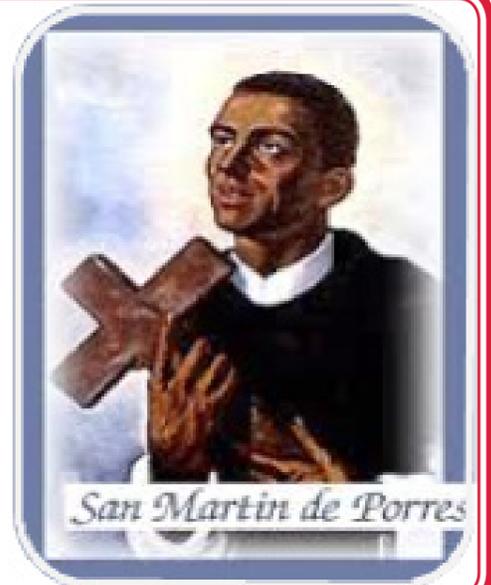


# ST MARTIN DE PORRES

## MAGAZINE



# Preaching through little things!

The Dominican Order has produced some great intellectuals, such as St Thomas Aquinas.

It has also produced great saints who preached through little things – St Martin de Porres stands out as a unique example. St Martin’s humility and willingness to take the last seat, an attitude that remained deeply rooted in him throughout his life cannot be underrated. He was first accepted to live in the Dominican Convent of the Rosary in Lima as a servant boy at the age of 15. When he eventually made his vows as a lay Dominican with the privilege of wearing the habit,

he became the almoner and infirmarian of the monastery and continued with menial tasks.

In addition, St Martin also continued with the kitchen work, cleaning and doing



By Br Isaac Mutelo OP

laundry for the brothers, barbering and using his skills as a healer and surgeon. In all his duties, his compassion shone through, for example in his patient care for the sick, tolerance towards his brothers even though some of them treated him badly. When his convent was in debt, St Martin de Porres is reported to have said “I am only a poor mulatto, sell me”.

Such an example challenges one to preach through little things in the contemporary world. Today, it is challenging to develop an attitude of humility and self-sacrifice especially when so much social emphasis is placed on individualism, getting ahead of others, having the best and being in authority. Such notions hinder one from detaching oneself from pride, selfishness and dissatisfaction. It hinders one from responding positively to the call of selflessness in places of work, homes and society.

itively to the call of selflessness in places of work, homes and society.

Martin’s life shows his profound love and self-sacrifice in his relationship with God through the humility and service he offered to the brothers in his monastery and beyond. The same can be said of the life and example of St Francis of Assisi and Mother Theresa, the latter a saint of our own times.

In a world where many people are homeless, hungry, dehumanised and abused, it is vital to reflect on how one can reach out to such people even in little ways. Sharing hope with people who are hopeless, being available to speak to people who lack company and being the source of joy to the sorrowful are part of preaching and witnessing to the Gospel. The life and example of St Martin de Porres shows that preaching through little things is equally central to Christian life and living and it is part of the mission of the Church. u

## What is Pentecost?

Many people know who Jesus is, just as they know their political leaders.

But ask somebody: What is Pentecost? What is the Assumption? What is the Ascension? Many will not know what to answer. Many people don’t even know the difference between a priest and a deacon! So we are dealing here with churchy language!

As Christians, we believe that some time after Easter, when Jesus rose from the tomb, he ascended into heaven. We use our earthly language to try and describe this event which we call the Ascension. Jesus told his disciples that he was going back to his Father, and having grown very fond of Jesus, the disciples were sad. But Jesus said he would not leave them orphans and would send them, from the Father, what he called “the Advocate” and whom we call the Holy Spirit. The Advocate would replace the presence of Jesus and bring them peace and inspire them.

And so after he ascended to his Father, he sent the promised Spirit. This is what we celebrate and remember at Pentecost. But when

we do this today we depict that original happening with colors and imageries. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that the disciples were together in the upper room for fear of the Jews. They hardly realised what was about to happen. In the midst of that fear, something incredible happened. This is described in an earthly language as tongues of fire descending upon the apostles, and that they being filled with the Spirit, went out with enthusiasm to proclaim the Good News in languages that everybody could understand. What an incredible event!

Notice that the apostles did not prepare for this moment with flowers and decorations! In the midst of their fear they were filled with the conviction that Jesus was alive and with them. When they went out from this upper room people thought they were drunk!

In plain language, this is what happened at that first event which we call Pentecost. And it is this that we remember and celebrate at this time.

But we don’t only remember. The reality of that day continues to happen to this very day when you and I are enthused with a conviction that Jesus is alive and lives in us. The result of



this is that we are impelled to live like Jesus according to His values and standards. When we recognise the dignity of others and live with love and compassion, we honour Jesus and make his spirit present in our lives.

In this way Pentecost is not just something we remember and celebrate but something we live throughout our lives out of the conviction that the spirit of Jesus is alive and active in our lives. This is Pentecost. This is the penetration of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And it is this spirit that will transform our lives and the world in which we live.

# God Calls Forth a Prophet

Besides his duties as assistant infirmarian, another of Martin's conventual chores was to ring the church bells.

He was famous throughout the city of Lima as the *campanero* (bell ringer) of the Dominican priory. In fact, whenever the neighbours, for one reason or another, failed to hear the early morning bells ring, they immediately concluded that Brother Martin had fallen ill.

What is interesting is that, in the testimonies collected for Martin's beatification, many of his contemporaries shared stories about Martin's devotion to ringing the *campana del alba*, the early morning bell, rung at about 4:30am - just before the first rays of the sun pierced the dark sky. Why such a devotion to ringing bells? What word was God speaking to Martin's contemplative heart during those early morning hours?

## A MESTIZO CAT

*A master carpenter from Spain, Francisco Perez Quintero, told this story about Martin's duties as the priory "campanero": "Every night a large white, black, and brown cat would come through a vent that opened into Martin's cell.... When he had reached him, the cat would begin to pull on his habit with its paws as if he were giving him signs that it was time for some duty .... Brother Martin de Porres would leave the cell to ring the dawn bell ("campana del alba") to which he was devoted .... The cat following in his tracks."*

This story is a cat lover's delight! Thanks to the groundbreaking work on the "little stories" of Martin de Porres by theologian Alex Garcia-Rivera, we know that this story is much more than just a cute anecdote about a cat.

Says Garcia-Rivera:

Given the violent encounter of Iberian, sub-Saharan African, and Amerindian cultures, the



## FOCUS: THE BELL RINGER OF LIMA

appearance of the white, black, and brown cat is striking .... This mestizo cat, after all, wakes up the other mestizo, the mulatto Martin, and "reminds" him of his duty.... By ringing the dawn bell, St. Martin.... is responsible for waking up the Church from her sleep to begin a new day. This white, black, and brown cat signifies something to do with the bell, usually a harbinger of important news or, more significantly, the transmitter of an important message.

It is through the telling of this seemingly innocent story about Martin's feline friend that we glimpse the profound meaning of Martin's devotion to ringing the dawn bells each day. Martin, who carried deep within his heart a vision of the reign of God, knew that the Church had not yet awakened to its proper role as the leaven of a new society. He saw the contradictions, the



racist laws, the unjust conquest of America by "Catholic" Spain, and he was painfully aware of the Church's deafening silence on these matters. The Church was asleep while bandits ransacked an entire continent.

So Martin and his mestizo cat teamed up as co-conspirators in an attempt to wake up the Dominican Order and the Church to a deeper understanding of God's justice. Martin, like the prophet Isaiah, heard a voice deep within his heart, asking, "Whom shall I send?" (Isa 6:8). Who will speak God's word of justice, equality, and love in the midst of this violence? Who will have the courage to proclaim the words of the ancient prophets in a new language for our day? "Here am I, Lord," prayed Martin, "send me" (Isa 6:8).

Less than 100 years before Martin began ringing the bells of the priory in Lima, another com-

munity of Dominican friars, on the island of Hispaniola (Dominican Republic) in the Caribbean, was sounding its own wake-up call. Not long after arriving on the island, the friars began to see the contradictions and the lies behind the European conquest of the Americas.

## A Cry for Justice

One of their own, Antonio de Montesinos, was called forth to sound the cry for justice:

*I am the voice of Christ crying out in the desert of this island .... the most shocking and dangerous voice you have ever heard .... With what right and by which justice do you hold these Indians in such terrible servitude? By what authority do you carry out such detestable wars against the people of these lands - people so meek and peaceful? Are these not human beings? .... Are you not obliged to love them as yourselves?*

Martin, taking his place in a long line of prophets, knew that somebody had to ring the bells to wake this generation up from its lethargic sleep. Someone had to show that it is possible to live harmoniously and peacefully in a world that is white, black, and brown all at the same time. So each morning, Martin and his clandestine calico cat did their part to usher in the dawn of a new day. The bells were rung as the friars sang the morning office of lauds, just about the time in which Zachariah's Canticle (Luke 1:78-79) announced the dawning of a new day:

*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace*

It was Martin's duty to help the "dawn from on high" break into the darkness of imperialism and its sinister shadow of death. Martin knew that God, who hears the cry of the poor, would faithfully guide the Church "into the way of peace".

# The Life of St Martin - 5

Is it a simple coincidence of history or might it be God's mysterious plan that three and a half centuries after Martin de Porres started ringing the bells of the Dominican priory in Lima, God raised up another prophet named Martin who shared the vision of a society in which white, black, and brown people might live together? Once the tricolored calico cat not a divine sign from God, one that continues to manifest itself today in new ways?

On August 28, 1963, the other Martin, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke the following words in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

*We have come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now ... Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice ... I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed .... I have a dream that my four children will one day live*

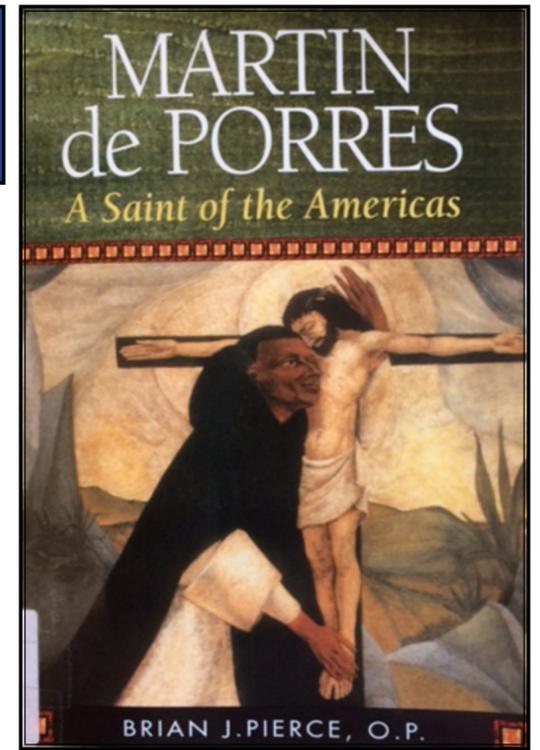


*in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.... I have a dream ... that one day .... little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and girls as sisters and brothers ....*

*And when we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city.... we will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"*

It is quite likely that Martin de Porres and his multicolored cat were present in the vast crowd gathered in Washington, D.C., that day, smiling upon the other Martin, as the bells of freedom rang out loud and clear. After all, just the previous year Martin de Porres had been declared a saint of the Church.

Some have speculated that it was the unaddressed racism within the Church that post-



poned Martin's canonisation for almost 300 years.

There is probably some truth to the speculation. At the same time, though, it just may be that God has the final word in the unfolding of history.

Is it not of tremendous value that Pope John XXIII had the prophetic courage to declare Martin a saint right in the midst of both the Second Vatican Council and the civil rights movement in the United States?

And is there not good reason to suspect that Martin de Porres was intimately involved in these historical events? One cannot help but hear in the voices of both Martins the ancient cry of the prophets, announcing the dawning of a new day of justice.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*What bells need to be rung today to wake up our Church as both Martins did in their day? Go back and read the Canticle of Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79), praying over this ancient hymn which is sung throughout the world as the sun rises each day. Write in a journal or notebook your prayerful reflections. If Martin's cat were to appear today where I live, what colors would it be? What languages would it speak? Spend some time praying for tolerance and an end to racial, political and religious injustice in the world.*

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# Dominicans - 100 Years of Ministry in South Africa

St Martin de Porres, patron of the St Martin Centre, is well-known and has a following throughout the world.

It is also well known that he belonged to a religious Order founded by St Dominic in 1216, and last year the 800th Jubilee of the founding of the Order of Preachers, also known as The Dominicans, was celebrated.

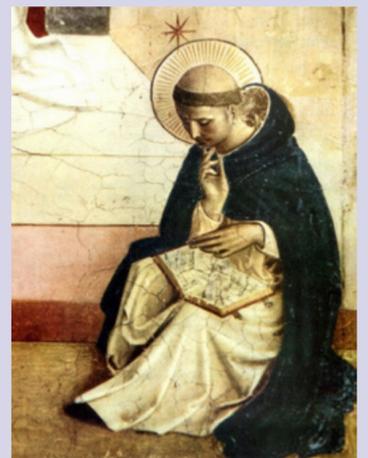
When St Dominic founded the order the Church was in great need of renewal. Only bishops were allowed to preach and very often their preaching left much to be desired.

St Dominic was very concerned about renewal and, supported by the prayers of a community of sisters that he formed, he attracted

many young men and priests to live together in community, to study the Scriptures and theology and to go out and proclaim the gospel. He obtained permission from the Pope to do what only bishops had been allowed to do - to preach. He wanted his followers to do what the Apostles were sent to do and so he wasted no time in sending them out in pairs to many countries to proclaim truth and to confront the heresies of the time.

Dominicans came to South Africa in 1917 and on August 5th this year will be celebrating the centenary of their presence in this country. St Dominic's feast day is celebrated on August 8th.

See [www.zaop.org](http://www.zaop.org) for more information.



# Touching the Vulnerable!

In the last newsletter I wrote about Fr Mark James' ministry to the deaf.

Unfortunately there are very few priests ministering to the deaf in our country. Father Mark saw this gap in the ministries of the church and felt called to respond. He was given the opportunity to study the ministry to the deaf and learnt the sign language. Today he ministers to the deaf in several parts of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland while at the same time being the parish priest of Kwa Thema, in Springs

I made an appeal for funds to help him fulfill this ministry. Unfortunately there has not yet been a response.

The deaf community is but one group in society that desperately needs the care of the church. However, there are others who also need this care. Like deaf people, there are many who are handicapped in some way but fulfill a very essential role in the church

and society. All too often, these people are not noticed. You might well find a teller at the bank or supermarket with an indication that he or she is deaf. These are people like you and me, it is just that they are blind or deaf. At moments like these we can be shocked into reality by recognising such people.

St Martin was very much aware of the poor and marginalised in his day. While he was a man of deep prayer he was very sensitive to the suffering of those around



Fr Mark James OP

him whether they were his brothers in the Order, clergy or people on the street. With very little he



Deaf people pray during the Mass

ministered to them as best he could. To this day, the poor and marginalised in Lima continue to queue up outside the priory for food or assistance of some kind.

In our own country we have millions of poor and marginalized people. There are many who are vulnerable for whatever reason. Through the ministry of the St. Martin Centre we would like to reach out and support ministry to the vulnerable of whatever kind. There are deaf people, orphans, abused women, street people, unemployed, migrants and refugees etc.

St. Martin would be very proud of us if we did what we could to respond to this desperate appeal which would bring so much happiness and hope to the vulnerable in our society. Maybe you don't have the time or opportunity to serve these people but there are others amongst the clergy and laity who reach out to these people with little support of financial assistance.

We believe you can make a difference through your generosity. Please respond now.

**Fr Emil Blaser OP**

**M**y name is Mavis Ngwenya and I work at St Martin de Porres centre in Springs.

I joined the team in 2003, working along with Caroline Mthembu (who had been with the centre for a great many years) and the late Fr Dominic Baldwin OP, the director at the time.

When I got this job I was so thrilled - it had happened just at the right time when I was desperately in need of work. Caroline phoned me with the news as I was walking home from a women's prayer meeting. It was indeed a blessing to me my prayers had been answered.

I was not sure of the kind of work I would be required to do but I was prepared to do anything. Caroline and Fr Dominic Baldwin explained to me about the centre and also explained to me what was expected of me. It was a challenge for me. The questions I asked myself were: will I be able to do this or do I have to go back to school?

## Mavis' Story

The answer was no, be positive and take the job, and I took it willingly, trusting that God would guide me because I think He is the one that called me to this place. They say a positive attitude is the foundation upon which we must develop ourselves be ready and look for the best qualities in those with whom you work with.

Working at the centre also challenged my faith and my relationship with God because of the work that we have to do. It is not just becoming an office assistant, it goes beyond that. We have a shrine at the Centre where we always say our prayers in the morning and before the end of our day - that includes an ongoing novena to St Martin de Porres for our intentions, and the intentions of all St Martin's friends who write or phone in, asking for prayers in accordance with their needs. We

do that with confidence and hope, trusting that God will hear our prayers through the intercession of St Martin de Porres. Mass intentions are said by the Priest in charge as well as any special Mass that is required. We also have to respond to letters that are written to us to comfort the writer, give them hope and to assure them that St Martin will absolutely intercede for them to our heavenly Father.

We have a Newsletter produced from the Centre with articles provided by the Priest In-Charge or anyone with good news. There was a time that we were challenged by this because Caroline and I had to come up with something (Articles) to produce a Newsletter. That was the most challenging time but we took a chance and did something that we have never done before and I think it was a good initiative.

Thanks to Fr Emil Blaser, our



new director, who is now putting together the articles for the newsletter. And we hope you find them very interesting.

We would like to hear your commentaries regarding the Newsletter. Feel free to write or you can phone anytime just to help us see where we need to improve.

I would once more like to take this opportunity to thank all our donors for their ongoing support to the Centre, without your help we would not be able to continue with the work that we do.

**Thank you again, you have kept the light burning.**

**God bless you all - Mavis**

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