

St. Peter Claver



1581 -1654

Feast Day:
September 9

St. Peter Claver was born to a wealthy Catholic family near Barcelona, Spain. He entered the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, at the age of 20, and he resolved to spend his life serving others in the colonies of New Spain in the Americas.

Claver arrived in Cartagena, in modern day Columbia, in 1610. There, he was moved by the plight of the African slaves from West Africa. Thousands of slaves were brought into Cartagena each year, even though two popes had prohibited the slave trade by papal decree.

Once Fr. Claver was ordained, he undertook his mission to the slaves with fervor. He would board the slave ships as soon as they docked and begin ministering to those who had survived the journey. Conditions aboard the ships were dismal. The holds were crowded, dirty, smelly, and disease-infested.

After the enslaved people had been moved to holding pens, Fr. Claver would bring them medicine, food and drink, and affirm their human dignity. Peter would also catechize the slaves using pictures and interpreters. Peter is said to have baptized over 300,000 enslaved people. Fr. Claver's mission fulfilled Jesus' call to give drink to the thirsty, not only by satisfying their actual thirst, but by satisfying their thirst for God and dignity. Fr. Claver spent the final four years of his life too sick to leave his room, and he died in 1654. Pope Leo XIII canonized St. Peter Claver in 1888 and declared him the patron Saint of missionary work among African peoples.

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