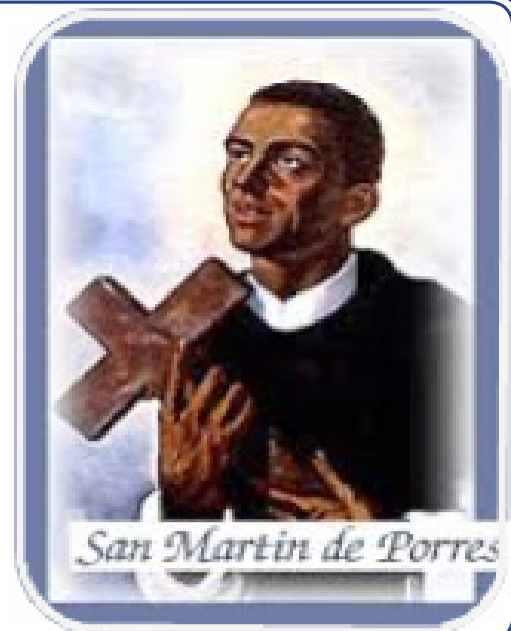


ST MARTIN DE PORRES

MAGAZINE



Dominicans - 100 years in SA

The Dominican Order has just celebrated its 800th birthday. Throughout the world, in more than 60 countries, Dominicans have celebrated their birth.

We in South Africa are in this year, 2017, celebrating the centenary of the arrival of the first Dominican Friars in our country. It is a special time of Jubilee for us. As we look back on these 100 years, there are many things we can be proud of, and yet like life itself, there were moments of darkness and disappointment for which we ask the Lord's forgiveness.

On August 5 the Dominican Friars will be hosting a gala dinner to celebrate the occasion. It is hoped that all our bishops will be present as well as many others who have played a part in the life of the Order in South Africa. Naturally our Dominican sisters will also celebrate with us. In the early years of our presence in South Africa the Dominican Friars worked very closely with the sisters. No doubt many of you who are reading this might very well have been taught by Dominican sisters. Indeed, we are proud to acknowledge that it was Dominican sisters who opened their schools to all races which



The Dominican logo on the wall of the church in Stellenbosch is made of ceramic tiles and is all that is left of the original Dominican Priory in Stellenbosch. It once adorned the refectory floor in the now-demolished Priory.

led to the birth of our new South Africa. No doubt, it would have been the sisters who introduced you to St Martin.

As we look back over the years, we would be truly grateful to hear from you about your school experiences and what the Dominican Order might have done for you.

As we stand on the brink of a new centenary, the Dominican Friars will be expanding into countries north of us, and we would like to invite you to do what generous people did 100 years ago when they sent and supported

missionaries to our country with their financial contributions. Please send your contributions to the St Martin Centre, with the reference JUBILEE, and we shall forward this to the Dominican Order.

The clients of St Martin Centre congratulate the Dominican Friars on the occasion of their 100th birthday. And as we say this, we are reminded of Fr Nicholas Humphreys who started the St Martin Centre more than 50 years ago. May he rest in peace.

What is Lent?

Lent begins on March 1 this year. It would therefore seem appropriate to share a word about Lent.

What is Lent? Some people confuse this with Advent and many don't know the difference. However, what most Catholics know about Lent is that it is a time of fasting.

Some people say that Lent is unbiblical because we don't find the word Lent in the Bible. That is indeed true but that does not mean that Lent has no biblical roots.

Lent is that time in the Church beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending at Easter. This period consists of 40 days, excluding Sundays. It is a time of fasting and abstinence which means eating less and abstaining from meat. The origins of Lent go back

to the 40 years that the Israelites wandered through the desert and to the 40 days that Jesus fasted in the desert. So this time of Lent is symbolic of those biblical roots and is always seen as a time of drawing closer to God through prayer and fasting in preparation for the great feast of Easter.



It is popularly a time of giving up something like smoking, drinking or some addiction we might have. But that would be giving this time a rather negative outlook. It is indeed a time of fasting and abstaining from meat and a time for more intense prayer and drawing closer to God. It would be more appropriate to see Lent not in a negative, but in a positive light. Instead of focusing on giving up things, let us rather focus on spending more time in prayer and Scripture reading and responding generously to the needs of the poor and the various important ministries in the Church. One very appropriate way of doing this is to respond generously to the Bishops' Lenten Appeal which touches the lives of millions of people in our country in a positive way.

Brother To All

In 1594, at age 15, Martin knocked on the door of the Dominican Priory of our Lady of the Rosary and asked to be received as a *donado*, a non-professed oblate brother.

From the house where he lived in Malambo, Martin could hear the Dominican Friars chanting the Psalms in Latin. Those ancient songs, originally sung by a people freed from slavery, touched the deep core within young Martin. He spent the rest of his life as a member of this community – a friar preacher in the Order of St Dominic.

These years, filled with prayer, community, tireless service to the poor, and deep and lasting friendships, transformed him. He had finally found a family where he felt at home. The word *friar* (*fraile* in Spanish) comes from the Latin *frater*, meaning “brother”. This was one of Martin’s greatest gifts – he was truly a brother to all.

One day, one of the Friars saw Martin cleaning the toilets of the Priory. During those days Martin had been staying at the house of the Archbishop of Mexico, who had come to Peru expressly to seek healing from Martin. The friar asked Martin, “Brother Martin, is it not better to be in the house of the Lord Archbishop of Mexico than in the toilets of the convent?” Martin quoted from one of the Psalms, “I would rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God / than live in the tents of wickedness” (84:10). He then added his own paraphrase, “Fr Juan, I pre-

fer a little time spent in this work then many days spent in the house of the Lord Archbishop.”

A SERVANT OF THE COMMUNITY

Brother Martin lived his Dominican life with such utter transparency that it often caught people off guard. The very presence of this young mulatto, son of an illegitimate union, was a bit of a question mark for many of the Friars.

He did not fit into any category, and this made some of them uncomfortable. Martin did not seem too bothered, though; if he had already come to the realisation that God frequently turns things upside down, disrupting the comfortable in order to reveal something new.

Had not the Virgin Mary sung of that very thing many centuries before? *“He (the Mighty One) has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty”* (Luke 1:52-53).

God was used to turning things upside down. Martin was just the latest actor on God’s stage.

The story of Martin’s preferring the convent toilets over the house of the Archbishop must be read in this turning-things-upside-down context. It is a perfect example of the “little stories” told of Martin; they are meant to shake us up a bit and

Focus - Entering the Dominicans

challenge us to a more authentic living of the gospel. For Martin, there was no real difference between cleaning the toilets or tending to the needs of the sick Archbishop. Father Juan, on the other hand, asking the question, because he, evidently, considered it of much more value to be in the luxurious home of the Archbishop than among smelly convent toilets.

Martin’s response (which had little to do with the spirituality of cleaning toilets) was intended to coax Father Juan into reflecting on his own priorities in life. This was the earthiness so characteristic of Martin. He lived fully in the present moment with a calm equanimity not terribly concerned with what everyone else thought about his spiritual life. This gave him a groundedness which helped him remain anchored both in God and in the very real world of the poor.

This groundedness and balance were probably learned gradually during Martin’s first years in the Priory. It is quite likely, given his difficult childhood, that Martin would have had to struggle at first with the adjustment to living a life in community. He had not grown up in an environment in which he felt himself an equal to others, and that inner wound needed the healing balm of love, the experience of being accepted by his brother Dominicans.

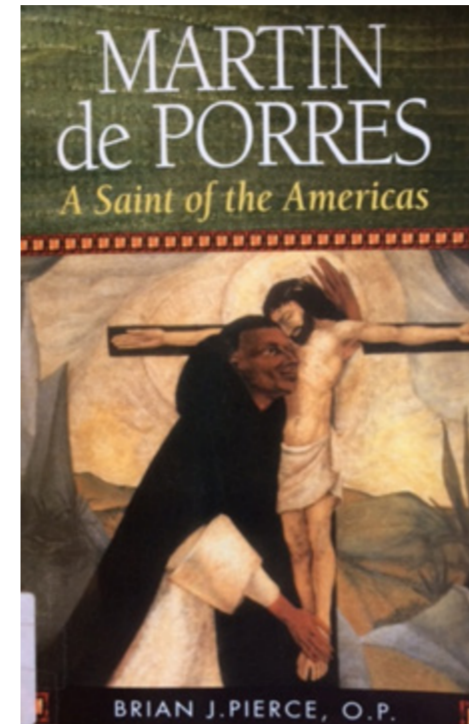
We know that Martin entered the Order first as a *donado*. There seems to be reason to believe that, at least in the beginning, he felt himself unworthy to be of full-fledged, professed friar in the community. His self-image had been damaged by life’s rough edges.

What is marvellous, though, is to look back and see how Martin opened himself to God and



The Convent/Priory of Santo Domingo in Lima, Peru, built in 1576

The Life of St Martin - 3



allowed God to show him the way back home to the fullness of his human dignity. “Becoming a brother is more than joining a community,” notes Timothy Radcliffe OP, “(It) will ask of me a patient and, sometimes painful, transformation of who I am.” Once Martin let God touch and transform the depths of his heart and soul, and discover there the gift of unconditional love, he was unstoppable. Like a spring-time flower breaks through the rain-softened ground, Martin sprouted and grew gracefully into “the freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). His life teaches all of us how to be brothers and sisters to one another.

One thing that probably did give Martin a big boost during his first years in the Priory was the joy of finding another mulatto brother like himself in the community. Miguel de Santo Domingo, originally from Cusco

and also remembered for exemplary holiness, had also entered the Order as a *donado*, though by the time Martin entered in 1594, Miguel had already been professed as a lay brother. Even though the racist environment within the colonial Church was quite severe, it does not seem that the Dominicans in Peru were willing to break the laws when necessary, as the cases of both Miguel and Martin show.

The Dominican historian, Juan Melendez, writing not long after Martin’s death, relates a story about the sudden reappearance of Martin’s father in his son’s life. According to the story, Juan de Porres showed up at the Priory one fine day (probably in 1596, two years after Martin entered) to protest his son’s second-class citizenship in the community, demanding that Martin be allowed to make profession as a lay brother. Juliana Cavallini sheds light on the incident, noting that “Martin firmly refused” to acquiesce to his father’s protests, since they “were inspired only by wounded pride and vainglory”. This explains the lapse of time between Juan de Porres’ sudden foray into the life of a son whom he barely knew, and Martin’s eventual acceptance of the community’s invitation to become a solemnly professed brother. Martin was finally professed - seven years later - this time, though, as a free response to the love he had received from his new family, his brothers in St Dominic.



The date was June 2, 1603, and the event was recorded with Martin’s very own signature in the Priory’s Book of Professions.

For Martin, there was really no difference between being a *donado* or a professed brother. He had given his life to God at a very young age, and so the day he knocked on the Priory door in 1594, he simply continued the giving away of his life, this time to the brothers in his community and from there to the whole world. He never wavered. His entire life was a testimony of what it means to be a brother - following in the footsteps of Jesus, “the firstborn within a large family” (Rom 8:29).

Humble as he was, Martin never lost his sense of humour. The religious habit worn by the professed brothers was not the same. There are references on his continuing to wear the habit of the *donados* even late in life. This is one of the reasons for the confusion surrounding the question of his profession of vows. The most probable explanation is that Martin, after mak-

ing his profession, either with permission from his superiors or just out of a kind of stubborn devotion to remaining a servant of the community, continued to wear his beloved *donado* habit until the end of his life. Martin was just that kind of person: stubbornly humble and delightfully free.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Why did Martin become a Dominican brother? How was he able to experience so deeply the unconditional, healing love of God? Do I ever experience being “loved unconditionally”? Do I struggle at times with affirming my own human dignity? What was it about Martin that made him so free? What does it mean for me to be a brother or sister to others? Read slowly the Canticle of Mary (Luke 1:46-55), praying for the understanding to live what it proclaims.

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To be continued.

REJECTION!

St Martin had every reason to be a very bitter man. His father was at the service of the Spanish nobility and his mother an African slave woman. Because he was black, Martin was quite simply rejected by his father. In the baptismal register, Martin is entered as having no father - illegitimate.

This experience of rejection is not foreign to us. We in South Africa have inherited a culture of rejection. When we were colonised, cheap labour was the order of the day and black workers were exploited. This was engraved into our constitution with the advent of apartheid.

Black people grew up in an atmosphere of rejection. Farmworkers had to live on the

farms of their white masters and have special permission to seek work in the towns. The infamous passbook was the order of the day. The experience of rejection was felt by all black people. This South African experience was not foreign to St Martin.

From his earliest years, he must have been encouraged by his mother and relations, to stand his ground and appreciate his inborn dignity. Having acquired the skills of a barber and medical man, he applied these skills lovingly and generously to all who came into his life, whether in the Priory or outside.

Even in the Dominican Order at the time, it was not allowed that someone like him could be clothed in the habit of the Order. This did not stop him. While the habit gave him an

identity as a Dominican there was something deep within him that moved him to reach out to others.

Jesus

What moved him or motivated him? We know from his earliest years that he derived much inspiration and strength from the simple devotion to the crucifix on which he would’ve seen someone who looked like one of those who oppressed him. In his devotion to the crucifix he discovered someone who suffered and died for us. In this devotion, he found strength to rise above any feelings of bitterness or rejection. As he matured he never lost this devotion which led him to an intense life of prayer.

Racism

Racism is not foreign to us in South Africa. Many black people are still exploited over against whites, even though sometimes very subtly. At the same time, many white people feel rejected and believe that they don’t have a future here.

We hear, see and read about racism in the media. And woven into this fabric is the experience of rejection. We can either succumb to it and become very bitter, or learn from the example of St Martin and of Jesus himself and find strength in prayer and in an appreciation of the beauty of the human person, no matter which group or country that person comes from.

May Lent be an appropriate time for us to pray for the eradication of racism and xenophobia and may we come to a fresh appreciation of the beauty and uniqueness of each person we meet or live with.



Human Rights - not just beer & braai!

In recent times we in South Africa have been witnessing various campaigns related to the violation of human rights. In the political world there have been calls for President Zuma to step down; University students raised their voices asking that fees should fall; there have been instances of racism and xenophobia; we know also of instances of assassinations. The list goes on and on. And people say this is not the South Africa we dreamed of and that many died for.

On March 21 we celebrate Human Rights Day, and many of our leaders will be making speeches. This could be and often is just another instance of words and words and words.

The Church has issued many statements on human rights and many have died defending human rights. If any of your human rights were violated you would certainly enlist the support of people and the Church to struggle with you that justice be done. And this is not meddling in politics. This would be a struggle for your human dignity and rights to be recognised – something we all hold supreme.

It would be very easy to hold St Martin de Porres in great esteem and to seek his prayers for us in our needs. This could be a sort of spiritualising of St Martin. We dare not forget that the greatness of St Martin is to be found in the way he handled the issue of the abuse of human rights and dignity. As a mulatto, he was rejected, even by his own father. And this is the experience of thousands of people even today.

Human Rights Day should not be just a public holiday for braai and beer. It is a

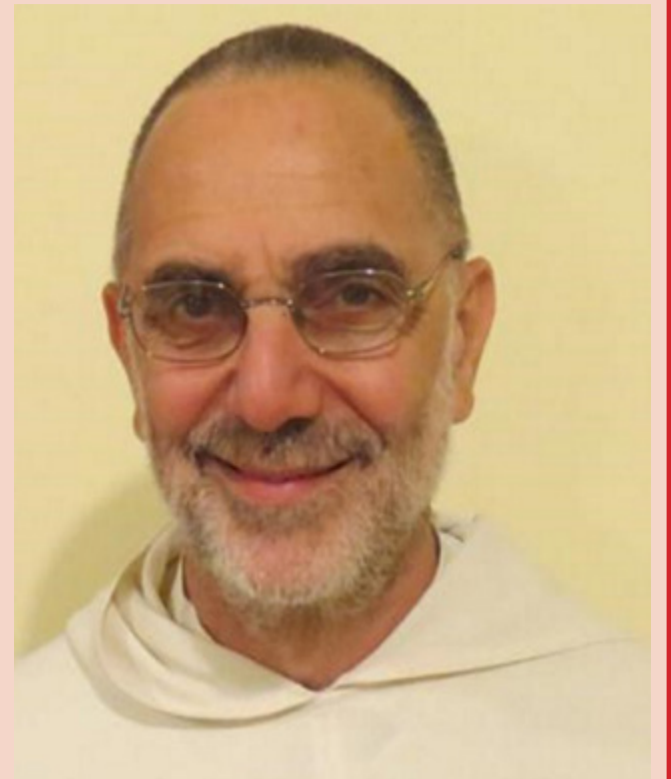
day for us to recognise our responsibility to struggle for a more just society and for human rights to be everywhere respected. On a practical level the Dominican Order, together with other religious Orders, has people and structures in place at the United Nations to speak and lobby in defence of helpless people. This we don't read about in newspapers and that's why we, at the St Martin Centre, feel it important to draw your attention to what the Dominican Order (to which St Martin belonged) is doing in this field.

On the website of the Dominican Order we read the following:

The Dominicans for Justice and Peace office at the United Nations in Geneva is an international service that is an extension of the work of many of our Dominican brothers and sisters throughout the world who are involved in the protection of human rights and vulnerable people.

We offer Dominican brothers and sisters who ask for our assistance:

- A platform at the international level that serves as an extension of their local work for justice and allows them to speak truth on situations of human rights violations.
- We represent their local concerns to the UN and its agencies, diplomatic missions, and other international NGOs, and make oral and written statements at the UN Commission on Human Rights.
- We advocate for reforms, and we make recommendations for improving human rights situations in countries.
- We provide research on international treaties, data and thematic issues that can assist the work of our brothers and sisters at the local level.



Fr Michael Deeb OP

- We host Dominican delegations in Geneva to enable them to network effectively with government missions and non-governmental organizations.

- We launch and respond to urgent appeals about local violations of human rights.

We Dominicans in South Africa are privileged to have one of our own brothers officially appointed by the Master of the Order as the Order's permanent representative at the United Nations. He is also the Order's promoter for Justice and Peace. He is Fr Mike Deeb OP and can be contacted at deebmick@gmail.com

Here in South Africa the coordinator for Justice and Peace at the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference is our very own provincial, Fr Stan Muyebe OP smuyebe@yahoo.co

St Martin de Porres Parishes

It is the custom in our Catholic Church to refer to the parishes from which we come after the Saint to which the parish is dedicated. "Which is your parish?" The answer would be "St Martin de Porres"! People seem proud to acknowledge their patron saint.

There are many parishes dedicated to St Martin de Porres. We, at the St Martin Centre, would like to invite these parishes to request a number of these newsletters for their parish. Admittedly, this will cost a little money which shouldn't be too exorbitant considering the inspiration and encouragement it would bring to parishioners.

Parish priests are invited to phone us requesting the number they would want or drop an email to eblaser@zaop.org with any suggestions you might have.



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