

# GUIDES

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## Peter Claver, Slave of the Slaves

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Pedro Trigo





# PETER CLAVER, SLAVE OF THE SLAVES

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This being the year the 125th anniversary of the canonization by Leo XIII of Peter Claver, a Catalan Jesuit born in Verdú (Lleida), we thought it would be interesting to publish this study, at once both profound and critical, about the extensive ministry of Peter Claver among his beloved African slaves.

This booklet is directed to all persons who would like to know more about this saint and his manner of evangelizing, which is quite different from today's catechetical programs. The article was first published in *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* (2004).

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# INTRODUCTION

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Peter Claver is an extreme case of social solidarity, both for his achievements and for the perspective that made him act as he did. He dedicated himself body and soul for thirty-eight years to the slaves in the port of Cartagena, and he did so with very effectively and to the great satisfaction of his flock. That involves living a life carried to the extreme. But even more than that, it means living life “from the other side of history,” that is, by belonging to the slaves. Peter Claver dispossessed himself in order to belong to those who were dispossessed of all their rights, including the right to dispose of themselves.

The legitimacy of slavery in a Christian society was justified by distinguishing between soul and body. The souls of the slaves continued to be free and belonged to God; their bodies, that is, their labor power, were alienated from them since they belonged to the master. This literally diabolical separation was possible because of the dualism characteristic of Christendom, which became more severe after Trent. In order to belong to the slaves, Claver mortified his body so that he could live almost exclusively as a splendid symbol of God’s love for them. We would have a hard time finding a saint who chastised his body as severely as Claver did, and certainly there was no other who has embraced and caressed as many people as he did with so much love.

The relation between solidarity and the body is a critical topic in our post-modern era, and this shows a solid advance with respect to the modern era. Caring is a basic attitude of our times. Christianity, given its view of the universe as creation, adopts that perspective of caring but also makes it dialectical. Though coming from another epoch, the case of Peter Claver throws much light on how we can effectively engage this topic in our own following of Jesus of Nazareth.



# 1 LIFE AND SOURCES

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Claver was born in Verdú (Lleida) in 1580. After studying in his hometown, he was sent by his parents to Barcelona, where he pursued general studies, including four years of grammar and one of rhetoric.

## 1.1 Biographical sketch

Claver entered the Society of Jesus in 1602. He made his novitiate in Tarragona, where he manifested extraordinary fervor. From there he was sent to Gerona, where he studied humanities for a year, and in 1605 to Mallorca to study philosophy. There, at the college of Montesión, he met someone who would play a major role in his life, Brother Alonso Rodríguez, an elderly man who had worked long years as a porter. Peter's superior gave him permission to speak for fifteen minutes each day with Brother Alonso, who inculcated in him devotion, humility, mortification, and his missionary vocation. Brother Alonso gave Peter his spiritual notebook, which Peter read assiduously throughout his life and which, with the General's permission, he left to the novitiate in Tunja when he became sick.

Having asked to go on the missions, Claver returned to the Iberian peninsula at the end of 1608, and finally in 1610, as he was beginning his second year of theology, he was sent to the Americas. Interestingly, he traveled alone and on a boat that was not very seaworthy, but he arrived in Cartagena without a problem. From there he was sent to Bogota, where from 1612 to 1615 he continued his theology studies, culminating in the *ad gradum* exam, which he passed. At his funeral, the vicar general of Cartagena, who was administering the diocese *sede vacante*, spoke appreciatively of the times when the two men had studied together and had great praise for Peter's intelligence and integrity.

In 1615 he was assigned to Cartagena, and he was ordained a priest there the following year. He began his ministry to the slaves alongside Father Alonso de Sandoval, but all the work fell on the new priest's shoulders when Father Alonso was called to Peru in 1617. Sandoval had arrived in Cartagena in 1605, and he continued to minister to the Africans until his death in 1652. In 1623 he finished his treatise, *De instauranda aethiopum salute* [On Assuring the Salvation of the Ethiopians], the only systematic work on the evangelization of Africans in the Americas; it was inspired by the treatise José de Acosta SJ, *De procuranda indorum salute* [On Assuring the Salvation of the Indians]. Sandoval's work demonstrates his great erudition and his ability to visualize situations and systematize experiences. He was a fine teacher for Peter Claver, who followed his methods and his spirit while adapting them to his own character. In April 1622 Claver made his solemn profession, signing the vow document with the formula which would define his life: *Petrus Claver, aethiopum semper servus* [Peter Claver, Forever a Servant of the Ethiopians].

In his biographical sketch of Claver, the historian Astráin says that his fellow Jesuits "viewed him as a poor man" who was not much good for anything "except what he was doing: catechizing the ignorant blacks" who disembarked in Cartagena and were then distributed to other parts of the continent. Astráin confirms his assessment with documents such as the secret reports sent to Rome by superiors. A report sent in 1616 states: "Fr. Peter Claver: intelligence, average; judgment, below average; prudence, lacking; business experience, lacking; academic learning, average; aptitude, useful for preaching and dealing with Indians." The historian further informs that the reports sent to Rome in 1642 describe Claver's "intelligence, judgment, prudence, and experiences as *mediocre*; he is said to be outstanding only in the ministry of catechizing the blacks. The 1649 catalog makes a slight change in the depiction: his intelligence is said to be good, but his prudence is judged scant." It is true that Claver was never proposed for the post of superior or consulted about Jesuit matters —and that despite the fact that there were few professed fathers. The only position that he held, besides his dedicated work with the Africans, was that of prefect of the church building.

It is worth considering why a person so notable in many ways was so poorly esteemed by his colleagues. This may be explained partly by the skill he had for hiding his good qualities and always belittling himself, even though such behavior should have been a reason for esteeming him in an epoch when so many others where ambitioning solemn profession and important posts. His attitude in this regard is revealed in a letter he wrote to the General, asking not to be given any grade in the Society but simply to be left with the simple vows made at the end of the novitiate. In his response, the General said that he was edified by his proposal but that Claver should remain indifferent to what the Society determined.

He was said to be mediocre in business matters, but when it came to the complicated business of dealing with the slaves, he performed perfectly well. The



same can be said regarding his careful organization of the Lenten and Easter seasons. It was important for him, for example, to have translators available for each African language, even though he himself could speak the common language of Angola. Since it was difficult to find translators who were constantly on hand, he wrote to the General in 1626 asking for persons to be assigned to this work as their exclusive mission. The General responded to him in 1628, enthusiastically supporting his proposal and ordering the Provincial to arrange to have assigned to this work the eight slaves Claver was requesting.

Claver's main problem, it seems, was in matters of judgment or prudence. For many Jesuits, superiors among them, his weakness in such a critical area was serious enough to make them question his fitness for the Society. This discussion takes us directly into the heart of Claver's ministry, but we will leave that until later. First we will describe the key elements that are in play.

We finish this sketch of his life by saying that he was struck down by a deadly epidemic that spread through the city in 1651. Upon returning from the Easter mission that he gave on the haciendas every year, his limbs were shivering so badly that soon he was unable to say Mass or even stand up. With the help of his faithful interpreters, he continued as best he could helping the lepers and doing other ministries until he died in 1654. On his sickbed he rejoiced at hearing read to him the story of the life of his teacher, Brother Alonso Rodríguez, written by Francisco Colín in 1652. His funeral was a veritable apotheosis.

## **1.2 Characteristics of the sources**

Our study of Peter Claver will start with the documents that emerged from the processes of his beatification and canonization. We will analyze these texts, situating them in their epoch, which was one of Spanish decadence as Hispanic America was consolidated into Creole America. The cultural ambience was American baroque, mainly a matter of sensibility. The religious ambience was that of American post-Tridentine, within which popular baroque piety flourished. Such piety was common in the Society of Jesus, which had been shaped by Fr. General Acquaviva into an extreme and remarkable expression of the counter-reformation.

As with all material of this kind, we should keep in mind that the questions that appear in the documents conform to a conception of sanctity that acts as a parameter. In other words, the persons testifying (and they testify because they believe in the sanctity of the person) must demonstrate that the person has fulfilled the requirements stipulated by the Holy See for him to be declared a saint. If they were allowed to give their testimony freely, what would come to light might be quite different; it would be what impressed the witnesses most about the person and what their own idea of sanctity was. They could not answer freely, however, but had to accept the model proposed and use it as a measure of the person.

This resulted in a displacement of paradigms since this predetermined schema did not allow history to reveal what the people of this epoch really considered the heroic following of Christ to be. All the process did was confirm that within that epoch there did indeed exist a person who corresponded to the prototype established by the Holy See. The innovative inspiration of the Spirit was obscured; the following of Christ was made irrelevant; the newness of history and the originality of the follower of Christ were pushed to the margin. Nevertheless, despite the rigidity of this schema, it could not fail to reveal the authenticity of the saint, if he was indeed a saint, and this revelation was all more notable when the questionnaire was less rigid. This is very evident in the case of Claver: some questions were hardly answered by the witnesses or were answered generically or even reluctantly, while other questions elicited a veritable avalanche of testimony. The content of the testimony, moreover, was very concrete; it transmitted the deep emotional impact that the saint had left on the witnesses.

Another problem with this type of material is that it does not allow us to follow the person's development. Since it starts with the final state of his holiness, we do not know how he arrived at that level of Christian flourishing. All the witnesses in Claver's case were from Cartagena, and they spoke of him only from the time he was aged 36, when he was already involved as a priest in the singular ministry that he carried out all his life.

We are therefore impeded both in our genetic analysis (how he came to be a saint) and in our structural analysis. Since the witnesses had to respond to a predetermined questionnaire, the questions in which Claver's character was relevant were mixed with questions in which it was not. Such a procedure makes it extraordinarily difficult to determine the structural elements of his life. Not only that, but the description of his ministry and relevant events fails to capture their multidimensional integrity. Instead, the details of his ministry are mentioned only as examples of some virtue of the saint: his desire to propagate the faith, charity toward others, care of the sick, mortification, etc.

### **1.3 The testimony of Brother Nicolás González**

Special mention should be made of the contribution of Brother Nicolás González, who knew the saint for more than twenty-seven years, five before entering the Society and twenty-two as a fellow religious. As the sacristan of the church of which Peter Claver was the prefect, he was the saint's constant companion. In fact, he *had* to be such because of the so-called "companion rule," which dictated that no Jesuit could leave the house alone, and Nicolás was the one charged with accompanying Peter. The brother professed an immense affection and admiration for Claver, and he expressed it clearly on various occasions. The saint, in turn, had complete confidence in him.

Extending to 130 pages in the original manuscript, the testimony of Nicolás does not restrict itself to simply describing Claver the person; it shows that the brother understood not only the logic and the structure of Claver's ministries but also his most intimate motivations. His testimony should therefore be the basis for any biography written about Peter Claver. We can assume that he had some influence on the testimony of the African interpreters, but that does not mean that he dictated their testimony. They themselves had tremendous affection for the saint and venerated him devoutly, and they were skilled in their work. Still, Nicolás may have influenced their testimony by giving it order and form.

As if his own testimony were not enough, Brother Nicolás González acted as the procurator of Claver's cause in the final part of the process. His testimony is quite consistent and credible, not only because it provides an impressive amount of data but because it understands and interprets the data in a convincing way. What emerges, then, is a living portrait of the saint and, even more, the mystery of his life. Nicolás's testimony is shown to be trustworthy since it is corroborated by much complementary data and by independent studies of authoritative persons, who add details to the basic depiction given by Brother Nicolás but do not change its essence.

#### **1.4 Other testimonies**

There is a great variety of witnesses: they are men and women of all ages and from all social conditions, races, cultures, and states of life. One group includes the Jesuit brothers who lived with Claver and his African interpreters; they were his steady collaborators in the apostolate and shared the intimate details of his daily life. Another group is formed by the devotees of the Society of Jesus in Cartagena, who had close relations with the saint. Among these should be especially mentioned the individuals who asked for his spiritual guidance and who in turn helped him greatly in his apostolate with the Africans and the sick. Another significant group consisted of the religious of Saint John of God and other persons who collaborated with Claver specifically in his work in the hospitals. Others giving testimony included priests and religious of other orders, civil and church authorities, and ordinary citizens of Cartagena, many of whom had known him from the time they were children. There were also many common folk, including the sick and the poor whom he helped on a regular basis.

One group that is significantly absent is that of the Jesuit priests. Not one of them appears in the published acts, either because none testified or because the translator, an Italian historian, did not consider their testimony relevant (she did not translate all the testimonies since she sought to avoid making the text excessively long and repetitive). In an attempt perhaps to cover over this scandalous absence, the official translator of the acts into Latin and Italian identifies the Jes-

uit brothers who testified as “reverend fathers.” This striking omission might be explained in part by the fact that nine priests of the Jesuit college in Cartagena had died in the plague that struck three years before the saint died. Also, mention should be made of Father Diego Ramírez Fariña, to whom the witnesses constantly referred. This priest, who was assigned to carry on Claver’s apostolate, arrived at the college fifteen days before his death. Claver was very sick, but he was quite moved by the news. He was so happy that he got down and kissed Ramírez’s feet, and he recommended him as a confessor to one of his penitents. Thus, even though Ramírez intervened indirectly and testified that he considered Claver a saint, we insist that he had hardly any experience of living with him.

## 2 THE APOSTOLATE OF SAINT PETER CLAVER

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The testimonies that we possess make it clear that the key to Claver's life was his consecration to the Africans as an expression of his consecration to God. In fact, he wrote in his formula of profession that he was dedicating himself to the salvation of the Africans and making himself a slave of the slaves forever.

### **2.1 Dedication to the integral salvation of the Africans**

I want to insist that Claver's consecration formula was intensely personal: it was the supreme expression of his fundamental option, an option taken after a long process of allowing God's will to act upon his life so as to give him the freedom for complete commitment. Since the traditional vow formula did not appear to him to be sufficient for expressing his personal consecration, he added his commitment to the Africans and made it the key element, the one toward which all else flowed.

This commitment was understood and experienced as a dispossession of self in order to belong to others. And this belonging to others opened up channels and gave content to his life; it saved his life; it fulfilled his life and made it fecund. His was a life that gave life to other lives. But we should not forget that it was a religious consecration; it formed part of his consecration to God. For Claver this did not involve any contradiction because it was obvious to him that the welfare of the Africans was part of their integral salvation; it meant that they would live virtuous and valuable lives as sons and daughters of God but above all that they would be respected and kept healthy and strong.

For Claver, therefore, loving the Africans –or wanting to help them– and desiring their salvation did not present any dilemma; it was all the same thing because the salvation he sought for them was not something impersonal but highly personalized, even though it also involved objective elements such as Christian doctrine and baptism, and eventually confession, Mass, and the virtuous life. The core of his ministry was teaching prayer and the life that flowed from that; he encouraged people to have a personalized relation with God and with Jesus, with the Virgin and the saints. For Claver there was no dichotomy here since he sought the salvation of the African slaves by means of intimately personal relations; all the testimonies emphasize that he loved the Africans and treated them as though they were his own family, his brothers and sisters.

Our analysis, therefore, will be grounded in this apostolate to the Africans: those just arriving, who would be sold and transported to the south; those working in the city of Cartagena; and those laboring on the haciendas on the coast and along the rivers.

## **2.2 Apostolate with the “ignorant” blacks**

### *2.2.1 Reception and initial care for those arriving*

The obligatory frame of reference is the work, *De instauranda Aethiopum salute*, by Claver’s teacher and companion Luis de Sandoval, who died two years before he did, after forty years of ministry with the Africans of Cartagena. In this work Sandoval describes in considerable detail how the slaves are captured, how they make the crossing, in what condition they arrive in Cartagena, and how they are sold. They are bone-chilling descriptions which are fully corroborated by the witnesses’ testimonies, especially as regards the condition of the Africans when they arrived and the quarantine to which they were immediately subjected. The testimonies make it clear that every shipment included a group of slaves who arrived sick because of the wretched conditions of the crossing and who received help from no one. The confinement in the humid holds of the ships, the overcrowding, the bad food, and the accumulated excrement gave rise to contagious diseases of the skin, the flesh (infected sores and tumors), the digestive tract, and the respiratory system. In such conditions the stench had to be absolutely intolerable. The testimonies abound in their accounts of the sores, the pus, the decayed flesh, and the frequent diarrhea.

The stench and the fear of contagion left the sick isolated. They were kept naked and under quarantine; they received no medical attention or prophylactic measures.

Sandoval describes in detail the catechetical methods and the administration of baptism, and he shows how dedicated the Jesuits were to his ministry. The initial

testimonies describing Claver's apostolic work are divided according to various questions. The first question concerned the administration of baptism and the instruction given the Africans, the second referred to Claver's zeal for the salvation of souls, the third asked about his charity toward the sick, and the fourth about his charity in general.

Whenever Claver learned that a ship was coming, he was so overjoyed that he offered Masses for the person who gave him the news. Thus, the first person to find out would quickly advise him since they desired to have the Masses applied to themselves. After inquiring about which countries the Africans were coming from, Claver would then seek out appropriate interpreters. If there were none ready to hand, he would search the countryside and pay them or their masters whatever they asked. In the course of the years he built up a complete corps of interpreters, about eighteen in all, some of them multilingual. To prepare for the new arrivals, Claver would collect alms among his devotees and then go to the market with his interpreters to buy gifts. Finally he would sail out to the slave ships with the gifts.

On board the ship Claver, with the help of the interpreters, would welcome the Africans, embracing and consoling each one of them. He told them that he was there as the father of them all. He explained that their masters would not kill them but would put them to work and that if they behaved well, they would be treated well. Claver stressed these points and gave proofs of friendly treatment in order to counter the belief the Africans already had: as many testimonies make clear, they arrived thinking that they would be killed so that their fat could be extracted for fuel and their blood be used to paint ships. It was for this reason that they arrived full of dread and desperation; on the long sea journey many starved themselves to death or threw themselves into the sea. Claver assured them that God had brought them to America in order to make them his children and give them knowledge about himself.

Claver would ask whether any persons were seriously ill or any newborns in danger. If there were, he would seek them out and treat them with the medicines he had brought, and then he would give them various things to eat and drink. He would ask the arrivals whether they were baptized, and if they were not, he would do his best, with the help of interpreters, to prepare them for baptism. After solemnly baptizing them, he would continue to instruct them. He anointed them all with the holy oils.

Claver would speak to all the Africans on the ship and show them great affection. He would ask the ship captains and the slave owners to allow the sick to disembark first, and he with his interpreters would help them so that they suffered as little as possible in the transfer to land. When all had disembarked, he again sent the interpreters to welcome them with gifts and to assure them of their companionship and assistance. When he was older and his health was failing, Claver's superiors prohibited him from going out to the ships; he would then send the in-

terpreters with the appropriate instructions while he waited on the dock to receive the Africans. He made sure that the sick were transferred with the greatest of care, and he himself would help.

When the African were in the quarantined lodgings reserved for them, Claver continued to minister to them, embracing them, consoling them, and giving out gifts. He dedicated much time every day to attending to the sick personally. All the witnesses affirm that he did this with great love, patience, and effectiveness, as if they were members of his own family. He never gave the impression that he was doing penance, although the interpreters would remain with the sick only out of respect for him. All the witnesses insist the he appeared impassive, as if made of bronze; he seemed not to belong to this world since he was not affected by the stench or the repugnant aspects of the contagious diseases. The witnesses emphasize that his face would be transfigured by his great delight and affection, and they describe the care he took that the interpreters and his other companions not become infected. To keep the sick from being overwhelmed by their own stench, he prepared infusions of aromatic herbs and wrapped his own cloak around the sick. He was skillful in concocting remedies, which showed him to be not only extremely generous but highly effective.

It is not easy to grasp what the Africans must have been feeling. Several interpreters testified that they had arrived in Cartagena physically weak and greatly anguished but that Claver's attention to them won them over forever. They had been captured with violence, they had been transported without consideration, and they were being sold as merchandise. At the moment they were expecting death, there appeared in their midst this extraordinary person who could communicate with them in a radically different way. The Africans no doubt had a hard time understanding what was happening, but all the testimonies assert that they welcomed the friendly approach of Claver, whose attitude was totally sincere.

### *2.2.2. Instruction in Christianity*

The process of instruction in Christianity began in the quarters where the Africans were kept in quarantine as they recovered their strength and waited to be sold or transferred to the south. Claver obtained clothes for everyone, especially the women, since they arrived naked. For the instruction classes he sat the men on one side and the women on the other, while the sick were kept apart and made as comfortable as possible. He had chairs brought for the interpreters, hoping that such a display of authority would encourage the slaves to become Christians. Imparting the instruction with great animation, Claver succeeded in getting the Africans to participate enthusiastically. He made them repeat his gestures often until they came naturally for them. He also show them lively drawings which portrayed different Africans with either desirable or repulsive qualities, depending on what he was trying to teach. He alternated group sessions with individual instruction.



Claver's basic instruction had five points: the Trinity, the Incarnation, the passion and death on the cross, the resurrection of Jesus, and the universal resurrection at the final judgment. He explained everything with illustrations, comparisons, and stories. He also had a drawing with a soul in flames, being tormented by demons. Claver would explain that the soul was that of an African who had died without baptism. He told them that they should therefore thank God for having brought them to a land of Christians, where they could be baptized and enter the Church, thus becoming children of God. But the most striking part of his instruction was when he took the cross from his chest and told them how the Lord had been nailed on that cross to pay for our sins and save the human race. If they wanted to be God's children, they should regret having lived so long without knowledge of God and given over to idolatry, drunkenness, lust, and other sins. They should therefore repent with all their heart and ask the Lord for forgiveness. Claver repeated this over and over again, showing them the crucified Christ and beating his breast: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, you are my father and my mother. I love you greatly. I am deeply pained for having offended you." One witness stated: "He used to say this with such fervor that he would remain in rapture for a long time, tenderly shedding many tears." The Africans would also respond by weeping and beating their breasts. He would then tell them that, just as snakes shed their skin, they also need to cast off their idolatry and vices. While saying this he would gesture as if he were removing the skin from each part of his body, "and everyone would imitate him in this action with such fervor that it seemed that they were truly ripping the skin off their bodies, spitting on it as a sign that they were getting rid of the old Adam with his passions and vices, and putting on the new man, Christ, with his virtues. In this way they professed the evangelical law that Christ taught."

Claver repeated these instruction in a very personalized way over many days. He explained the faith to Africans and taught them to make acts of faith. He also encouraged them to have hope that they would see Jesus and enjoy him in heaven. He would explain them "about hope with such earnest words and vivid expressions that their hearts and souls would become inflamed with the certain expectation of the glory they would attain by means of baptism." He would then lead them to make acts of love of God, and he would tell them "how for God and for his love they should love one another dearly, feeling for their companions the same affection they had for themselves." He would give them very concrete examples, such as sharing food, renouncing vengeance, or putting aside enmities that had arisen in their homeland or aboard ship. He would ask those who had been enemies to forgive and embrace one another "as brothers who are children of God." And he would conclude by telling them that the whole of Christian law is summed up in charity.

Claver's method of starting with the Trinity was not very pedagogical. Nor was it wise for him to omit mention of the Spirit of the Creator at work in creation,

for that was a theme that would have helped to link Christianity with their African religions. Likewise, the Africans would not have been helped to understand Christianity as a religion that values humanity since Claver omitted talk of the public life of Jesus, skipping from the incarnation straight to the passion. Claver's very Pauline insistence on the love of Jesus as manifested on the cross does make sense, as does his teaching that the proper response is to love Jesus and not keep crucifying him with our sins. He taught that God was our father and our mother. These men and women condemned to slavery could easily grasp the idea of a God made human and crucified. They were certainly moved by the idea that personal relationships, based on the mutual love between Jesus and themselves, were of the utmost importance, but such relationships were not very evident, apart from the treatment they received from Claver and his assistants. The extreme situation in which they found themselves was indeed propitious for a spiritual rebirth. By accepting this faith, they secured for themselves a dignified place in this world to which they had come as condemned souls. The faith helped them to acquire a certain interiority, which was a form of freedom. The fact that this stranger, who asked nothing of them but gave them affection and the things they needed, should dedicate so much time to them was the best news of all –that was truly the Gospel. Claver's ministrations were living proof that God loved them and wanted to make them his children. However, when they separated from Claver, everything returned to the same depressive state; they were treated cruelly and impersonally. It was not easy to reconcile the world of Father Claver with their new daily reality.

### *2.2.3 Baptism*

The ceremony of baptism was made as solemn and joyful as possible, but it was also very colorful and personalized. On one side would be the picture of a wretched unbaptized African in hell, and on the other would be the picture of a handsome African, now cleansed by the water of baptism and saved by the blood of Christ on the cross. Each candidate would be asked a series of questions:

do you want to be baptized?  
whose water is this? (God's)  
whose child will you be after baptism? (God's)  
where will you go with that water? (to heaven)

Then Claver, "completely enflamed with the love of God" (as one interpreter put it), would baptize the candidates by pouring water on their heads from a ceramic pitcher. Immediately he would order a medal with Jesus on one side and Mary on the other to be placed around the neck of each new Christian. "After baptizing everybody, he would kneel before the altar and remain in prayer for a

long while, giving thanks to God for the favors done to him, especially for having made him an instrument so that these people might receive the water of baptism. After embracing them all, he would bid them goodbye, telling them to remember what they were like before receiving holy baptism, because now they were in the grace of God and so were God's adoptive sons and daughters and, as such, heirs of glory."

The scene was truly spectacular. According to the theology of the epoch, which denied salvation to those outside the Church, baptizing non-believers was the most sublime thing that could be done. But even today, when we believe that Jesus at Easter poured out the Spirit into the hearts of all, can we not acknowledge that Claver was doing the most wonderful thing that can happen to a person? Is it not comprehensible that a man of faith like Claver would be overjoyed that God had chosen him to bring hundreds of thousands of persons into close relation with God, especially persons who were being maltreated and yet were in reality divinely blessed despite their depersonalization?

Nevertheless, there was one teaching that must have been very bitter for the Africans: they were told that their ancestors were in hell. By tradition they considered their ancestors as sacred beings, for they had given them life, they had lived and died to make space for them. They felt bonded with their ancestors by sacred ties, by the spirit. How could they believe that they were in hell simply because they did not know Jesus or receive baptism, through no fault of their own? It was good for Claver to exalt the greatness of baptism, but was it necessary to denigrate what had gone before? This was the same problem that faced Xavier in Japan. The difference, of course was that in Japan the people were free, they had a voice, they were in their own land, and the missionary was their guest. They could therefore tell Xavier about the sadness they felt at that teaching, which was something he could not remedy. But here in Cartagena the Africans had no voice; they could not manifest their sorrow or even their disagreement. Besides, how could they do anything that would offend the only person who received and welcomed them, the only one who showed them love and gave them relief from their desperate state, the friend who introduced them to this new world and bestowed on them the extraordinary dignity of being children of God?

The day after the baptism, Claver would return early in the morning and explain to them that, since they were now children of God, they should avoid doing anything that would offend God, but since they were weak, they had a remedy in confession if they did sin. He showed them how to make a confession, and he told them not to be ashamed to admit their sins because the confessor stood in the place of God and would keep secret whatever he was told. Claver would spend many days instructing them about confession. On the feast days he would take them to Mass, but "the bad odor was so strong that the Spanish women couldn't stand it and would leave the church." This must have been a common occurrence, because there are many testimonies to this effect.

#### *2.2.4 Bidding farewell to those who were traveling south*

Whenever Claver learned that some groups were leaving for other places, especially Peru, he went to see them and encourage them. He told them that they would find good masters who would take care of them and give them clothing. He insisted that if anyone got sick on the journey, they should take the person to a confessor. He reminded them of the commandments of God and of the Church, and he explained to them again that they should confess with sorrow and remorse for having offended God and should resolve not to do so again. If there was no priest, they should make an act of contrition, which was the same one he had taught them at the beginning. He would repeat it to them until they knew it by memory: “Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, you are my father and my mother. I love you dearly, and I am heartily sorry for having offended you. I love you very very much.” With great affection he turned this whole responsibility over to the African who was in charge of them. “Finally, he would speak to the ship captains and the owners, asking them for the love of God to take good care of the slaves and to give them gifts on the journey south. They would promise to do so, and Claver would relay this assurance to the Africans in order to console and encourage them. A day or two before the journey, he would go to their houses, bringing them tobacco and other gifts.”

#### *2.2.5 Evaluation of this ministry of Claver*

It is very important to understand the theology of that time in order to understand this type of ministry. Baptism was seen as the essential means for being a child of God, and confession was seen as the second path to salvation if one sinned after baptism; if no confessor was available, then a sincere act of confession was necessary. For Peter Claver, as for us, there was nothing comparable to the dignity and good fortune of being a child of God and living and dying as such. That is why this ministry was taken so seriously: it allowed the Africans to take possession of the greatness to which they were called. By his devotion he led them into the mystery, and they participated in it as best they could. This explains the great joy the saint experienced.

It must be emphasized that for Claver the greatest possible manifestation of God’s love was that God made us his children. Claver’s human love for the Africans was therefore like a sacrament of the mystery to which they were called. The truth of Claver’s love, his generosity, and his affection made the Africans realize that this mystery was very real. That is why the formula of the act of contrition, which he recited from the depths of his soul, was a synthesis of everything he taught. The truth that they were children of God was revealed to them in the fact that he was truly for them a father and mother and brother. That profound reality gave him strength, constancy, brilliance, and tenderness. Because of his complete absorption in the relationship with the Africans, he was not bothered by the fa-

tigue, the stench, or the danger of contagion. It is also clear that Claver's attitude and behavior powerfully impressed not only the residents of Cartagena, especially the priests and royal officials, but also those who were directly in charge of the Africans: the slave owners and the ship captains.

## **2.3 Integral attention to the Africans residing in the city**

The second ministry Claver had with the Africans had to do with the perseverance of those who were already baptized and lived in the city or nearby. He ministered daily to the city dwellers, most especially during Lent, and he attended to those outside the city for several months after Easter. According to a priest of Cartagena who had known Claver since boyhood, this apostolate gave excellent results: "Experience has shown that all have persevered in the faith they were first taught; they are careful to attend Mass, visit churches, and practice charity. They have a special devotion of asking for Masses to be said for their deceased."

### *2.3.1 Dedication to hearing confessions*

The testimonies about Claver's ministry during Lent are abundant. Every day he heard confessions from the hour when the church was opened until ten o'clock in the morning on workdays and eleven o'clock on Sundays and feast days. He would then celebrate Mass, the final Mass of the day, which provided an opportunity for those who were busy earlier. Often he would be so absorbed in the ministry of confessions that they would have to call him to go say Mass. After devoting some time to thanksgiving, he would continue confessing until the church was closed at noon; later, when it was opened again at two, he would continue until six o'clock. During the day he would hear the confessions mainly of the African women; later in the day he would hear the confessions of the men in a reception hall until nine in the evening, when the college closed its gates. Near the confessional in the chapel he had pious pictures of hell, purgatory, and heaven, and also pictures of the passion, including the crucifixion. Using the former set of pictures he gave fervent talks, so much so that the people "not only cried out, moved by the force of the pain they were feeling and by the father's words, but they raised their hands as if begging for forgiveness and mercy from heaven." Finally he would kneel down, and all would kneel with him, and "he would say for them a devout act of contrition. The way he said it was enough to move the hardest and most stubborn of hearts to sorrow and repentance. Even though the father ministered this way only for the Africans for whom he had special care, the present witness and many other Spaniards drew close to hear him."

Since the church was very damp because of its proximity to the sea, Claver would put down boards and straw mats so that the people could sit down while

they were waiting. Often they would still get dirty, however, and Claver and the interpreters would help clean them up. Claver would personally help the elderly and the infirm to the confessional and then to the altar. When some slaves had to leave to return to their masters, he would first give them communion and then some treats –biscuits, aromatic herbs, a sip of wine– so that they would recover their strength and not faint on the way.

The witnesses insist greatly on the warm, human way in which Claver received the slaves, so much so that they always had recourse to him. At night he would be so exhausted that he would have to be carried to the dining room. There he would eat roast plantain and bread dipped in weak wine, but according to one interpreter, “he ate very little and he gave most of his food to this witness who was accompanying him.” When he was extremely tired, he would ask to have a few drops of wine sprinkled on a handkerchief, which he would inhale now and then. A few times he was so exhausted that he fainted in the confessional.

### *2.3.2 Mass and procession on feast days*

On Sundays and feast day afternoons, he would go forth with a crucifix mounted on a staff and ring a bell as a sign for all the Africans to gather together. He would also send the interpreters out to get the people, and everyone would join in a grand procession that would weave through the streets singing and praying, preceded by red banner. The meeting point was the Yerba Plaza. There Claver would mount a platform, ask the people questions from the catechism, and give gifts to those who answered best. Then two interpreters would recite the whole catechism, one asking the questions and the other answering them. After that Claver would explain certain points that he felt the people did not understand, and he would exhort them “with fervor and devotion more than with reasons and words.” Then they would return to the church while singing praises. There in the church, “while all knelt down, Father Claver would stand in the middle of them and, with a tender and distressed voice, have them recite the act of contrition. Finally he would dismiss them.”

On Sunday mornings, as we said, he would send out the interpreters to bring the Africans to the eleven o’clock Mass. “Sometimes there were so many that they didn’t fit in the church, and the odor they gave off was so bad that this witness at times, like some Spanish ladies, fled from the church. But for Father Claver this smell was like flowers and roses.”

### *2.3.3 Evaluation of this ministry*

This procedure of Claver was no doubt much influenced by the Church precept obliging the faithful to confess and receive communion, but the way he carried it out was anything but conventional. He sought to have the Africans feel the reality of God’s love for them, and after feeling this love, to feel sorry for having offend-

ed God and to seek a sincere conversion. He wanted to convince them that God's great love for them shone forth especially in the passion of Jesus. He used every means to help them to see themselves as children of God and to realize that God embraces them with an unflagging love. He knew that this process dignified and ennobled the Africans. Because of the intensity of his desire, Claver experienced the odor which came from his children and brothers and sisters as if it were the fragrance of roses. That is why he would go forth to seek them and why they let themselves be found and responded eagerly to his requests. Their dignity as baptized Christians gave them the right to associate with the Spanish, who in the church were not their masters but their brothers and sisters. Occupying that sacred space as equals must have given them immense satisfaction. Certainly, they wanted everyone to stay in the church, but the fact that some women had to leave was also a recognition that the Africans had every right to occupy that space. The source of this social recognition was the ministry of Peter Claver, in whom they experienced the maternal love of Papa-God.

The tenderness that surrounded that recognition was made evident in the presents he gave them in the confessional. Only a saintly man could comprehend that those gifts not only did not desecrate the sacred tribunal of the confessional but were the precise equivalent of the banquet that the father arranged after the return of the prodigal son. These penitents also came from a far country, but they had not squandered their divine inheritance since no one had ever revealed it to them. They came from a far country suffering the opprobrium of slavery at the hands of persons who professed to be Christian.

This transcendental quality of Claver shone so brightly that some Spaniards were also moved to devotion; assembling in the chapel near the confessional, they would recite the act of contrition along with the slaves. Many Spaniards also accompanied Claver on the Sunday afternoon processions with the Africans, and they were willing to wait in long lines in order to be able to confess with him. They put up with the foul odor of the slaves in order to attend Claver's Masses, or else they left without protest when they could stand it no longer.

Claver's tenderness reached its peak when he was dealing with the invalid sick, whom he would have brought to him in man-borne chairs. When they arrived at the church, he would personally seek to make them comfortable and bring them close to the altar after confessing them. Before they returned home, he would shower them with medicines, food, and other treats, including a sip of wine. Treated thus as lords and ladies, how were these sick people not going to experience Claver as the embodiment of God's tender mercy?

Two details seem to me especially worthy of notice: 1) Claver's personalized attention to the slaves in confession and 2) the freedom with which the slaves took possession of the public spaces (streets and plazas). The latter was a type of liberation. These invisible folk, who had to yield to everyone else and who passed through these public places doing the humblest of labors, were now marching

through the streets and plazas with their heads held high; they flooded into public view without any work to do, intent only on devotion. The attention Claver paid the slaves in hearing their confessions had the same result: these men and women who submissively served the needs of others were in turn served, given preference, and positively spoiled by a person who possessed great authority. This certainly gave them great satisfaction. It made them realize that Christianity was truly something transcendent.

Claver's personalized relations with the slaves enabled him view the state of each person and not be content simply with formal observance of a precept; rather, he would start a process that moved each penitent toward authentic conversion. Accordingly, he would not absolve those who led a disorderly life during Lent but only during Holy Week, after he made sure that their hearts had been touched by the sermons and pious exercises.

## **2.4 Post-Easter missions on the haciendas**

Claver reserved the Easter season for traveling around the haciendas so that the slaves could make their annual confession and receive communion. It was the rainy season, when sickness was common. Sometimes there were no roads, and he would be up to his knees in mud. Other times he traveled to the towns on horseback, accompanied by an interpreter and equipped with licenses to confess, say Mass, and marry.

At the haciendas they would offer him splendid lodging, but he would insist that they give him the worst slave quarters or even a hovel where not even slaves would live. He generally would find some grimy place overrun with rats and bats, and after helping to clean it up, he would stay there. He would not sleep on the bed they gave him but on a mat. He would hear confessions until eleven in the morning, at which hour he would say Mass so that all the people in the vicinity could attend. Afterward he would retire to his quarters. One of the hacienda owners testified that he would have to go to call Claver to make him come eat: "Often I would find him in rapture, looking toward heaven and with the missal open to the passion. Even when we approached him and called him, the father took no notice, nor did he make a move until this witness spoke to him and told him to come eat since it was late. He then made no excuses, but showed great modesty and obedience; after marking the page of the missal, he went with this witness." He would eat only a piece of salted meat, a tortilla, and some cassava; at night he might have some roast plantain and water. If there was any food left over on the table, he would take it and give it to the slaves. If people gave him eggs or chickens, he would accept them, but then he would either give them to the poorest folk or have them cooked and served to the sick. In the afternoon he would preach, teach catechism, and hear confessions. One interpreter reports that he saw Claver



being bitten by mosquitoes, and when he insisted that Claver kill them, the saint responded that “they were doing him a favor since they were draining his bad blood.”

I want to stress the extraordinary spiritual freedom Claver manifested by situating himself so decisively in the world of the slaves. He ate what they ate, and he even took the food of their masters in order to share it to them. Moreover, in practice he was almost totally dedicated to the slaves; at most he would celebrate Mass and hear confessions for the slave masters and other free persons. If they insisted, he would spend a while with them at table, but he would soon take his leave, saying that he had some business to take care of for the Africans. One might think that the masters would have been resentful, but the testimonies indicate that they were very edified. They interpreted Claver’s behavior as a sign of extreme humility; he was acting as if the things of the world did not exist for him but only the things of Jesus Christ –and that was true.

Since he did not eat until after midday, and even then did so sparingly, and since he labored in his ministry until late at night, he occasionally fainted. When he would come to again, however, he would not rest or accept any gift but would continue to do whatever he had been doing.

His doctor testified that “his greatest joy and recreation was leaving the city after Easter and visiting the Africans living in the countryside.” This was the most difficult apostolate he had, so much so that he eventually returned from one of those journeys with the sickness of which he died. Despite the hardships, his evangelical instinct made him understand that being Christ-like meant going among the poor in order to make them aware of the only wealth he could give them: God and Jesus as motherly Father and merciful Brother. Claver brought the slaves close to God and Jesus, and he urged them to respond to God and Jesus in love. His success came not only from his fervent exhortations but also from his complete commitment to the slaves, along with the Gospel, as Paul did. His solicitude for them was humble, generous, tender, dedicated, and strong; it was in effect the human certification that God and his Son were truly giving themselves to the slaves. The fact that Claver lived in their world and not in that of the masters; the fact that he made the masters know that his main concern was the slaves; the fact that he conceded to those in power as little time as possible but gave generously of his time to the slaves; the fact that he ate the slaves’ food and shared with them the food of the whites; the fact that God’s envoy belonged almost exclusively to them –all these truths must have left the slaves feeling gratified, dignified, and comforted.

## **2.5 The scandal of making communion easy for the Africans**

I want to insist on one very striking evangelical instinct that Claver had. Brother Nicolás testifies as follows: “This witness observed that Father Peter Claver, de-

spite his great devotion and fervor, had few scruples in giving communion to any class of persons—whether Spaniards or Africans or Indians—when he discovered in them even a modest capacity for receiving communion. In general, he encouraged everybody to receive communion frequently, and he was very diligent in instructing those who were still not ready to receive this venerable sacrament. So few scruples had he in this matter that he was criticized for the ease with which he conceded this faculty to persons, both Africans and Indians. He responded to such criticism with great gentleness, modestly, and humility. When questioned by the religious of our Society, by other religious, or by lay people, he would recount to them the gospel parable about the king who threw a splendid feast and who, when some guests excused themselves, told the servants to bring to the feast the blind, the lame, and the crazy. And he would tell them that they should try to guess to whom he was referring, for it was to the poor African slaves and other abandoned folk of this city.”

Thus, though his facile concession of communion to Africans and Indians was criticized both by members of his own community and by other religious and lay people, he delighted in responding to them with the parable of the banquet, which he would apply unhesitatingly to the slaves and forsaken souls of Cartagena. Giving communion to the Indians had been a decision of the early Jesuits defended by José de Acosta. Acosta even presented the position to the Pope, who confirmed the right of Indians to receive communion. In a caste society, however, where frequent communion was considered to be only for “select” souls, it was unacceptable that the Africans be counted among them. If the Africans were considered select, what argument could be offered for making them slaves? What is select for the God of Jesus does not coincide with social hierarchies. This Christian principle was difficult to swallow, but it was not easy to refute, especially when demonstrated by the example of a holy man.

Giving communion to the Africans was the most vivid symbol of the non-conformity of Peter Claver’s evangelical stance. Those who saw him preparing the slaves for confession and communion could never accuse him of negligence. Indeed, they would have to admit that they themselves had not been prepared with as much fervor. The root problem was the doubt about spending so much effort on an inferior class of people instead of dedicating it to more respectable subjects. To this problem Claver responded with solid Gospel teaching: the predilection of God and Jesus was for the poor.

## 3 DEDICATION TO THE SICK

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As we mentioned already, Peter Claver's second major ministry was caring for the sick. The majority of them, obviously, were African slaves since they were badly neglected, forced to live in unsanitary conditions and endure hard labor. But there were also poor Spaniards, and even some persons of high estate got sick.

The hospitals of Cartagena were only for the poor or, at most, ordinary folk. By law all lepers had to go to San Lázaro Hospital. (When well-off persons got leprosy, however, they were allowed to live in quarters separated from the main house or on a hacienda they owned.) In this section we will describe Claver's ministry at the San Lázaro Hospital and the San Sebastián Hospital (run by the Saint John of God Brothers), as well as his care of the sick outside the hospitals, whether they were persons lying in isolated hovels, slaves living in their master's home, or the masters themselves.

### 3.1 His service in the San Sebastián Hospital

#### 3.1.1 *He ministered as one more religious of Saint John of God*

Brother Nicolás reports that the members of the community of Saint John of God were "Claver's closest friends." "The love and affection he showed to the religious of Saint John of God was exceptional. Whenever he saw them or met with them, he spoke lovingly and embraced them with great humility and submission. He was moved by the great charity they showed to the sick." The prior called

Claver a “great protector of this hospital.” It should be clear, then, why the whole Saint John of God community attended his funeral: they did so “not out of duty or by invitation, but simply for the great affection and esteem they had for the father.” Another religious brother stated that when Claver was on mission outside the city, “they missed him sorely, both the brothers of this hospital and the poor people themselves, because he provided both spiritual and material consolation to everybody. When he returned, he was received by all with applause and general delight. He was very happy when he came to this hospital.” Another witness stated that during meals Claver would serve table as if he were simply another Saint John of God brother, diligently obeying the person in charge of the operation. The religious brothers were most especially grateful to him when a fleet came in because then the sick might number as many as nine hundred, and the brothers could not keep up with the needs. “At those times the father would come to help, not just serving food, hearing confessions, giving Extreme Unction, and administering the sacraments, but also attending to other tasks such as making beds and the like.”

Claver took special care of the sickest patients and those with the most repugnant and contagious diseases. The brothers were impressed by the fact that he had no fear of contagion and gave no sign of repugnance. They said that he delighted in caring for the sick and did so with tender, merciful love as “a man blessed by the hand of God.”

What is more, he never seemed to get tired despite his scanty consumption of food and drink, his excessive work load, and the intolerable heat. One witness said that “he arranged everything so that the patients would be directed toward God with all their heart.” Another testified: “It is true that he gathered much fruit in the service of God our Lord. He led many souls back to the holy service of God by the example of his holy life and his salutary counsels.”

### *3.1.2 Care of bodies and souls*

The witnesses attest to how attentive Claver was to the bodies of the sick, making sure that the patients were clean and comfortable and that everything possible was being done to help them recover their health. There were many testimonies about the remedies that he had sent to the patients and about his tenacity in caring for the sick until they were out of danger. He was also said to have a keen knowledge of when a sickness was mortal. Sometimes, when the best doctor at the hospital saw a patient as hopeless, he “would ask the father what he thought. Very often the father would tell this witness to help such-and-such a patient and to apply every possible remedy. The father would insist that as long as the soul was in the body it was against charity to stop applying remedies. This witness observed that, whenever the father said this, the patients were cured and rose up healthy and sound. He considered the healing of many of the sick to be something supernatural.” The doctor added that “he had such great confidence in Claver that he was certain that

the father could give the sick nothing that was not restorative because of the great charity and love of God with which he did so.” It is a fact that Claver’s observations about symptoms even today appear to be appropriate, indicating that he had a very detailed insight into the state of the sick person.

Claver attended to the state of the patients’ soul perhaps even more than he did to the state of their body. He had a great ability to console and encourage people, and he dedicated many hours to this ministry. No doubt Claver’s buoyant attitude contributed greatly to helping the sick take heart and be cured. The religious brothers observed this paradox in Claver: he was able to tolerate the unpleasant odors as if made of bronze, and “at the same time he was very compassionate with the sick and felt sorry for them when they complained about some bad odor. To comfort and refresh them, he would moisten their noses and wrists with a little vinegar mixed with water.” Similar testimonies were given about cases where someone had difficulty eating: “With his own hands he would give the patient mouthfuls, without worry and without nausea. Rather, in all this he displayed great charity and fraternal love.” He seemed to be so devoted to the sick that he paid no attention at all to how he himself might be affected by the physical state in which they found themselves.

Claver did not visit the sick unaccompanied. Since he was the novice master for the Jesuit brothers, he took all of them with him twice a week. Carrying brooms, they would go to the hospital to sweep the wards, make the beds, serve the food, and wash the dishes. Besides all this, he would perform the duties of his priestly office: hearing confessions, consoling the sick, and anointing them with the holy oils.

### *3.1.3 A living image of the gratuitous, personalized love of God*

I want to insist that Claver’s unflagging energy was sustained precisely by the devoted attention he gave to the sick. His ultimate objectives were threefold: that the sick bear with their sickness as good children of God, that they take advantage of the sickness to make progress in virtues and overcome vices, and that they die (if that be their fate) as true Christians. But since he was doing all this out of love for the sick, convinced that it was for their ultimate wellbeing, his great love shone forth in everything he did, whether personally attending to the sick or applying his nursing skills to cure the infirmity. Since the illness, if it was contagious or repugnant, would often repel people and leave the sick person isolated, Claver would demonstrate his special concern for the person. Overcoming his repugnance and fear of contagion, he would devote himself to those who were in need not only of medical care but also of human intimacy.

The sick understood that he desired only what was good for them. Therefore, when he spoke to them of God or proposed that they confess, they accepted that he was doing this also for their good. It was clear to them that he was not propos-

ing confession just to do his job, and it was equally clear that his arduous efforts were not aimed at gaining merit or benefiting himself in any way. Everyone could see his genuine joy in meeting them and his personal devotion to them. Peter Claver was thus for them a reflection of the love of God that he spoke to them about, and he was also a reflection of the Christ whom he preached to them and with whom he sought to put them in contact. Herein lay the evangelical quality of his dedication to the hospitals and to sick people in general.

Claver's charity was an expression of transcendence, as was also experienced by the captured English pirates or the semi-enslaved Moors. Despite their initial hostility, these men would end up yielding to Claver's affection and would be won over "by the father's counsels and holy exhortations and by the humility with which he helped them in their sickness." Likewise, he helped to bring about the conversion of public sinners as well as of individuals who many years before had left the priesthood or the consecrated life.

## **3.2 Devoted attention to the lepers**

### *3.2.1 Father and mother to every one*

Claver was even more dedicated to the San Lázaro Hospital than to the San Sebastián. The latter, after all, had a very zealous community of brothers who took good care of the patients, whereas the lepers were quite neglected. A Brother of Mercy testified that "if it had not been for Father Peter Claver, those poor souls would have died." In the San Lázaro Hospital, Claver had many roles: he looked after the food, the medicines, and the installations; he washed the sick and gave them medications; he accompanied them with love and consolation; he watched out for their spiritual health and their closeness to God; and finally, he offered them dignified funerals and commended their souls to God. So great was Claver's solicitude that the almoner of the hospital, who was also a patient, stated that "every day he [the almoner] would arrive to the college at Claver's orders and give him an account of the state of the patients. Then the father would give him something to take back, such as clothing or medicines, and he sent the patients what they asked for. If anyone was in need of confession, he would go immediately to the person as soon as the almoner advised him." In this way "he was not only the buyer and manager of the hospital but also its pastor." Claver also built a stone chapel for the hospital, and he got mosquito nets for all the patients so that they could sleep well. So great was the esteem that they felt for the father that when he died, they declared "that even if their fathers and mothers had died, it would not cause them as much sorrow as the loss of Father Peter Claver, and that they felt extremely sad and distressed at such a great loss since he was father and mother to each and every person in particular."

Whenever Claver arrived at the hospital, the patients would go out to meet him, and he would embrace each one of them. When all were gathered together and seated as comfortably as possible, he would stand in the middle of them and, making the sign of the cross, he would recite the prayers with them. “He would encourage them to be patient and to accept the will of God. He told that they would gain great merit before our Lord and would also possess divine grace and friendship if they loved one other as brothers and sisters and children of God and if they refrained from curses and all offenses against God.” He would then make a fervent act of contrition in which all would take part; he would finish by hearing the confessions of those who wanted to confess and would give out the gifts he had brought for them.

Claver would then visit the wards of the sickest and most disabled patients. First he would console them with his human warmth; then he would make their beds, lifting them up and giving them as much relief as he could; finally, if they wished, he would confess them. All witnesses insist that he was especially attentive to those most abandoned because of their appearance or their smell, which would frighten others away. He spent much time with them, touching them, healing them, and feeding them personally, with no fear of contagion. For this reason the patients claimed that “the father was not a man of this world but a heavenly being.” Equally amazed by Claver were the religious brothers who regularly accompanied him and the lay people who did so occasionally; all were extremely impressed and edified by what they saw. When a neighbor warned Claver that he might get sick, the father “laughed heartily at the idea.” Everyone agreed that he was “very joyful and happy.” A beggar who resided in the hospital for a time said that “the father showed so much joy and satisfaction when he was embracing the patients that one would think that he was enjoying the world’s greatest entertainments.” He stated further that “with his consecrated hands the father would lovingly wipe off their saliva; he would make them stick out their tongues so that he could clean off the scales on them, something that amazed this witness. The witness was even more astonished when he saw the father kneel down and with his tongue lick the sores on the patients’ feet and kiss them.”

### *3.2.2 His closeness to them made them feel human again*

Since in all cultures lepers are the untouchables almost by definition, it is normal for them to feel very isolated and forsaken. As a result, they may easily lose hope and self-esteem and give themselves over to base instincts, whether these be of resentment, erotic fantasy, or self-harm. For this reason Claver lovingly encouraged them to measure up to their full status as children of God, telling them that they would find companionship in their relationship with God, which in turn would help them relate to one another as sisters and brothers. By keeping their mutual respect strong, they would also remain hopeful and might even be cured.

Claver's cordial and spontaneous friendship with the lepers made them feel truly human. They were thus able to recognize his call for patience as the path to dignity, and they were able to affirm that God was not the cause of their disease but their companion in it. While we have no image of Jesus licking the wounds of the sick, we do know that he touched the lepers of his time. The fact that Claver did not catch the disease was a sign that there was nothing morbid about his relation with the sick; rather, it was a maternal closeness which the sick themselves appreciated.

### **3.3 Care of individual patients**

#### *3.3.1 A mutual relation*

There are many testimonies about Claver's caring for individual patients. What they say in general is that, if he was told someone who was sick or incapacitated, especially if they were incurably stricken Africans, he would visit them regularly, bring them food and clothing, inquire about their health, and provide them remedies. He would console them and confess them, and if they were mortally ill, he would anoint them with the holy oils. Not only that, but he would "enter a nearby house and ask the residents, for the love of God, to take care of the sick person and not forget about him. He told the neighbors that God would reward them if they sent the patient something and visited him once in a while." He even succeeded in getting some devout persons to take sick person into their homes and care for them. One witness, for example, told of a free African woman who took care of a patient for six years "out of charity and at the request of the father." The caretaker describes the patient's final hours; as death approached, Claver told her: "Mother Ursula, God loves you dearly and therefore wants to take you away to rest. You will die today, and you won't have to remain in purgatory more than three hours. Please remember, when you find yourself before God in glory, to pray for me and for this woman to whom you owe so much for she has done more for you than if she were your mother."

A similar story was told by another witness, who had asked Claver to visit his extremely sick father. After Claver had spent more than an hour and a half alone with the ailing man, the witness wanted to see what was happening, so he and his mother quietly entered another room which gave them a view of the sickbed. "They saw Father Claver kneeling, with his hands placed on the bed, and he was asking the patient, for the love of God, to give his word that he would commend Claver to the Divine Majesty when he arrived in heaven, because he was going to die the next day. ... The patient gave him his word that he would do as he asked, and then Claver asked him to embrace him as a sign that he would keep his promise, and the patient embraced him." When the witness's mother began to



cry, he consoled her, saying that what they had seen should give them great joy. This scene is a moving demonstration of what we have been saying: Claver's relations with the sick were mutual relations based on the shared condition of being children of God and looking toward the definitive encounter with God. By urging the patient to long for that encounter, congratulating him for being so close to it, and asking him for his intercession at that great moment, Claver was able to show that death was only a passage to a better life. What more can be done for a sick person? What more can be done so that the patient experiences death as the culmination of life? If death tends to be experienced as an end to this life and a time of lonely isolation, what better antidote and encouragement can there be than a conversation like this? For Claver, then, attending to the sick was clearly not a matter of making a sacrifice for God; it was entering into the most Christian and humanizing relationship possible.

This aspect is seen especially in the way Claver would talk to the most incurable and repugnant patients, such as an African woman to whom, according to Brother Nicolás, he spoke this way: "In you I see much patience and much suffering for the love of God. I find myself very much in need of those virtues, and I come to this place in search of them and to learn about them. Teach me, teach me—he would say—because I come to learn from you." The one who supposedly is coming to give makes it clear that that he is coming to receive, thus making the patients his benefactors. Of course, he would then take out his bronze crucifix and give it to the patients to kiss so that they would learn to have the patience of the Crucified One who was innocent but suffered for them. He also brought the patients whatever they needed, including some gifts, and he consoled them. But it was also true that Claver came to learn. He would strengthen the patients and encourage them, but he would also learn from them. The relationship was mutual and supremely human, and because it was gratuitous, it did not humble the patients but exalted them.

### *3.3.2 The triumph of love over personal weakness*

There are abundant testimonies about Claver's apparent lack of concern about repugnant symptoms. His secret was in the advice he gave one interpreter: "He often told this witness that she should not feel revulsion since they were our neighbors." One testimony, however, seems to show Claver as made of something less than bronze, but his determination to be a neighbor to a person who needed him was so strong that he allowed nothing about the person to stand in the way of establishing a relationship. The triumph of love over personal weakness is sometimes an overwhelming, dramatic affair: "When an African slave named Rufina was suffering from a skin disease whose suppurations and bad odor caused horror and nausea in people, the venerable father came to console her. He felt disgust at the pus and the bad odor, but he said, 'Body, do you dislike this? Well, now you'll pay for it!'

He told someone else to gather together in a saucer all the discharge coming from the patient; then he took it and drank it, causing fright and wonderment among all present. The venerable father then approached the sick woman again, washed her, and removed all the discharge.”

Several testimonies refer to Claver’s indefatigability in visiting sick Africans, “even when a measles outbreak in this city would wear out three or four of the brothers who accompanied him. When a brother got so tired that he could hardly walk or move, Claver would return to the college and leave him there, and he would find another to take with him. In this way he would go through three or four companions every day, but he himself was untiring.” Two witnesses who accompanied him relate one case that reveals the delicacy, efficacy, and humanity with which he attended to those who had contagious diseases.

There are also several reports of times when he went, without being called, to care for an extremely sick patient who seemed on the verge of death –but then he declared that the sick person would not die, and sure enough, the patient got better. He drew close to other moribund patients to help them die well. His keen interest for others provided him with exceptional antennas.

## 4 INTEGRAL CARE FOR PRISONERS AND THOSE CONDEMNED TO DEATH

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Care for prisoners, especially those condemned to death, was a third area of the similarly extreme ministry in which Peter Claver eagerly engaged and in which his apostolic fruitfulness was evident.

### 4.1 Availability for the sake of rehabilitation

Not a week went by that Claver did not go to visit the prisons. As was the case with the sick, he would bring them gifts, they would tell him their stories, and he would listen to all they had to say. If they asked him to do something, he would do it diligently. He would insist that the defense lawyers not be negligent but rather “advance the causes of these poor prisoners.” He would encourage the prisoners to go confession and would attend to all who wanted to confess. Then he would bring them all together and “tell them that it was better to pay for the sins we’ve committed in this life than to pay for them in hell, where punishment does not end. He would end by taking out his bronze crucifix ... and telling them that the remedy for all their trials was to be found in the crucified Lord. He would then have them recite a very devout act of contrition so that they would be more consoled and disposed to patiently bear with their trials. ... As he was leaving, he would tell them that if they needed him, they should send for him and that, no matter the hour, he would come quickly to attend to them.” Claver spent a great deal of time consoling the prisoners in solitary confinement.

As we can see, Claver’s relationships here also are realistic, humane, and holistic. He especially urged the prisoners to “bear patiently with their confinement.” He listened to them attentively since every convict had his version of what

happened and wanted to explain it to an impartial and humane judge. In this regard, the convict did not expect answers; he simply wanted to be heard. Claver was happy to help those for whom something could be done, and he consoled everyone with words and gifts.

The imprisoned were amply punished just by being confined. It was important for them to be treated humanely and not as monsters so that they would become actual monsters or engage in monstrous behavior. The question of confession was crucial for the prisoners. Only by confessing the truth before God could they become reconciled with themselves and achieve personal rehabilitation. Placing the Condemned One before the condemned prisoners had a very special significance: Jesus could understand them, and with him they could express their distress. The imprisoned were tremendously helped by knowing that they had the support of someone who was free. Their contact with Claver was a sacrament of dignity, recognition, and hope. That was why his parting words meant so much to them.

## **4.2 An opportunity to reorder one's life**

Claver's concern for those condemned to death sums up perfectly all we have said so far. The whole of his relationship with the condemned was directed toward helping them forget their past lives and all external realities and to concentrate their attention on the supreme moment they were living. He insisted with them that "there was a long road to travel and very little time, so they had to make many acts of true contrition and feel encouraged to trust in the Lord." He would place in their hands a crucifix and tell them: "This is the wood by which you can escape from this great storm. Only by embracing this cross will you be able to free yourself from the tempest. Embrace the cross and don't lose sight of it, for that is your salvation." In this way he helped the condemned to make their death an act that defined their life. That is why he insisted that they forget everything else and concentrate only on this momentous step they were about to take. He told them not to undergo death as victims possessed by terror and despair, hating the society that was doing away with their lives. Now they had the opportunity to define their deaths and so put a justifying seal on the whole of their lives. That is why he gave them as a companion another executed man, one whose mortal torment became his greatest achievement. Since Jesus had handed over his life for him, the condemned man should rectify his own life. To that end the father was available at any time, until the condemned man died.

Claver stressed that the condemned had an opportunity to define their lives such as few other persons had. He therefore would say without any irony: "You're lucky, little brother, that you know the day when you will die. You only have to trust in God." He would also tell them, as he would sick persons close to death: "I would be so happy if only you could take me with you!" Claver wanted to live

his own final moments with that same ability to decide that the condemned men enjoyed. His whole effort was to help the condemned to appreciate how great this moment of transition was. He based his approach on the magnificent presupposition that the criminal is not defined by his crime. God always gives him the genuine opportunity to redefine his life and also the strength to do so. Claver was obviously not a representative of civil society; he represented the God who desires not the death of the sinner but that he be converted and live. Claver was a follow of the Good Shepherd who goes to any length to rescue the lost sheep.

### **4.3 Promoting the ideal Christian way of dying**

After this careful preparation, Claver “would for a long time hear the general confession of the condemned man. Then, if time permitted –and otherwise the next day– he would celebrate Mass for him, give him communion, and recite a gospel over him. ... He stayed by his side day and night, ceaselessly attending to him and encouraging him.” While putting on his vestments, “he would utter so many tender words that he softened the bitterness of the condemned man and deeply moved all the prisoners who were present.” When the prisoner was taken to the place of execution, Claver would yield to other priests and religious so that they could comfort the man. At the intersections where crowds would gather, Claver would “have the condemned man stop and talk to the people, asking forgiveness for the bad example he had given and urging them to learn from him not to offend God.” While they made their way forward, Claver would sprinkle holy water on him and refresh him with perfumed water. “When they reached the place of execution, he would have the prisoner kiss the ladder since it was the instrument by which he was to ascend to a joyful life with God. He would then wipe the sweat from the man’s face and give him food that he had brought with him so that the prisoner would not faint at this bitter moment. After absolving him, he would embrace him repeatedly, consoling him and encouraging him. He would express his desire to be so fortunate as to be able to accompany the condemned man on his way to heaven. With the same charity and zeal he would stay with the prisoner until he was dead. While the man was agonizing, Claver would have played for him music that had been prepared in the cathedral, accompanied by an organ and all the required instruments.”

Claver wanted the prisoner to die as a perfect Christian. By accompanying the man without any recrimination, in a spirit of reconciliation and rehabilitation, Claver was the sacrament of God’s embrace. Thus, this convict who had given bad example was now able to set a good example. Claver would urge him to face death courageously in expiation for his faults but knowing that he was on his way to heaven and the arms of the Father. He would say nothing to the man about further purgation, for the execution itself was a horribly bitter dose. He treated the

prisoner as a person of dignity, honoring his agony with singing and the music of various instruments, including the organ.

Though the execution was a painful and odious act, carried out before a crowd hungry for spectacle, Claver managed to transform it into an act of final rehabilitation for the convict, who thus became more an actor than a passive victim. The music surrounded the ex-criminal and served as applause for the integrity with which he ended his life. This radical recasting of the execution helped also to redeem the system of justice, whose aim was not only to restore order by punishing the transgressor but also to rehabilitate the convict. Thanks to Claver's ministry, not only the external but also the internal order was reestablished; the source of disorder was effectively transformed into a source of a new, more humane order. In this regard, we should note that it was the prison wardens who called Claver whenever a death sentence was imposed upon a prisoner.

#### **4.4 Respecting the person and treating no one as a convict**

The many stories that are told about Claver reveal the depths of his humanity. So extreme was his sympathy, in fact, that he could give the impression that he was on the prisoner's side and so did not treat him as a convict. Once, when a religious brother reproached him for what he thought was improper behavior, Claver responded: "If I commit no irregularity in leaving him to his own fate, much less do I commit one in helping to save this soul." This case reminds us of the disputes Jesus had with the Pharisees about which should prevail, the traditional rules or the ultimate welfare of the person. For in a Christian society this latter is the end to which all rules should be directed.

Claver's sympathy is even more evident in his treatment of those condemned by the Inquisition. Although he thought that the processions of convicts through the streets yielded some fruit, "he still felt great compassion for the prisoners. As far as he could, he provided their souls and bodies with spiritual and material consolation, and he encouraged them to bear with their penances with patience, silence, and humility." Claver would join the processions and try to get close to the prisoners. "They were very happy when they saw him. Some would say, 'Father, commend me to God,' and others, 'Say a Mass for me.' He would tell them that he'd be happy to do so." He brought gifts to the prison for them, and he consoled them and encouraged them to be patient and tolerant.

Claver was realistic in recommending that the prisoners remain silent since they would surely have been seen as insolent if they had tried to defend themselves. But he did not recommend silence that was motivated by fear or presumption. Rather, he inculcated sentiments of humility, tolerance, acceptance of others, and surrender to God. It is noteworthy that many officials of the Holy Office recognized his holiness and testified on his behalf.

## 5 THE WELLSPRING OF HIS APOSTOLATE

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After reviewing all these activities of Claver, we must ask: what was the source of such abundant, constant, and pure charity? It is clear that for Peter Claver the height of charity was putting people in touch with the God of love, the maternal Father who is merciful, welcoming, and kindhearted. This was so because God was the one who enlivened his own life, who saved it, valued it, and brought to fulfillment.

### 5.1 Absorbed in God

The witnesses testified that whatever hours Claver had left over after helping the needy was dedicated to God, the Virgin, the saints, and especially Jesus Christ. A common refrain of the testimonies was that he spent “the whole day absorbed in God, seeking ways to express his love in everything he saw.” Referring to Claver’s habit of prayer, one of the college administrators said that “he didn’t know when the father paused from it, because when he went to visit him in his room, he always found him in prayer.” Another layman said that “he saw the father praying continually during the whole day and most of the night.” The college barber, who dealt a lot with the priests, commented that “whenever I looked for him about some matter, I found him in prayer and contemplation.” An agent of the Holy Office declared that “each time this witness went to visit him in his lodging, which he did frequently, he found him at prayer.” Brother Nicolás described in detail the way Claver prayed; he summed it up by saying that “whatever time he was not busy attending to the spiritual welfare of souls by hearing confessions or teaching catechism or instructing the Africans, he used for prayer and for communication with God. ... There is good reason to believe that he spent the whole night praying.” More than one witness mentioned that Claver “was so enraptured and ecstatic that he took no notice of the presence of this witness nor heard him when he spoke.”

## 5.2 Baroque popular piety

We can describe his devotion as popular religiosity or baroque Catholic piety. Brother Nicolás makes special mention of his staunch devotion to the Virgin, which included praying the rosary and promoting this practice among the faithful. He even established a small factory to make rosary beads, which he distributed generously and which were highly valued since they came from his hand.

He also had great devotion to the cross. In all his different ministries he would brandish the bronze cross that he wore on his person, and he would offer it to be kissed by the sick and those in need of consolation or contrition. He also had a rough wooden cross that he wore on his chest and prized highly; he used to give it to persons in desperate circumstances, asking them to return it to him later. Several testimonies claim that this cross worked miraculous cures. Four years before Claver's death, the viceroy of Peru, while on his way to Spain, wanted to visit him because of his reputation for sanctity. After trying in vain to kiss Claver's hand, the viceroy asked him to remember him and his family in his prayers, which the father promised to do. When the viceroy asked him for some personal item as a token, Claver "answered that he was poor and had nothing to give him." The rector then asked Brother Nicolás what Claver might have to give the viceroy, and Nicolás said that what he most valued was the wooden cross. When the rector then ordered the cross to be brought to him, "the father, obedient as he was, immediately went for the cross and gave it to the marquis, telling him that he was giving it to him very reluctantly since it had always been his medicine and his physician." As on other occasions, what stands out here is both Claver's profound love of the cross and his dislike of social niceties. Claver told the viceroy frankly that he was giving him the cross out of obedience, since it seemed to him a frivolous act, as it truly was. Not grasping the situation, the marquis took the cross with great devotion and appreciation, saying that "he valued it more than a Golden Fleece."

Claver was also a devotee of holy water, which he sprinkled on the sick and the condemned. He always made the sign of the cross with it, and he took care that the church always had holy water available. He also had a devotion to the holy souls, the guardian angels, his patron saint, Saint Ignatius, Saint Dominic, and Saint Anthony the abbot. He religiously attended sermons, and he participated in Lenten practices such as the imposition of ashes, the blessing of palms, and the preaching of penances.

## 5.3 He spent his whole life crucified in imitation of Christ

What was most characteristic of Claver and most shaped his spiritual temperament was his constant contemplation of the passion of Jesus: "What he meditated



on most frequently was the prayer in Gethsemane, the scourging at the column, the mocking with the crown of thorns, the crucifixion of the Lord, and the descent from the cross.” He had a book of pictures which portrayed each step of the passion. In his room he would leave the book open all day long, showing the step he was contemplating. He told Brother Nicolás that “he performed many of his mortifications and penances in reverent memory of the passion.” Several witnesses testified that they had surprised him in his room wearing a crown of thorns on his head and a rope around his neck. He also flogged himself when he went to bed at nine and when he got up at four in the morning. He did this at such length and with such intensity that a neighbor testified that he regularly heard him.

Besides the book of pictures, he had in his room several portraits of the passion, “so that wherever one looked, there was something that recalled these mysteries.” He also had wooden crosses with a Christ painted on them; these he would take to the sick and the imprisoned. In front of the confessional in the chapel Brother Nicolás would place pictures of the passion, which Claver would show to the rougher or more reluctant penitents, urging them to do penance. He would always end by reciting a very fervent act of contrition and beating his breast while he showed the penitents the bronze Christ. With intense feeling he would repeat, “Lord, I love you dearly,” and the penitents would repeat it after him with true sorrow for their sins. He was so enthralled by the passion that he recommended the devotion to his penitents and all his friends. Moreover, it can be said that his whole life was as “an imitation of Christ in his sorrows and sufferings. He had engraved and impressed on his heart Christ crucified and all the insignias of his passion. During his whole life he crucified himself in imitation of Christ.”

This crucified life was revealed in his absolute poverty, which was evident to all who knew him. No one ever saw him with a new habit; he always wore old, mended ones, though they were always kept clean. In his room he had only an old table, an old chair, and a stool that he sat on. He did not sleep in the bed except when he was very sick. As he told the marquis, “he was poor and had nothing.” And he needed nothing. His crucified life was also revealed in his obedience, for he asked permission for every little thing and he did whatever he was ordered, as when he was told by the provincial to take off his hairshirt after one of his illnesses. His crucified life was evident in his perfect mortification of all his senses, beginning with sight and hearing. His mortification was such that he knew nothing except what of concern for his mission; he had no curiosity about other matters. We have already seen how he mortified his senses of smell and taste, and he would not gratify them even with the foods available during feasts. What he crucified most of all, however, was his own self-love. Several witnesses said that he would take flight when people spoke well of him. When people asked him to pray for them, supposing him to be closer to God, he would tell them that it was not a good idea and that it could do them harm. He considered himself the most abject and useless man in the world.

## 5.4 Mortified body, liberated body

Given the exhausting, almost superhuman apostolate Claver exercised, it would seem that his excessive penances were completely out of place. The extreme fatigue of his ministry was penance enough. Moreover, his doctor insisted that his infirmities were caused by “his mistreatment of his body through the fasting, wearing a hairshirt, and other mortifications he practiced.” If we take a closer look, however, we have to admit that the thirty-eight years he dedicated to the apostolate we have described, in the scorching heat of Cartagena, was a very long time. It cannot be said, then, that his severe way of life did him serious harm.

But as we said, the fruit of his mortification was that his body not only was not an impediment to his apostolate but was a completely fit instrument for it. If the human body has both an organic and a symbolic function, then it can be said that Claver managed to reduce the former to a minimum so that the latter could be totally engaged in his relations with others. Many of the witnesses state that he had a lifeless appearance, but all the testimonies agree that Claver was tremendously communicative and irradiated affection with the poor and the sick; his face lit up with fervor and joy when serving the newly arrived slaves and the lepers. Paul describes this state of soul in his letter to the Corinthians: “We always carrying around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our body. . . . As a result, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you” (2 Cor 4:10,12).

It is clear that Claver’s ascetical practices were not masochistic, nor did they close him off from others. To the contrary, the personal freedom they gave him allowed him to give himself with consummate humanity to those who needed him, especially the persons most abandoned and despised. His minimal needs made him ready at all times to announce the Gospel and to give of himself. His mortification of the senses became care for those whose senses were infirm; his total abstinence made possible his incredible generosity toward the needy. This man who kept nothing for himself had his room full of things to give to others. Even in the confessional he had a little dispensary which always had a little wine in it; he would give it to those who needed a boost in spirit—just one more sign of his exquisite humaneness.

Even though he was not concerned about the happenings and intrigues of the city, he had a tremendous ability to stimulate people’s generosity and to involve others either occasionally or systematically in projects serving the poor. He was exceptionally dedicated to the poor himself, but he also sought out collaborators since it was a splendid way to multiply works of charity and make them contagious. He was constantly out begging either for donations or for people’s involvement, and he was always grateful to those who gave, serving them spiritually in turn. Many witnesses expressed their gratitude that Claver had made use of them in his ministry, and it is clear that they contributed readily, happy to participate in his spiritual mission.

Claver's mortification did not absorb him in himself, as can be seen especially in the banquets he organized on the big feast days; those at the college gate were for the poor, and those at the San Lázaro Hospital were for the lepers. Like Jesus, he served at table with great joy, and he would feed the disabled personally. At the end of the banquet, with the help of the interpreters, he would gather up all the utensils and plates and wash them. These banquets were true sacraments of the kingdom and made it clear that he mortified himself so that he could dedicate all his vital energies to events such as these.

The same can be said of the very close relations Claver had with his most direct collaborators, namely, the African interpreters and the Jesuit brothers who accompanied him. He showed them great respect, he loved them, he indulged them, and he gave them a true sense of participating in his ministry. The many testimonies they gave showed them to be worthy of the trust he had in them and gave expression to the immense affection and respect they had for him.

Thus, the extremely ascetical Peter Claver, seemingly indefatigable and otherworldly, was also a man of great sensitivity. He spent his life embracing and caressing the poor, the sick, and the slaves; he treated them with infinite tenderness. And when he spoke of God, he became so inflamed with love that his devotion was contagious.

His ascetical practices were indeed extreme, and they had to be since his ministry was even more so. Asceticism was his means of unifying his person so that he could love God and become a neighbor to those who had fallen into the hands of thieves and been left half-dead by the roadside. Jesus crucified and the crucified persons of this world were his whole life. Asceticism helped him remain steadfast in his dedication to his ministry, it kept him from being distracted by extraneous concerns, and it prevented internal resistances from hindering his service.

All this became abundantly clear in his death. He had lived his whole life unmindful of his own welfare, pouring himself out for others; when he died, all the people poured out for him in a great show of gratuitous love. Since he was a staunch defender of humility, it was just as well that it was only after his death that great homage was paid him. He had always refused to let people kiss his hand, but once he was dead, that hand was kissed constantly for two entire days. Witnesses even attest that his hand did not become stiff but remained soft and seemingly alive, and it gave off a sweet odor. During his life this man of solemn poverty gave away everything he could, including himself. In death, the people wanted to dispossess him even further in order keep his spirit with them. He ended up, literally, as a body totally given to others and thus completely symbolic.

## **5.5 The prudence of Peter Claver**

We spoke of the scandalous fact that none of Claver's fellow Jesuit priests offered testimony for him. It is understandable that the priests might have had various

reasons for feeling annoyed by his activities. Regarding his ministry, they all approved of his dedication to the Africans since it was not only his assignment by obedience but also an apostolate especially commended to the Society of Jesus. However, his systematic preference of Africans over whites was seen as unacceptable in a society based on slavery and castes. The sudden irruption of a multitude of Africans into the church, to attend a Mass at which he presided, was bound to alienate the persons of polite society, especially the women. Such behavior was certain to vex his companions since it frightened away their devotees. Also, the way Claver discriminated against whites in the confessional caused scandal. Some considered intolerable his extremely harsh manner of criticizing women who came to church in fancy outfits, especially when accompanied by nursemaids. At one point the rector angrily admonished him in the church, before many witnesses, because he told a woman who wanted to confess to him that she should come back wearing a more modest dress. For the rector, this was the last straw; it stretched the limit of his patience and tolerance.

Claver did many things that must have seemed unbecoming of a priest and contrary to the typically sober Jesuit way of proceeding: he treated the slaves with great tenderness, embracing them and caressing them; he gave them not only medicine and food but also sweets, tobacco, and wine; he had a veritable stockpile of these things in his room and even in the confessional; and on the feast days he arranged succulent meals for the slaves, dining with them and serving at table. The fact that he gave out not only necessary items but also sweets, tobacco, and wine impressed even the “devil’s advocate” during the beatification process.

Some must have been revolted also by the great honor he paid to the slaves who served as interpreters, placing them above himself, and by the way he attended to them in his room when they were sick. Such behavior was not in keeping with the proper order to be observed in society. The friction produced by the matter of the interpreters can be seen in the fact that he had to have recourse to the Superior General. Once, after an argument he had with Claver about the interpreters, the Jesuit superior ordered him to go to the dining room and remain on his knees until advised otherwise. Other members of the community had to intercede with the superior before a message was sent giving him relief, after more than half an hour.

Claver’s custom of eating late (especially on Sundays, when he said the eleven o’clock Mass) and his failure to attend the recreation periods made his fellow Jesuits conclude that he did not like community life. It is true that they had plenty of communication with him both in the apostolate and in spiritual matters, but that seemed to them insufficient. It is also true that he always asked the rector for permissions and obeyed his orders, but that was still not enough.

But how could they not reconsider their view of Claver when they saw the outpouring of devotion by the people and when they heard the authorities not just request but demand that the funeral be a solemn affair and not just a simple burial? How could they remain indifferent when they saw that the people’s devo-

tion increased with time and when they heard the wailing of the Africans and the testimonies of those who were viewing his body? Claver's fellow Jesuits tried to discover the force exerted by this man with whom they had lived but whose charisma was lost to them because they disapproved of his conduct. Did their failure to discern those heroic virtues indicate a lack of spiritual depth? Why could they not understand that what they saw as defects either were not defects or had some explanation, and that in any case these "defects" in no way detracted from the extraordinary goodness that shone forth in his person?

In any case, it should be noted that Brother Nicolás recalled that after Claver's death the Jesuits failed to stipulate the customary indulgences and other suffrages, and that this neglect was due to their concept of him, since it seemed evident to them that he had no need of them. Brother Nicolás also stated that the superior ordered him, eight or ten days after Claver's death, "to note down everything he knew about Claver's virtues and apostolic ministries."

## **5.6 Radicality and transcendence**

Peter Claver was not ideological. He did not devote himself to elaborating theories, nor did he preach general maxims. He never preached against the enslavement of Africans. He tried to mediate between them and their masters, he insisted with the masters that they treat the slaves kindly and not punish them, he tried to soften the punishment of slaves who had committed a serious offense, and he urged the Africans to respect one another and fulfill their obligations.

But beyond these services, what was most characteristic of Claver was the way he related with the Africans. He would tell them, from the moment they arrived in the boats, that they had been brought from Africa to be of service to others. Well, Claver was to be of service to them, and this to such an extent that the relations he formed with them were absolutely transcendent. Those relationships did not reflect the harsh reality of the situation; instead, in a very concrete way, they showed the Africans what it meant to follow Jesus given that situation. A normal person would not have been able to do what Claver did. We might conjecture that the incomprehension of the other Jesuits was due to their being fairly normal persons; their way of proceeding gave evidence of an unwitting lack of evangelical radicality. Their failure to recognize Claver's virtue naturally gave rise to unconscious feelings of resentment. The town folk, after all, held the Jesuits in high esteem because of the excellence of the Christian institution they ran.

The ordinary people grasped that Claver could do what he did because he made present the humanizing transcendence of the Spirit of Jesus. Only for this reason were they willing they put up with his eccentricities and even approve of them. They did not view him as subversive but as transcendent. That was why so many persons collaborated with him, and that was why so many persons who had

been reprimanded by him testified on his behalf. They could not fail to recognize in his actions the mercy of Jesus and of God himself. This was also the considered opinion of the advocate for Claver's cause in the response he gave to the objections of the defender of the faith.

**For more information about Saint Peter Claver:**

*Proceso de beatificación y canonización de S. Pedro Claver.* Spanish translation from the Latin and the Italian by Anna Maria Splendiani and Tulio Ariztízabal, Bogotá, Centro Editorial Javierano, 2002, 593 pp.

Ángel VALTIERRA, SJ., *San Pedro Claver. El santo que libertó una raza*, Bogotá, Ed. Pax, 1964, 391 pp.

Joan GABERNET, *Pere Claver*, Barcelona, ed. Claret, 2010, 192 pp.

Juan BALARI ZANOTTI, *Pasión por el riesgo: San Pedro Claver*, Barcelona, 2012, 153 pp.

*Sant Pere Claver. Esclau dels esclaus*, DVD in Catalan, Barcelona, ed. Claret.

*San Pedro Claver. Esclavo de los esclavos*, DVD in Spanish and English, Madrid, Edibesa.



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