

The Story of St. Benedict the Moor



Benedict the Moor, also known as Benedict the Black, was born near Messina, Italy in 1526. He was the son of Christopher and Diana Manasseri, Africans who were taken to Italy as slaves and later became Christians. Benedict was a devout, sweet-tempered child, and by the time he was 10 years old, he was known as the "Holy Negro." For the rest of his life, people referred to him that way.

Benedict worked as a field hand until he reached the age of 18, when he was given his liberty. For the next 10 years, he earned his living as a day laborer, sharing his meager wages with poor and devoting much of his leisure time to the care of the sick.

Although his race and his parents' servitude made Benedict the object of frequent ridicule, he bore each humiliation with great dignity. One day, the gentleness of Benedict's replies to his tormentors attracted the attention of Jerome Lanzi, a young man who had withdrawn from the world to imitate the life of St. Francis of Assisi. "You make fun of him now," Jerome Lanzi said of those who were jeering at Benedict, "but I can tell you that ere long you will hear great things about him".

Shortly after that incident, Benedict disposed of his few possessions and joined Jerome's small group of hermits. The solitaires, who originally lived in the hills near Messina, later moved to a new location outside Palermo. After Jerome died, Benedict reluctantly became the group's superior, and the community prospered under his leadership. When Pope Pius IV directed all independent groups of hermits to become affiliated with established religious orders, Benedict entered the Order of the Friars Minor of the Observance. As a Franciscan lay brother, he worked for a number of years as a cook at the Friary of St. Mary of Jesus in Palermo, and it is said that food

multiplied miraculously in his hands. Domestic duties, which gave Benedict many opportunities to perform small acts of charity, were well suited to his retired nature. In 1578, however, he was appointed guardian of the Palermo Friary. The illiterate lay brother did not welcome this recognition, but he was obliged, under obedience, to accept his new responsibilities and soon proved to be an ideal superior.

The Holy Negro's reputation for sanctity spread throughout the country, and wherever he went, large groups of lay people and members of the clergy met him, kissed his hand, and obtained pieces of his habit. To avoid such attention, Benedict traveled at night whenever he could. When daytime journeys were unavoidable, he covered his face with his hood. Benedict later became vicar of the convent and master of novices. His ability to expound Sacred Scriptures impressed both priests and novices, and his intuitive understanding of complex theological questions astonished religious scholars. Benedict was said to have the power to read the mind of others, and because of his extraordinary compassion, people from every part of Italy sought his counsel. Benedict never abandoned the austere practices acquired during the days as a hermit. Although he ate sparingly, he often said that it was proper, as a gesture of gratitude, to partake of foods given as alms. Toward the end of his life Benedict asked to be relieved of all his offices and was permitted to return to his work in the kitchen. He resumed his duties as cook, but his days were punctuated by audiences with poor men and women seeking alms, distinguished people seeking advice and prayers, and the sick who sought cures for their illness.

At the age of 63, Benedict contracted a severe illness. He died at Palermo, at the very hour he had predicted, on April 4, 1589.

A widespread cult developed immediately following his death and devotion to him was especially popular in Latin America, Italy, and Spain. In 1611, Spain's King Phillip 11 donated a new shrine to the friary church at Palermo, where Benedict was buried. Benedict's incorrupt remains were transferred to the shrine, where they are still venerated by the faithful.

Benedict was beatified by Pope Benedict XIV in 1743 and canonized by Pope Pius VII in 1807. He is the heavenly protector of the city of Palermo and the patron saint of blacks in North America. His feast is celebrated on April 4th.