

## A LIFE FORMED IN SANCTITY

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**F**ifty years ago, on 6 May 1962 at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Blessed John XXIII proclaimed—in the presence of thirty-eight cardinals, numerous archbishops and bishops, and 40,000 pilgrims from more than fifty countries—the sanctity of Martin de Porres, the early 17th-century Dominican brother from Peru.

Five months later, on 11 October 1962, again at St. Peter's Basilica, Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council.

Perhaps the Pope had this saintly man in mind when he summoned the historic event that captured the curiosity and attention of millions of people throughout the world, as the media extensively covered the deliberations of thousands of cardinals, bishops, and theologians gathered in Rome.

The Council had in mind to explicate the many diverse roles within the Church, which is evident from even a cursory look at the council documents: *Christus Dominus* focuses on the pastoral office of bishops, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* on the ministry and life of priests, and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* on the apostolate of the laity. Martin de Porres fits neatly into the mold of *Perfectae Caritatis*, the document on religious life. All of these different roles serve in the unity of truth, that is, in the mystical body of Christ. Indeed, St. Martin, known for his unreserved service to others, was primarily a servant of this divine truth.

But are the diverse roles within the Church to be considered identical in nature? If that were the case, how do we make sense

of the extensive third chapter of *Lumen Gentium* which details the hierarchical nature of the Church?

### A HARMONY OF VOCATIONS

There can and should be diversity within the Church so long as the different roles are properly distinguished from each other and share in the identity of belonging to the Catholic faith. Here we see the mode of defining a thing according to its proper genus and species. This man and that man are both Catholic: One man is a priest of the Catholic faith, the other a layman of the Catholic faith. The genus? Each is Catholic and belongs to the Church. One is not “more” Catholic than the other. The species, or specific difference, is that each is situated in a certain state of life and has a specific role in the Church. There is diversity amongst the members of the Church according to each one’s proper vocation.

The word “vocation” is used in many different ways today, often very ambiguously. We can at least distinguish between “vocation” in a general sense and “vocation” in a proper sense. Generally, a vocation is a gift of grace by God to be called to a life of holiness. *Lumen Gentium* states:

Therefore all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness, according to the Apostle’s saying: ‘For this is the will of God, your sanctification’ (1 Thess. 4:3). This holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful and so it must be; it is expressed in many ways by the individuals who, each in his own state of life, tend to the perfection of love, thus helping others to grow in holiness (LG 39).

A vocation taken in the proper sense is a gift of grace by God to be called to a specific form of life within the Church. It is the gift

of a vocation, taken generally and properly, which informs the role and identity of a man in the Church.

#### A VOCATION IN HARMONY

The poor mulatto man from Lima, Peru can serve as a perfect model of both the specific vocation to the religious life and the universal vocation to holiness. Though he is piously known for his extraordinary miracles, recounted by the many entertaining stories of his bilocations, healings, and even conversations with animals, it was St. Martin's remarkable and tireless service to the poor that contributed to his status as a wonder-worker for social justice.

Each day of his life, St. Martin fed nearly two hundred people, and it is said that he disbursed \$2000 worth of necessities—an incredible sum for the time—among the sick and dying Indians, Africans, and Spaniards in Lima. He visited the hovels of the abandoned, and established an orphanage for the poor and homeless children of Peru. A poor man himself, he was affectionately dubbed “Father of the Poor” by the people of Lima, and he is recognized today as the patron saint of social and interracial justice.

The declaration of St. Martin de Porres as a saint of the Church could not have come at a more appropriate time. The world was rapidly changing at the turn of the 1960s. Many social movements were happening at the time, notably the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Amidst such leaders as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., the Catholic Church displayed to the world a true saint for our time in the mulatto from South America.

Yet there is more—much more—to the life of St. Martin than his social work. Unfortunately, many aspects of his life and holiness are often overlooked. The Church certainly encourages the people of God to be in solidarity with the men of this world in various social, economic, and political situations (as taught in



FORD MADOX BROWN - CHRIST WASHING PETER'S FEET

*Gaudium et Spes*, for example), but these types of actions should always be seen as coming from a life of holiness.

St. Martin de Porres became a saint not only because of the great things he did in his life but also because he received with humility the answer to the question of who he was—that is, in the service of God and of his neighbor in his vocation as a Dominican lay brother. Here there is shown the completeness of the call to sainthood: The saint is filled with divine charity, and it is charity which animates all of his or her actions. The saint is more than a political advocate, brilliant speaker, or daring figure.

The essence of St. Martin's life is summed up in his Dominican vocation. As a young man, Martin spent countless hours in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament or before Our Lady's altar in the

Dominican Church of the Most Holy Rosary in Lima. It is said that St. Martin received his vocation when the Queen of the Most Holy Rosary revealed to him that God wished him to become a member of the Order of Preachers.

Martin already had a great admiration for the Friars Preachers. Just as St. Catherine of Siena, who, as a young girl, would watch the friars walk past her home and then hurry outside to kiss their footprints, Martin saw the Order with great awe and wonder. He saw it as a holy Order, under the constant care and protection of the Mother of God. Through his contact with the friars, Martin developed fervent devotions to the Dominican saints—his favorites being St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Vincent Ferrer.

At the age of fifteen, Martin knocked at the door of the Dominican convent and asked to be admitted as a tertiary helper. He did not ask for the black and white habit of a full lay brother—or as we say today cooperator brother—for in his humility he felt that it was too honorable for him. Instead, Martin sought the lowest place in the community. After nine years of service as a tertiary, Martin was ordered by virtue of holy obedience to make solemn vows and become a full brother at the age of twenty-four. The rest of Martin's life, including his role and his identity in the Church, would be formed according to the Dominican way of life.

The Fundamental Constitution of the Order of Friars Preachers stipulates the specific form of life undertaken by St. Martin:

Sharing the Apostles' mission, we also follow their way of life, in the form devised by Saint Dominic. We do our best to live of one accord the common life, observing faithfully the evangelical counsels, fervent in prayer and in the common celebration of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist and the divine office, diligent in study and constant in regular observance. Not only do these things contribute to the glory of God and our sanctification, they also bear directly on the salvation of humankind, since together they prepare and impel us to preach; they give our preaching its

character, and, in turn, are influenced by it. The life of the order comprises a synthesis of these elements, inseparably interconnected, harmoniously balanced and mutually enriching. It is an apostolic life in the full sense of the word, from which preaching and teaching ought to issue from an abundance of contemplation.

Martin was called by God to partake in the life of a Dominican friar, and he accepted his chosen state of life with utter humility. Emblematic of his humility and holiness is the story that while Martin was cleaning the washroom—one of the many lowly chores he performed daily in the priory—a brother jokingly called out to him: “Brother Martin, don’t you think you would be better off in the palace of the Archbishop of Mexico than here cleaning lavatories?” Martin responded with the verse from Psalm 84: I have chosen to be an abject in the house of my God.

Martin’s reply is an instance of how he identified his place among the grand scheme of the hierarchical structure of the Church. God called Martin to live the Dominican life as a simple non-ordained brother, and Martin did not seek to do otherwise. The only thing that Martin sought was God Himself, and he did so by the life he received from God.

#### A SANCTIFIED LIFE

It takes a gift of great humility to remain faithful in one’s vocation, especially when one experiences unexpected difficulties or feels unappreciated, but with trust in God’s providence, the reward will be a hundredfold as the revelation of one’s identity—the identity of being a saint—will be made manifest. *Lumen Gentium* makes this message clear, and provides fitting words of conclusion:

Therefore, all the faithful of Christ are invited to strive for the holiness and perfection of their own proper state. Indeed

they have an obligation to so strive. Let all then have care that they guide aright their own deepest sentiments of soul. Let neither the use of the things of this world nor attachment to riches, which is against the spirit of evangelical poverty, hinder them in their quest for perfect love. Let them heed the admonition of the Apostle to those who use this world; let them not come to terms with this world; for this world, as we see it, is passing away (LG 42).

God raised the lowly Martin de Porres to the heights of the canon of saints in 1962, and, by the prayers of this holy man, He will not cease to raise men and women up to heaven. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the canonization of St. Martin de Porres, Pope Benedict XVI enlightened the thousands of pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square: "Today... we ask [St. Martin de Porres] to intercede for the work of the New Evangelization, which kindles holiness in the Church." May St. Martin de Porres be our patron and model during this anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

*John Baptist Hoang entered the Order of Preachers in 2009.*