

Saint inspired sense of self-worth among slaves

Africans who were enslaved meant something to St. Peter Claver, and he gathered many volunteers to assist him in acts of mercy. It was these volunteers who altered, in a positive way, Peter Claver's ministry when a ship was coming into port. The group also cared for the lepers and those with smallpox. On holy days Peter and crew often prepared a festive event for the slaves. Lemons, oranges, food and even brandy and tobacco were available.

Since the slaves were from various parts of Africa, language was a barrier. Since Peter spoke only Spanish, he got around this apparent obstacle because the group that assisted him spoke many dialects also. Through his helpers he was able to instruct and eventually convert the slaves. It is estimated that Peter Claver and his helpers converted approximately 300,000 African slaves. The saint inspired within the slaves a sense of self-worth amidst the hardships of slavery. Peter Claver followed the slaves to the plantation where they were encouraged to live as Christians. He also prevailed upon their masters to treat them as human beings.

St. Peter Claver begged donations in the towns for his ministry. Some responsible Carthaginians and devoted Catholics helped him with his works. The traders and those who profited from the slave trade did not care for the saint. Some Catholics thought his time and efforts could be better used elsewhere. Even some of his fellow Jesuits were influenced by the complaints brought against him. Peter Claver was accused of indiscreet zeal and profaning the sacraments by converting the slaves since the accusers claimed the Africans had no souls. Fashionable women refused to enter the church if Peter was worshipping with slaves. Nevertheless, St. Peter Claver continued to do his work, accepted the humiliations and became the "Miracle Worker" of New Granada.

Struck with a condition that almost paralyzed him, St. Peter Claver became an invalid for four years. He became helplessly dependent during this time. Racked with pain and unable to celebrate Mass, he suffered both mentally and physically - his apostolate was over. People began to forget about him and his works. Peter felt

useless and also that he was a burden to others. His fellow Jesuits having been reduced to extreme poverty were busy with their own individual responsibilities. Days passed without anyone visiting him. St. Peter Claver lapsed into a coma and died on the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady, Sept. 8, 1654. Upon his death the city magistrate who had previously frowned upon his work ordered that Peter Claver should be buried at public expense. The young man who was timid and lacked self confidence grew into an aggressive evangelizer of slaves in the New World.

On April 3, 1622, St. Peter Claver wrote, "Love to Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Alphonso, my saints, my teacher and my dear Negroes and patrons." And with those words, he vowed to become "The slave of slaves."

St. Peter Claver and his friend, Brother Alphonsus Rodriguez, were both canonized on the same day, Jan. 15, 1888. St. Peter Claver's feast day is Sept. 9.

The cloister or house where St. Peter Claver lived is now a museum and a shrine, a special place of silence and prayer. Next to the shrine is a beautiful baroque church, designed by Dutch and German architects. Here in the high altar are the remains of the preserved body of St. Peter Claver.

In 1860, when the Jesuits took over the congregation of black Catholics in Baltimore, they used the basement of St. Ignatius as their church and named the facility, Blessed Peter Claver Chapel.

Our own St. Peter Claver Church on Fremont Street, dedicated Sept. 9, 1888, was one of the first churches to be dedicated to the saint.

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