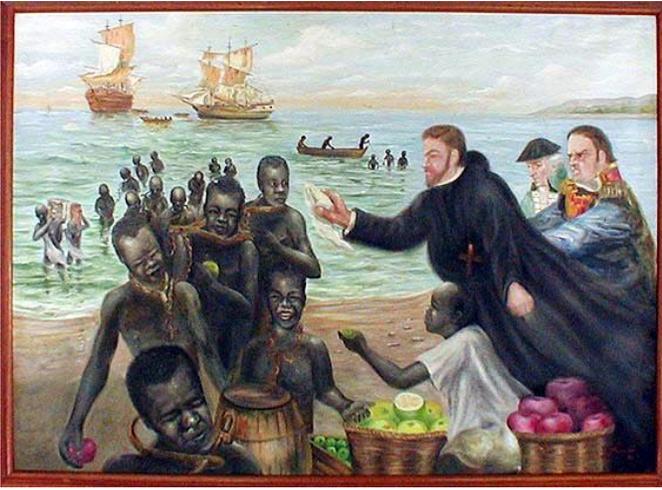


## Saint Peter Claver (Feast Day September 9)



Saint Peter Claver (June 26, 1580–September 8, 1654) (Spanish: San Pedro Claver Corberó) was a Jesuit priest who, due to his remarkable life and work, became the patron saint of slaves, of Colombia and of African Americans.

The Spanish settlers in the Americas had a perceived need for laborers both to cultivate the lands which they had conquered and to work the gold mines. European diseases decimated the indigenous peoples, and the Spanish replaced them as a default labor force with slaves brought from Africa. The coasts of Guinea, the Congo, and Angola became a market for slave-dealers. Due to its position on the Caribbean Sea, The Colombian city of Cartagena became a chief slave-mart of the New World. A thousand slaves landed there each month. The great demand for slaves in the

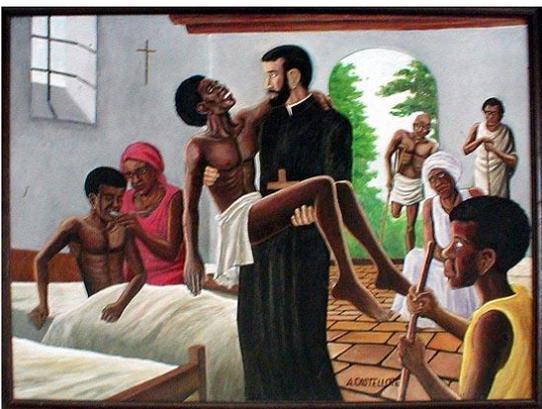
Americas meant that the trade was extremely profitable for merchants, even though as many as one-third of the slaves died on the voyage from Africa to South America. The slave ships arrived with hundreds of slaves lying chained together in the reeking hold of the ship, many of them already dead. When slave ships arrived, even in the middle of the night, St. Peter Claver ran out to meet them with a team of interpreters who knew the various African dialects. They brought food and clothes to the living and removing the bodies of those who had died. St. Peter personally cared for the weakest first and took the sick to a nearby hospital he had built. Once the slaves regained their strength, he began to teach them the Good News of Christ. Eventually he baptized them into the Faith. St. Peter would baptize small groups of slaves and give them all the same saint name. This was so that they could help each other remember the saint name which was foreign to them and difficult to remember.

St. Peter dedicated his life to the service of these people, humbly caring for the lepers and those suffering from smallpox, cleaning their sores and consoling them when others were disgusted by their diseases. He and the slaves he ministered to would prepare great banquets to celebrate holy days, inviting and ministering to the lepers, slaves, and beggars. St. Peter called himself “the slave of the slaves forever.” He would not show any preference to the wealthy Spanish colonists who also sought his counsel. Wealthy Spanish ladies would have to stand in line with the African slaves in order to go to confession to St. Peter.

Some of the Spanish Colonists did not agree that it was a good thing to give the slaves a sense of dignity as St. Peter did. Some of merchants and landowners despised St. Peter Claver, but nevertheless he continued his efforts to help the slaves until his death in 1654. His efforts were continuously supported by his Jesuit religious order.

An excerpt from one of his letters:

*Yesterday, May 30, 1627, on the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, numerous blacks, brought from the rivers of Africa, disembarked from a large ship. Carrying two baskets of oranges, lemons, sweet biscuits, and I know not what else, we hurried toward them. When we approached their quarters, we thought we were entering another Guinea. We had to force our way through the crowd until we reached the sick. Large numbers of the sick*



*were lying on wet ground or rather in puddles of mud. To prevent excessive dampness, someone had thought of building up a mound with a mixture of tiles and broken pieces of bricks. This, then, was their couch, a very uncomfortable one not only for that reason, but especially because they were naked, without any clothing to protect them.*

*We laid aside our cloaks, therefore, and brought from a warehouse whatever was handy to build a platform. In that way we covered a space to which we at last transferred the sick, by forcing a passage through bands of slaves. Then we divided the sick into two groups: one group my companion approached with an interpreter, while I addressed the other group. There were two blacks, nearer death than life, already cold, whose pulse could scarcely be detected. With the help of a tile we pulled some live coals together and placed them in the middle near the dying men. Into this fire we tossed aromatics. Of these we had two wallets full, and we used them all up on this occasion. Then, using our own cloaks, for they had nothing of this sort, and to ask the owners for others would have been a waste of words, we provided for them a smoke treatment, by which they seemed to recover their warmth and the breath of life. The joy in their eyes as they looked at us was something to see.*

*This was how we spoke to them, not with words but with our hands and our actions. And in fact, convinced as they were that they had been brought here to be eaten, any other language would have proved utterly useless. Then we sat, or rather knelt, beside them and bathed their faces and bodies with wine. We made every effort to encourage them with friendly gestures and displayed in their presence the emotions which somehow naturally tend to hearten the sick.*

*He became the prophet and miracle worker of Cartagena, and many were convinced that often God would not have spared the city save for him. During his life he is said to have baptized and instructed in the Faith more than 300,000 of the Africans brought to the Americas. He was beatified July 16, 1850, by Pope Pius IX, and canonized January 15, 1888, by Pope Leo XIII. His feast is celebrated on September 9, which marks the day after his death on September 8 (the same day as the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary). On July 7, 1896, he was proclaimed the special patron of all the Catholic missionaries who work with Africans peoples living throughout the world.*

