

In 1537, Pope Paul III condemned slavery as a grave social injustice. A foundational scriptural reference was Jesus' great commission of the Apostles to make disciples of all nations. "All" without exception are to be granted access to the sacraments and the saving power of Christ. "Paul III did not hesitate to condemn the forced servitude of Blacks and Indians ... once such practices became known to the Holy See."ⁱ This was not the first papal condemnation of slavery, nor would it be the last.

Today we celebrate the Feast of Saint Peter Claver who spent over 4 decades of his life dealing with the 17th century consequences of society's failure to recognize that slaves' lives matter. Born in Spain in 1581, he joined the Jesuit religious order at the age of 20. After his studies, he was ordained a priest and served as a missionary in the Spanish colonies of the New World.

The slave trade was fully developed in the Americas by the time Peter Claver arrived in present day Columbia. Ten thousand slaves poured into the port city of Cartagena each year.ⁱⁱ Africans were sold into slavery by Africans and European colonists were eager to exploit the labor supply for work on plantations and in mines. Travel across the oceans was inhumane and as many as one third died in the bellies of ships. Those who arrived in the New World were often deathly ill and were bought and sold like they had no inherent dignity. Once a slave, always a slave until death.

Peter was horrified by the human cruelty and exploitation. He vowed to be the "slave of the blacks forever." His ministry began with tending to their human needs. "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, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me" (Mt 25:35-36). He truly believed that "we must speak to them with our hands before we try to speak to them with our lips."ⁱⁱⁱ

Peter Claver was also concerned for the slave's spiritual wellbeing. Where his skills of language failed, he used pictures and interpreters. Having tended to their physical needs, they responded to his loving care and concern.

He lived an austere life. The need was so great and his love of God so strong that he often fasted from food and sleep in service of the slaves. God rewarded his humble service and at the touch of his cloak, many who were ill were miraculously cured. He baptized more than 300,000 slaves and did his best to teach each one of them the faith.

Peter Claver's work required resources and seeing the good that he accomplished, a number of Spanish royal officials were benefactors supporting his relief efforts and the religious education of the slaves. Peter and his interpreters were not well received by the slave traders. Prejudice also reared its ugly head. Some Europeans refused to enter the same church or confessional as the slaves.

Given strength and fortitude by his love of God, Peter Claver "preached in the city square, gave missions to sailors and traders as well as country missions, during which he avoided, when possible, the hospitality of the planters and owners and lodged in the slave quarters instead."^{iv}

He died September 8th, 1654 after a 4-year bout with illness that severely limited his ministry. Saint Peter's life as a Jesuit missionary truly embodies the teaching of Jesus to "love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34).

ⁱ ewtn.com/catholicism/library/popes-and-slavery-setting-the-record-straight-1119

ⁱⁱ franciscanmedia.org/saint-peter-claver/

ⁱⁱⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-peter-claver-589

^{iv} franciscanmedia.org/saint-peter-claver/