

Father's Notes

September 8, 2024

On Monday, we celebrate the memorial of a beloved saint, Peter Claver. Born in 1581, near Barcelona, Spain, he entered the Jesuits and soon sensed a call to serve the foreign missions. He was sent to the new world, Cartagena, Colombia.

Spanish colonists had arrived about 120 years earlier. Those who came from the European continent were a mixed lot: those who sought to make their homeland more powerful, and there were those who sought to follow Jesus' command to go and make disciples. The distinction between these groups was not always clear.

In many cases, though not all, the indigenous peoples of the new world were overpowered by the Europeans. Some colonials justified their actions saying by that the indigenous peoples didn't have souls. In 1573, ten years before Peter Claver's birth, Pope Paul III declared that the indigenous peoples were to be regarded with dignity, as human beings.

The African slave trade was also underway when Peter arrived in Cartagena, an important port city for this purpose. Some of the slaves were men, women and children that had been captured by the Spanish traders, and others were what we might simply call the misfits of their African society—war criminals, the mentally unstable, the sick—people that the African chiefs were willing to sell. Every year about 10,000 slaves were shipped across the ocean to work in the mines and farms. It's estimated that because of the horrible conditions, only two-thirds survived the long trip.

Peter responded to this atrocity. When a ship arrived with slaves, he went to the dock and gained access to the cargo-area. There, he cared for their wounds and provided food and drink. He wrote, "Yesterday, May 30, 1627, on the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, numerous blacks, brought from Africa, disembarked from a large ship. (With food), we hurried toward them.... forcing our way through the crowd until we reached the sick. Large numbers were lying on wet ground, in mud." Peter wanted to restore their human dignity, but also to teach them Christianity: "We must speak to them with our hands before we try to speak to them with our lips."

Some opposed his efforts, mostly those who profited from the slave trade, but also his brother Jesuits, some of whom believed Peter was desecrating the sacraments by administering them to slaves. When he invited the black slaves to church, some Christians refused to sit near them.

Having spent the duration of his life in this work, Peter contracted an illness from a widespread epidemic, at age 69. For the few years he remained alive, he mostly remained alone in his room. He died on September 8th, 1654. He referred to himself as Aethiopum Servus (Servant to the Africans).

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