

## BLESSED MARTIN DE PORRES, "FATHER OF THE POOR"

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During the three years that Our Lord "went about doing good," we read of Him associating more frequently with the poor than with the wealthy. We read of Him now "filling the needy with good things"; now feeding five thousand by the wayside, now delivering His awe-inspiring sermon, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." And just as Almighty God fed the starving multitude, so the same God in the fulness of time raised up a fervent Apostle whose pure life was spent in assisting the poor, the wretched, the outcast. For ever dear to the hearts of the colored race should be the name of the humble Dominican lay-brother, Blessed Martin de Porres. "This humble negro," says Bishop Herbert, "did more for the establishment of the Catholic religion in South America than all the viceroys, governors, and generals who held sway over Spanish America."

In the city of Lima, Peru, far-famed as the birthplace of America's first flower of sanctity, Saint Rose, Blessed Martin was born on the 9th of December, 1569. His father was Don James de Porres, a Spanish nobleman who held a responsible position under King Philip the Second. His mother was Anna Velasquez, of the then despised colored race. "The laws of nature," says Saint Ignatius, "ordain that the son should resemble the mother." Thus it was in the case of little Martin de Porres; he inherited the dark complexion of his negress mother. This so exceedingly grieved Don James, "that he could never look upon his little son, without a feeling of shame at having thus disgraced his noble origin by his marriage with a colored woman."<sup>1</sup>

What hope was there for the future of a boy whose appearance seemed an impediment to any social rank or dignity? But God considers not the countenance: "Man beholds the face, but God looks upon the heart. Man considers the actions, but God weighs the intentions."<sup>2</sup> He is not a respecter of persons. He chooses whom He wills, regardless of whether one's skin be white, black, yellow or brown; in a word, "the Spirit breatheth

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<sup>1</sup> L. Herbert's *Life of Martin de Porres*, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Imitation of Christ*, p. 175.

where It will," and Blessed Martin from the very dawn of reason listened attentively to the sweet voice of the Spirit of Love.

The child was early impressed by his pious mother with the thought that the eye of God was always watching him, and, keeping this wholesome thought before his mind, he rapidly advanced in wisdom and holiness. "The only difficulty," says his biographer, "was to make the child play, for when his work was done, he would slip into his room to pray, or else, if he could, would make his way to the church, where, prostrate before the Blessed Sacrament, he would pour out all the love of his heart to Him Who was the guide and joy of his life."

Our saintly American negro sought a friend, and found One—found One Who strengthened his soul and kept it pure in the midst of an impure atmosphere. The age in which Blessed Martin lived was an age of corruption and immorality and the field in which he labored was covered with the poisonous weeds of greed and avarice. But this little colored youth was destined to become a lovely flower plucked out of God's own garden and planted in a barren land to spread the perfume of a guileless life and shame the greed of a luxurious race. Soon this great servant of God was to spread the odor of his sanctity abroad in many lands, for Don James, who hated the appearance of his son, drove the little fellow out of his house and apprenticed him to a barber. This position must have been humiliating for the son of a Spanish nobleman. But, no! For our future saint was ever mindful of the words of Saint Paul the apostle: "If any man think himself to be something, whereas he is nothing, he deceiveth himself" (Gal. xi, 3). Reflecting on this undeniable truth, Blessed Martin firmly resolved to carry his cross manfully for love of Him Who had been rejected, despised, and spit upon by His own.

While in the trying position of a barber's apprentice, Martin de Porres faithfully obeyed his employer. Moreover, whatever wages he earned he cheerfully gave to the poor, knowing that "God loveth a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. ix. v. 9).

In those days a certain knowledge of medicine was combined with the barber's trade, and this afforded Martin an excellent opportunity to acquire a practical knowledge of the medical art—which knowledge he afterwards so benignantly utilized in

aiding his beloved poor and in soothing his suffering patients that he was surnamed, "Father of the Poor."

Almighty God did not will that his faithful servant should always remain a barber's apprentice, but commanded him to go out into the highways and byways, and lift up the wretched souls who had fallen in the mire and degradation of sin. Thus it happened that the Mother of our Blessed Saviour appeared to Martin de Porres and bade him enter the Order of Saint Dominic. Hastening to the Dominican monastery at Lima, he humbly asked to be admitted into the Order as a lay-brother. The postulant was warmly received by the Father Superior, John of Lorenzano, a man as remarkable for his quick discernment of character as for his personal holiness.

The Dominican Fathers quickly perceived the solid piety nurtured in the heart and revealed in the countenance of the new lay-brother and soon he was entrusted with the important position of infirmarian. In discharging the duties of this wearisome office Martin de Porres showed that he possessed three sterling qualities; which qualities according to Cardinal Manning, are essentially necessary for sanctity, namely, "fervor, exactness and punctuality." The deep fervor of this illustrious son of Saint Dominic never shone forth so clearly as when the fatal epidemic raged in Lima. Thousands of men, women, and little children being attacked by this dreadful malady, Blessed Martin was sent by his Prior to the various hospitals to minister to the fever-stricken patients.

It is impossible to describe the willingness, tenderness and zeal with which he nursed back to health, the most miserable and abandoned sufferers, healing their aching bodies by day, and at night instilling into their hearts an unshaken confidence in God's mercy, thus preparing their souls for that last dread passage between time and eternity. Not content with tending the sick at all hours of the night, he frequently obtained permission from his superior to bring some poor sufferer home to his own cell, where he could redouble his watchfulness; and intensify his prayers, and thus did this unlettered Friar merit the glorious title, "Angel of Consolation." His room, which was poor but clean, became known as "Brother Martin's little hospital."

After the epidemic had ceased, Blessed Martin was commanded by his superior to distribute alms to the necessitous poor.

Daily a throng of hungry and starving people of both sexes congregated at the door of the Dominican monastery; and never, did he send one away without food. He fed them not only with bread, but also with the Word of God; "For not in bread alone doth man live but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God" (Matt. iv, 4).

Again we find this saintly lay-brother gathering the little children about him on the street corner, catechizing, instructing and planting the seeds of the Christian Faith in their pure, untarnished hearts.

But how could he teach, who had been wholly and wrongfully deprived by his father of even a grammar school education? What Martin de Porres had been deprived of by his earthly father was supplied by the Eternal Father: "In the midst of the Church the Lord opened his mouth and filled him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding" (Eccles.. xv, 5).

This humble lay-brother had such an extraordinary knowledge of sacred subjects that students of colleges, doctors of philosophy, and eminent theologians, would come to him to decide the most abstruse questions. Scarcely had the difficulty been proposed than he would explain it with marvellous clearness and accuracy; furthermore, he would quote whole passages by heart from the writings of Saint Thomas, and add—"Read what the Angelic Doctor says."

But it was not remarkable prudence, nor sound judgment, nor depth of wisdom which made Martin de Porres great in the eyes of men and blessed in the sight of God. No, it was his unbounded charity that won for him greatness in life, and happiness in death. One thing which bitterly grieved the heart of this true servant of God was the wretched condition of the orphan children who, after the epidemic, had been left homeless, starving and wandering in the streets of the town. To each one of those little abandoned waifs he might truly say:

"I behold in thee  
An image of Him Who died on the tree,  
Thou also hast had thy crown of thorns;  
Thou also hast had the world's buffets and scorns."

Moved by tender compassion for those parentless children, Blessed Martin resolved to build an orphanage to shelter them. His remarkable sanctity, gentleness of disposition and zeal in

this undertaking inspired two generous benefactors to contribute \$200,000 towards the erection of this charitable institution, which was afterwards called the College of the Holy Cross, and which will remain as a lasting monument to the boundless charity and zeal of this true imitator of Saint Dominic.

One of the most attractive characteristics in the life of our saint was undoubtedly his charming simplicity. In every created thing he saw the goodness and kindness of God, and thus his love was Christlike; it extended itself not only to intelligent beings but even to the animal kingdom. One day, finding a raven whose leg had been broken by a passing sportsman, our Saint brought the wounded bird to his cell, cured the fractured member, and set it at liberty. The bird instead of flying away nestled in an adjacent wood, flew to the Dominican monastery morning after morning, and thenceforth became the constant companion of its benefactor. Blessed Martin's admirable fondness for birds reminds us of Saint Francis of Assisi; his compassion for the homeless brings before us Saint John of God, while his love for the poor recalls Saint Dominic selling his books during a famine to feed the poor.

But what shall we say of Brother Martin's life in the monastery? What is to be thought of his religious observance, his spirit of prayer and mortification, his invincible fortitude and patience, together with his power of reading men's hearts, and foretelling future events? All these qualities he possessed in an eminent degree and exercised them not for his own glory but for the glory of God and for the uplifting of down-trodden humanity. Negligence, idleness, or laziness, played no part in the life of Martin de Porres, for he took to heart these important words of the Imitation of Christ: "A negligent and lukewarm religious man has trouble upon trouble, and on every side suffers anguish; because he has no comfort within and is hindered from seeking any without."

At length, replete with heavenly merit, and exhausted by a life "spent in doing good," Blessed Martin surrendered his soul into the hands of its Creator, on the 3d of November, 1639, while the Dominican Fathers stood by his bed reciting the words: "Verbum caro factum est" (Brev. II, S. O. P., p. 950).

One hundred and ninety-seven years later, on the 19th of March, 1836, Pope Gregory XVI declared Martin de Porres

Blessed, and ordered his feast to be celebrated on the 5th of November. The two very striking miracles wrought through Blessed Martin's intercession, and thoroughly considered in the procession of his beatification were these: The immediate restoration of sight to a poor woman; the instantaneous cure of a little boy whose skull had been crushed by a fall of thirty feet on a stone pavement. But just as these two miracles enrolled the name of Martin de Porres among the Blessed, so there are two virtues which make him stand out as a model lay-brother for all time—his humility and his purity. Humility was the weapon with which he conquered himself, became lord of the world, friend of Christ, heir of heaven. Purity cleansed from his heart all the dross of earth. "Blessed," says Jesus Christ, "are the clean of heart for they shall see God."

—Bro. Ceslaus McEniry, O. P.