



St. Peter Claver, S.J.
1580-1654

Missionary
Slave of the Slaves
Patron of Ministry with Blacks



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“Señor, yo te quiero mucho.” These words coming out of the mouth of St. Peter Claver in this very early portrait of him mean, “Lord, I love you very much.” It was one of the small set of phrases that Claver had his interpreters translate into the multiple languages of the African slaves brought to the port of Cartagena in what is now Colombia. It is also the theme of Claver’s life and ministry. He deeply loved his God, and he deeply loved the

people of God who came to his care, especially the Africans who arrived on the slave ships.

Vocation

Peter Claver, the son of a farmer, was born in Spain in 1580. He obtained his first degrees at the University of Barcelona, and at the age of 20, entered the Society of Jesus. While he was studying philosophy on the island of Majorca in 1605, he was inspired and encouraged by St. Alphonsus Rodriguez to hear and respond to the call to minister in the New World.

Mission

Peter Claver came to Cartagena, Colombia, while he was still a seminarian. He was the first Jesuit to be ordained a priest in Cartagena. Even before ordination, Peter began his special ministry to the slaves. Cartagena was a major port of entry for West African slave ships. Before a ship would arrive Peter would beg food, fruit, medicine and clothing around the city. He learned one African language, but used slaves as interpreters and catechists. For 44 years he was there whenever a slave ship arrived to be a kind presence, a Christ presence in the midst of horror, fear and evil. He bathed, anointed and bandaged the ill and injured. He instructed, baptized and followed up the lives of his sisters and brothers as they were moved from ship, to slave sheds, to plantations and mines. He formed organizations of others who helped care for the physical and spiritual needs of the slaves. He was hated by those in power and ostracized by some of his own brother “religious.” Nothing stopped him but his own sickness and death.

Vision

What made his so unique was that he considered every slave, healthy or near death, as very special and precious. He made a vow to spend his life as “a slave of the slaves.” He did this at a time and place where most people considered the slaves mere property and not quite

human. The barest minimum was provided to keep them alive and nothing was provided for their souls. In fact many people argued that they did not have souls.

Ministry

It is estimated that Claver baptized between 300,000 and 400,000 slaves. Those numbers, taken together with the stories of his functioning with little sleep and little food and with extensive corporal penances, might at first glance support an assessment that this was a man of indiscriminate and even fanatical zeal. The facts present a very different interpretation. Claver was very clear-sighted about the physical and emotional state of the slaves when the ship arrived in port. Those basic human needs had to be attended to first. If a person was dying, Claver would try to communicate the bare fundamentals of faith and try to elicit enough of a response to justify baptizing that person. However, if a person was healthy, baptism was only offered after a period of instruction. Claver also placed a high priority on continuing to support these new Christians after their baptism. He visited them in their new locations and encouraged them in their faith, a practice that did not always endear him to their owners. Even though Claver readily took initiative and operated with amazing courage and stamina, he did not function in isolation. He recruited interpreters and catechists who could communicate in the native languages. He also utilized pictures as a way of instructing people. Even though his primary focus was the slaves, he also ministered to other groups. However, he never allowed those groups to disassociate him from his African brothers and sisters.

Impact

In 1650 Cartagena was hit with a plague, and Claver fell victim to the disease. Even so, he lived for another four years still trying to do as much as his broken health allowed. During that time he was ill cared for by the member of his own religious community assigned to help him. He died on September 8, 1654. He was beatified by Pope Pius IX on July 16, 1850, and was canonized on January 15, 1885 by Pope Leo XIII. He was declared the patron of missions to Black people on July 7, 1896. There are a number of churches in African American communities that are named after him. The Knights and Ladies of St. Peter Claver are organizations that continue his spirit of dedication and compassionate service in the African American community



In the tradition of Peter Claver

Inspired by the life and example of St. Peter Claver, a community of Jesuits lives and works in close association with African Americans in South Cumminsville, Winton Hills, and other parts of the Cincinnati area. They describe their efforts as a neighbor-to-neighbor urban ministry. As neighbors and fellow parishioners, they learn from those in the community around them.

Peter Claver was immersed in the evils of the social system of the slave trade. The Jesuits in the community that bears his name face the contemporary issues of the drug trade, unemployment, poverty, at-risk youth, a struggling educational system, neglected seniors, inadequate housing. Like Claver, they make no pretence of being able to tackle these challenges by themselves. Instead they serve on councils, contribute through committee work, volunteer in local organizations, collaborate with local churches, participate in network organizations, and encourage local initiative, leadership, and empowerment.

Sharing Claver's awareness of the power of the arts, they contribute to the development of alternative images through painting, photography, music, gardening, and craft projects. They offer their own gifts, and they encourage others to discover, develop and share theirs.

They are grateful for the blessings they have received by being part of these local communities. They have been enriched by the relationships that have developed and they are motivated by the possibilities that lie within the people in the area. They operate from the belief that together we can make a difference.

They also believe that it is possible to forge mutually beneficial relationships with other communities. Through a dialogue of equal partners and a sharing of resources, it is possible to address issues and to devise strategies that can facilitate positive change not only locally but in large contexts as well.

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