



# The Life of St. Peter Claver, S. J.: Apostle to the Negroes

*Unknown Author, Brother Hermenegild TOSF*

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THE Apostolate of St. Peter Claver is unique. In the history of God's Saints we read of heroic souls giving themselves as slaves in exchange for Christian captives. Two orders, the Trinitarians and the Order of Mercy had this for their object. From 1198 to 1787 the former redeemed, from the Moors of Africa, 900,000 white slaves, while the latter from 1218 to 1632 ransomed 490,736, and added a fourth vow to the usual three, viz: "To take the place of a captive if there were no other means of effecting his ransom." But St. Peter Claver's vocation was different. He was in a new world whose aborigenes were rapidly dying out; a new business had sprung up-the slave traffic-by which Negroes were brought from Africa to work in America. Strange commerce! Unholy scheme of money making! Banking houses, mercantile circles, clerks, skippers, et id genus omne, were engaged in this traffic in human flesh. In spite of the commercial loss represented by the bones scattered along the bed of the Atlantic, and over the trackless deserts of Africa, the profits of this traffic were enormous, consequently flesh and bones weighed lighter than the traders' gold. St. Peter Claver's call was to these slaves; surely a unique vocation. No sympathy was his; no encouragement, nothing but open hostility, ill-concealed contempt, or at best an irritating apathy. For forty years he met the incoming slave ship, to repeat day by day the same round of work. In his life there are no startling or diversified events, no frequent voyages. St. Peter Claver crossed the seas but once, and never quitted, for the rest of his life, the country to which obedience restricted him. He performed no important negotiations, established or reformed no religious order, made no brilliant changes of places or circumstances. His actions are heroic, his miracles stupendous; but they are always the same, ever in the same place and for the same despised Negro slaves. What was done yesterday St. Peter Claver repeats to-morrow. So his forty years of labor roll on in a crucified sameness. Variety in suffering, as in pleasure, change of place as of work renders them more relishing, now every and any alternative was denied to St. Peter Claver, who for instance, a thousand times kissed and sucked loathsome ulcers; a feat which is regarded as heroic in other Saints when done but once. Nature had nothing to cling to in those forty years of Christ-like sacrifice among the slaves of Carthage. This fidelity to duties so painfully monotonous was an essential element in the holiness of his life. In Christ crucified he found the power and the wisdom of God. And it took the strength of Christ to continue on so faithfully. This life of St. Peter Claver is brought out in order to stimulate vocations to the Negro Missions, which even now have the characteristics of Claver's vocation. True! slavery is gone but many of its effects remain; remain not only on the Blacks but also on the Whites. Much as men are willing to forgive those, who wrong them, yet they' never forgive those whom they themselves have wronged. Wretched paradox! The poor Negro is never forgiven because he is black and because he was a slave. His vices are thrown up to him by those who engendered them; his services of two-and-a-half centuries are the reason why they who were benefitted have not a good word for him. The vocation to the Negro Missions is truly Claverine. In place of the slave-ship, we have the cheap, badly built tenements; instead of the middle passage, there are now the back streets and alleys. But the atmosphere surrounding the Negro Missions is about the same as Claver found it in Carthage; neglect, apathy, hostility, misrepresentation.

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