

# St. Peter Claver, patron of African-Americans

In 1888, Pope XIII declared Peter Claver a saint. Under St. Peter Claver's patronage came the African Missions, African-Americans, slavery and interracial justice. The saint is also the patron of the Diocese of Lake Charles and the Diocese of Shreveport, both in Louisiana. Pope Leo wrote of this saint, known as "the slave to the slaves," that "No life, except the life of Christ, has moved me so deeply as that of St. Peter Claver.'

The son of a farmer, St. Peter Claver was born in Verde, Spain. At the early age of 13, Peter Claver lost his mother. Shortly afterward, his brother James died. At the age of 20, Peter Claver entered the Jesuit community in Tarragona, Spain. Highly gifted and intellectually acute, he was sent to the College of Montision on the Isle of Majorca, which belonged to Spain. While studying philosophy, he became a good friend of the door keeper, Brother Alphonsus Rodriguez. It was Brother Alphonsus who encouraged Peter Claver to become a missionary to the new world. Peter Claver received his first degree from the University of Barcelona.

Before his ordination in 1610, Peter Claver arrived in South America, where he did his theological studies. Even then, the Jesuits had seminaries in the new world. Peter Claver was ordained in 1615. He was missioned in Cartagena, which is now Colombia, in South America. It was here that the future saint would spend the next 44 years of his life. Slavery had been in the New World for 100 years and Cartagena was one of the chief centers of the slave trade. Some 10,000 Africans were imported each year with nearly one-third dying en route. When convenient, the dead were simply thrown overboard. Slavery was condemned by Pope Paul III, but it continued, nevertheless.

Spanish settlers arriving in the New World discovered gold and silver mines in South America. There was a need to cultivate the land and work the mines on the territory, which they had conquered. European diseases eliminated many of the natives so the Spaniards replaced them with forced labor from Africa. From the coast of West Africa, the Spaniards bought from the chiefs their slaves and other conquered tribes,

for which they paid next to nothing. The slaves were sold in the New World for 200 times that amount. The coasts of The Congo, Angola and Guinea were major markets for the slave trade. Enslavement was a position held in the Quran for those who did not accept the teaching of Muhammad. The Christian Spaniards knew better, but there were huge profits to be made in the slave trade, so they, too, joined this new endeavor.

When Peter Claver arrived at the Jesuit house at Cartagena, he was influenced by another Jesuit, Alfonso de Sandoval, who for 40 years had devoted himself to the service of slaves. Peter Claver was to continue that service. Sandoval, like Claver, was a learned man, a missionary and writer. He actually wrote a book on evangelizing the slaves. That book became the black Bible for Peter Claver. Sandoval gave Peter Claver an internship in caring for and evangelizing the slave. He took the younger Jesuit to meet the incoming ship and showed him how to care for the merchandise, as the slaves were called. The human cargo were put in stock yards, similar to the slave pens that were here in Baltimore on Pratt Street. Depending on the health of the slave, they went to the auction block. Sandoval took Peter to the plantations, slave huts and to visit the sick and dying.

Peter Claver met each ship in Cartagena with food, medicine, clothing for the living and cloths to cover those who had died. He would attend to the weakest first and then take those who needed medical assistance to a hospital he built for the slaves. Upon entering the ship, Peter Claver carried a leather bag with holy water, holy oil, a cross and an ecclesiastical handbook. He spent anywhere from five to eight hours on board. By caring for the physical need of the slaves, Peter said, "We must first speak with our hands; before we try to speak with our lips".

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