

Saint of the Month for September 2014

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

Saint Peter Claver, Priest
Tuesday, September 9

This month I have chosen Saint Peter Claver because of his long and heroic work in South America helping thousands of African slaves.

Many people think that the transatlantic slave trade was only between Africa and the North American colonies, later the United States of America. However, it also included the Caribbean and South America. Many countries and peoples were involved: Britain, Spain, Portugal, and Arabs from multiple Mediterranean countries. It also involved some African tribal leaders.

Saint Peter was born Pedro Claver in Catalonia (southeastern Spain) about 1581 of a distinguished family. He showed good promise by having fine qualities of mind and spirit, and it was thought he might have a vocation in the Church. He was sent to study at the University of Barcelona (in Catalonia), and graduated with distinction. He was given minor orders (not given now) and applied to the Jesuits. He was received into the novitiate of Tarragona at the age of twenty, and was sent to the college of Montesione in Majorca. Here he met Saint Alphonsus Rodriguez, who was the porter, but so much more. (He reminds me of Saint André Bessette- please see my article of January 2014.) The two got along well: Peter learned much about the saints from this brother, and Alphonsus was impressed by Peter, and thought he might be suited for a new, arduous, and neglected work. Brother Alphonsus got Peter fired up with the idea of ministering in the colonies of the new world.

Peter was interested in this challenging work, and asked his provincial if he might go- he was told that his superiors would decide his vocation in due time- a “we’ll see” sort of answer! He was sent to Barcelona to study theology, and after two years asked again to go to South America. This time the answer was yes, and he embarked on a long sea voyage in April 1610, never returning to Spain. He landed in Cartagena, in what is now Colombia, in the north part of South America.

Saint Peter was then sent to Santa Fé’s Jesuit house to complete his studies of theology, and also was put to work as sacristan, porter, infirmarian, and cook. In 1615 he went back to Cartagena and was ordained a priest.

By this time the slave trade had been established for about 100 years, and Cartagena was a clearing house. The local Indians were not considered strong enough to handle the gold and silver mining, and so the demand became quite high for African slaves. That demand was met, and with a great profit. A slave could be bought in West Africa for four crowns, and sold in South America for 200 crowns. About one third of those transported died on the way, but that didn’t make the trade in humans diminish. The journey was about six or seven weeks, and the people were packed into ships in horrible and foul conditions.

The trade had been condemned by Pope Paul III and many others, but it continued for a long time. Many slave owners had their slaves baptized, and felt that they had done enough. This sacrament was often viewed by the slaves as part of their oppression, as they had been given no religious instruction and no improvement in their physical condition. The local clergy couldn't do very much, as they had no money and no support from free people, especially the slave owners.

Enter Father Peter Claver. He started by working under Father Alfonso de Sandoval, who had worked for forty years in the service of the slaves. Father Claver was about to do almost the same. He developed a method and an organization, and went to work. He assembled a group of assistants, and met the slaves shortly after their arrival- the slaves were put into pens or yards where again they were packed into tight spaces, sleeping nearly on top of each other in a hot and humid climate. Father Peter and his band offered medicines, food, brandy, lemons, and tobacco to those who would accept them. He said "We must speak to them with our hands, before we can speak to them with our lips." He baptized the dying and any babies born on the voyage.

He must have had a strong stomach as well as incredible perseverance- the stench had to have been unbearable.

The slaves of course couldn't speak Spanish, so Father Claver gathered seven interpreters to help him, one of whom could speak four West African dialects. They used pictures from the life of Christ to do some religious instruction before offering baptism. During the nearly 40 years he did this work he probably baptized about 300,000 slaves. The volume of human cargo was incredible- at least 10,000 still-living souls were brought to the city each year.

In general, Father Peter never saw the slaves again, as they were moved to plantations and mines far away from the city; he did visit those living nearby after Easter each year. In the fall he conducted what we might call a mission for the sailors and traders, often with little success.

Each week he visited the two hospitals in Cartagena, one for general cases, and one for lepers.

In 1650 an epidemic struck the city, and Father Claver was a victim. He survived, but was a broken man thereafter. His order had been hit hard, and so he often had very little help himself. In 1654 he was near death, and the locals seemed to remember that they had a saint in their midst, and so carried off just about everything in his cell so that they might have a relic. He died a few days later; it was September 8, the feast of the birthday of Mary. He was canonized in 1888 by Pope Leo XIII along with his friend Alphonsus Rodriguez.

The commemoration is given the rank of Obligatory Memorial. (**Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition** (Scepter Publishers); **Butler's Lives of the Saints, 2nd Edition** (Ave Maria Press); **Magnificat**, September 2014; **Encyclopædia Britannica, 15th Edition**)

Collect from the Mass of Saint Peter Claver:

O God, who made Saint Peter Claver a slave of slaves
and strengthened him with wonderful charity and patience

as he came to their help,
grant, through his intercession,
that, seeking the things of Jesus Christ,
we may love our neighbor in deeds and in truth.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. (**Roman Missal, Third Edition**)

Saint Peter Claver was a man of uncommon perseverance and courage. Not many of us will do the kind of work he did, but we might ask ourselves if we might do something more to help the poor and the hungry and the sick. There is no shortage of honest organizations helping the poor in most places on the planet, and there are opportunities in our local area as well. Perhaps we can be inspired by Saint Peter's efforts to remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:40: "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." Saint Peter Claver did remember these words, every day! Saint Peter Claver, pray for us!