



September 9

Commemoration: Peter Claver, priest, missionary to Colombia, 1654

Peter Claver (Spanish: *San Pedro Claver Corberó*) (26 June 1580 – 8 September 1654) was a Jesuit who due to his life and work became the patron saint of slaves, of Colombia, and of African Americans.

St. Peter Claver was born in 1580 into a prosperous farming family in the Spanish village of Verdu, Cataluña about 54 miles from Barcelona, 70 years after King Ferdinand of Spain had set in motion the colonial slavery culture by authorizing the purchase of 250 African slaves in Lisbon for his territories in New Spain. Claver's parents were devout Catholics and taught Peter from earliest childhood to let nothing come between him and the love of God. As a student at the University of Barcelona, Claver was noted for his piety and high intelligence. He was given permission to enter the Jesuit College at Palma, Majorca in 1602, and after two years of study there, he wrote these words in a notebook which he kept with him throughout his life: "I must dedicate myself to the service of God until death, on the understanding that I am like a slave."

Claver arrived in Cartagena in 1610. He was still a novice at the time and he needed to wait five years to be ordained as a priest, living in the Jesuit monasteries of Tunja and Bogotá. In those years of preparation he was deeply disturbed by the hard treatment and living conditions of the black slaves being brought from Africa. By his time the slave trade had been established in the Americas for about 100 years and Cartagena was a chief center for it. Ten thousand slaves poured into the port yearly; crossing the Atlantic from West Africa under conditions so foul and inhuman that an estimated one-third of them died in transit. Although slave-trading was condemned by Pope Paul III and later labeled "supreme villainy" by Pius IX, there were fortunes to be made and it continued to flourish.

Claver's predecessor, Alonso de Sandoval, was his mentor and inspiration. Sandoval had devoted himself to the service of the slaves for 40 years before Claver arrived to continue his work. Sandoval tried to learn about their customs and their languages and he learned so much about them that when he went back to Spain he authored a book in Seville in 1627 about the nature, customs, rites and superstitions of the Africans. Sandoval taught Claver all he knew about the slaves. When finally in 1622 Claver was ordained, he added along with his ordination signature another vow: *Petrus Claver, aethiopum siempre servus*-- Peter Claver, slave of the Negro, for ever.

Where Sandoval was wont to visit the slaves in the places where they were working Claver's practice was to head for the wharf as soon as a slave ship entered the port. Boarding the ships he moved into the filthy and diseased holds to doctor and minister to their ill-treated and terrified human cargo. These had suffered a voyage that lasted several months under horrible conditions. It was difficult to move around on the ships because the slave traffickers filled them to the maximum. They were often told they were being taken to a land where they would be eaten. Claver always wore a cloak that he would lend to anyone who was in need. Legend says that whoever wore the cloak inherited eternal health and was cleansed of any disease. After the slaves were herded from the ship and penned in nearby yards to be studied by crowds and buyers, Claver plunged in among them with medicines, food, bread, brandy, lemons and tobacco. With the help of interpreters and pictures which he carried with him, he gave basic instruction and assured the slaves of their human dignity and God's saving love.

Claver had conflicts with some of his Jesuit brothers who viewed the slaves merely as slaves. Claver saw them as fellow Christians and encouraged others to do so. During the 40 years of his ministry, it is estimated he single-handedly catechized and baptized 300,000 slaves. Furthermore, he followed up to see that as Christians they were accorded their Christian and civil rights.

His apostolate extended beyond his care for slaves. He preached in the city square, gave missions to sailors and traders as well as country missions - returning every spring to visit those he had baptized and to ensure that they were being treated humanely. During these missions he avoided, whenever possible, the hospitality of the planters

and overseers, and would lodge instead in the slave quarters.

His work on behalf of the slaves did not prevent him from caring also for the souls of the more well-to-do members of society and for the traders and visitors (including Muslims and English Protestants) to Cartagena, or for condemned criminals, many of whom he prepared for death. He was also a frequent visitor to the city's hospitals. Through years of unrelenting toil and the force of his own extraordinary personality the situation of the slaves slowly improved. He himself became a moral force, indeed the apostle of Cartagena.

Illness finally forced the saint into his room. He was attacked by a paralytic illness resembling Parkinson's Disease. He lingered another four years, largely forgotten and neglected, and died on September 9, 1654. The city magistrates, who'd previously considered him something of a nuisance for his frequent petitions on behalf of the slaves, ordered a public funeral and he was buried with great pomp and ceremony. It was only after his death that the vast scope of Claver's ministry began to be realized; which was weighty even before the astronomical numbers of people he personally baptized - more than anyone else - is considered.

He was canonized in 1888, and Pope Leo XIII declared him the worldwide patron of missionary work among black slaves.