

SAINTS ALIVE! NOVEMBER 3, MARTIN DE PORRES



Martin de Porres is the patron saint of social justice. He is also the patron saint of mixed-race people and all those seeking interracial harmony.

Born in Lima, Peru in 1579, Martin was the illegitimate son of a Spanish nobleman. His sister Juana was born three years later in 1581 and the father then abandoned the family. Martin grew up in poverty and, when his mother could no longer support him, he was sent to primary school for two years and then placed to learn the medical arts.

Martin grew up in a time where local Indians were actively discriminated against. He wished to enter religious life but by law in Peru, descendants of Africans and Indians were barred from becoming full members of religious orders. He was received (though not as a full member) at the Dominican Convent of the Rosary in Lima where he continued to practice his healing. He also took on kitchen work, laundry, and cleaning. No chore was beneath him.

De Porres was placed in charge of the infirmary where he was known for his care of the sick. He ministered without distinction to Spanish nobles and to African slaves. One day an aged beggar, covered with ulcers and almost naked, stretched out his hand, and Martin took him to his own bed. One of his brethren reproved him. Martin replied: "Compassion, my dear Brother, is preferable to cleanliness."

When an epidemic struck Lima, Martin continued to transport the sick to the convent until the Provincial Superior, alarmed by the contagion threatening the friars, forbade him to continue to do so. His sister, who lived in the country, offered her house to lodge those whom the residence of the religious would not hold. One day he found on the street a poor Indian, bleeding to death from a dagger wound, and took him to his own room until he could transport him to his sister's hospice. The prior, when he heard of this, reprimanded de Porres for disobedience. Martin replied, "Forgive my error, and please instruct me, for I did not know that the precept of obedience took precedence over that of charity."

Martin understood the need for social justice as a responsibility of his faith, just as he devoted himself to works of charity.

De Porres was noted for work on behalf of the poor, establishing a children's hospital and a residence for orphans and abandoned children. He treated all people regardless of their color, race or status. He took care of slaves brought from Africa.

My grandmother always said that cleanliness was next to godliness. Perhaps so, but St. Martin de Porres taught us that compassion was preferable to cleanliness (and therefore closer to godliness) and that charity was preferable to the rules.

St. Martin de Porres, pray for us.



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