

# Martin de Porres and the Eucharist

By Mark James OP

I am living and working with the Deaf community in Manzini, eSwatini (Swaziland).

Here in the Cathedral parish there is exposition of the Blessed Sacrament from 07h00 in the morning until 17h00 in the evening twice a month. This devotion is enthusiastically supported by the Catholic parishioners of Manzini. There are always people praying before the Blessed Sacrament no matter what time you go into the chapel.

When I saw the popularity of this devotion here in Manzini, I was reminded of Martin's own devotedness to praying before the tabernacle of the Lord, sometimes all through the night. I also recalled his love of attending Mass and receiving the Eucharist regularly. In his time, it wasn't possible to receive the Eucharist daily as we do today.

What strikes me about Martin's devotion to the Eucharist is that when in contemplation, he didn't just reflect on Christ on the cross but also on the mystery of Christ in the Eucharist. In both these practices he didn't just discover compassion for the poor but also his vocation to serve and give himself for the good of others. Martin never wrote any theology books, so we can't see what he thought about the Eucharist. The only way to read Martin is to look at his life, the way he lived was a book. His life was one dedicated to love, to *caritas*, that is if we take St Thomas Aquinas' definition: "To will the good of another."

In the early Church the Eucharist was originally called either *agape* which means 'love' or *pax* which translates as 'peace.' The Eucharist is a meal of love, of self-giving love, of learning how to will the good of others as Jesus did. It is no wonder that Martin had such devotion to the Eucharist.

The elements of the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus and so the Eucharist is a celebration of how we are ourselves transformed. What is particularly interesting about Martin is that he appears as another Christ in his relations with others. Martin loves the poor and sick, but he also gives time to the rich and powerful, as Jesus did. Martin's compassion even extends to reaching out to all of God's creatures, the cats, dogs and even the lowly mice. It is as if Martin has been transfigured. The elements of bread and wine are transformed into Jesus' body and blood, so to when we consume the Eucharist we ourselves undergo a transformation.

Normally whatever we eat and drink gets transformed into us as the food and drink strengthens and nourishes our bodies. With the Eucharist it is different. When we consume the Eucharist, it is not we who assimilate it but rather it assimilates us. The Eucharist transforms us so that we come to be 'conformed to Christ' as Paul reminds us. We become members of his body and are one with him. If we allow it, the Eucharist transforms us so that we become more Christ-like, just like Martin.

Reflecting on the Eucharist like Martin means looking towards Christ and allowing ourselves to be transformed by him, by being shaped by the Holy Spirit. In the Eucharist the elements of bread and wine are transformed into his body and blood this is the doctrine of transubstantiation. But when we read the institution narrative carefully we see it says: 'This is my body given up for you' and 'This is my blood poured out for you.' It is not just the mysterious transformation of the elements of bread and wine transformed into Christ's body and blood that we celebrate. It is that Jesus gives us his body and blood as a gift. In the Eucharist we remember that Jesus was killed on the cross by the actions of people living in a violent world.

Pope Benedict reminds us that in transubstantiation we discover a second, more profound level of transformation: Jesus transforms the violence of those people who were against him by responding 'with an act of giving, an act of love.' Jesus does not continue a cycle of violence but transforms it by a generous act of self-giving love. In the Eucharist, we celebrate that violence is defeated by love.

Pope Benedict wrote: 'This is the transformation that the world needs and which alone can redeem the world.' In Christ, death is transformed by acts of love. This is what Martin often did himself. He would not allow other people's pettiness and violence to prevent him from responding with acts of love, like the time he was called a dog by one of his Dominican brothers; he repaid this violence with an act of love by bringing the brother a bowl of his favourite soup for lunch. He didn't pour it over him either!

Martin teaches us is that the Eucharist is a social sacrament and not just a personal one. It is not about me and Christ but more importantly about reaching out in compassion to my neighbour. In this sense, Eucharist becomes communion; a sharing in the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit but also communion with suffering humanity and all of creation. It is about growing in communion with God, but also as Church in solidarity with all suffering people in our world. If we allow Christ to transform us through the Eucharist our lives too will become a gift of love for a world torn apart by hatred and violence.

Let us keep on contemplating and receiving the Eucharist so that we open our lives to Christ's transforming power so that we too may be willing to give our lives as a gift of love, of *caritas*, thereby anticipating a world, marked less by violence, and more by justice and peace.



*Happy Feast of St Martin!*

*St Martin's Feast Day occurs on November 3rd.  
We wish you all a happy and blessed Feast Day!*



# MARTIN'S DEATH

"The end came. It all began when Martin was saying good-bye to Juan Vásquez de Parra, who had become a soldier and was about to embark as part of the Armada of the South Sea. Martin said to him in [the port of] Callao, 'Adios, Juancho. We will not see each other again in this century, and if we were to see each other, you would doubt.' Having said these words, Juan departed and Martin stayed. ... This was around June 1639. Three months went by and in the third or fourth week of October Martin fell ill."

## WISDOM FOR THE WORLD

Martin knew that the end was near. What cannot go unnoticed is how the beginning of the end coincided with Juancho's good-bye.

His "son" was a man now, a free man, like Martin himself. The experience of spiritual fatherhood was, for Martin, the culminating grace of his life. Now, with Juancho's setting sail for the East and the adventures of life that awaited him, Martin knew that he, too, was ready for his final journey: the preparation for death.

Like a good father, Martin had passed on to his son the wisdom of his own lived experience. He had poured out his own life into the heart and soul of Juancho, just like Christ had done with



## FOCUS: A LIFE FREELY GIVEN

Martin's death was to Lima what Mother Teresa of Calcutta's death was to the world. It was an event which moved an entire people, a whole city—the passing of a great saint. Thomas Merton once wrote, "In my ending is my meaning." "I Martin's ending, his final days, the throngs who gathered to bid him farewell, all at-test to the meaning of his life. It was a great life; one well-lived. In the end, Martin, like Jesus, gave his life away—freely—as a gift:

"The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ... No one takes it from me, but I lay it of my own accord" (Jn 10:11, 18). And so he did, on November 3, 1639.

him. "I do not call you servants any longer... I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." (Jn 15:15–16). Martin's life was complete. Now it was time to let go.

Each night the Dominican friars had the custom of gathering in the priory chapel to end their day with the Compline liturgy and the singing of two ancient canticles. One of them, the *Salve Regina*, was sung to Mary, the mother of mercy. The other canticle, from Luke's Gospel, was the Canticle of Simeon — an old Hebrew man's song of thanks to God for letting his tired, old eyes see the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel before he died.

One can imagine Martin returning from the port of Callao that June day in 1639, after saying good-bye to his beloved Juancho. He must have felt the same mixture of emotions — joy, pride, sadness — that any parent feels when a son or daughter leaves home for the first time. There he was, back in the chapel where he had spent many nights in prayer, joining the friars and old Simeon in giving thanks to God and praying for the grace needed for the final journey:

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all the people" (Lk 2:29–31):

With these words, Martin began to prepare for death. The first day of his illness (he probably died of typhus), Martin told his friend, Father Juan de Barbarán, who had stopped by to see him, "The time has come. I will die of this illness, and no medicine is going to be of any help."

Martin never wavered from this conviction, and each time the friars showed up with medicines with which to save the life of their dear and holy brother, Martin refused. As was noted earlier, he even scolded them for proposing to kill animals in order to make medicines for his healing. He walked into the arms of death with utter freedom, overflowing with gratitude for God's gifts of life and love. In the words of a contemporary Dominican friar in Peru, "Martin loved life. He adored life. He defended life."

Within three months, Martin was bedridden. He did not stop being "Martin" though. He tried to resist letting the friars put sheets on his bed, but the prior commanded him to accept under obedience. It was a trick he had tried once before, when struck with a case of severe fevers. That time Martin had insisted on sleeping on his scrap of cowhide on the cold floor, even after the prior had ordered that a mattress and sheets be taken to his room.

Martin finally accepted the mandate — faithful, at least in theory, to his vow of obedience. It was all useless, however, because they later discovered that, though Martin was "obediently sleeping on the mattress and sheets," he was doing so while



still dressed in his penitential hair shirt and woolen habit. Arguing with Martin's stubborn holiness was a waste of time.

As the end drew near, Martin received the anointing of the sick and the sacrament of confession "with many tears". He also received the Viaticum, the final Eucharist, a Latin term which means "the provision for the journey". The bread he had broken and shared with so many during his life was now given to him as bread for the journey. In a way similar to the final hours of life of the founder of the Order, his holy father, Saint Dominic, Martin even spoke some words to those who were gathered, "which brought all who were present to tears". Early in the evening of November 3, another of his old friends, Francisco Ortiz, arrived.

Years later he shared his final, tender moments with Martin: "I wanted to say good-bye in case he died that night," he recalled.

Approaching the bed, he bent over and kissed Martin on the neck.

Martin, feeling the presence of his friend, "reached his arm out and rubbed my head and neck. ... He then drew me close to him with great strength, pressing me against his neck so much that I began to sweat profusely".

At that moment, Francisco remembered, as did many others, "There was a heavenly aroma softer and greater than anything I had ever experienced."

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving... imita-

## The Life of St Martin - 13

tors of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph 4:32–5:2).

Twice that evening they asked Martin if it was time to sound the *tablas*, the wooden clappers used to summon the community to the bedside of a dying friar, and both times he shook his head "no".

Finally, around eight o'clock that night, Martin was again asked, and this time, "lowering his head, he said 'yes'". The friars gathered and began to sing the Creed and to say the prayers of commendation for the dying. Martin quietly breathed his last, surrounded by those who had been his brothers for forty-five years. The bells of the *convento* the very ones that Martin had devotedly rung for more than four decades — announced to all of Lima that their beloved Martin had gone home to God, carrying in his heart the bread of life.

Bishop Pierre Claverie, OP, the slain archbishop of Oran, Algeria, once said, "The value of my life depends on my capacity to give it away." Is this not what Martin taught us so gently, so perfectly? His life was of such immense value because he gave it away, like

bread — blessed and broken — every day of his life.

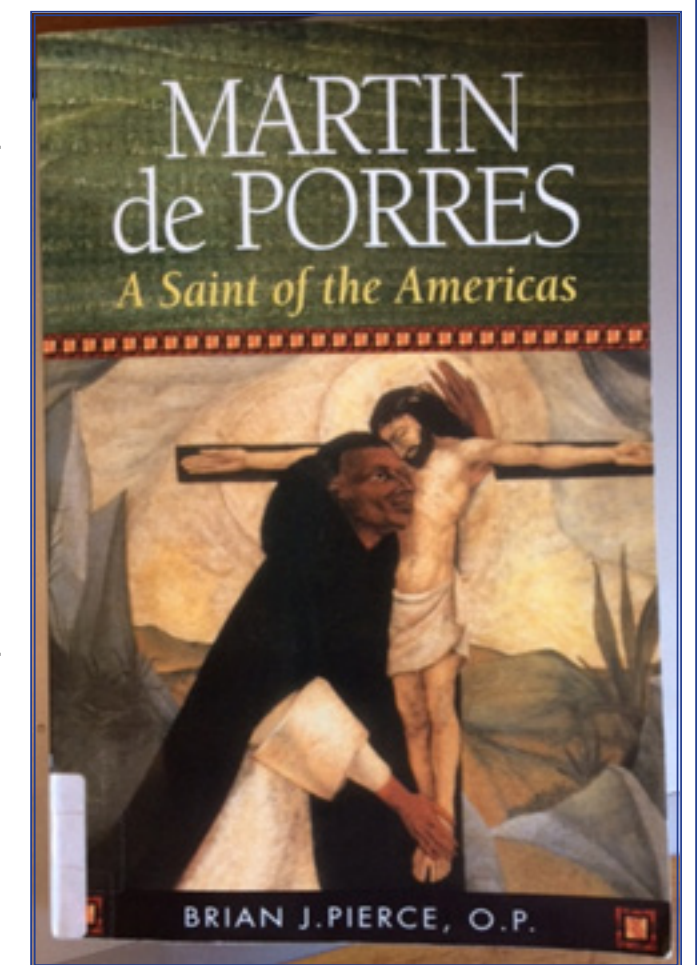
At his funeral the next day, the whole city, of Lima was present, 'people of every race, language and way of life'. It was just what Martin would have wanted — a gathering around the eucharistic table where everyone has a place, where no one is left out. We can be sure that even the dogs and the cats and the mice were present that day, to say good-bye to the friend who had first invited them to "the table", the friend who, like Jesus, celebrated the end of his life by giving himself away. Martin's final gift was to become bread for the world.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*Why was Martin able to approach death so gently, with such great trust? Do I ever think about death? Does it frighten me, or do I feel at peace with dying? Jesus gave his life away. Martin gave his life away. Bishop Claverie gave his life away. Am I giving my life away little by little? How is giving one's life away a preparation for death? How do love, friendship, and marriage prepare us for death? Have you ever tried*

*to write your own obituary or chosen the readings and music for your own funeral? You may want to try this, and reflect on the experience.*

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# St Dominic's Feast Day - as seen by St Martin

By Isaac Mutelo OP

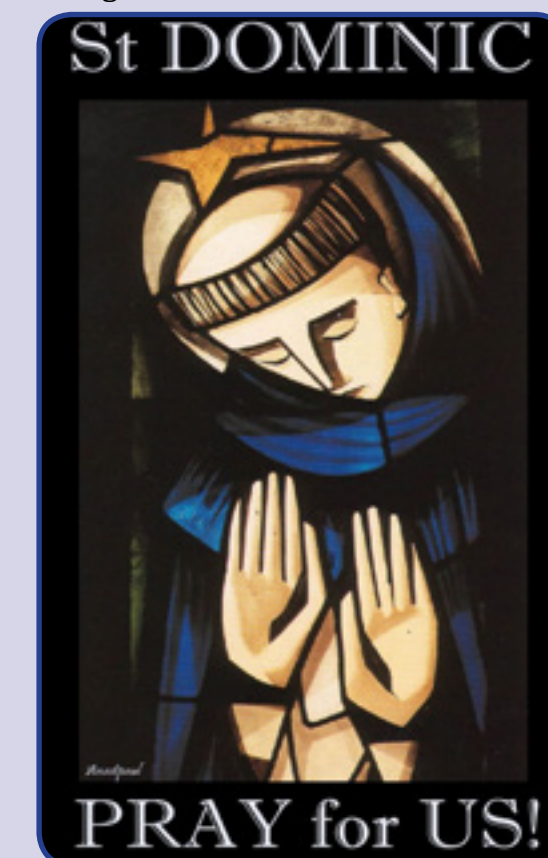
On 8 August, we celebrated the feast of St Dominic (often called Dominic de Guzmán) who was born about eight centuries ago in Caleruega, Spain and founded the Order of Friars Preachers (Dominicans), a religious order with a universal mission of preaching for the salvation of souls.

St Dominic was himself a great preacher, missionary, reformer, mystic and defender of the Church against erroneous teachings. He is often portrayed holding a book on icons and images. The Dominican family is blessed with many saints who helps one to reflect on Christian living.

Among them, St Martin de Porrès presents an aspect of Dominican life and mission which is vital to Christian living in the world today. After joining the Dominican family, St Martín became widely known for his unique healing powers, great humility and involvement in social work through his support for orphans and abandoned children. Through his willingness to occupy the last seat, St Martin stands as an example of selflessness and unconditional service to others.

St Martin's ability to serve all those in need of healing and material support regardless of their background is a direct challenge to our social contexts where cases of corruption, power struggles and injustices are manifold even within Christian communities.

The world is moving too fast and catching up with it is not easy. What one often sees are the fruits of dissatisfaction: the hunger for what one does not have, the hunger to be better than others, the hunger to be ahead of others, the hunger to appear more reputable than others, the hunger for higher positions, the hunger for domination, the hunger to have the best form of material possessions, the hunger for more, and more, and more.



Not many people find it easy to be at peace with selflessness, especially when so much social emphasis is placed on feeling good, getting ahead of others and having the best. Such negative socio-economic aspects which are contrary to the life and example of St Martin are vital to ponder about as we celebrate the feast of St Dominic.

St Dominic himself preached charity and lived his life in solidarity with the poor and needy. Having been moved with pity and compassion at the sight of the dying poor, St Dominic sold his own personal books to help. This is possible when one develops a selfless and prophetic spirit, by letting the reality of Christ transform one's life, perception of life and relation to others.

In that way, one becomes a life-giving spirit to others through a life of service, love and charity which corresponds to God's kindness and mercy. By trying to wear the garment of St Martin and looking at the world with his eyes, one grows in selfless service, thereby fulfilling one's Christian calling.

Through his life of poverty, humility and charity, St Martin stands as a great reminder that the greatest recipe to authentic preaching and Christian living is love and service. As we celebrate the feast of St Dominic, the life and example of Martin literally reminds us of the wish of St Dominic: "have charity, guard humility, make your treasure out of voluntary poverty".



# St Dominic - Path to Holiness

**O**n a Friday morning recently, I received a surprise call from an old friend.

We have been friends since I joined the Dominican Order in 2013. We have had, on numerous occasions, discussions raging from politics, economics and religious life in general, though we never agreed on certain principles that bound religious life. But one thing he likes talking about is the life of St Dominic. He is so passionate about him that he calls him 'His holiness St Dominic'. I must admit he knows more about Dominic than I do.

However, the reason he called was for us to meet for coffee on Sunday morning after our Community Eucharist liturgy at Scottville Mall in Pietermaritzburg. I agreed to meet him. And knowing him to be an excellent orator, I knew I am getting into another endless discussion that Sunday. I guess you know or have people in your life who are extroverted. My friend is such a one. So, I had to eat something before having our coffee. Despite that side of him, he talks sense. Sunday came. We met for coffee and as usual he complained about his career, his kids and the pressure at his place or work. Then for the next half of the conversation we talked about St Dominic.

For the first time, I enjoyed the discussion on St Dominic who delights his soul. During the discussion he said something that struck me. In his gentle tone he said:



## By Ernest Mwape OP

"Brother do you know that St Dominic followed a unique path to holiness for himself and his adherents?"

That caught my attention. I asked him to explain his statement further.

"Dominic infused special ideals in his followers, epitomes which sprang from his character," he said. 'His path to holiness was formed by his personal character which brought out a quality of sanctity. The quality most of us are striving to achieve daily. For Dominic, looking into his miracles between 1232 and 1234 which resulted from the sanctity of his body, they became possible because he allowed God to work through him, as distinct from most of us whose egos have 'scripted' our daily activities, leaving the direction of the Holy Spirit out of them.

"Dominic opened up to the will of God as he lived and moved from one village to the next. Another thing that Dominic was keen on was to bring out the best in people he encountered and among his friars. He was not concerned with building beautiful churches or in including animated stories in his homilies but looked at the reality of the people before him and responded according to their needs.

"That for me is the path to holiness", he said.

He then asked me my thoughts about the subject. Fortunately, prior to our meeting I had read Pope Francis' Third Apostolic Exhortation 'A Call to Holiness' (*Gaudete et Exsultate*) published on April 9, 2018. I quickly borrowed a phrase from what the Holy Father had said, that 'holiness is as diverse as humanity'. In other words, telling me that the term holiness is synonymous in the spiritual sense with humanity. For St Dominic, during his time this meant living according to the signs of the time and making God present in all situations.

In our time, I said, the path to holiness is making sure

one is available to serve others in humility in our diverse communities, showing compassion to the poor, and those suffering in many ways. It is about sharing a smile with those around us, listening to those in despair, being agents of forgiveness, shutting our selfishness out and opening our hearts to those different from us. It is about freeing those enslaved in the world of consumerism, and promoting the culture of community fellowship (Act 2: 42- 47). I think the path to holiness that Dominic envisioned is to be always alert to the will of God and letting him direct our hearts.

In a similar vein, it is about allowing people to discern their own path to holiness, experiencing God's mercy and love without infringing on their freedom to worship God in truth and in spirit (John 4: 24). In addition, today, St Dominic challenges us to identify with Christ in different aspects of our lives. For students at different levels of our education, as we study in different disciplines of our education, we should glorify God and not ourselves.

To those who are working either in formal or informal employment, the path to holiness means making sure you get to work on time, marketing the Christian ethics towards work. For mothers, fathers, and grandparents the path to holiness as St Dominic envisioned it is to continue to transmit the truth and wisdom to the next generation despite the distractions of the new age of technology.

Well, I ended my comments on this note, hoping that he would add something to what I had articulated on the subject. So, I leave it to you to continue to think of what your own path to holiness is, as parent, grandparent, married couple, single parent, student and so forth.

By the way... we didn't even finish our coffee because we were so immersed in our discussion that we both forget to drink the coffee set before us.

## Thank You!

I would like to thank all those who responded so generously to our recent financial appeal. You will be forever blessed!

Fr Emil Blaser OP

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