



## A MAN FOR EVERY RACE

At the time of Martin de Porres' birth, Lima was a city of sharp social contrasts. Its primary concern was an attempt at amalgamation of two proud, autonymous peoples, the native Incan Indians and the Spanish *conquistadores*. A third social factor was supplied by the Negroes brought to the New World in ever increasing numbers to fill up the slave quotas depleted by the deaths of thousands of overworked and maltreated Indians.

It was in 1531 that Francisco Pizarro had penetrated the land of the Incans, verifying the tales of remarkable wealth and culture. Pizarro's *conquistadores* succeeded in plundering the temples and palaces of their gold and silver and precious stones. Dissatisfied with the Incan capital at Cuzco, he moved the new sight to Lima, situated on the Rimac river, seven miles from where it flows into the Pacific. Pizarro christened his new conquest on January 6, 1535, as *Ciudad de los Reyes*, The City of the Kings, in honor of the feast of the Epiphany.

With the faults commonly attributed to the *conquistadores*, it must be borne in mind that they brought the precious gift of the Faith to this strange new

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world. In addition the Spaniards brought with them a zeal for culture and learning. Before 1600, Lima had already produced at least one great poet, the Dominican Ojeda. The Spaniards in Lima had contributed notable sculptures, paintings and other works of art. By a grant from Charles V, the University of San Marcos, first in the Western Hemisphere, was founded in 1551 under Dominican direction and secularized in 1571. But the society of Lima was sharply divided. The Native Indian as well as the Negro was forced to work the mines, to live in misery, and at times to die in the streets. Consequently, Lima knew poverty and vice; physical and spiritual misery. Fortunately it also had its homes of virtue and its apostles of charity to overcome the power of evil, stimulate the growth of sanctity and relieve the needs of the miserable. In Saint Martin's century alone, Lima could boast of at least three other canonized saints: the Archbishop, St. Turibius; the Franciscan, St. Francis Solano; and the Dominican tertiary, St. Rose. It was in this city of social contrasts, a city of cultured and unlettered, of sinners and saints, that the soul of Martin de Porres developed in sanctity.

Martin de Porres was born on December 9, 1579. A few days later he was baptized in the church of San Sebastian, Lima. His father, Don Juan de Porres, was a native of Spain and a knight of Alcantara; his mother, Anna Velasquez, was a freed Negro from Panama. Their union was a "free love" affair not blessed by the Church, and after the birth of Juana, their second child, the couple separated. Don Juan refused to acknowledge his son and daughter, because their mother belonged to a lower caste and according to a tradition, because the children resembled Anna. Perhaps, the father considered it beneath his dignity as a *conquistador* to have a son and daughter who resembled the conquered race.

As a boy, Martin manifested a tender compassion for the poor. We are told that when sent on errands he often met people worse off than himself, and would give them his mother's money, annoying Anna who was barely managing to squeeze out a meagre existence. But the punishments he received from her were not able to dampen the joy he experienced in helping the poor.

Martin was born and lived his childhood amidst lowly conditions. He was brought up in circumstances that ordinarily have a hardening effect on character, but which for him were the occasion of growth in holiness. Aided by divine grace, he stayed close to God and developed that remarkable compassion toward human suffering which was to characterize his whole life.

Juan de Porres did not fail entirely in his duties toward his children. Taking them to Guayaquil, Ecuador, he provided a private tutor for their education. Young Martin, then about eight years old, is said to have progressed rapidly in his studies. This education ended abruptly after two years when his father, an envoy in the service of Philip II of Spain, was called away to Panama to assume a new post. Unwilling to take the children with him, Juan entrusted his daughter to the care of an uncle in Guayaquil, while Martin was sent back to Lima to live with his mother.

Anna tried hard to foster the young boy's schooling. When he was about twelve, she found him a place as an apprentice to a barber. At that time a barber fulfilled the combined functions of barber, physician and druggist and under the guidance of this tutor Martin soon learned something of medicine. By day he labored as an apprentice, sometimes in the hospitals, at other times in private homes. At night, he sacrificed sleep in order to devote time to prayer and other spiritual exercises. Martin became known throughout Lima for his virtuous life. To the people of the city he was the surgeon's apprentice who was all things to all men. He shared his modest earnings with the poor. Under the influence of grace he learned in his hard surroundings to place unwavering trust in the Saviour of mankind. His daily contacts with the poor and afflicted enkindled in his heart the fire of charity and this burning charity soon demanded new outlets for its zeal.

For some time, the young Negro had desired to consecrate his entire life to God. Under the designs of Divine Providence, he sought admittance to the Dominican Order at the Priory of the Holy Rosary, Lima. He asked to be admitted as an oblate, a place inferior to that of the laybrothers. Juan de Porres was hurt by his son's ambitions. Although not openly hostile, he would have preferred his son to become a Dominican priest, or at least a laybrother of the First Order. Martin's future superiors, Juan de Lorenzana, Provincial, and Francisco Vega, Superior of the Priory of the Holy Rosary, were perfectly willing to receive him as a laybrother, but respecting Martin's humble wish, they received him as an oblate.

Although not yet having attained the stature of a laybrother, Martin performed the ordinary duties of the Dominican laybrother. He was also assigned to serve as infirmarian, a position for which his previous experience had admirably equipped him. In addition to his medical chores, Martin cut hair and performed routine domestic duties. After a period of nine years as an oblate, he sealed his consecration to God by taking solemn vows. Martin was then 24.

By his solemn profession Martin's affiliation with the Dominican Order was rendered permanent. Until death he would strive to be faithful to the aims of the Dominican Order, whose rule and constitutions were to be his design for holy living. He would never mount a pulpit to preach; yet, paradoxically, his ministrations to the fathers and his work as "Apostle to the Poor" would prove to be one continuous, compelling sermon.

As infirmarian of the large Priory, Martin daily came in contact with human suffering. His charity urged him to take care of even the most insignificant needs of the sick. Once, one of his patients, Peter de Montedescas, was suffering from a gangrenous infection in his leg. In addition to the physical pain which the priest was experiencing, he was tormented by the prospect of having his leg amputated. Overwhelmed by his personal misery, the priest repelled all who approached to comfort him. Secretly, Martin had learned that the man was experiencing a great craving for a particular food. Before the priest was able to respond, Martin offered him what he desired. This act of generosity, seemingly insignificant, effected a wonderful change in the man's disposition. Now resigned to God's will, he regained peace of soul. He asked Brother Martin to place his hand on the diseased limb and to intercede for him with God. In a short time the priest made a complete recovery without benefit of an operation.

In addition to his patients in the infirmary, Martin exhibited a genuine interest in the activities of the novices. His position as barber and infirmarian enabled him to enjoy more freedom in associating with the novices than is customary. Aware of the laybrother's sanctity, the Novice-Master freely allowed the novices to associate with him. This interest is illustrated by an incident related by a Dominican priest, Cyprian Medina at the beatification process. He recalled how Martin had once come to his defense to save him from the pranks of the other novices. Cyprian had been dubbed by his fellow novices as "the ugly" because of his awkwardness and unhandsome features. Although they were engaging in good natured fun, the remarks probably wounded the young man's sensitivity. One day in the barber shop Brother Martin put an end to these remarks by making an unbelievable prophecy. He predicted that Cyprian would not only improve in physical appearance but that he would achieve prominence within the Order. Since the novices had great respect for his words, they no longer taunted Cyprian. As events turned out, Martin's prediction was fulfilled to the letter. After an illness, Cyprian greatly improved in physical appearance, and as the years passed by he assumed more and more important

tasks, becoming Regent of Studies at the University of Lima and later Bishop of Huamanga.

Lima was overrun with thousands of poor and starving people. There was no organized system for alleviating such misery, such as most cities enjoy today. In desperation the poor were driven to seek what relief they could from the priories of the city. It was customary for them to come to the gate of a priory where a porter would receive them and tend to their needs as best he could. Perceiving his kindness and eagerness to relieve suffering in any form, Martin's superiors assigned him this task in addition to his other duties. It has been estimated that Brother Martin fed daily as many as one hundred sixty of the poor and that he distributed each week more than two thousand dollars' worth of clothing and other necessities of life. Gifted with a keen spiritual insight, Martin was able to see in the poor and afflicted, members of the Mystical Body of Christ. To Martin, color or race was no barrier; whether Spaniard, Indian or Negro, he treated all with equal kindness. His work as gatekeeper was paralleled by his fellow Dominican laybrother, Bl. John Massias at the Priory of St. Mary Magdalen also in Lima. Each had for his apostolate the spiritual and temporal welfare of the sick and poor of Lima. Biographers of the two men relate that they often spent their free time together, discussing common problems, exchanging ideas and laying plans for future works of mercy. Each drew from the other's saintly example greater strength and confidence to meet the pressing problems of their apostolate.

Martin and John Massias both perceived the need for planned social reform. For, despite the excellence of the work each did for those who came to them for assistance, there were countless others who would continue to roam the streets unaided unless some method could be devised to help them. For the many homeless and unwanted children of Peru, there was a most urgent need for an orphanage. Martin realized that unless some Catholic school were maintained to take care of the physical and religious needs of these children, there would be little hope of their ever becoming responsible Christian citizens. He pleaded their cause with such zeal that the civil and ecclesiastical authorities soon gave substantial assistance. His sincerity in this project also persuaded many persons of means to contribute generously. Through his influence a wealthy merchant Matthew Pastor and his wife established the school and orphanage of the Holy Cross.

Martin cared for the sick and the dying, for the poor who came to the gate of the Priory; he went in search of others and treated them in their homes. Among these there were even priests whose poverty forced them to

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live as peasants. Every night he used to visit the sick Negroes in the vicinity of Limatambo, about two miles outside the city, where the Dominicans had a farm. There he distributed medicines to the Negro families and dressed the wounds of those injured while working that day in the mines. It is said that his mere presence brought light to these souls enveloped in fear and despair. Finding a Negro or Indian at the point of death, he would quickly send for a priest and console the dying until his arrival. He often provided burial with his own hands. Although a laybrother, he was truly what the Dominican Constitutions call a co-operator to his brother priests.

Usually the Dominican laybrother did not have to walk far before finding someone in immediate need of medical attention. Often he found it necessary to transfer the patient to the Priory Infirmary for further rest and treatment. He brought so many of these people into the house that it became a source of friction and irritation in the community. So much so, that for the peace and good of the community the Provincial intervened, ordering Martin to stop bringing his patients in. Martin realized that he had a strict obligation to obey the Provincial's command. His religious obedience, however, could never prove to be a contradiction to his all embracing charity. One evening, after binding the wound of a seriously wounded Indian, Martin was forced into making a crucial decision. Whether to take this man to the Priory or to let him die for sure on the streets? Martin rushed the man to the Priory. Intending to transfer the patient elsewhere as soon as possible, he carried him to his cell. The Provincial learned of this violation of his explicit command and imposed a stiff penance on Martin. In humility he performed the penance without protest.

Several days later while performing a service for the Provincial, he begged pardon for the violation. And seeking a clarification of the rule, he addressed the Provincial; "Please be kind enough to enlighten me on this point. I did not think that the precept of obedience prevailed over that of charity." The laybrother's clear vision and common sense so powerfully appealed to the Provincial that he decided to allow Brother Martin to use his own judgment hereafter in the exercise of mercy at the Priory.

Instances of remarkable humility abound in the life of Saint Martin de Porres. It is related that when Martin was dying, one of the Fathers warned him not to argue with the enemy, but simply cling to the faith in the merits of Jesus Christ. To which Martin could only reply with a faint smile, "Satan is too proud to make use of any subtleties on a poor, ignorant laybrother like me." On another occasion in order to pay off a pressing debt, the Prior was forced to sell some furnishings at the market place in the

city. When Martin heard of this, he hurried to the Prior with what he thought was a better and more economical idea: "The Order has always treated me, a worthless mulatto very well. I want to do something for the Order in return. Why not sell me, instead."

Martin made full use of his vows as means to perfection. He assiduously obeyed all the commands of his superiors. His room, utterly devoid of everything except a crude bed, wooden cross, and pictures of the Blessed Mother and St. Dominic, reflected his spirit of poverty. The well patched habit he wore often drew good natured comments from his companions. Far from taking offense he would joyfully retort, "the shabbiest habits are the most in style." The constant penances employed in the warfare to subdue the flesh, enabled him to practice chastity to a heroic degree.

Prominent in his life of prayer was devotion to Our Lord in the Eucharist and to the Blessed Mother. He received Holy Communion as often as he could, far more often than was then customary. His devotion prompted him to spend many hours in silent adoration, partially concealed in some corner of the church. A faithful devotee of Our Lady and her rosary, he enthusiastically assumed the responsibility of managing the flowers and vigil lights placed before the statue of the Blessed Virgin in the vestibule of the refectory.

A great paradox in the life of Martin de Porres is that while he himself willed to remain humble and obscure, God willed to work many prodigies through him. A prodigy perhaps unique to Martin was his apparent presence in two places at once. Speculation as to how this is possible is practically endless. All we have to go on is the fact that reliable witnesses from China, Japan and Algeria, testified they had met Martin just as they had seen him again in Lima on personal trips there. Yet, Martin's superiors maintained that the laybrother had never resided elsewhere than in his Priory in Lima.

In fact, God worked so many favors through Martin that it became embarrassing for him at times. It is related that the Archbishop of Mexico on a trip to Lima came down with an attack of pleurisy. The Archbishop requested Martin for a cure, and Martin knew that if the cure were worked people would make a big fuss over him. Since his superiors put him under obedience, he had to comply with the prelate's wish. Placing his hand on the man's side, the cure took place immediately. His mission accomplished and embarrassed by the whole thing, Martin sheepishly left the room.

Just as public manifestations of Divine power abounded in his life, so there were not absent the machinations of the powers of evil. In fact it is

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said that the visible manifestations of the devil became so frequent and spectacular that another laybrother was assigned to serve as companion in his cell at night. One night all four walls of his room began to shake, and with them so did Brother Fulano, his assigned guardian. Then a weird streak of fire exploded enveloping the whole room in flames. Choking and gasping the petrified Fulano was sure the end was near for both of them. But for Martin, calm and cool, it was just another one of those things which he had to put up with so often.

It seems that Martin had a matter of fact way of saying things. When the Procurator out of curiosity asked why he was wearing a new habit, he simply replied it was the habit in which he would be buried. This came as a shock since he was in good health at the time. But soon afterward his health failed and on November 3, 1639 the great saint died. His funeral resembled that of a great statesman. Every class of Lima's sharply divided society paid its final respects to its beloved Martin: Spaniards, Negroes, Indians, old men and children, the poor and rich, priest and civil authorities as well.

Immediately, the move for the canonization of Martin de Porres was begun. It proved to be a long and tedious process. In 1686 after 164 persons had given testimony to the heroic life and virtues of Martin de Porres the Apostolic Process was concluded. But then it was nearly a hundred years until Pope Clement XIII issued an Apostolic Decree proclaiming the heroic character of Brother Martin's life and deeds on April 29, 1763. And then came another long interval until Gregory XVI on September 10, 1837 declared Martin de Porres a blessed servant of God. Now we are privileged in our day to witness his solemn canonization by John XXIII.

Everyone is willing to admit that Martin's canonization at this time is providential. Close to the heart of every major social crisis is the racial problem of black and white; like East and West, it seems the two shall never meet. But now both white and black can look to Saint Martin as a mediator. In his very blood the two became one. In his ministry there was no such distinction either. From a crippled priest in the Priory Infirmary, he could go to bind the wound of an Indian dying in the street and then feed a starving negro miner. Just as race was no barrier to his charity neither was class. He was all things to all men and no one scrupled to ask for his help because of his color. He is everybody's Saint. As the current Broadway drama depicts Saint Thomas More, as "A Man for All Seasons," so perhaps we may be justified in calling Martin "A Man for All Races."

—Walter McGuire, O.P.