

## BROTHER MARTIN

TO those who live abroad, the problem of the American Negro may seem vague and distant, for missionary fields in China and Japan are much better publicized than those in the Southern United States. But the soul of an American Negro is just as important as any other soul, and it is a certain fact that the elevation of an American Negro to the dignity of Sainthood would do much to further the cause of the Church among the coloured people of the world.

For this reason, the cause of Blessed Martin de Porres, the famous South American Negro, has become a favourite topic in the Catholic Press of the United States. The Dominican publication, *The Torch*, published in New York City, has recently inaugurated a movement known as the *Blessed Martin Guild*, which co-ordinates all efforts toward canonization made by Martin's friends. In its work, the Guild is constantly actuated by the thought of the thirteen million American Negroes who have yet to receive the light of faith, and to whom a Saint of their own race would be an undoubted inspiration. It is with this same purpose, therefore, that the present article is submitted to the readers of **BLACKFRIARS**—that they may realize to some extent the vast apostolate awaiting the humble Dominican laybrother.

Martin de Porres was born in 1579 in Lima, Peru, the son of Don Juan de Porres, a Spanish nobleman, and Anna Velasquez, a Negress. Don Juan had come to the New World in search of adventure and wealth—one of those colourful *conquistadores* who figure so prominently in a certain field of fiction. But when Don Juan's son was born and was seen to have inherited the dark features of the mother's subjected people, the haughty noble abandoned his wife and child and left them to survive as well as they could.

As a result, the little boy grew up amid dreadful squalor, for the great mineral resources of Peru produced two distinct classes of society—those who attained enormous wealth, and those subjected natives through whose labour

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the earth was forced to yield its hoard of precious ore. In the sixteenth century the city of Lima presented the spectacle of a class that revelled in every luxury, while poverty, vice and disease stalked the streets. One was either poor or rich. One either ruled or was ruled. And young Martin's circumstances showed him little of the brighter side of life.

When he was twelve, the boy was apprenticed to a barber, or surgeon, in order that he might learn the art of medicine as it was then practised. All his life the child had been distinguished by his love of the sick and poor, and it was a great joy to have this additional opportunity of learning how to cure the ills of those about him. As the years passed, everyone came to know the kindly-hearted youth who passed through the poverty-racked streets of Lima with his food and medicines. There were even some who called him a saint, remembering the cures he achieved, apparently through the mere touch of his hand, or the administration of some simple herb. But whatever his spiritual plane, Martin was best known for his cheerful trust in God and for an all-embracing charity.

At the age of twenty-two, the young mulatto, whose very father had cast him off, was received into the Tertiary Brotherhood of the Order of Preachers. Here he continued his duties as physician to the hordes of indigent Indians and Spaniards who flocked to the gates of the Dominican Convent of the Holy Rosary in Lima. Not for nine years, and then only at the command of his Prior, did he receive the habit of a regular Brother of the First Order.

The life of Brother Martin is a saga of unending wonders. He cured the sick; he wrought conversions; he performed unspeakable wonders, passing through solid walls and closed doors on his errands of mercy. He conversed with saints and angels, and by the grace of God was apparently in two places at once. Frequently travellers told of having met him in France, in China, in Africa, although it was well known that Martin had never left his native city of Lima.

There are numerous tales of Martin's humility. At one time the Prior of the convent of the Holy Rosary was beset with numerous debts. Knowing his difficulty, the humble

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laybrother offered himself to be sold as a slave, in order that the necessary means might be secured. As for personal effects, Martin would never accept anything new. Shoes must always be given to a poor person first, so that the real owner might not enjoy their good appearance; and he owned but two habits, both worn and patched beyond description.

The holy laybrother was intensely fond of children. Remembering his own loveless childhood, the poor abandoned waifs of Lima appealed to him particularly. In their young souls he saw the slumbering promise of the future, and for years he solicited funds for the erection of a foundling home where Peru's disinherited youth might learn of God and His most holy Church. Despite his ecstasies, visions and heroic penitential life, the humble Dominican was a man of foresight. He loved God with an all-consuming ardour and desired only that all men should feel as he. To this end did he go among the sick and poor, believing that if people were cured of their sickness they would hunger to know the Author of such grace.

But in 1639, in the sixtieth year of his age, Brother Martin's active life came to an abrupt end. In vain did his brethren try to get him to take the remedies which had so often cured the beggars at the gate. He declared his work was over, and that God had no further use for him upon this earth.

The whole city of Lima was plunged into mourning at the news of Martin's death. Thousands flocked to the chapel of the Dominican convent to gaze for the last time on the humble servant of God. So great was their reverence for Martin's sanctity that they cut off pieces of his habit to preserve as pious relics, and many times was it necessary to replace the black and white garb of the holy Brother.

Two hundred years after his death, Martin was beatified by Pope Gregory XVI. Since that time the story of his life has spread to many lands, but it is in the two Americas that he is most widely known. Here the leading Catholic periodicals devote considerable space to the story of his glorious life, to the continued graces which shower down upon his devoted clients. In New York City, *The Torch* is in constant

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receipt of letters of thanksgiving from readers scattered throughout the United States, and since the formation of the *Blessed Martin Guild* in 1935, thousands of persons have been apprised of the humble laybrother through the medium of devotional literature. His life has been told in story, hymn and verse, circulated in book form and dramatized for radio presentation. The Reverend Thomas McGlynn, O.P., has designed a statue of Martin which is the first of its kind in North America, and thousands of copies of a popular booklet dealing with the life of the wonderworker of Lima have been distributed by the Guild.

The missions in the United States among the coloured people in the South present a fertile field for the Church's extension, and it is here that Brother Martin's task unquestionably lies. For the work of Communism is ever rampant among those whom depression has caught in its grip; the leaders of socialistic thought are constantly dangling bright promises before the eyes of the unlettered and distressed. In life, Brother Martin was the friend of just such poor and questing souls. He walked the streets of his native Lima seeking them out, curing their ills, and preaching the love of God in his every act. Now that he is in Heaven, his charity remains the same. The canonization of a man of Martin's type will have a tremendous influence on the thirteen million of his coloured brethren who still await the light.

Realizing this fact, the *Blessed Martin Guild*, through its founder, the Reverend Edward L. Hughes, O.P., begs the prayers of the readers of BLACKFRIARS for the success of its praiseworthy aim—that Blessed Martin de Porres may soon reach the exalted rank of Sainthood, and lead into the one true Fold those members of his race who still walk in ignorant disunion.

M. FABYAN WINDEATT.