

SAINT MARTIN DE PORRES

APOSTLE OF CHARITY

1579-1639

BY

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TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY

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FROM THE ITALIAN ORIGINAL

I FIORETTI DEL BEATO MARTINO

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Official Approbation of the Dominican Order

This interesting and inspiring biography of St. Martin de Porres was originally entitled *I Fioretti del Beato Martino* and was presented to the public in 1957. In that same year the Master General of the Dominican Order, now Michael Cardinal Browne, O.P., wrote a letter of commendation to the author, Giuliana Cavallini.

At the time of the canonization of St. Martin de Porres the biography was published in a new edition by the Office of the Dominican Postulator General, under the title, *Vita de San Martino*. At the same time, the English version was prepared for the *Cross and Crown Series of Spirituality* of the B. Herder Book Company by Caroline Holland of Chicago. New material was added to the original volume in order to make this biography as definitive as possible.

I am very pleased that Father Jordan Aumann, O.P., General Editor of the *Cross and Crown Series of Spirituality*, has selected this biography for American distribution. I am certain that through the medium of this excellent English translation the life of St. Martin de Porres will be made known to many more readers and those who are already devoted to him will gain a more intimate knowledge of his holy life.

I am also happy to state that by the authority of the Most Reverend Aniceto Fernández, O.P., Master General of the Dominican Order, this volume is recognized and presented as an official biography of St. Martin de Porres.

May God, through the intercession of St. Martin, bless this volume with every success.

FATHER TARCISIUS PICCARI, O.P.

Postulator General

Santa Sabina, Rome, Italy

Preface

In the summer of 1955, when I finished this biography of Martin de Porres, I wrote a Preface as an explanation of the title I had given the work: *I Fioretti del Beato Martino* (*The Little Flowers of Blessed Martin*).

Now, after Martin's canonization and with the publication of these "*fioretti*" in English, I find nothing to be changed in the original Preface, although the title of the book cannot remain as it was in the Italian edition. A translation of the original title into English would have little meaning.



These "*fioretti*" are neither a chronological nor a critical story of the life of Martin de Porres. They are episodes taken from the testimony given during the process of his beatification. The persons who gave the testimony had known Martin during his lifetime and they were asked to state under oath what they knew about him. It is certain, therefore, that these witnesses faithfully presented the facts as they knew them. The events were too extraordinary to be forgotten, especially since so little time had elapsed since they happened.

The sole justification for the presentation of these extraordinary details of the life of Martin de Porres—inexplicable from any natural point of view—is the person who emerges from the sworn testimony of the witnesses. The inclusion of

such details is natural and even necessary, for no portrait of the Saint would be complete if these exterior manifestations of his sanctity were omitted.

We can accept, and even enjoy, these amazing details, knowing that the authentic sanctity of the Dominican Brother of Lima rests on another basis: the constant and heroic practice of the virtues, and principally that of charity, the virtue which unquestionably marked his whole life.

Many lives of Martin de Porres have been written in the last hundred years, especially in the United States, where devotion to him has grown in a remarkable manner ever since 1866. In that year Father Felice Barotti erected a chapel in Washington as a center for the African-Americans to whom he had dedicated his apostolate. The chapel was placed under the patronage of St. Martin whom Father Barotti proposed as a model and a symbol of hope for the suffering victims of racial prejudice.

Martin de Porres, whose sanctity was so rich and varied in its aspects, attracts and comforts. A true son of St. Dominic, faithful to the severest traditions of his Order, Martin had a mind and heart open and ready to respond to all the needs of his fellow men. And while he planned and carried out magnificent projects in what we today would call the social apostolate, he did not disdain at the same time to exercise his skills and even his gift of healing in the service of animals and plants.

Among the numerous books written about Martin, many of them of great importance, these "*fioretti*" blossom in all humility. They bloom as a result of the spiritual development

of that “tree of love” which was the soul of Martin de Porres, to use an expression of St. Catherine of Siena. In her allegory of the tree planted in the soil of humility and nourished by prayer, she states that such a tree blossoms in charity, to the praise of God and the benefit of men.



I add to the original Preface only the hope that these “*fioretti*,” crossing the frontiers of the land where they blossomed, may carry to the vast world the sweet odor of the sanctity of Martin de Porres and inspire in souls a love for the beauty of a holy life. May they also contribute in their own small way to that revitalization of the Mystical Body of Christ which Pope John XXIII earnestly desired as a result of the Ecumenical Council, as he stated in his solemn address at the canonization of Martin de Porres.

GIULIANA CAVALLINI

Missionary of the Schools

Chapter 1

HIS CHILDHOOD

*Her ways are beautiful ways;
and all her paths are peaceable.*

Prov. 3:17

St. Martin de Porres was born in Lima, Peru, on 9 December 1579.

There is no need to describe Lima nor to outline its history. Those who are uncertain of its geographical position need only consult a map of South America. If one follows the outline of the western coast from north to south, Lima will be found about one-third the way down the length of the continent, near its port, Callao.

The story of the first decade of the Spanish conquest is such a mixture of daring and cruelty that admiration for these intrepid pioneers is cut short by horror at their inhumanity. The first white men to arrive on the shores of the New World were, it is true, fearless in facing and overcoming the thousand unknown dangers presented by a deadly climate and a savage land infested with wild animals and with insects even more dangerous than the beasts. But at the same time, thirst for gold made them masters of cruelty, contrasting strangely with that character of heralds of the Gospel, in which they gloried, and probably with sincere intentions.

It is almost a miracle that the Catholic faith was established among the Indians in spite of the brutality practiced by the conquistadors.

When Hatuey, chief of Cuba, was offered baptism at the very moment that the invaders, dissatisfied with the gold he had offered to sate their cupidity, were preparing to burn him alive, he asked the missionary priest, "Will the white Christians also enter into paradise?" Receiving an affirmative reply, he is said to have retorted, "Then I prefer to do without it!"¹

But the Indians soon found staunch defenders. In 1510, twelve Friars Preachers founded a monastery on the island of Santo Domingo, and on a Sunday of the same year, one of them, Father Anthony de Montesino, denounced the cruelty of the Spaniards from the pulpit: "Because of the cruelty and tyranny you have inflicted upon an innocent and peaceful people, you are farther from salvation than the Moslems who deny the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ!" And he declared that neither he nor his fellow priests would give absolution to those who mistreated the natives.

Indifferent to all protests and threats, Father Montesino continued to preach constantly on the same theme until the day he embarked upon a ship leaving for Spain so that he could plead the cause of the Indians before the King. It was not easy to gain an audience with King Ferdinand; all those interested in the unlimited plundering of the land across the sea impeded him. It seems that finally Father Anthony (a man whose courageous heart was matched by his athlete's

¹ Cf. L. D. Baldwin, *The Story of the Americas*, p. 91 (New York: 1943).

physique) gained entrance to the King's presence by sheer force, throwing aside an attendant stationed at the door to prevent his entering. The first laws for the protection of the rights of the Indians, known as the Laws of Burgos of 1514, resulted from his audience with the King.

But the preaching of Father Anthony had an even greater effect. It aroused the interest of Bartholomew de Las Casas, then a diocesan priest, but later to become a Dominican and a bishop. He would dedicate his whole life to the cause of the Indians and would become a model for all defenders of the natives against the tyranny of the whites.²

The new laws, which were to crown the efforts of Las Casas in 1542, were not yet promulgated when Pizarro and Almagro, with few men but great daring, came down from Panama in a small boat, journeying southward towards the fabled land of the Incas. It is sad, but not surprising, that the conquest of Peru was marked by the same scenes of horror that had been staged in regions conquered in the preceding years. The inhabitants of Peru had reached a high degree of culture and their system of government was perfectly organized. The contrast between the brutal methods of conquest and the customs of a population far from primitive was therefore all the more striking. In fact, in some respects the Peruvians were more civilized than the Europeans who used violent means to substitute their authority for that of the Incas.³

² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 109–10.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 150 ss.

In a few years the whole country was conquered for the Spanish. On the feast of the Epiphany, 1535, Pizarro laid the foundation of the new capital, destined to replace the old capital of Cuzco, which was situated in the mountains and too far from the seaport. This new capital was at first called "City of the Kings," in memory of the day of its foundation, but later the commemoration of the Three Kings was supplanted by the vivid and sonorous presence of the river which passes through the city, the Rimac. And from "Rimac" the name "Lima" was derived.⁴

The first years of the history of Lima were tormented ones, filled with the struggle not only between the Spaniards and the natives, but between the Spaniards themselves. The thirst for power and wealth, which made the conquerors

⁴ The *Enciclopedia Universal Ilustrada Europeo-Americana*, Espasa Calpe (vol. 51, p. 587, Rimac) explains the derivation of the name of Lima from that of the river Rimac by the habit of the Spanish conquistadors of changing into "l" the soft "r" of the local language, even though it is possible that the word "Lima" may derive from the pronunciation of the natives of the coastal regions, being less pure than that of the natives of the mountain areas. Since the word "*rimac*" in the Quechua language means "the speaker," it could have been given to the river as a poetical way of expressing the murmuring of its waters.

According to W. H. Prescott (*The History of the Conquest of Peru*, p. 258) the river derived its name from that of a temple situated in the valley and often frequented by the Indians because of its oracles.

D. Enrique Tusquets (*Los grandes contrastes de un continente*, p. 376) disregards the generally accepted etymology and writes: "Lima was founded by Pizarro ... and given the names of *Lima* and *City of the Kings*. He gave it the first name because of the great number of lime trees growing in the region, and the second, because he intended it, with the passage of time, to become the capital of the vast empire of the Spanish possessions in America." ("*Lima*" means fruit of the lime tree; the Peruvians call both the fruit and the tree "*lima*.")

capable of any cruelty that could open the door to treasure, led them to fight against one another in order to attain the posts of honor and profit. The city was not yet seven years old when Pizarro was murdered in his own palace, victim of a plot headed by the son of the same James de Almagro who had been Pizarro's companion in the conquest of Peru, and of whose death Pizarro cannot be held innocent.

Nevertheless, with the rapidity with which every seed brought from the Old World seemed to develop in the New, Lima swiftly acquired enough calm to become a center of culture as well as the political and commercial capital. In 1551 the Dominicans founded a university there, the University of St. Mark, the first to be established in all the territory of the two Americas. Lima had been founded only sixteen years previously.

The sons of St. Dominic were the first to preach the Gospel in the land of the Incas. They had shared the perils of the Peruvian adventure with Pizarro in the same boat in which he and his men sailed south through the Pacific. Missionaries of many other orders followed them: Franciscans, Augustinians, Mercedarians, Jesuits. But Divine Providence reserved for the first missionary workers the finest fruits of the seed of the Gospel sown between the seacoast and the forbidding heights of the Andes.

The first bishop was a Dominican, Vincent de Valverde. The first center of culture was Dominican, the University of St. Mark. And, far more important than all else, the first saint was a Dominican, St. Rose of Lima.

But even before the waters of baptism had infused, together with sanctifying grace, the seed of sanctity into the soul of little Rose of Santa María—in fact, seven years before—another privileged soul, destined to reach the heights of perfection in the Order of Friars Preachers, received the gift of supernatural life at the same baptismal font in the church of St. Sebastian in Lima.

Martin was the son of John de Porres, a noble Spanish gentleman and Knight of the Order of Alcántara, and of Anna Velázquez a free black woman. When the father saw that the infant’s skin was black, he did not wish to acknowledge the baby as his son. The baptismal registry carries the entry, “Martin, son of an unknown father.” But later, John repented and legally acknowledged Martin and Joan, the daughter born two years later.⁵

Martin’s first years were spent with his mother and little sister. Since he was quick-witted, Anna sometimes sent him to do the shopping. Martin left with the money and the empty basket. Often—but not always—he returned without any money and the basket still empty. There were so many poor in Lima, and Martin could not refuse those who asked for charity.

And how much time he took to go to the market! He could spend half the morning disposing of a few pennies. Not because he stopped along the way to play with other lads his age, but because if he came across a church, he went in

⁵ *Responsio ad Novas Animadversiones R.P.D. Fidei Promotoris super Dubio ecc.*, pp. 4–5 (Romae: 1742). All succeeding references to this source will be simply *Responsio*.

to greet his heavenly Father, who had made him His son, while his own earthly father had repudiated him. He passed from the light of the street to the mysterious and prayerful shadows of the church, and going the length of the spacious nave with the light step of a child, he knelt before the altar. There he stayed, absorbed in prayer, his huge eyes, wide open and showing very white in his black face, fixed on the crucifix or on a picture of the Virgin, wrapped in the silence of the soaring arches and in the profound peace so different from the noisy squalor of his own home.

But at home he had to settle accounts with his mother, who, having very little money, could not approve the generosity of her little son. “See, it’s your fault that today we have nothing to eat; not only you, but also your little sister and myself!”

Martin took his punishment in silence. If he wept, it was over his mother’s difficulties. And at the first opportunity, he repeated the offense.⁶

In the meantime, the little circle of acquaintance of Anna Velázquez began to notice the child, so intelligent and so good. There were perhaps those who shook their heads and criticized John de Porres who, rich though he was, left the mother and children to live in misery.

At that period John de Porres did not live in Lima, but in Guayaquil, Ecuador, where he had a government post. He went to Lima only from time to time. After one of these visits to Lima, he returned to Guayaquil with the two children

⁶ Cf. H. G. Gaffney, *Blessed Martin, Wonder Worker*, pp. 12–13 (Tralee: 1949).

and kept them with him, treating them as a father should treat his own children. In addition to engaging competent teachers for them, he himself completed their education by daily contact, spending with them whatever free hours he could spare from his official duties.

Thus it happened that on one occasion, when taking a walk with Martin and Joan, John de Porres met one of his uncles, James de Miranda, who asked him who the two children were. He answered frankly, “They are my children, and those of Anna Velázquez. I have them with me here, and I am seeing to their education.”⁷

Martin was then eight years old, Joan six.

This serene interlude did not last long, perhaps not more than four years. It was interrupted and ended when John de Porres left Ecuador to govern Panama. Joan was entrusted to the care of the uncle, James de Miranda, and John took Martin back to Lima to his mother. He wanted the boy to be confirmed before his own departure for Panama. Before leaving Lima, John gave Anna sufficient funds to permit Martin to complete his education and to learn a trade, and also enough money to ensure their being freed from privation.

⁷ *Responsio*, p. 5.

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