

All Saints
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

November 1, 2020
Rev. Paul Moore

Becoming a Saint

San Martín de Porres was born in Lima, Peru in 1579. He was the illegitimate son of a Spanish nobleman and a freed slave woman of African and Indigenous descent. His mother bore the nobleman a daughter two years later, and then the children's father abandoned the family, leaving them destitute. Martin's mother survived by taking in laundry.

At the time, there was a law in Peru forbidding people of African or Indigenous descent entry into the religious orders. However, Martin was a person of prayer since his boyhood, and he wanted to enter the monastery. He was, therefore, accepted as a "donado," one given to the monastery to perform menial tasks. At 15 he entered a Dominican monastery and was permitted to wear the habit and live with the brothers, but he was not professed as a monk. He lived happily this way, working in the kitchen, begging for the needs of the monastery that the coffers could not cover, and giving food and money to the poor. When stories of miraculous cures began to gather around his ministrations to the poor, the Prior decided to turn a blind eye to the law and allow him to profess as a brother. He was later confirmed as a full member of the order, much to the consternation of many of his brother monks.

When an epidemic broke out in the city, Martin was on the forefront of taking care of the ill and dying. The monastery infirmary could not hold all the ill brothers, so Martin began taking people to his sister's house in town. When he also took in an indigenous man who had been stabbed, he was reproved by his Prior. His reply was, "Forgive my error, and please instruct me, for I did not know that the precept of obedience took precedence over that of charity." He was allowed to continue his work.

When we think of All Saints, we generally think in two categories. We think of our own saints, whose names we will read during communion, and who are remembered on the Ofrenda in front of the Altar. The survey I sent out last week addressed the role of these people in our lives. (By the way, thank you to those who participated.) Here are the highlights:

Among respondents, this day is really important. You expressed appreciation for the contributions of those who have gone before, mainly family, or a close friend. You are very aware of the way they still inform your thoughts and feelings, good and otherwise. Setting aside a day aside to remind us of our connection renews the bonds that transcend distance and death, and that we all have a common experience of loss. The Ofrenda is a beautiful expression of another culture's way of honoring those who have gone before. The marigolds, sacred to the Aztecs and the reminder of life in the midst of death. The sugar skulls that remind us that death is often bitter-sweet. We share with our Hispanic sisters and brothers, and we learn to love.

Along with our personal saints, we think of people like San Martin, patron of people of mixed blood, of those who care for the sick and those who seek racial harmony. Maybe you have your own personal "saint of the Church" that you appreciate,

- St. Francis of Assisi,
- St. Benedict of Nursia,
- St. Bavo of Ghent, patron saint of falconry.

Or maybe you choose a biblical saints, like Peter, Andrew or (one of my favorites,) Gideon. We look at their lives, both personal and general, and we see, in broad brushstrokes, those dimensions of the Kingdom described in the Beatitudes in today's Gospel lesson. Blessed are the meek, the poor in spirit, the humble of heart, those who mourn, those who thirst after God. In these kinds of people, the Kingdom of Heaven comes near to us.

But we don't normally think in terms of another idea from the first lesson today from Revelations. The scene in heaven painted for us there is of a great host of saints, dressed in white robes, who are lamenting before God for vindication. They have been through "the great ordeal." When you think about it, ordeals reveal saints. For Martín it was his mixed race, his illegitimate status and his poverty. For our own saints, perhaps it was the struggles of life that made them wise and compassionate so that their memory still informs and inspire our own lives. Maybe, like Martín's response to his Prior, they said something profoundly wise and humble that resonates with you. Perhaps, like his example of self-giving mercy, their examples taught you your own ideals for life.

But there are others who have undergone great ordeals. If the stories of your past loved ones still whisper in your heart, and if the stories of saints still inspire, who listens to those whose stories of ordeal are not heard?

I watched a documentary a number of years ago made by a Hispanic American journalist who rode the trains with the immigrants from Central America across Mexico to the US border. She told the chilling story of a brother and sister, 10 and 11, who were coming to the US to find their mother. All they knew was that she lived in Wisconsin. They made it across the border, and walked out into the desert, never to be seen again. Only God hears the full story of their ordeal.

Their story, as far as we know it, uncovers other stories. What about our world economy, politics and cultures make it so that these two children launched on such an impossible mission? Or what impels so many people we know in Resurrección to literally walk the soles off their feet in search of the American Dream for their children? The untold stories that are now being told about what it is really like to live as an African American, or Hispanic, or Asian, in the United States today are making us uncomfortable as a people. The legacy of the link between the economy we enjoy today and the institution of chattel slavery is not an easy thing to hear, and yet it is part of our story. These "saints" make us hear our own stories in another light. Perhaps hearing our untold stories, the unvarnished, the uncomfortable, the unsettling stories launch us on our own ordeal toward sainthood.

Here is a comforting thought: one need not die to become a saint. The second lesson today from I John has some interesting language in it. We are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. The what we will be has not yet been revealed—and in that hope we purify ourselves.

Ordeals are those purifying, difficult moments we live through that strip away the soil and reveal the bedrock of who we are. We go through them individually. So many of the high medieval saints began their lives as second sons of noblemen who became soldiers. Something happened that turned them inside out, like Francis meeting the lepers on the way home from battle, and from then on, they live a radically different life. In our own lives, we hear stories of how we caused pain and suffering in others that we did not recognize, appreciate or acknowledge. Or perhaps there was a moment when we realized that everything we'd lived for was of no importance in the grand scheme of things; or we suffer a severe illness, a tragedy, a financial crisis, or being victimized by cruel people, or we fall in love, or are overcome by beauty at just the right moment. These are turning points, purifying ordeals.

We go through them as a society. The anguish of a divided people is putting us all through an ordeal as we approach Tuesday's election. I think of our sisters and brothers in Resurrección who are already fearing violence from the government AND white supremacist groups in the area. What is November 4th going to look like for them? If the Republican candidate wins, will that so empower these groups that they take it upon themselves to engage in violence against non-white people? Or if the Democratic candidate wins, will it so anger these groups that they do the same thing? We are tied together, them and we, in the Communion of All the Saints. What happens to them happens to us, and vice versa. I am ready to offer our house, and even the church as sanctuary.

All Saints Day calls us to live into our own ordeals; to not be afraid the difficulty of living true to our faith and our God, to stand up for truth, justice and mercy that leads to peace and harmony and to hold aloft the banner of the Beloved Community, because we belong to the communion of the saints of Jesus Christ.