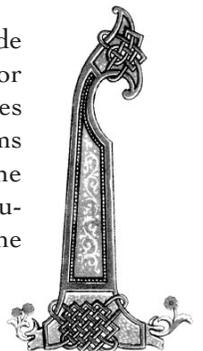
BORN 1581; DIED 1654
PRIEST
FEAST DAY: SEPTEMBER 9

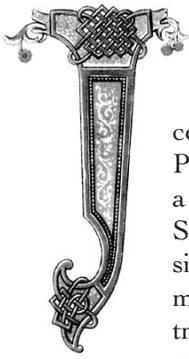
WHEN THE KING will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.... as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'" (Mt 25:34-36, 40). St. Peter Claver completely lived this Gospel of service.

Born in Verdu near Barcelona, Spain, the son of a farmer, Peter was educated at the University of Barcelona. At twenty, he entered the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and was sent to study at

Palma, Mallorca. There the Jesuit lay brother and porter, St. Alfonso Rodriguez, told him that he was called to become a missionary to South America. He requested this assignment but was first returned to Barcelona for further study. Finally, in 1610, he was sent to the New World. Following his arrival at Cartagena, New Granada (modern Colombia), he spent five years studying for the priesthood; he was ordained in 1615. During this period, he was a porter, cook, and infirmarian.

By the time of Peter's arrival, the slave trade from Africa to the Americas had existed for nearly one hundred years. Successive popes had condemned this trade in the harshest terms possible, to no avail. Cartagena had become the chief port-of-entry for ten to twelve thousand Africans arriving by ship annually. The





conditions of their journey were unspeakable. Packed like sardines and given little food, nearly a third died from disease or starvation en route. Sailors would terrify them with horrible fantasies about their eventual fate. Slave traders permitted the captives to be baptized, but the brutal treatment made Baptism a symbol of misery and oppression for the Africans.

Peter committed himself to becoming a “slave to the Negroes forever.” His Jesuit mentor, Alfonso de Sandoval, who himself spent forty years caring for slaves, dreaded the arrival of every slave ship, so terrible were the conditions of the slaves and the fatigue of the work. Peter, however, experienced overwhelming joy with the arrival of every ship, for there were new souls for him to succor and save.

Although neither confident nor outgoing, Peter’s total love for the slaves was buttressed by organizational gifts and an excellent understanding of the human heart. He obtained financial support, and recruited interpreters to help him communicate in the various languages of the captives. With interpreters, he rowed out to every arriving ship, bringing not only basic foodstuffs but also delicacies — fruit, tobacco, brandy. Despite the dreadful odor, he went below decks and immediately nursed the sick and dying, seeking also to baptize anyone who could be brought to even a glimmering of faith. He often went alone, since he was the only one who could stand the stench, dismissing his heroism as the product of “no taste and a strong stomach.” When the captives were brought ashore a few days later, he met them with more food, medicine, and delicacies. Despite being sleep-deprived and maintaining a skimpy diet,

he was able to carry some of the sick to shore, and found carts so they would not have to walk to the slave pens.

Without hygiene, the slave pens smelled just as awful as the ships. Nevertheless, during the time before the slaves were sent to plantations and gold mines, he continued to care for the sick and dying, and began considerable catechesis of the healthy. One of his most effective tools was pictures. He communicated the faith and instilled in the captives a sense of self-respect and dignity in the midst of their inhumane living conditions. Over nearly forty years, he bap-

tized about three hundred thousand people.

Despite resistance and efforts to humiliate him, Peter insisted on the Africans’ basic human rights, and pleaded with traders

and slave owners to treat them well. He toured plantations every year to offer missions, lodging in slave quarters and being harassed for wasting time and blamed for any unruly behavior by the slaves. He also cared for the sick in Cartagena’s hospitals and ministered to those on death row. He led even the most hardened criminals to repent and turn to Christ. He also conducted missions among the traders and seamen. His cloak, which covered the sores of the sick and cushioned the ill and infirm, acquired a reputation for miracles. People sought to touch it; it was shredded by people wanting pieces.

Sick, ill-treated, and nearly forgotten in the last few years of his life, Peter thus shared even more completely in the sufferings of those whom he had served. Yet he is a glory of the Church in the Americas, a man who made himself a slave to those despised by all, seeing them truly as the brothers and sisters of the Lord.

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