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A NEGRO SAINT FOR NEGROES

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I



WHEN the stage production, "The Green Pastures" closed recently in New York, it had to its credit a record of six hundred and forty performances as well as the distinction of having been the most widely discussed presentation of recent years. We are not interested so much in its condemnation by those who thought it blasphemy to show God and His angels in Negro form, or in its praises by those who considered the play an edifying portrayal of a strong and simple religious reality, as we are in a very basic truth, exemplified in the play, which neither sort of disputant can dispute, namely, that all men, Negroes not excepted, interpret life quite naturally in terms of self. Where one can somehow find one's likeness, one can love. That is why men are devoted to their families, why they are patriotic, why, in truth, they are religious. God is infinite perfection and in Himself infinitely worthy of love, but He is loved by men because His perfection is the model of *their* being, the cause of *their* existence and *their* final end. It is the realization of the connection between self and family, country, race and Maker that moulds the attitudes of men toward each. Love is their first emotion and the cause of all the rest. And love, we learn from Aristotle, is founded on likeness. The Son of God became man that from our obvious likeness to His Humanity, our love for Him might abound. So, the pious Negro who thinks of God as of a dignified and gentle colored parson is no more guilty of error and no less illustrates truth than the painter who represents the Deity in the form of a

gigantic white man with a kindly face and a flowing gray beard. Both err (if we suppose the image to affirm anything) because God is neither white nor black but pure spirit—and both tell the truth, since, whether white or black, man resembles God by a participated and imperfect likeness in everything of entity that man possesses. Both concepts are analogies springing from equally natural human needs.

An article under the title "Negro Statues for Negro Churches" by a Mr. Aldrich in "The Chronicle" for January 1930, urged the Catholic Negro to find a stronger bond of love for his faith by cultivating devotion to the saints whom God had given his race, and, more especially, to adapt an efficacious means of devotion by replacing the images of white saints with new images of Negro patrons. While it is all important to impress upon the Negro the truth that a likeness greater than that of race, the likeness of sanctifying grace, joins him with the citizens of Heaven, who will deny the immense utility of showing him that sanctifying grace and eternal glory have been bestowed on Negroes like himself? Is it not his right to know that saints of his race now inhabit "The Green Pastures" of blessedness eternal? Ought we not to be happy to explain to the colored man that, in a sense most intimately interesting to himself, his religion is truly *Catholic*?

II

"The Spirit breatheth where he will" and certainly His breath has touched the souls of countless Negroes, whose humble lot on earth has made them fit vessels of divine mercy. Most of them are unknown to men and shall be revealed only when they shall stand before the throne in that multitude which no man can number. For Catholic Negroes these elect of their race change the vision of "The Green Pastures" from a dramatic fiction to the most consoling fact. But if the vast majority of the Negro blessed, together with the concourse of their heavenly compatriots from all "races, tribes and peoples and tongues" must remain unnamed and their deeds unknown to men until eternity dawns for all, there are some on whose lives the divine seal of miracles has been placed and whose names have been elevated to the altars of Christendom. One, especially, may Negro Catholics invoke by name, assured not only of his final victory by the Church's solemn beatification, but also of a likeness in his life so near their own that their invocation may well carry with it the deepest love and confidence. With certainty of being heard by one who understands, they may call out beyond the clouds to a Negro Saint—"Blessed Martin de Porres, pray for us." Martin de Porres is not only a

Negro saint, he is in a certain sense a Saint because he was a Negro. By submitting to the Providence which allowed him to be an outcast because of his color, he took the first important step on the way of self denial that led to his sanctification.

His story is simple and may be briefly sketched. He was born of a Negro mother, Anna Velasquez, a liberated slave. The record of his baptism in the Church of St. Sebastian, Lima, dated December 9th, 1579 does not name his father. Don John de Porres, Knight of the Order of Alcantara and a man of some importance in the Peruvian Government later acknowledged his son, brought him along when on a diplomatic mission in Guayaquil and sent him to a school for a brief education. On his return to Lima, John de Porres decided that his mulatto child was a hindrance to his social and political advancement and proceeded to clear away the obstacle by apprenticing the boy to a barber. Martin knew no more of home. He lived in an attic room near his work; walked to Mass daily; labored earnestly at his trade acquiring a knowledge of surgery and medicine; and devoted his evenings to prayer and pious study. His social contacts were apparently limited to his customers at the barber-shop and his clients in the streets of Lima, the poor and sick on whom he spent his earnings and his precious knowledge of the healing arts—medicine and kindness. He entered the Dominican Order in the unique position of a tertiary Lay brother. No other instance is known of the solemn profession of a Dominican Tertiary. Prayer, penance, and ministering to the sick and poor, with the dominant quality of utter self-disdain throughout and a chronicle of miracles that won for him the title of "Thaumaturgus of Peru"—sum up the remainder of his life. His holy death occurred on November 3, 1639, in the same convent where he received the Dominican habit. He was sixty years old when he died. Marvels followed his death. Twenty-five years later when popular devotion brought about a transfer of his remains from the chapter room of the convent to a vault in the Church, this body was found incorrupt. Pope Gregory XVI declared him "Blessed" on March 19, 1836.

III

A justifiable pride in the Negro rebels against his being branded by the white man as "inferior." Yet, somehow, the colored man must manage to adjust himself not only to this humiliation, but as well, to its many consequences in daily social and civic life. The only alternative to this adjustment is a hatred which both fails to destroy the

burden and reacts to make the one hating miserable. In order to effect a more tolerable state of things for the colored man, it is no more necessary that the white man be brought to regard the Negro justly than that the Negro be educated to an intelligent attitude towards a prejudice among whites that gives little promise of vanishing.

Of course, the only intelligent attitude toward racial persecution is the same as the only sensible outlook on any sort of suffering—Christian patience. And Christian patience is a product of faith and humility. It is not hard for one to put up with the sorrows of life's brief day when one's faith illumines a view of eternal happiness. It is not hard for one to endure the contempt of men, who admits he rather deserves to be thought little of. But the abstract presentation of the Christian ideal is not always enough to move the listener to action. So the church continually places the lives of the Saints before her children for their encouragement. We more devotedly strive for a goal which we have seen others gloriously attain and it becomes easier for us to stifle pride when we know how humans like ourselves have been happy in humility.

There may be many useful ways and means proposed for the general improvement of Negroes but, certainly, few can excel the patronage and example of one who faced their problems fully and became a saint. There is none more fitted for this purpose than the Negro Lay Brother of Lima, Peru, Blessed Martin de Porres. He was poor; he was a laborer; and he had to put up with humiliations because he was black. Cannot the same be said of nearly every Negro to-day?

IV

It would be foolish to think that one so ardently human as Martin did not find it hard to forget the injuries heaped on him even in his boyhood. His father had thrown him out of the world and, according to one author, even his mother despised him for voiding her social ambitions. He found himself uncared for and enjoying little more than permission to exist. At least such were appearances. But faith taught him that the Son of God had humbled Himself and taken the form of a slave and, through sympathy and gratitude, the poor negro discovered a real advantage in being despised. Then, with a vision unimpaired by concupiscence he saw that sin was something tremendous and trembled at his own faults. To be a sinner and yet to be loved by God made suffering not only tolerable but a thing to be desired. And so to the world that ignored him except to humble

him he gave back a willing service. While earning a living as a barber's apprentice he studied all he could of medicine and surgery that he might alleviate the suffering of the poor. He gave them all his money too, except the little he had to pay for his lodging and food.

When his confessor advised him to apply for reception into the Dominican Order he made sure that he found a place lower than the least, and was so insistent that he overcame the desires of the Fathers to make a cleric of him, and became not even a first order Lay brother but an oblate, devoted to manual labor about the house, without enjoying the privilege of wearing the full habit of the Order.

We have indications that even in the religious life he found those who corresponded with his willingness to be looked down upon. After the attention of the community had been drawn to combat with diabolical forces in which Martin had figured, the Master of Novices found it fitting to make the following significant comment: "Believe me when I tell you, that this *despised mulatto* is a great Saint and, one whom you should hold in real veneration." In his office of infirmarian he had to deal with some very impatient patients. One of them took occasion of what appeared to be tardiness on the part of Martin, to vent his contempt for his negro attendant, and charged him with hypocrisy. Blessed Martin's reply illustrates the whole tenor of his life. He thanked the sick man for having really found him out and for having been so charitable as to correct him. To the abuse of another patient he responded by kissing the sufferer's feet and begging forgiveness. And when the pitched tones of the angered man drew others to the room, Martin explained, with a touch of humor, that although it was not Ash Wednesday, he was already receiving his ashes.

The people of Lima soon came to know the saintly lay brother through his wonderful works of charity. He built an orphanage after the city had refused the work as an impossible project. He became the guardian angel of all kinds of people in need and danger. He distributed alms at the convent and sought throughout the streets and hovels of the city those who were too sick or too proud to come and beg.

His gifts of wisdom, counsel and infused knowledge as well as his many miracles added to his renown and he became the instructor and advisor of prominent personages in civil and ecclesiastical life, among them, the Viceroy and the Archbishop of Peru. He had repaid the contempt of the world with humble slavery and now the world came back to lay its homage at his feet. But if he was affected at all by popular veneration it was only to grieve him because he never lost

the conviction that he was a sinner and, as such, worthy of nothing but chastisement.

We cannot go into much detail on the supernatural manifestations of his life. He had a wonderful devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Mother of God. He was often seen in ecstasy raised from the ground. Once while in prayer before the tabernacle a fire was seen to envelope the altar, while Martin remained transfixed in contemplation. After word of the event brought others to the scene, the fire had gone and Martin, oblivious of all, remained there kneeling. Perhaps the flame was but a sign to men of the charity that burned in the heart of the humble mulatto. Several miracles of bilocation, one of which is given in the lessons of his feast, and miracles of multiplication of alms are related of him. Yet all these signs and wonders are but witnesses to the greatest miracle of all—his humility.

Another admirable quality of his life, is his love for animals. He befriended all of them because they were creatures of God. He pitied and helped any he found suffering. His characteristic love of lowly things is illustrated in perhaps his best known miracle—his saving of the rats who were about to be destroyed in his convent. He also saved the convent from the rats. Hence the miracle. At his command, one of them scurried through the cloister as if giving an alarm, and soon all of its kind followed it back and out into the convent gardens, to the feet of Martin, where he substituted more substantial food for the poorly nourishing fare of sacred vestments which had come near working their destruction.

One day Father John of Barbasan, the procurator of the community, was taken aback to see Martin wearing a brand new habit. The humble and humorous Lay brother thus explained his unusual attire: "That is, Father, because I am going to be buried in it." Soon after the fever which had given him much suffering throughout his life, and which he had ignored except under obedience, became acute. When he heard that the doctors were going to apply the blood of chickens, a remedy common in those days, he pleaded: "Pray do not deprive those little creatures of God of their lives for me, for the remedy would do me no good. The time is come for me to die." His agony was of short duration. Following his victory over a final assault of Satan against his faith he was consoled by a vision of Our Lady, and Saints Joseph, Dominic, Vincent Ferrer and Catherine. When the end drew near and the brethren gathered he begged their forgiveness for his faults and bad example. Thus his last words expressed the humility which had been his life. Immediately his gaze went heavenward. The sorrowing members of the community recited

the Credo, and, at the words "Et homo factus est," he smiled, pressed the cross to his breast and died.

In his preface to the Life of Blessed Martin, the late Cardinal Vaughn gives an estimate of the far-reaching influence of the Dominican Blessed's life, and an appeal for the propagation of his devotion, which well sums up the objective of the present article:

"Blessed Martin must be ranked among the Apostles of America. As St. Francis Xavier followed Vasco de Gama in the East, so did Martin spread the Gospel of Charity in the footsteps of Pizarro. And as a matter of fact, it came to pass that by the beginning of the following century Lima became famous for the piety and faith of its inhabitants—a result brought about in great measure by the apostolate which had been exercised by the Blessed Martin de Porres.

"The conclusion we wish to be drawn from all this is, that God makes use of the weak things of the world to confound the strong. He uses poor, humble people, whom the world despises, to be the instruments of the power of His grace. He now through us sets before our dear coloured children, whom we all love and minister to as their servants and fathers, a most touching model, a most powerful patron. God grant to them the grace to study the life of Blessed Martin to imitate his spirit, to put on his virtues, to confide in his intercession, and to continue in North America, among an acquisitive, energetic, and worldly people, the mission of faith, charity and salvation, which marked the earthly career of this holy Dominican lay brother in the wealthy and corrupt capital of Peru."

The cause of Blessed Martin's canonization was taken up anew by the Sacred Congregation of Rites in 1926, and its early completion is looked for by the members of his Order and the Catholics of South America, where he is held in great veneration. If Negro Catholics in this country learn of him and add their prayers to the cause, the happy day may soon come when they may invoke a new patron of their race, Saint Martin de Porres.

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