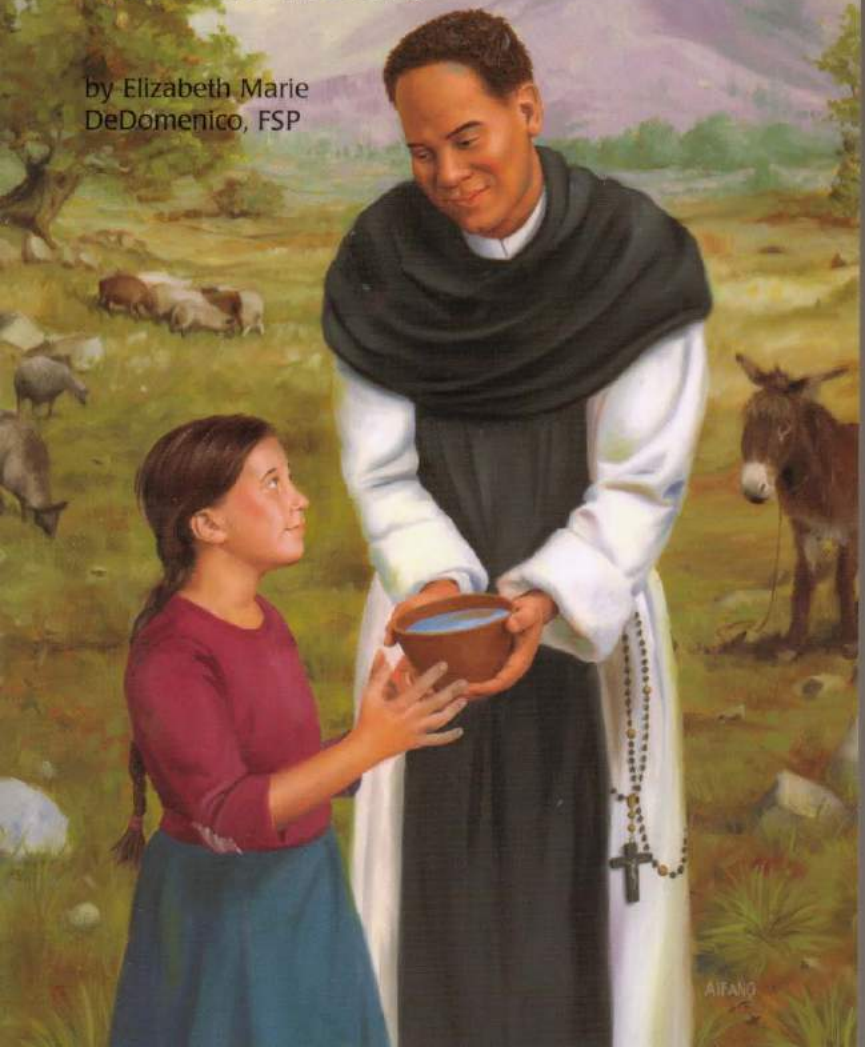


Saint Martin de Porres

Humble Healer

by Elizabeth Marie
DeDomenico, FSP



EMPIRE OF THE INCAS

While Christians all over the world were preparing for the birth of the Savior, little Martin de Porres was born on December 9, 1579. Only forty-eight years before, on this very same date, Our Lady of Guadalupe had appeared to Juan Diego in Mexico. Martin was born in Lima, Peru, far south of Mexico, the land of the Aztec Indians. Lima was a royal city that had been part of the land of the Incas, another great empire of ancient people.

Just fifty years before Martin's birth the powerful Inca people had ruled an area that today covers the countries of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and northern Chile. They cared for the land and grew many crops to feed their people. They worshiped the sun and moon and had a ruler they honored and obeyed as a god. They built temples and roads throughout the land. But in 1533, Francisco Pizarro and his band of about two hundred soldiers conquered this great empire for the King of Spain. Pizarro chose Lima to be the capital of the new land.

Now the Spaniards ruled the Incas, and for many years they struggled to bring peace. They also sent missionaries to preach to the people and baptize those who wished to become Christian. The Dominicans, a religious Order founded by Saint Dominic in the 1200s, was the first Order to come to Peru. Dominican priests and brothers built churches, priories, and schools, and were a healing presence for the native peoples who had suffered so much under the Spanish conquerors.

On that sunny December day in 1579, Ana Velazquez bundled her newborn son in her arms and waited quietly. She was very tired. With a sigh, she gazed down at her baby. "My little one," Ana whispered, "you look too much like me and not at all like your father. I hope that he will accept you...."

Martin continued to sleep peacefully in his mother's arms. Ana couldn't take her eyes from the dark little face and tiny hands that were so perfect and yet so small.

All at once the door banged open. In strode Juan de Porres—Don Juan as he was known. Don Juan belonged to the Spanish nobility and had come to the New World seeking his fortune. While visiting in

Panama, he had met Ana, a beautiful black woman. She had fallen in love with the handsome Spaniard and they had come to live in the city of Lima.

Now, however, Ana was very anxious. Juan had never married her because her social status was far below his, and the law would not allow them to marry. What would become of her and her baby if Juan abandoned them?

"This is your son, Juan," said Ana, her eyes looking hopefully into his. The baby acknowledged the introduction with a big yawn.

As Juan de Porres looked down at his son, his face fell. But he said nothing.

"Father Polanco at San Sebastian's said he can baptize the baby right away," Ana continued, trying to fill the awkward silence with words. "Today, in fact. Juan and Ana will be the godparents. But we must hurry."

"I will not be coming," Don Juan said slowly. "I will not give the child my family name. You can have him baptized, however. I must be going now...I have business to attend to. Goodbye, Ana."

"Goodbye, Juan," Ana answered sadly. The door closed behind Juan, and Ana looked down at her sleeping infant. "I will

name you Martin, my little one," she said softly. "God in heaven will be your Father."



Later, at the baptism, Father Polanco asked for the name of the child's father in order to enter it on the birth certificate. Ana stared silently at the floor. Taking a pen, the priest wrote in the large baptismal register: "On Wednesday, December 9, 1579, I baptized Martin—father, unknown—mother, Ana Velazquez, a free woman. His godparents were Juan de Huesca and Ana de Escarcena. Signed: Antonio Polanco."

And that's how Martin began his life. It appeared that his father had rejected him and that he was going to suffer much because of the color of his skin. But God had wonderful plans for Martin. And no one could have guessed it, but the little child would bring great honor to the family of Juan de Porres.

THE MARKET

Eight-year-old Martin grinned as he looked out the window. The sky was clear and you could see for miles. Surely his mother would send him to the market today.

"What do you see, Martin?" asked Juana. She was just two years younger than Martin and resembled him with her dark hair, skin, and eyes. "I want to see, too." But even when she jumped up and down, Juana was too small to peer out the window.

"It's a good day to go to the market," Martin explained patiently. "The merchants will be out there today, with fruits and vegetables, and fresh bread, too! If Mama sends me, I'll get food for all of us to eat."

"I want to go!" Juana squealed. "I'm hungry. Please, can I go with you?"

"No, no," Martin soothed. "You're too little. But I'll bring back something special for you, Juana. I promise."

Ana had been watching from the kitchen. She smiled and sighed. Juan de Porres had gone off to Ecuador on govern-

ment business, leaving her on her own to provide for her small family. There was never enough money or food. But somehow it was hard to be sad with Martin around. He was the little man of the house and wanted to do all that he could to take care of his mother and sister.

"Here, Martin," Ana called. "I have a few coins for you today. You can go to the market, but make sure not to give the money away to the first poor person you meet!"

Martin excitedly swung his basket over his arm and tucked the money into a safe pocket. Today he had an important mission. He knew there was not much food left in the cupboard.

As he skipped down Espiritu Santo Street, Martin headed in the direction of the marketplace. The city of Lima was located in a valley, and the lovely Rimac River ran right through it. The Plaza de Armas was in the center of the city. There, too, stood the cathedral where the Spanish conquistador, Francisco Pizarro, had been buried after being murdered during the fighting that followed his victory over the Incan Indians.

Although he was not descended from the Incas, since he was of mixed Spanish and black ancestry, Martin loved the native

people and they loved him. He was always happy and helpful toward everyone. His smile lit up his face and brought joy wherever he went.

Martin enjoyed all the sights and sounds of the market: the merchants selling their goods, the townspeople as they went from stall to stall looking for bargains, the animals tied to poles or wagons to keep them from wandering away, the noisy children playing in the streets. Then there were the beautiful crafts, especially the colorful tapestries produced by the Indians. Their cloth weavings were the finest to be found anywhere.

Martin took his time, going from place to place, trying to make just the right choices so that he could stretch his money and fill his basket to the brim. Finally, the last coin was gone, and it was time to head back home. As Martin started off, he noticed a group of poor people with whom he had made friends. A few of them had caught sight of him.

"Martin, Martin!" called one of the beggars, his clothes torn and patched. Leaning on a cane to steady himself, the beggar waved for the young boy to come closer.

As Martin approached the ragged group, he found himself surrounded by the poor. Their hungry eyes and sad cries went straight to his heart.

"Martin, do you have anything for us today?" one boy asked hopefully.

"Of course," Martin responded with a smile. And before he knew what was happening, Martin was handing out the food he had just bought! His hungry friends went away happy and grateful, but Martin found himself staring down at an empty basket. *What will Mama say?* he worried.

On the way home Martin stopped in at the church. He paused before the altar, then genuflected and crossed himself reverently. Looking up at the large crucifix, Martin prayed, "Dear God, please take care of my family! I gave all our food away, and now I have nothing to bring my mother and sister.... I'm sorry if I did the wrong thing. But how can I say no to people who need my help?"

A few minutes later, Martin continued on his way. He was ready now to accept any scolding he might receive.

Back at home, Martin stood quietly before his mother and held out the empty basket. "See what you've done!" his mother



*Martin couldn't refuse the poor
who asked him for food.*

exclaimed. She was upset, but not surprised. "What we will have for dinner now? And what about your little sister? You don't want her to get sick, do you?"

Martin shuffled his feet. "I'm sorry, Mama," he murmured. "From now on I'll try to be very good."

"I know you mean well, Martin," Ana said quietly, resting her hand on his shoulder. "You must try harder next time, that's all. But now I have some news. Your father has returned to Lima, and he has something important to tell you."