

9. September 2026

THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

“Saint Peter Claver: Apostle to the African slaves”

To discover the heroic deeds that can be achieved through the grace of God, one must delve into the lives of the saints. One will always find that their love for God enabled them to love in a way that far surpasses human understanding. We encounter a fire of love for God and neighbor that still burns brightly today and remains present in the memory of the Church. People who have shone so brightly in their pursuit of holiness, like the saint we honor today, are always ready to help us follow Jesus to the best of our ability. Their fervor and their willingness to make sacrifices may at times put us to shame, knock at our hearts, and prompt us to ask whether we are following the Spirit of the Lord sufficiently to become witnesses of His surpassing love ourselves, in the way God has entrusted to us.

Born in 1581 in Verdu, Spain, this saint was the highly gifted son of noble and devout parents. He studied with distinction among the Jesuits in Barcelona and was admitted to their order in 1602. With his superiors' permission, Peter traveled to the Americas as a missionary in 1610, landing in Cartagena, Colombia, a city of 201,000. Divine Providence led him there to become the guardian angel for the African slaves brought to this place by ship to be sold.

After completing his theological studies and being ordained a priest, he began his indescribably arduous and painful work. As soon as a ship carrying slaves bound in chains and nearly wasting away in filth and misery docked, his otherwise pale and gaunt face took on an expression of gentle kindness. With a sack on his back containing bread, fruit, tobacco, wine, and so on—which he had begged for door to door—he hurried to the ship. There, he brought refreshment to the poor and soothed their anger over their long ordeal. He also won their trust. Then he asked them to lead him to their sick. He wanted to provide them with spiritual and physical comfort and continued sustenance. After this initial greeting, he accompanied those who were still able to walk to their pens—dark, damp rooms containing nothing but the bare earth. Men, women, young, and old were locked up together in these pens with almost no clothing. They were given their meager meals in large, dirty dishes until they could be sold at the market. The filth, the stench, the heat, the furious shouts of some, the moans of others, the diseases,

sores, smallpox, and so on turned these pens into an agonizing hell. Every year, an average of 12,000 Africans were unloaded there and led to the markets.

During their brief time there, Peter visited their pens daily. He cleaned them and comforted the slaves with a mother's tenderness. He begged for clothes and food for them. He instructed them in the holy faith and prayed with them. He taught them to make the sign of the cross and to pray the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary. With touching simplicity, he spoke to them about the goodness of the Almighty Creator, the mercy of the crucified Redeemer who died for us, and the love of the Holy Spirit. He prepared them for Holy Baptism and administered it to them with the utmost solemnity. Peter carried out this immense task for forty years, whenever new shipments of slaves arrived from Africa, and he always performed it with growing love and ever greater self-sacrifice. In return, however, the grateful slaves honored and loved him with indescribable devotion and obedience, and their farewells to him when they had to leave Cartagena very often even moved onlookers to tears.

Because the climate in this city is very unhealthy, there were always many sick people. The saint cared especially for those afflicted by the most loathsome diseases. His tireless service to the slaves also included making penance for them by chastising himself whenever he witnessed the spiritual misery of the souls entrusted to him.

Amid all the misery he encountered, he was sustained by deep piety. Whenever he walked alone along the road, he was absorbed in prayer; many nights he prayed before the tabernacle, where a radiant glow would often encircle his head and ecstasies would allow him to gaze upon heaven.

However, it was not only the suffering of the slaves that he endured to be a source of comfort to them. He also endured the hostility of the slave traders. It is reported:

"The slave traders often reviled him severely, shoving and chasing him out the door. Peter endured it all in silence, appeasing the angry traders with pleas until they granted him access to the slaves once more. He was slandered and threatened with death, but he was not afraid. His superiors, suspicious of him because of his extraordinary deeds, often slandered him before them with accusations that he was corrupting the slaves by baptizing them twice and so on. This is why they forbade him from administering the holy sacraments for some time. Peter

could easily have defended himself, but he remained silent and confided his distress only to Jesus in the tabernacle.”

During the plague that raged in 1650, Peter worked with superhuman energy at the most dangerous posts until he himself was struck down by it; it did not kill him, but paralyzed him so severely that he could no longer walk, celebrate Mass, or eat. Nevertheless, he did not rest. Every day, he had himself carried to church to attend Mass and continued to hear confessions in his cell.

In 1654, he returned his rich life into the hands of the Heavenly Father. He remained faithful to his calling, and through him, our Heavenly Father granted us a bright light of radiant love for God and neighbor!

Reflection on the Daily Reading: <https://en.elijamission.net/time-is-short-2/>