

Racial Justice Sunday – St Martin de Porres

There is a Saint whose name I know will be familiar to you who is the patron Saint of barbers, of nurses, of African Americans, of procurators, bursers and accountants, of social justice and of race relations. Who is that? - and why am I telling you about him today?

His name is Saint Martin de Porres, and the special reason for referring to him is that today is Racial Justice Sunday. But why is he patron of such a variety of personal activities?

You may know that he was born the illegitimate son of a Spanish grandee and a freed slave woman of either negro or native Indian stock in Lima, Peru. That was in 1579 when the Spanish ruled the territory.

He lived to be sixty years of age and when he died he was held in great respect but he began his life in poverty suffering from the stigma of illegitimacy and also from racial prejudice for features and dark complexion which he inherited from his mother.

His father abandoned the family when a second child was born and his mother was unable to provide for Martin and handed him over to the care of a primary school run by religious.

When he was twelve he was apprenticed to a barber, whose trade in those days included the drawing blood and the extraction of bad teeth. He also learned during that time to care for wounds and to prepare and administer medicines and soothing potions.

After a few years in this medical apostolate he applied to the Dominicans to be a 'lay helper' considering himself unworthy to be received as a religious brother. However, after nine years the example of his prayer and penance, charity and humility led the community to invite him to make full religious profession.

Many of his nights were spent in prayer and penitential practices, and his days were filled with nursing the sick and caring for the poor. It was particularly impressive that he treated all persons with equal respect and tenderness regardless of their colour, race or status.

Martin was instrumental in founding an orphanage, and did all he could to ease the suffering of slaves brought from Africa.

He was entrusted with the management of the alms given to the priory – accounting for and distributing the funds with practicality and generosity and in due course he became the procurator for the religious house and for the city of Lima. He became a formidable fund raiser, among other things raising money to pay for the dowries of poor girls so that they could marry, or enter a convent.

There was a time when the priory was in debt and he said: *I am only a poor mulatto. I am the property of the Order. Sell me!*

His daily work was in the kitchen, the laundry and the infirmary of the priory but God chose to fill his life with extraordinary gifts of grace: ecstasies that lifted him from the ground, light filling the room where he prayed, the ability to be present to people in more than one place at the same time, instantaneous cures, and a remarkable control over animals. Many religious took him as their spiritual director.

Martin de Porres was canonised by Pope John XXIII in 1962 and on that occasion the Holy Father remarked: *He excused the faults of others; he forgave the bitterest injuries; lovingly he comforted the sick, he provided food and clothing and medicine for the poor, he helped as best he could those who were enslaved and he tried with all his might to set the guilty free from their sinful ways and from the burden of their sins. Thus he deserved to be called by the name the people gave him – Martin of Charity.*

One could hardly imagine a more fitting patron of Christian forgiveness – on the part of those discriminated against – and Christian justice : to overcome racism, a sin which we well know still pervades society today.

On Racial Justice Sunday we are reminded of our two-fold responsibility as Catholic Christians. To be a **welcoming** community, that is a *parish of sanctuary* where people of all races and ethnic groups can feel at home. And to be a **prophetic** community – that is, to be both a **sign and an instrument of communion** to all who are excluded, marginalised, or on the receiving end of prejudice.

We are members of a Church that is truly Catholic, universal, spread throughout the whole world and living within all cultures and customs and among all races on earth. We share one faith; we are all fundamentally brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore we should recognise, celebrate, and continually strive to advance the realisation among our peers and contemporaries that we share a common humanity and are equal in dignity and worth in the eyes of God in whose image we are all made.