

St. Martin De Porres: A Saint for the 21st Century

It is indeed a great privilege to offer reflections about the Life of **St. Martin de Porres** and to celebrate him as my brother in the Dominican family.

It is also a pleasure to celebrate Martin as one of the Church's saints with African roots because it recognizes the diverse nature of the Catholic Church. Since 1990, November has been designated as National Black Catholic History Month, not to be confused with Black History month in February. The month of November was designated to remember the contributions of Black Catholics to the universal Church, in part, because the feast day of St. Martin and the birth date St. Augustine occur in November. So, it is indeed an honor to reflect about Martin de Porres during this time.

But most of all, it's a pleasure to celebrate and reflect on the life of St. Martin de Porres because of the messages of unity, grace and hope evident in his life. St. Martin de Porres is the patron saint of social and racial justice, and I think his life has a lot to say to us in our current times.

Many of us know at least a little about the life of St. Martin de Porres. We probably have heard of the miracle involving both people and animals. We know of his humility, his gentleness, and his amazing love and compassion for the poor and suffering, and perhaps more importantly, we know that he loved and healed even the people who were unkind toward him. We have heard and we have been inspired by the many powerful manifestations of God's grace that he performed during his life, and through his intercession after his death.

These divine events, however, will not be the focus of my reflections today. Instead, after praying about what I would share with you, I felt called to focus on *the messages and insights Martin's life reveals to us*

today—about ourselves and about how, perhaps, we are being called to respond in the world today.

In the 25th Chapter of Matthew we hear this familiar scripture:

“Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom that has been 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, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me. But, Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or see you naked, or ill, or in prison? And he will say to them in reply, “Whatever you did for the least of these brothers (and sisters) of mine—you did for me.”

This passage proclaims the very heart of what it means to live out the Gospel. It is a Scripture passage, which from a young age, was stamped on the very heart of Martin de Porres.

Let me briefly share some facts about the early life and times of Martin de Porres. He was born in Lima, Peru in 1579, the illegitimate son of a Spanish nobleman, Juan de Porres, and a freed African woman from Panama, named Ana Velasquez. Martin was baptized in December of 1579 and his father was listed as “unknown.” The father abandoned the family shortly after the birth of Martin’s younger sister, Juana.

Martin was born into poverty and of mixed blood, in a world where the slavery of both Africans and Indians was an acceptable business. Slave labor in the mining of gold and silver and in agriculture fueled the growing pursuit of power and wealth that built the Spanish empire in the New World. His mixed African heritage placed him at the bottom of this class-based society.

When Martin was six years old, his father returned and took Martin and his sister to live with him in Ecuador. However, the next year, Martin was sent back to Lima, where he lived in a poor Afro-Peruvian neighborhood with Isabel Garcia. There is no explanation about why Martin did not go back to live with his mother, Ana. Martin lived with Isabel Garcia from the age of eight, until he entered the Dominican priory at age 15.

These were the circumstances that Martin was born into. His early life experiences were tragic and he suffered wounds of hurt and discrimination. However, Fr. Brian Pierce, a Dominican priest who has preached and written extensively about Martin, said this about the effect of these circumstances on Martin's life in his book entitled, Martin de Porres: A Saint of the Americas. He wrote:

“What for others could have easily turned into a life of bitterness and anger, for Martin became an opportunity for holiness. Martin entrusted the chaos and the poverty of those early years to God, who took the Spanish and African threads of his heart and wove them into a beautiful tapestry of love. Perhaps Martin's greatest gift was his capacity to let God turn his suffering into compassion.”

We, like Martin, have no control over the circumstances of the lives that we are born into. But I think the life of Martin de Porres exemplifies a message about “life circumstances.” **We know that message.** We know that, God can turn any circumstance in life to our good. In Romans 8:28, St. Paul expressed it this way: “For I know that all things work together for the good for those who love God.”

I believe God used three circumstances to transform the life of Martin de Porres. I'm sure there were others, but I will just speak of three. First, there was Martin's open heart and deep love for God, specifically, in his devotion to the Crucified Christ. When he was eight years old, Martin would request candle stubs that he would use at night to pray before his

crucifix. Through this devotion, Martin began to see all suffering in light of the suffering of Christ.

Second, even as a young child, Martin had a deep compassion for the poor and suffering. Stories tell us that his mother, Ana, would send Martin to the market with her meager funds to buy food for the family, and he would either give away the money or give away the food. There was always someone he met whom he felt was more in need. In addition, he would stop and pray at every church in the neighborhood before returning home from his errands. So his tardiness was also probably a concern for his mother. As a mother myself, I think “exasperation” is not quite the word that Ana probably used to describe her feelings about those experiences. The point, however, is that Martin’s heart reflected the heart of Christ at a very young age.

The third transformative experience was Martin’s admittance to the Dominican priory. Colonial Church laws prohibited Indians, Africans or people of mixed blood from entering religious life or becoming priests. However, at 15, Martin walked to the priory of Our Lady of the Rosary in Lima, and requested to enter as a “donado,” a lay servant. He was accepted and in 1603, at age 24, because of his holiness, he was asked by the community to make solemn profession as a lay brother, despite the existing discriminatory law. So the Dominicans in Lima were not afraid to break the law when necessary.

Fr. Cyprian Davis, OSB a Benedictine monk, in his book entitled, The History of Black Catholics in the United States, wrote about St. Martin de Porres and his entrance into the Dominican Order. It is in his chapter documenting the early African roots of Catholicism that Cyprian wrote:

“When Martin became a Dominican lay brother, he soon became a one-man charity agency in the city of Lima. This dark skinned friar in his black and white habit traveled the streets of a cruel and indifferent city, to bring healing and compassion to the Indian outcast, the abandoned slave, and the forgotten child. During the

day St. Martin de Porres was a man of action, during the night he was a man of prayer, a mystic. For more than 40 years he literally lived out his calling as “Father of the Poor.”

St. Martin de Porres was, indeed, a man of prayer and action. Our actions may not be on the scale of what Martin was able to accomplish, but God does not call us to “be” St. Martin, or anyone else. God calls us from where we are and to use our particular gifts, “to love God, and to love our neighbor as our self.”

Martin consistently gave all credit to God for any healing or good that came through his efforts. In one of the few quotes we have from St. Martin he says to a sick person after healing them: “I only cure you. It is God who heals you.” His life revealed a deep trust and reliance on God. St. Martin embodied the words of Acts 17: 28 which declare, “For in God, we live and move and have our being.” To live our lives in this deep place of trust in God has the capacity to truly transform our lives, our circumstances and even our world.

St. Martin de Porres’ life reflected God’s love for all people. He understood the interconnectedness of all of creation to each other and to God. For him, everyone was deserving of love and compassion. So despite the social, racial, and economic injustices of his day, St. Martin de Porres kept his joyful, humble and gentle manner wherever and with whomever he served, including those who were unkind towards him. Martin’s manner was always the same, humorous and loving.

A story is told of Martin visiting a priest who was ill and facing the amputation of his leg. In good humor, Martin made some comment that angered the priest, who then called Martin a “mulatto dog and other bad things.” Martin left his room laughing, but returned the next day with a salad of capers, which the priest had secretly desired all day.

Feeling remorse over his anger and his words, the priest apologized and asked Martin to take pity on him. Martin immediately laid his hands on the leg and it was healed. It seems that even those who were unkind towards Martin were transformed by his loving non-violent response.

In writing about how St. Martin de Porres coped with the violence inflicted upon him, Brian Pierce, OP wrote: “Martin did not enjoy being treated like an animal any more than Jesus enjoyed being crucified. Both, however, had the capacity to endure with hope and trust that love would ultimately triumph.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, also spoke about the connection between nonviolence and love when he said, “At the center of non-violence stands the principle of love.”

St. Martin de Porres was not formally canonized until 1962, some 300 years after his death in 1639. But the people of Lima, his Dominican community, and many in other countries already knew of Martin’s sanctity.

When Martin was beatified in 1837 by Pope Gregory XVI, his popularity increased dramatically, especially in the U.S. His story resonated deeply within the African American Catholic community. One such story of Martin’s connection with Black Catholics in the U.S is surprisingly reflected in the history of St. Augustine Catholic Church in Washington, DC which was written about in detail by Celia Cussen, a professor at the University of Chile, in her book, Black Saint of the Americas: The Life and Afterlife of Martin de Porres. Cussen shared:

“In 1858, African American members of St. Matthews Church in Washington, DC (tired of the segregated environment in their church) raised enough funds to build a small chapel and school which they named Blessed Martin de Porres. Parishioners however called it St. Martin’s.

The Black Catholic community of St. Martin's was successful and the community eventually raised funds to erect a larger new church, which by necessity would need to bear the name of a fully recognized saint.

The new church opened in 1867 and was the first site for Augustine's Church. It was named for the theologian and bishop of Hippo in North Africa. However, the community did not forget its link to Martin de Porres. So, a life-sized representation of Martin in his Dominican habit was painted over the altar along with St. Augustine and St. Peter Claver."

The current site of St. Augustine's church was built in the early 20th century, but it has had a proud history from its very beginning among Black Catholics, as well as the wider Catholic Church. But the church began under the patronage of Martin de Porres.

St. Martin's canonization in 1962, by Pope John XXIII, came at a pivotal time in history. Fr. Brian Pierce made an excellent observation about the timing of Martin's canonization. He wrote that "Martin became a saint in the midst of Vatican II—(a movement that brought renewal within the Church). The proclamation also came in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, which changed the history of discrimination in the US. In 1963, the March on Washington, highlighted a dream of racial harmony, that was articulated by another "Martin,"—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." Dr. King led a movement that would change the landscape of a people and a nation. Pierce said that, "Pope John XXIII performed an act of prophetic courage to declare Martin a saint in the midst of these two events, and one cannot help but hear in the voices of both Martin's—the ancient cry of the prophets, announcing the dawning of a new day of justice."

The "new day of justice," however, continues to be, "a work in progress." While much has been accomplished, economic and social

inequality continues to be key issues in the 21st century, just as they were in Martin's time. Consider this snapshot of a few current issues today:

- The wealthiest 1% of the world own 48 % of the world's wealth.
- Half the world lives on \$2 a day and 25, 000 (mostly children) die of hunger every day.
- The modern day form of slavery—human trafficking—has reached epidemic proportions.
- Thousands of families are leaving their homes in the Middle East, Latin America, Mexico and other places, fleeing violence and poverty.
- Add to this, issues like immigration, gun violence or mass incarceration of black and brown people, and a host of “ism's” that I could also mention.

So, considering this “snapshot” of our society—I ask once again, **“What relevant messages or insights does the life of St. Martin de Porres reveal when we consider our response to key issues of today?”** Current issues which are rooted in the same motives of wealth and power that prevailed in Martin's time.

From my own reflection, it seems that the messages revealed in the life of St. Martin de Porres, are the same as the one's visible in the lives of people throughout the ages who have possessed the same spirit of love and justice as Martin. People like Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr. Cesar Chavez, Sojourner Truth—and a host of others, both known and unknown.

What their lives tell us is that love and respect for human dignity must outweigh the pursuit of wealth and power and ideologies of oppression. Their lives tell us that we must consider the words in Matthew 25 and the great commandment “to love God and to love our neighbor as we

love ourselves.” These ideals are essential to the welfare of humanity and to proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The ultimate message that is clear in the life of St. Martin de Porres, the Patron saint of Justice, **is the transforming power of love and non-violence.** I invite you to consider on this Feast of Martin de Porres, **“What personal message does his life reveal for you?”**

Consider also, that when Jesus said “to love God, and to love your neighbor as yourself,” it was not a suggestion. It was a commandment that was given to **all** those who would follow God’s law of love.

So, despite the issues of society, there is much that is good in our world! The life of St. Martin de Porres reflects the unity, grace and hope that are always present among God’s people. For in the hope of the resurrection, God’s triumph over evil always remains true. **In faithfulness and truth, God said to Martin and God says to us: “Behold, I make all things new!”**

Sr. Pat Dual, OP

