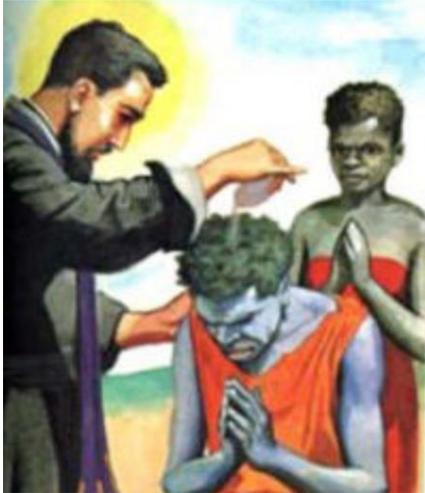


Our Patron Saint: Peter Claver, A Man Who Knew How To Love



Peter Claver, the Apostle of the Slaves, was born of impoverished parents in the village of Verdu, Spain, in 1580. In 1604, he joined the Society of Jesus. The idea of slavery was deeply imbedded in his consciousness. He thought of himself as a slave of God.

St. Peter Claver took his final vows for the priesthood in August 1604. While studying philosophy, the future priest was influenced by St. Alphonsus Rodriguez to go to the Indies and save "million of those perishing souls."

Peter was sent to be a missionary in Colombia, South America. He hurriedly took passage on a boat laden with gold, silver, pearls and slaves. He saw for the first time the plight of slaves, most of whom were Negroes.

The ship was crowded far beyond capacity. Drinking water was kept on deck in open jars and barrels; cockroaches and other bugs invaded the food. Storms and epidemics made life sheer misery, especially to the slaves.

In 1610, he landed at Cartagena, now Colombia, the principal slave market of the New World, where a thousand slaves landed every month. At the age of forty two. Peter Claver became the first Jesuit priest to be ordained in Cartagena. It was then, in 1622, that he made his solemn profession and signed the final formula: "Peter Claver, slave of the Negroes forever."

He labored unceasingly for the salvation of the African slaves and the abolition of the African slave trade, and the love he lavished on them was something that transcended the natural order.

Father Claver met every slave ship; he would hurry to the revolting inferno of the hold, and offer the poor refreshments which he had collected by house-to-house visitation. Then he would care for the sick and dying, and instruct the slaves through African catechists, before administering the sacraments. Through his efforts three hundred thousand souls entered the Church.

Furthermore, he did not lose sight of his converts when they left the ships, but followed them to the plantations to which they were sent, encouraged them to live as Christians, and prevailed on their masters to treat them humanely. "We must," he said, "speak to them with our hands before we speak to them with our lips."

On September 8, 1654, Peter Claver died in utter peace. In 1851 he was beatified by Pope Pius IX, and in 1888 he was declared a saint by Pope Leo XIII.

A million slaves passed through Cartagena on their way to the plantations and mines of South America. Over a third met St. Peter Claver. He was able to offer them the joy of discovering that they were fully human. Truly, Peter Claver deserves the title of "*Liberator of a Race.*"

His life was a shining example to all: *the man who knew how to love.*