

In the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, an armistice brought an end to the major hostilities of World War I in 1918. This Veterans Day we honor all American veterans—living or dead. We give thanks to our veterans who served this country honorably during war or peace.

In addition to Veterans Day, 11 November is also the Memorial of Martin of Tours, the patron saint of soldiers. Martin left his family at the age of 15 to serve as a Roman soldier. On duty one day, he encountered a man who was freezing for lack of adequate clothing. Other soldiers in the unit paid no attention to the man. However, Martin stopped to render aid. He cut his own cloak in half with his sword and offered it to the beggar. That night, Jesus came to Martin in a dream wearing his cloak. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me” (Mt 25:35-36). Martin had a generous heart and gave much of his pay away to help the poor, but this one incident was life changing.

Martin had studied the faith for eight years since he was 10 but he had never been baptized. “Martin knew that the time for him to join the Church had arrived. He remained in the army for two years after his baptism, but desired to give his life to God more fully.”ⁱ He asked for an honorable discharge, but was met with skepticism and accused of cowardice for timing his decision when the Germans were on the offensive.

Wanting to become a soldier for Christ, Martin was willing to put his faith to the test. He countered, “In the name of the Lord Jesus, and protected not by a helmet and buckler, but by the sign of the cross, I will thrust myself into the thickest squadrons of the enemy without fear.”ⁱⁱ Fortuitously and perhaps as the answer to many prayers, the Germans sought peace and Martin was granted his discharge without having to prove his point.

In his desire to live his faith more fully, he was aided by Bishop Hilary of Poitiers. Bishop Hilary ordained him as a deacon and priest and gave Martin a piece of land to build a monastery in the region of Gaul. Martin lived the austere life of a monk and invited others to join him in a life set apart and devoted to prayer. The heart of young soldier who reached out to the freezing beggar still lived within Martin. As a monk with the help of God, he raised two people from the dead through his prayers. Recognized for his holiness, he was appointed as the Bishop of Tours in present-day France over and above his own desires to live the more solitary life of a monk.

As a bishop, he lived very simply and served his flock faithfully. As a model Christian, he educated people to abandon pagan practices. In response to the heresy of Priscillianism, civil authorities wanted to sentence heretics to death. But Martin, and other prominent Christians opposed the death penalty. Bishop Martin reached out to everyone offering guidance to deal with the moral, intellectual, and spiritual difficulties that troubled them. He was a keen promoter of vocations and encouraged many to live a consecrated life of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Soldiers know the horrors of war and desire peace more ardently than anyone. We can look to Saint Martin for guidance in how to build a more just society that replaces the need to take up arms with the more difficult work of sowing seeds of peace. On the 11th of November in 2007, Pope Benedict advised, “May Saint Martin help us to understand that only by means of a common commitment to sharing is it possible to respond to the great challenge of our times: to build a world of peace and justice where each person can live with dignity.”ⁱⁱⁱ Saint Martin, pray for us to live in solidarity with the poor. Help us to share our cloaks with the freezing, our fresh water with the thirsty, our food with the hungry and our knowledge with those most in need.

ⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-martin-of-tours-50

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20071111.html