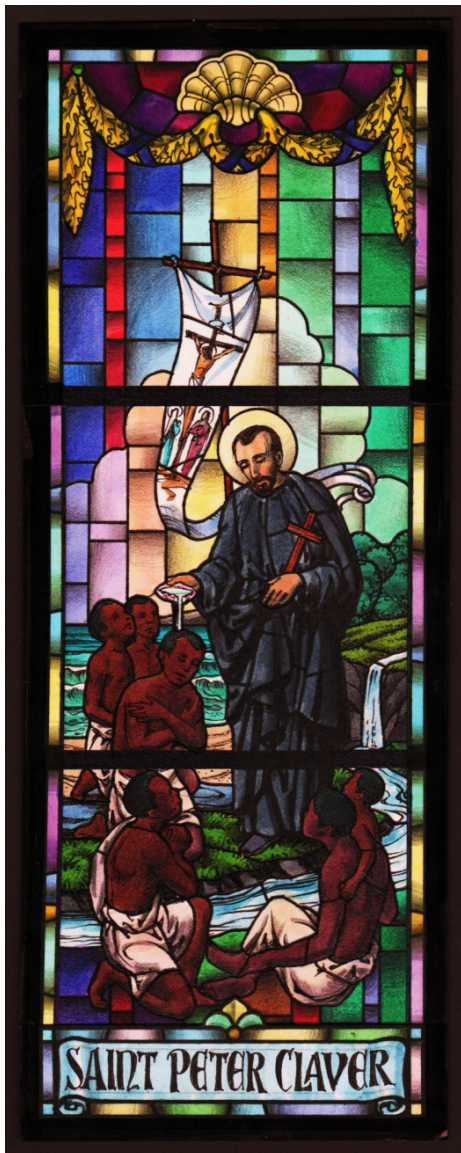


## St. Peter Claver: Slave of the Slaves Forever

By Joseph F. X. Sladky (9/8/14 Crisis Magazine)



Odd as it may seem, the great “Defender of the Indians,” Bartolomé de Las Casas, did not originally see the injustice of Negro slavery. To be fair, he bitterly regretted his position later, and he soundly denounced the African slave trade once he was better informed. Even so, early on, he was a vocal and influential proponent of importing black slaves from Africa to shoulder the

labor burdens which the Indians were not constitutionally fit to undertake. In no small part, this contributed to the growth of the black slave traffic from Africa, which increased prodigiously during the years of the sixteenth century.

Cartagena de Indias was one of two ports in Spanish America which the Council of the Indies had stipulated could receive slaves. Acting as a major clearing-house for African slaves, the sheds and yards of Cartagena became the market where these captives were bought and sent to other areas in the Americas. As is well-known, the lot of slaves on these ships was truly abominable and beastly. Straitened in tight quarters and chained down in the ship’s hold, this “human cargo” was

provided no clothing, given scanty rations of loathsome food and water, and kept in horribly foul and unhygienic conditions beneath the deck. Of the 400-500 slaves on each ship, it was usual for a third of the slaves to die on the voyage; many of the rest, after a two month voyage, arrived in Cartagena famished, diseased, and hopeless. Nevertheless, as the trade was very lucrative, slavers shipped about 10,000 slaves from Africa to Cartagena each year.

It was in this lamentable environment that St. Peter Claver found his field for apostolic work. Like Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, Claver was not a high-profile social reformer, but a saint who worked to alleviate the physical and spiritual misery of individual slaves on a one-to-one basis, giving them a sense of their own personal dignity, providing them with patient Christian instruction, and instilling in them a true hope in their eternal salvation. Because he daily worked on improving himself through a deep prayer life, ascetical works, and a deep charity for others, St. Peter Claver was able to transform the physical and spiritual life of the Negro slaves in Cartagena so effectively.

**Early Life** Peter Claver was born in the Catalonian village of Verdú, most probably on 25 June 1580. His father, the mayor of Verdú, was Pedro Claver y Mingüella, and his mother was Ana Corberó y Claver. For four years he studied humanities at the University of Barcelona, then known as a *studium generale*. In Barcelona he became acquainted with the Society of Jesus. After being admitted into the Jesuits by Claudio Aquaviva, Claver went to Tarragona to complete his novitiate between 1602 and 1604. Next, he moved to the Jesuit college of Gerona, where he finished his studies in the humanities. During his novitiate, he kept a notebook in which he recorded his meditations, some of which would presage his future life. Already likening himself to a slave, he wrote:

“I must dedicate myself to the service of God until death, on the understanding that I am like a slave, wholly occupied in the service of his master and

*in the endeavor to please and content him in all and in every way with his whole soul, body, and mind.”*

**The Influences of Alphonsus Rodríguez and Alonso de Sandoval** After completing his studies in Gerona, Claver was sent to study philosophy at the college of Montesión on the island of Majorca, living here from 1605 to 1608. It was in the gentle climate of Palma that Claver would form his decisive friendship with Alphonsus Rodríguez. The latter, the porter at the college, was a simple Jesuit lay brother. At the same time, he was a man of extraordinary holiness. Early on, Rodríguez took Claver under his wing, and he became the master of the young man’s interior life. When they met, Rodríguez was a man of eighty, Claver a man of twenty-five. Although he would spend only three years at Montesión, these would be the most formative years in his life. Keeping a notebook of the spiritual teachings of Rodríguez, Claver faithfully incorporated the former’s program into his own life. It was Rodríguez who decisively inspired Claver to work for the harvest of souls in the apostolic field of the New World. Wishing to remain a lay brother, Claver did not think he deserved the honor of being one of Christ’s priests. Nevertheless, in 1608, his superiors sent him back to Barcelona to begin a year and a half of theological studies. Without having completed these studies, he was sent to Seville and then onto the New World.

From Spain, Claver was sent to Cartagena de Indias in New Granada, now modern-day Colombia. Arriving in 1611, he journeyed to Santa Fe de Bogotá to complete his theological studies. As the climate in Bogotá was not conducive to his health, Claver carried out his tertianship at Tunja. He was then sent back to Cartagena, where he was ordained a priest on March 19, 1616. At this time, he became an assistant to Fr. Alonso de Sandoval, the great initiator of the Negro slave apostolate.

Just as Rodriguez influenced Claver’s spiritual life, it was Sandoval who mentored him in his missionary activity among the black slaves. This

great Jesuit would write a practical manual for missionaries to use in working with and evangelizing the Negroes. It was titled *Naturaleza, policía sagrada y profana, costumbres, ritos, y supersticiones de los etíopes* (1629). The African slaves belonged to almost forty different “races” and used up to fifteen different languages. In this guide, Sandoval meticulously described the physical appearance and the artificial markings on the various “races” of Negroes from the different sections of West Africa. Sandoval’s research facilitated the identification of the languages of the various African peoples, thus simplifying the work of interpreters. It was above all, Claver, who pushed his superiors to have *The Nature, Religion, Customs, Rites, and Superstitions of the Negroes* published. He himself would use it regularly and diligently in his own work.

**Claver’s Ministry to the African Slaves** In a career lasting about thirty-five years, Claver never missed the arrival of a slave ship. Extremely eager to meet and welcome these poor captives, his “eyes shone” and his “face flushed” when he heard of a slave ship carrying “human treasures” from Africa. He often took a small boat out himself to meet the slaver’s ship. His greatest concern was whether the poor captives had been baptized or not. If he deemed that they had not been christened, he spent some time catechizing them, and then he baptized them. He often brought perfumed water to pour over the heads of the unfortunates, along with refreshing cool water for them to drink. Before his spiritual ministrations, he always brought the slaves little gifts, such as lemons, oranges, bananas, cakes, and tobacco. His immense charity won them over, often restoring hope in their hearts.

Always ministering to their physical needs before he addressed their spiritual needs, he was wont to say, “We must speak to them with our hands, before we try to speak to them with our lips.” Before they were taken to the slave sheds, Claver first took care of the sick, especially baptizing the dying children. Following this, he heard the confessions of the Christian slaves through

interpreters, and he administered last rites to the dying. Lastly, he gave days of instruction to the pagan blacks, baptizing them, and catechizing them further. In all, he is said to have instructed and baptized around 300,000 African slaves. Just as St. Francis Xavier has truly acquired the title of “Apostle of the East Indies,” St. Peter Claver has rightly earned the title of “Apostle of the West Indies.”

Claver’s heroism in dealing with the diseased and sick is astounding. Even so, it was an everyday occurrence. Claver would wipe the sweat from the faces of the slaves with his own handkerchief. Moreover, he would often clothe the sick and diseased in his own cloak. As some of his interpreters witnessed, the cloak had to be washed up to seven times a day from the stink and filth which it had accumulated. It was routine for Claver to console his fellow man by joyfully undertaking practices which were considered extremely repugnant to most. As one eye-witness notes, “Most admirable was that he not only cleansed these plague-ridden ulcers with the two handkerchiefs he kept for that, but did not hesitate to press his lips to them.” He plainly saw Christ “in the least of these brethren.”

The chief problem in the evangelization of the slaves lay in the numerous languages used by the many “races” of Africans. Although Claver himself never mastered the African languages, he did have some facility with Angolese, the most common of them. On account of these linguistic difficulties, he continually worked with a team of interpreters, black slaves who had a fine ear and tongue for languages. It is important to note that Claver empowered these slave interpreters to become true leaders, diligently training them in the Christian faith. Treating them as his equals, close friends, and true collaborators in the work of evangelization, he always carefully looked after their food, clothing, and medicines. If they were seriously sick, he gave up his bed to them, and slept on the floor.

As images are the books of the illiterate, Claver was liberal in his use of pictures in catechizing the

new converts. In his instructions, he taught them the rudiments of the faith. He especially enjoyed teaching them about the life, passion, and death of Christ through illustrations and the crucifix. At times, he even used the monitory pictures of hell to inspire in them a true sense of contrition for their own sins. At the same time, he also gave them hope, teaching them about the glories of heaven. It was not an easy task. The slaves had to be patiently drilled in such simple matters as the sign of the cross. At all times, however, he reminded them of their own dignity and worth, teaching them that Christ had redeemed them at a great price with his blood.

Every spring, Claver would set out on rural missions to plantations surrounding Cartagena. Here he would check up on the lives of his charges as much as he was able. Refusing the hospitality of the plantation owners, he dwelt in the Negro slave quarters. On many occasions, he was ill-received by the plantation owners and their wives. They looked at his spiritual ministrations among their slaves as a waste of their time. Throughout his life, he was never a revolutionary, a “hater of the rich and embittered protector of the poor.” Although he had a special predilection for the poor black slaves, he did not ignore the rich; rather, he exhorted the wealthy to carry out their social duties and he promoted cooperation between the classes.

**Other Works of Claver** In addition to his special work with African slaves, Claver also made regular visits to serve and teach the inmates of the leper colony at the San Lázaro Royal Hospital. As he consoled them, he reminded them, “Make of life a ladder to heaven, leprosy of the body does not matter if the soul is clean.” That is not all. He also worked closely with the Brothers of St. John of God at their hospital of San Sebastián. When he visited their hospital, he would first sweep rooms, make up the beds, and then serve meals. Only then would he visit each patient, bringing them spiritual consolation. In his very practical way, he carried a notebook which catalogued all the sick people in the community. In this way, he could effectively follow up on

them over time.

Beyond all this, Claver also ministered to prisoners several times a week. He delivered very blunt direct sermons to the inmates. Like St. Joseph Cafasso, he was very conscientious to spiritually prepare those who were condemned to death. One witness noted, "He was so devoted to this ministry that there was no one condemned by the courts in his day whom he did not assist." He also ensured that the poor were all given a proper burial.

Every now and then French or English heretics were captured by the Spanish, giving Claver an opportunity to patiently open their eyes to the truth. He was very successful in bringing back many of these men to the true faith. With great difficulty, he also brought about the conversion of some Muslim Moors. Like the Curé of Ars, he also employed many hours in conferring the sacrament of Penance, sometimes spending eleven to fifteen hours a day in the hot, humid, and stifling confessional. In one Lent he heard 5,000 confessions.

**Death and Canonization** Throughout it all, Claver understood that his remarkable missionary work among the black slaves and lepers needed to be undergirded by a strong interior life. It appears that he watched much, and slept little. According to over 150 witnesses under oath, Claver slept three hours each night, prayed for five consecutive hours, and he scourged himself thrice. Prayer, usually carried out in the early morning, always preceded his active missionary work. This regimen was kept for about forty years. All in all, his growth in sanctity was regular. Brother González, his constant companion, relates, "Each day he did at least one heroic deed."

Over his career, Claver had survived five epidemics which devastated the population of Cartagena. Nevertheless, the fifth epidemic took its toll on him. His hands began to shake and he could no longer say mass. On occasion, he did hear confessions, but he was generally inactive for

the last four year of his life. Ironically, during this time, he was put in the hands of a selfish and brutal black slave who regularly tormented and mistreated him. Like St. Francis Xavier, almost one hundred years earlier, he died in "utter abandonment" on September 8, 1654.

After he had died, everyone suddenly remembered the "Saint" again. Immediately, the inhabitants of Cartagena set out to gather relics from him. Some devotees tried to tear sections of his clothing, still others tore away even his toenails; the more restrained just touched their rosaries to his body. On account of his great service to the community, he was given a funeral at the expense of state. Claver was beatified by Pope Pius IX on September 21, 1851. Along with his friend and spiritual mentor, Alphonsus Rodríguez, he was canonized by Leo XIII on January 15, 1888. Eight years later, the pope named Claver the Patron of all the Missions to the Negroes. His Memorial Day is September 9.

As his biographer, Angel Valtierra, notes, Claver sincerely believed in the slaves' "capacity for virtue, for faithfulness, for holiness." Like his Divine Master, he "came not to be served, but to serve." In order to serve the slaves, he became "their slave."

**His own motto was "Peter Claver, slave of the Negroes for ever."**

His heroic love and self-sacrifice for the African slaves is unparalleled in the history of the Church. Among the greatest testimonials to Claver is the extraordinary comment of Leo XIII, "No life, except the life of Christ, has so moved me as that of St. Peter Claver."

Suggested Reading: *Angel Valtierra, S.J., Peter Claver: Saint of the Slaves, trans. Janet H. Perry and L.J. Woodward (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960).*