

Life

St. Martin de Porres was born in Lima, Peru in 1579. His mother might be of African or Native American descent. His father was a Spanish Duke stationed in Lima. His parents were not married. Martin inherited his mother's dark skin and appearance. His father only acknowledged him as his son when he was 8 years old. Later, he abandoned them, and the family lived in poverty. Because of his skin colour and status as an illegitimate child, Martin was discriminated against all his life. When he was 12 years old, Martin apprenticed under a barber-surgeon, and learned how to draw blood and dress wounds. Soon, he received a calling, but in Peru, by law, all descendants of African or Natives were not allowed to become full members of religious orders. He spent long hours in prayer seeking the Lord's guidance. When he was 15 years old, he asked the Dominicans of Holy Rosary Priory in Lima to accept him as a volunteer to perform insignificant menial tasks, in order to fulfill his desire to live in the seminary and wear a habit. During this period, he made a living as a barber and cared for the sick. However, not everyone in the seminary accepted him, some called him horrible names because of his skin colour, but he forgave them. In 1603, because of his holiness, the superior abolished the rules based on skin colour and let Martin take his vow to become a Dominican lay brother and to take care of the sick. He visited and treated patients on ships carrying African slaves, bringing them love and hope. Later, he founded an orphanage and a children's hospital for the poor.

Martin is most famous for his charity. Regardless of wealth, status, race or nationality, as long as there is a need, whether it is clothing, prayers, or even miracles, he would try his best to provide it. In fact, God also gave him special graces; in addition to the grace of healing, he could levitate during prayer, have aerial flight and bilocation. Martin was humble and obedient but not cowardly, and had often spoken out for social justice. For example, when a friar reproved him for giving up his bed to a homeless man with open sores, he replied: "Compassion, my dear brother, is preferable to cleanliness." When reprimanded during the epidemic why he disobeyed orders and brought patients from outside the hospital for treatment, he said: "Forgive my error, and please instruct me, for I did not know that the precept of obedience took precedence over that of charity". People around him began to change because of him.

Martin prayed fervently, lived an austere life, and abstained from meat. His love not only transcended national boundaries, but also extended to other living creatures. He fed and healed all animals that came close to him, and they also obeyed his orders. It was said that once he heard that the friars were intending to kill the rats; he immediately asked the rats to leave the monastery and promised to feed them at the back door. From then on, there were no more rats in the monastery. St. Martin died peacefully in 1639 at the age of sixty. He was America's first black saint and the patron saint of racial harmony and social justice.

Reflection

When people insulted Martin because of his skin colour, the Lord lifted him up with miracles. When people called him a dog, the Lord made the animals obey his commands. Everyone in the world was created in the love of God. Christ suffered and died for the love of all mankind, regardless of race or skin colour. We should learn from St. Martin's works of charity and speak out for the brothers and sisters who are discriminated against and provide assistance to them.

Prayer

When Pope Benedict XVI was still a cardinal, he pointed out in a synod of bishops on June 2, 2002, that St. Martin often stayed up all night in adoration of the Eucharist, and then worked tirelessly during the day to care for and help those who were excluded and despised in society. He could identify with them not only because of his own origin, but he also saw Christ in the weak, the insulted and spurned. At that time, Cardinal Ratzinger pointed out that we must learn from St. Martin to be in communion in the Eucharist with those in need: "The encounter with the Lord, who gives himself to us from the cross, makes all of us members of the one body by means of the one bread, which when responded to fully moves us to serve the suffering, to care for the weak and the forgotten".

May we learn from St. Martin de Porres to be in communion with the least of our brothers and sisters in the Eucharist. We also pray for our brothers and sisters who are discriminated against because of their origin or skin colour. St. Martin de Porres, pray for us.