

**SAINTS AND BROTHERS TO ALL:  
MARTIN DE PORRES, O.P. AND JUAN MACIAS, O.P.**

BROTHER IGNATIUS PERKINS, OP  
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CENTER FOR CATHOLIC AND DOMINICAN STUDIES  
PROVIDENCE COLLEGE, PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

**INTRODUCTION**

I am indeed grateful for the invitation to be with you today to engage you in a conversation about two of my brothers, Martin de Porres and Juan Macias. Their lives as Dominican Friars in the seventeenth century, living in the same city of Lima, Peru with two other saints, Rose of Lima and Turibius of Mongrovejo, Archbishop of Lima, are historically significant. Their lives are the cause of great interest in the work of evangelization, not only because of their presence to but also because of their importance for the Church in Lima at that time. It is beyond the scope of today's presentation to offer scholarly insight into this phenomenon: four persons, three of them Dominicans, lived at the same time, in the same city and were collaborators in the work of preaching the Word. Each was later canonized for his or her heroic virtues. I must leave this scholarly work for others more competent in history to come to an informed understanding of this historic phenomenon in the life of the Church in Peru.

I would like to take a few minutes to review some of the more interesting historical anecdotes about Martin and Juan. Some of what I will share with you is factual, some is legend, but all of it is important to understand the vocation and ministry of these two canonized Dominican Brothers, and to see how they lived the charism of St. Dominic. I would like, then, to follow with an understanding of how the lives of these two seventeenth-century Friars can help us re-focus our own lives as today we work to bring the Gospel Message to those who are searching for healing and hope, those who are far from the faith, but especially the unwanted and unloved in our families, in our communities and in our global world.

What is most important, however, is a new understanding of the lives and ministries of these two brothers, what is relevant to our current understanding of a global world in need of healing and hope, our responsibility for re-affirming the dignity of the human person given the model of these Dominican Friars – who are also brothers to each of us. I trust this will provide an opportunity for us to engage in a conversation with one another.

**THE CALL TO DOMINICAN LIFE**

Of the two brothers, Martin, is the better known internationally. Martin, the first mulatto to be beatified by the Church for his virtues, was born in Lima, Peru on December 9, 1579. He was the natural son of Don Juan de Porres, a Spanish nobleman and Ana Velazquez, a freed black slave from Panama. In his Baptismal Register, it should be noted that his father was listed as unknown. Martin was different. He inherited

his mother's features and color that were undesirable physical characteristics among his father's prominent social class. In addition to his physical features and color, Martin was assigned the label of being illegitimate.

His father, however, did not completely abandon his paternal responsibility. He provided for Martin and his sister's education for a short time. Rather than risk being embarrassed by his children's color and physical features, different from his own, Martin and his sister were sent home to their mother at the time their father was appointed governor of Panama. His father arranged for Martin to serve as an apprentice to a barber-surgeon, Dr. Marcelo de Ribera, upon his return to Lima. It was during these years that Martin developed his understanding and skills in treating the sick and caring for them.

At the age of sixteen, Martin, already a member of the Dominican Third Order, was invited to be accepted by the Dominicans at the Convent of the Holy Rosary (also known as St. Dominic Priory) as a "donatus," that is, a layman working for the community in return for food and lodging. Once again, he was labeled as different. Contrary to the existing canon laws at the time, which prohibited Indians, blacks and their descendants from joining religious orders, the prior of the Convent of the Holy Rosary, was willing to disregard these laws and admit Martin as a lay brother, a fully professed Friar of the Order. Martin objected, however, to the proposed exception and it was not until 1609, at the age of twenty-four, that he finally professed vows as a Dominican Friar. Certain experiences of discrimination would later serve him well in his ministry as a Brother in the Order.

Juan Macias experienced a different path to the Friars of the Order of Preachers. Six years after the birth of Martin, Juan Macias was born on March 2, 1585, in Ribera Del Fresno in Spain, of parents from noble families who were victims of financial misfortune. Juan's parents died when he was very young. Orphaned at an early age when both parents died, he was left in the care of an uncle who made Juan earn his living as a shepherd. Being an orphan in the sixteenth century brought one face to face with the experience of homelessness and allowed little association with others. Like his future Dominican Brother, Martin de Porres, Juan Macias was marginalized and set aside from mainstream society. Even at this early age, in his loneliness and abandonment in the fields, Juan frequently meditated on the mysteries of the Rosary and engaged in intercessory prayer with Mary, the Mother of God, and the Beloved Disciple, John the Evangelist. After spending many years as a shepherd, at the age of 35, he journeyed with some of his fellow-countrymen to Peru where he worked on a cattle ranch. His persistence in his personal prayer life excited in him the possibilities of a religious vocation. After two years, he moved to Lima. He contacted the Dominican Friars at the Priory of St. Mary Magdalene in Lima. On January 3, 1622, Juan, now 37 years old, was accepted as a lay brother of the Friars of the Order of Preachers.

History does not provide much detail about what initially attracted Martin and Juan to Dominican life. Martin was a member of the Dominican Third Order prior to his admission and legend has it that Juan had visited a Dominican church in Spain before he traveled to Peru.

However, the call to the consecrated life as a Dominican friar is simultaneously gift and mystery. The mystery of the call of two men as Dominican Brothers, who served in the same city roughly as contemporaries, and who attained sainthood along with Rose of Lima (canonized in 1671) and Turibius of Mongrovejo, the Archbishop of Lima (1726), may not be fully understood this side of the Resurrection. For Martin and Juan we will soon come to understand their call to Dominican life and to the Order's mission of evangelization

#### **CONSOLERS OF THE SICK AND THOSE IN DISTRESS**

Traditionally, the ministries of lay brothers of the Order were largely those of providing services for the community. Only occasionally did they engage in ministries beyond the confines the priories. Often times these ministries were hidden and unnoticed.

All Friars of the Order assume responsibility for preaching and the salvation of souls. Lay brothers now referred to as Cooperator Brothers of the Order--exercise the privilege and right to do the Holy Preaching but from wide varieties of pulpits; to travel to places wherever evangelization is desperately needed among the poor, the destitute, the abandoned and the unwanted. Preaching from many pulpits, the Dominican brother responds – not merely with words – but with the Word of God that lives in his heart. It is indeed the privilege of the Dominican Brother to announce the Kingdom of God to all those yearning for the message of salvation especially among people in circumstances where their priest brothers have not yet appeared.

How did Martin and Juan give expression to their vocation for preaching and the salvation of souls? How did Martin and Juan make Christ present to the world through their personal witness as Dominican Friars? Rather than offering a detailed review of their many miracles, acts of charity and compassion, some of the important themes and activities that will help in understanding the message these Brothers have for our lives in today's world will be reviewed.

Juan Macias served as the porter for the Priory of St. Mary Magdalene for twenty-two years. In this unique role, he was the first to meet those coming to the Priory, poor and rich alike, those who sought counseling, food and clothing, as well as those searching for Christ in their lives. Juan Macias was not simply an attendant at the door – he opened wide the door of faith, hope and compassionate mercy to people in search of healing – even for the despairing. He greeted those seeking shelter or food, and all who sought refuge and security, especially those who were far from the practice of the faith. Through this unique and open door into Dominican life, he was a witness of Christ to others by his presence to them; especially to the sick, the disabled and the disfigured, the unwanted and homeless of the city of Lima. His basket of provisions, food for the body and the soul, was full and distributed from freely without limit. In addition, when he could not personally collect sufficient provisions for the poor, he would send his burrow alone, baskets on its back, into the city to seek rations of food. The heroic virtues and the many miracles, documented in the testimonies of his beatification and canonization, attest to the authentic expression of his Dominican vocation as *consoler of the sick and those in*

*distress* – the same qualities that are attributed to St. Dominic. This was Juan Macias’ preaching – God’s message of salvation, the message of hope, the message of enduring love for every person without exception or limitation.

Martin De Porres’ ministry was expressed through a different door of evangelization, that of caring for the sick and the dying of his Dominican community, of those among the despised of the streets of Lima, and of those who had no hope. Assigned as the community infirmarian of Holy Rosary Priory, which at the time numbered nearly three hundred friars, Martin applied his skills acquired as a barber-surgeon to the brothers of the community. Caring for his brothers in his community was his first preaching. Nevertheless, like his brother Juan Macias, who lived at St. Mary Magdalene Priory in another section of a then-sprawling Lima, Martin cared for those who also came to the door of the Priory seeking help. So concerned, however, was he with how he might find others who need help, Martin would travel the streets of Lima and bring the sick home and into his cell to nurse their wounds. It was on more than one occasion that he was reported to the Prior of the community for bringing the destitute and strangers into the Dominican Community.

Martin’s compassion and charity for the sick and the aged, bringing the Gospel of hope and healing to those who were orphaned and homeless in the slums and barrios of Lima, to those suffering from stigmatized illnesses or lifestyle, was his lived expression of the life of St. Dominic as *consoler of the sick and those in distress*. His influence in caring for the poor and the sick of Lima resulted in the establishment of an orphanage and a children’s hospital. Martin also had a devotion to all God’s creatures especially those who were suffering. He had a special affection for animals, which is often displayed in Dominican iconography.

It is reported in historical records that Martin De Porres, his Dominican Brother, Juan Macias, and his Dominican Sister, Rose of Lima, were friends who met on occasion. While there is little specific information about how they may have collaborated in the Holy Preaching, we are confident that they were the inheritors of the charism of St. Dominic and that each in his or her own expression of the Holy Preaching were faithful consolers of the sick and those in distress. As Dominicans, the Holy Preaching was a very part of their personhood. Their encounters with one another and with those they touched by bringing the Word of God, including those who had never heard about God, those who had heard and still did not believe, and those who were far from the practice of the faith, were for them an encounter with Christ, an authentic Dominican Moment.

#### **THE EUCHARIST AS THE SACRAMENT OF CHARITY**

Encounters between Juan and Martin in caring for others were both enriched and radically dependent on their encounters with Christ in the presence of the Eucharist. Though it was not the custom of the time to receive the Eucharist daily, Juan and Martin spent hours each day and oftentimes well into the night in contemplative adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, even when other brothers in the community were fast asleep. This prayer totally enveloped them and brought them into the life and healing ministry of Christ.

In the experience of Martin and Juan, we come to more fully understand what St. Thomas Aquinas means when he speaks about the Eucharist as the Sacrament of Charity. The late Fr. Thomas Gilby, a noted Thomistic scholar, in interpreting the words of Aquinas about the effects of the Eucharist, wrote that through the sacrament of the Eucharist, whether it is received or desired, grace is increased and the life of the Spirit is perfected. The Eucharist spiritually strengthens not only the habits of grace and especially the virtue of charity but these virtues are aroused to activity in those who remain close to the Eucharistic Christ.<sup>1</sup> There exists theological warrant to ascribe the effects of the Eucharist as something specific in the lives and ministries of Martin de Porres and Juan Macias. The Eucharist as the Sacrament of Charity enabled their works of mercy and compassion much as we read about in the life of St. Dominic and his own ministries to the sick and dying, the unwanted and the disenfranchised.

### **BROTHERS TO US IN OUR MISSION TODAY**

What do the lives of Brothers Martin and Juan mean for us today? What themes evident in their lives of contemplative prayer, preaching, and evangelization have relevance for our global world and for our own response as ministers of the Gospel?

If we have been awaked and informed of systemic changes in our world today, we cannot help but be aware of the plight of the poor, the disenfranchised, the unwanted and the unloved. We find such persons in our families, in the places where we work, in our neighborhoods and cities, and indeed throughout the world. Their numbers are countless. We know too well that the moral compass of life has dramatically shifted away from an absolute moral ethic that promotes and defends human dignity and freedom toward a relativist ethic built on moral relativism, individualism, absolute autonomy, and the commodification of the human person.

When preparing this essay, I searched for references to human dignity and how this modern notion may have guided the ministries of Martin de Porres and Juan Macias. I soon realized that the modern term, human dignity, is suitably applied to the needs of the poor and sick. It remains the case that the notion of human dignity, although the concept begins to develop in the sixteenth century, appears in Church documents only in the twentieth century. What is important to observe is that the fundamental ethical principles of human dignity, freedom, equality, and respect for all persons across the continuum of life from conception to natural death, as these values were realized by Martin and Juan in their ministries of preaching and evangelization in caring for the poor, the sick, and the unloved, find expression today in the vocation and ministry of the Cooperator Brothers in the Order of Preachers. As the Letter of James reminds us, this lived reality always must accompany the Holy Preaching. What Saint Thomas Aquinas explains is that nothing that is good and holy in the Church exists apart from the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Charity. Martin and Juan revealed this Eucharistic spirituality in their roles of consolers of the sick and of providing unfailing assistance to those in distress. This spirituality must also be our own.

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<sup>1</sup> T. Gilby (Ed). "Holy Communion" in *Summa Theologiae* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1975), Volume 59, pp. 7.

The vocation of consoler of the sick and to those in distress that we find in the life of St. Dominic and which was lived, breathed and embraced by his brothers, finds its roots clearly in Jesus' own ministry to the sick, to the dying, to those troubled in any way and especially to the despised of his day. Saint Dominic clearly enjoined this mission on his brothers when he spoke his last words to them: *keep charity*. Caring for one another with compassion, affirming and protecting human dignity and freedom, living the virtue of charity and practicing forgiveness toward all, valuing the sacredness of human life of every person comprise the gift that these noble friars, Martin DePorres and Juan Macias, embody. They shared St Dominic's imperative toward charity with those who came to them seeking healing and hope. This gift is deeply embedded in the genetic code of all those brothers and sisters who are called to Dominican life. It is also the genetic code that should appear in those persons who are called to be followers of Christ. Thus they become brothers and sisters to one another.

Our lived response to fulfilling this high mission will not be any easier today than it was in the times of Martin and Juan. If we are to live out our call of charity, we must remain spiritually grounded in prayer and be relentless in our devotion to the Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament of Charity. Through various encounters with Jesus, we will have the courage and commitment, as they did, to engage in preaching and evangelization in radical ways – to open new and unknown doors and be unafraid to walk through them. Like Martin and Juan, we too will discover that we are called to live along the lines of human brokenness, to respond to all persons especially those who are unwanted and unloved, to our brothers and sisters who live in families, in communities, and in nations, particularly those who live under oppressive conditions that crucify humanity in its flesh and in its unity.<sup>2</sup> In this encounter, we will experience the privilege and the grace to see, to touch, to nourish, and to care for our brothers and sisters, all of whom reveal the very face of Christ in distressing disguise.

In his solicitude for the Church, Christ calls, in each age, persons to take care of His people -- no exceptions -- every one of them. Each of us should be free to respond to the radical call that evangelization evokes; to open our doors to those who seek healing and hope as did Martin and Juan; to console the sick and the abandoned in their darkest hour wherever they may be; to believe and then to proclaim that every person born into the world is worthy of our respect and of our unlimited love regardless of the reason for their illness or their station in life.

The work of healing remains the work of Jesus Himself. We stand on holy ground inasmuch as we have become by Baptism brothers and sisters to one another and – O great mystery of divine grace! -- to Jesus himself. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> T. Radcliffe, "Sing a New Song: The Christian Vocation," (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1999): 242.