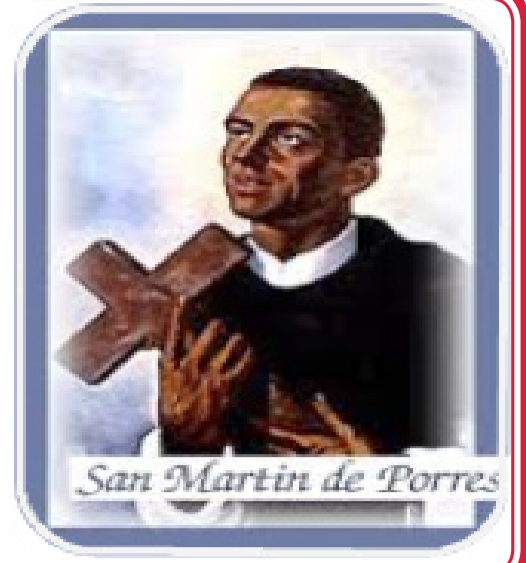


ST MARTIN DE PORRES

MAGAZINE



St Martin - Living for Justice

By Martin Badenhorst OP

Martin de Porres Velázquez had very little chance of ever being a professed Dominican. The church authorities of his time, in the Spanish colonies of South America were prejudiced against former slaves, black persons and those born of the union of Spanish and former black slaves. They supported their prejudice by an unfortunate reading of scripture (as sadly happens so often in history), in particular Deuteronomy 22:3-4, where foreigners and those born of a foreign mix are excluded from the community for ten generations. This was read as forbidding the entry of converts and their children into religious life and the priesthood.

An unjust reading of a scriptural law that did not apply to South America in the 16th and 17th centuries, the time of Martin de Porres. At the same time it became a law imposed by the church authorities and Dominican leadership of the time on the colonies.

In his desire to serve God and neighbour, Martin would have to face this injustice. He did so with great humility and tenacity. Eventually overturning the law through his sheer holiness, which could not be argued away.

Here Martin follows in a great line of saints and friends of God. Those who responded to injustice and persecution with a profound sense of divine justice. This response also takes a healthy sense of humour to see how an injustice can be undermined in the apparent keeping of the unjust law.

Here we can look at that inspired woman, Moses' mother right in the early reaches of the Scriptures. Pharaoh commands that all the



male children be thrown in the Nile (Ex 1:22). When his mother can no longer hide him, she puts Moses in the water (Ex 2:3) as required, protected by a waterproof basket - not forbidden thus possible. She undermines and overturns the unjust law by obeying it, to the letter, in a creative and life-giving way.

Every unjust law is open to this sort of subversion.

Martin realises this and so, in all humility and with humour, refuses any compromised membership of the Order until the law is changed. With that change, brought about by the pressure the Lima convent of Dominicans placed on the authorities, Martin could be a member of the convent in good standing. This opened the way to a greater good, the accepting of indigenous peoples to minister to God's people without hindrance.

The work of God always reaches beyond the boundaries we impose on God. In every age the church has to learn this truth anew. In every age the faithful also face injustice. How do we respond to it?

We may respond through activism which faces injustice with force. The life of Martin de Porres asks of us to embrace the way of God. All laws should be made for the greater good of all members of society. The laws should also make a special effort to embrace the poor, the widowed, the orphaned and the stranger. Where the laws cause injustice then we must subvert them toward the greater good.

But laws are not just the things of states and governments. In our relations with each other we also make lesser rules, in family life, in relationships, at work and at school. Do we shape the rules we make for others and ourselves according to the needs of justice and of doing the greatest good for the greatest number?

When we run into difficulties, let us turn to the great examples like Moses' mother and St Martin de Porres, asking their intercession so that we may do good by the rules we make. When faced with injustice let us also ask Martin's intercession for the inspiration to subvert injustice with grace.

Prayer to St Martin de Porres

Most humble St Martin de Porres, your burning charity embraced not only the poor and needy but even the animals of the field. For your splendid example of charity, we honour you and invoke your help. From your place in heaven, hear the requests of your needy brethren, so that, by imitating your virtues we may live contentedly in that state in which God has placed us. And carrying our cross with strength and courage, may we follow in the footsteps of our blessed Redeemer and his most sorrowful mother, so that at last we may reach the kingdom of heaven through the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.



MARTIN - SPIRITUAL FATHER

"Brother Martin was a man of great charity, who.. healed his brother religious when they were sick but also assisted in the duty of spreading the Great Love of the world. For this they knew him as their father and consolation, calling him 'father of the poor.' Moreover, he cared for lay people outside [these walls] from every state of life, healing them of their pains, wounds and inflammations... and thus an infinite number sought him out, and all found in him some help: the sick, relief; the afflicted, consolation; and the rest; refuge. He did this willingly, his semblance happy and peaceful." Friar Antonio Gutiérrez OP.

NURTURING OTHERS ON THE WAY

In the early centuries of the Church, many men and women went out into the desert to live ascetical lives of penance and prayer, the most famous of them being Anthony of Egypt.

These "desert fathers and mothers" sought simplicity and solitude in order to live the gospel in a radical way, as a sign of the coming of the kingdom of God. It was common for Christians longing to live a deeper life of prayer and discipleship to seek out these desert fathers and mothers for counsel and guidance on the spiritual path.

Martin, though he would never have said it himself, was a "spiritual father" in this ancient desert tradition. His love and wisdom nurtured and guided others along the path of life.

Martin always called the blacks and Indians "hijos" ("my children"), and because of this filial love, he often found himself in situations in which he had to protect and defend the poor, as fathers and mothers do with their children.

One day someone stole the mattress and blanket of a black man who was one of Martin's helpers in the infirmary. Upon hearing of it, Martin immediately said, "You Stay here," and then he went directly to the cell of one of the friars, where he found the stolen articles. Scolding the

friar for not keeping a better eye on the priory servant who had stolen the things, Martin said: "Father, if your servant does not have a bed, then buy him one. He shouldn't be going and stealing one from someone else."

Martin picked the mattress up and carried it back to his helper.

Martin's friend, Juan Vásquez, tells another story of two delinquents taking refuge in the priory, trying to escape from possible arrest by the Royal Court. The officials eventually suspected that the two men might be hiding in the basement beneath the infirmary kitchen of the priory, and so, says Juan, "At two-thirty in the afternoon Don Cristóbal de la Cerda arrived in search of the two delinquents.. who fled up through the infirmary kitchen to Brother Martin's cell. 'Father, for the love of God, help us,' they cried. 'The Justice is after us; they are already here.'

"Martin responded, 'Come in here; get on your knees and pray to God.' They knelt down just as the Court Official entered the cell. Martin also knelt down in front of the delinquents. The official looked around, and seeing nothing but some mattresses on the floor, turned and left."

God had miraculously granted them mercy (and invisibility!).

Busto notes, in his comments on this incident, that Martin acted in defense of the right to reli-



FOCUS: PARENT TO THE POOR

Even though Martin was not a priest, and therefore was addressed as "Fray Martin" ("Brother Martin"), there were many people who insisted on calling Martin "father." Once, while visiting some farms near Limatambo, some Indians approached and asked Martin if he would celebrate a Mass in memory of their deceased parents and grandparents. Martin immediately said "Hijos, yo no soy de misa" ("My children, I do not celebrate the Mass."), to which the Indians responded, "No problem, Padre, we know that you will have the Masses celebrated." The truth is, of course, that Martin was very much a father. He poured out his life in love as a gift to others. He who was the "son of an unknown father" became the spiritual father of many.

gious asylum. The Court official, he notes, far from exercising his authority, was actually abusing it, by entering illegally into a sacred space. Though there is no record of the words Martin said to the men whose lives God saved that day, we can be sure that he let them know that next time they were on their own! However, after such a powerful experience of God's mercy, and thanks to the help of "Padre Martin," there probably was no "next time."

Another incident shows the depth of respect that some of Lima's upper class had for Martin. Doctor Baltazar Carranza de Orozco, a Spaniard, was a lawyer for the Royal Court. His reverence and love for Martin were so great that he begged him for several years to accept him as a spiritual son, and to permit him to call Martin "Padre."

Martin resisted for a long time, saying in his typical fashion, "Why would you want a mulatto for a father?"

So insistent was the doctor that Martin finally gave in to his quest. A few days later he found Doctor Carranza in the sacristy, walked up to him, embraced him, and called him "son".

Then, with a bit of humour, Martin added, "That

means that your children are now my grandchildren." Doctor Carranza testified that from 1628 onward, "our friendship continued to grow".

Martin's closest lay friend seems to have been his helper and travelling companion, Juan Vásquez de Parra. Juan, who was born in Spain, came to America in 1635 with his father, an official of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Soon after arriving in Lima, Juan's father died, leaving Juan, only about fourteen at the time, to survive on his own. Not long after that, Martin found him wandering around the priory cemetery one day, "poor and tattered."

Martin immediately took Juan up to his cell and gave him a clean shirt to put on. He then explained to the young lad that he was welcome to take his meals at the priory and that he could sleep in the linen room that was adjacent to Martin's cell. Martin also encouraged him to spend a few days looking around the priory to see if there might be a trade he would like to learn. Juan, whom Martin affectionately nicknamed "Juancho", soon let it be known that he wanted to be a barber/surgeon — like Martin — and thus began the friendship that deeply graced the final three or four years of Martin's life.

Juan always referred to Martin as "Padre", and indeed Martin cared for him like a son. When one looks back at the gift of this friendship in the context of Martin's life, one cannot help but see the wondrous hand of God at work. The spiritual father-son

The Life of St Martin - 12

relationship that Martin shared with his friend Juan was the coming to full circle of Martin's journey with his own father, who, we can assume, had died by this time, still estranged from his son.

Juancho was, in a mysterious way, a blending of both Martin and his father. Like Martin, Juancho was a "son without a father" but he was also Spanish — fashioned from the same clay as Martin's father. In Juancho, Martin and his father, who was, incidentally, also named Juan, finally met face to face: a duel between two warriors. This no ordinary duel, though; it was a spiritual battle of two hearts finally becoming one in the heart of Christ. "He is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Eph 2:14).

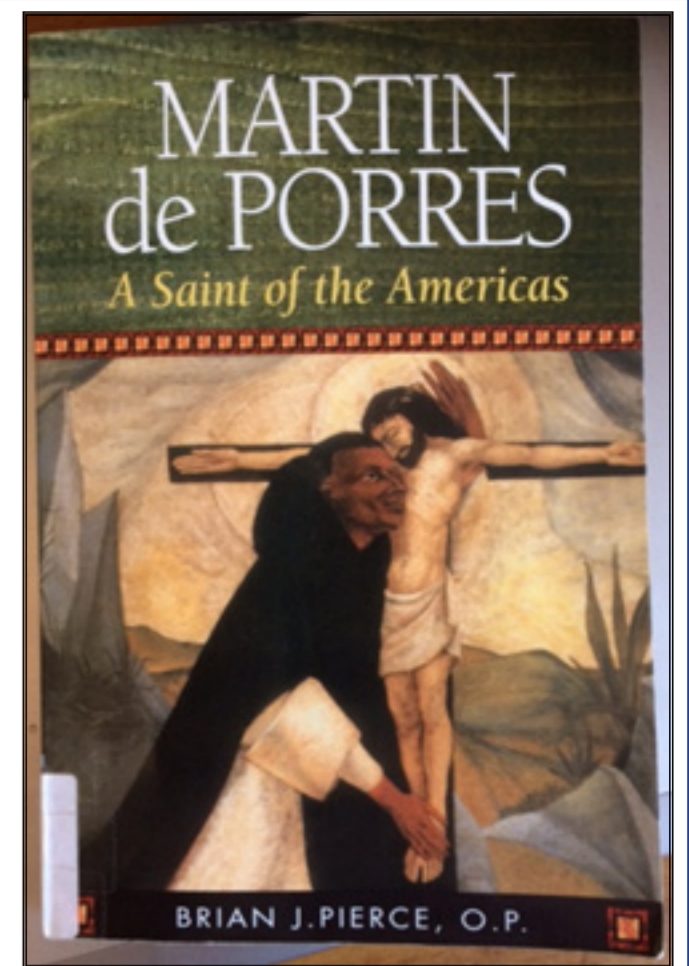
This time, though, the gospel story reversed the characters, with the prodigal father coming home to the son, and being received with the kiss of peace that heals all wars. Juancho was the missing piece of a puzzle that Martin's heart had longed to find — the end of a journey that had always seemed unfinished. By loving Juancho as his son, Martin found

the catalyst for a healing on many levels. He was able to become the father he never had, a father who reached out in compassion to an orphaned son and, in so doing, Martin loved the son whom his father had failed. At the same time, by Martin's reaching out in unconditional love to Juancho, a Spaniard, he was, in a spiritual sense, reaching out to heal his own father's wounded heart. In this mystery, which is none other than the paschal mystery, God redeemed Juan de Porras through the courageous, all-embracing love of his son.

Perhaps this was Martin's greatest miracle — a free gift from God, given to him during the last four years of his life.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Do I share my spiritual life with a wisdom figure, a spiritual mother or father? Have I been a guide for someone else on the journey of life? What were some of Martin's gifts that made him such a wise spiritual father? List them. Do I have any of these same qualities? Why was the friendship with Juancho such a source of joy for Martin? How did this spiritual friendship with



Juancho bring the relationship between Martin and his father to a place of healing and peace? Pray for the reconciliation between families and nations.

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Mary the Model of Unconditional Love

By Aphiwokuhle Xulu OP

Throughout the history of the Church and in the Gospels, we are told of Mary, the Blessed Virgin, Mother of God and our mother. Many places of worship dedicated to her have been built round the world and in these places there are miracles that happen every day attributed to her intercession. Because indeed who else would the Lord listen to more favourably than to the young girl who said "yes" to His will?

A story is told of one miracle that happened to a physician who brought his eight-year-old handicapped daughter to Lourdes, where Our Lady appeared to St Bernadette in France. Before his daughter was born, this physician was one of those parents who had everything lined up for his daughter, from the school she would attend, the sport she would play, and so on, but, unfortunately, she was born with a severe mental handicap. She would be unable to do anything that he had planned for her. Because of this, he became despondent and had a feeling of abandonment; in fact he himself could not become the best father he could be to his daughter, leaving the very challenging work of raising a handicapped child to his wife.

They undertook the trip to France to seek healing for his daughter's mental handicap. At Lourdes people are brought to the baths and he brought his daughter to the bath when her turn came. She was lowered into the water but nothing happened. His daugh-

ter looked the same. Despondent again, the physician returned to the grotto at night where he says he heard a voice which sounded like that of a woman. He believes that it was the voice of Our Lady - it was the most beautiful voice he had ever heard. The voice said to him, 'I want you to love your daughter the way I do, just the way she is.' After hearing the voice, the physician felt at peace and healed.

He had been consoled by Our Lady and returned home a completely changed man.

This story affirms the weight of the words we hear from Holy Scripture, "Behold your Mother".

This story provides a clear definition of the role of Mary as our mother. It is through her intercession that many Christians can say that when they come to her, they experience a sense of belonging, consolation, comfort, peace and joy. If we are going to call Mary Our Lady, we then have a special calling to become who and what she is to us - the mirror of justice, merciful and immaculate to the last letter.

As the Church prepares for the celebration of the Feast of St Dominic de Guzman, founder of the Order of Preachers, is it not fitting to listen to what he has to say about Our Lady so that we may draw inspiration? He says, "One day, through the Rosary, the Scapular, Our Lady will save the world." With so much happening in our lives, we need to understand the mission of the Father, the co-operation expected from us. Our Lady is the greatest model of this co-operation. One can only imagine how things would have turned out if Our Lady was not full of love and compassion towards the Apostles. The charity she showed to the Apostles is the charity we should imitate in undertaking our social responsibility in eradicating poverty, discomfort and alike to our brothers and sister.

May Mother Mary be the source of all charity and justice in our lives.



Pilgrims await their turn at the baths at Lourdes

St Martin - Patron Saint of Social Justice

During this month of August, we celebrate the feast of St Dominic.

In June 1994, I had an opportunity to visit Italy as I was heading back to South Africa after having completed a year's formation course in Ireland. One of the cities I was very keen to visit was Florence and, especially the convent of San Marco. This was the community established as part of the new Dominican revival started under Raymond of Capua, when he was Master of the Order. Savonarola lived there, as did Saint Antoninus and for me, most important of all, Blessed John of Fiesole, otherwise known as Fra Angelico. I was very keen to see his paintings which adorn the house (which is now a museum) and each room has a fresco (painting on the wall) painted by Fra Angelico. It is a visit that is rich for its wonderful art and contemplation.

My favourite one is not in any of the friars' cells but rather in the cloister or the courtyard as you enter the priory grounds even before you enter the house. On the wall near the entrance, if memory serves me well, is the painting of St Dominic praying at the foot of the cross. Fra Angelico was reminding the Dominican brothers that central to the Dominican vocation and spirituality is the Cross of Christ.

It was from prayer and contemplation of the wounded Christ on the cross that Dominic could recognise the face of Christ in the misery of the people of his time. Even while a student in Palencia, Dominic's mercy and compassion compelled him during a time of famine in the city to sell his books and give the money to feed the hungry.

'How can I study on dead skins while living skins are dying of hunger?' On two separate occasions, we are told that, Dominic was willing to sell himself off as a slave to ransom those people captured by the Moors.

When we reflect on Dominic's life, we can see it was a generous outpouring of love and compassion for the lost, sick, the poor and sinners. Often, he would spend whole nights praying, weeping and imploring: 'Lord, what will become of sinners?'

By Mark James OP

Martin de Porres (1579-1639) proved himself to be a true son of St Dominic by also pouring out his life, in mercy and compassion for the poor and suffering people of Lima, Peru. Unlike Dominic, Martin knew what it meant to grow up poor. Peru was a newly established colony that had been violently subjugated by Spain only forty-three years previously. He grew up knowing rejection by his Spanish father and being subjected to racial slurs.



Even while young, there are accounts of Martin's compassion for the sufferings of others. Sometimes when he was sent out by his mother to buy food for the family he came back empty-handed because he had given away the bread or food he had bought to those begging in the streets.

When he became a Dominican, he was known in the priory for his concern for the brothers, especially those who were sick. He would do the work no one else was willing to do like sweep the cloister and other menial chores. But it was for the poor of Lima that Martin never spared himself even if it meant disobey-

ing his superiors. On one occasion, Martin nursed a very sick and elderly beggar who was covered in open sores in his own room and bed in the priory. When taken to task for this Martin is said to have replied: 'Compassion, my dear brother, is preferable to cleanliness.'

On another occasion the superior forbade him under obedience to nurse those with bubonic plague for fear that he would spread the contagion among the brothers in the priory. Martin responded: 'Forgive my error and please instruct me, for I did not know that obedience took precedence over charity!'

Like Dominic, Martin too was strengthened in his service of the poor through his contemplation of the cross of Christ. It was in contemplating the wounded Christ on the cross that Martin could see the face of Christ in the wounded and suffering people of Lima. It is probably no coincidence that when Martin was beatified by Pope Gregory XVI in 1837, it was shortly after Britain abolished slavery. Fr Bruce Schultz OP suggests that perhaps it was to encourage other nations in Europe and the United States to do likewise.

Similarly, when Martin was canonised saint by Pope John XXIII in 1962 it was at a time when many African countries were fighting for independence from their European colonial masters and the Civil Rights Movement in United States inspired by Martin Luther King was in full swing. It is no wonder that Martin was proclaimed the patron saint for social justice. At the heart of the commitment for social justice is the desire for a more loving and compassionate world where the poor, the marginalised, the disenfranchised, the abandoned, women and children, the disabled, the Deaf, the polluted planet, and all creatures of the planet find their rightful place.

For us today, we too need to reflect on the mystery of the cross that our hearts too may be transformed that like Dominic and Martin, we may not be concerned about our own comfort but seek to respond to the face of suffering and poor in our world. Let us pray for this heart of mercy and compassion.

St Martin Centre
46 Derby Avenue
PO BOX 303

Springs 1560 South Africa
Director: Fr Emil Blaser OP

www.stmartincentre.org.za
stmartincentre@gmail.com

Tel: 011 362 4482

Fax: 011 362 4369

Acc Name: St Martin Centre

Bank: Standard Bank

Branch: Springs

Branch code: 012142

Acc. No: 020858647

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