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978-1-107-03437-2 - Black Saint of the Americas: The Life and Afterlife of Martín de Porres

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Excerpt

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## Introduction

One day in March 1664, Fray Tomás Marín wedged his shovel through the crusted surface of the underground burial chamber of the Dominican convent of Nuestra Señora del Rosario in Lima. After much digging, he uncovered the rough boards that enclosed the human remains of Fray Martín de Porres, the celebrated convent healer, dead by this time for twenty-five years. Juan de Figueroa, a wealthy member of Lima's city council and friend of the voluntary servant Martín, had built a new chapel in Martín's honor. Fray Tomás was charged with removing the bones from the common grave for reburial in the new sanctuary. In the presence of the viceroy, the provincial of his order and the prior of the convent, a doctor, a surgeon, and several of his fellow Dominicans, Fray Tomás unearthed the skeleton of Fray Martín; remarkably, it was still intact. As he ventured to lift it out of the grave by the waist, the skeleton collapsed into pieces.

After a quarter of a century underground, the bones, it appeared to Fray Tomás and the other astonished onlookers, were quite fresh, with traces of flesh still attached to them, as though they had been only recently buried. The skull left a clot of blood on Tomás's hands, and when he pressed his palms together, the lump burst and oozed living blood (*sangre viva*). From inside the open grave, Fray Tomás handed up the remains to another friar who placed them one by one in a box for reburial. This man would later remark that after handling the bones and then washing away the grave dirt, there remained on his hands a strong fragrance, like that of dried roses. During the process, one of the other friars present, the lay brother Laureano de los Santos, snatched from the grave some of the dirt mixed with flesh, and passed it on to his friend, a free black man named Juan Criollo, who was suffering from a burning fever. In a deposition later

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that year, Juan Criollo would testify that he had invoked the intercession of Fray Martín before dissolving the grave dirt in water and drinking it. According to both Juan Criollo and Fray Laureano de los Santos, the fever immediately subsided.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the cult of Martín de Porres (1579–1639) really began, but by the time of the disinterment of his remains in 1664, many residents of Lima already considered the holy convent servant a local saint. A papal order of several decades earlier prohibited these local devotees – the *limeños* – not only from erecting an altar where his adherents might remember and pray to him, but also from placing his image or even a candle at the site where he was buried. In spite of these decrees, Martín’s reputation had spread quickly. His popularity had persuaded the Dominicans to move his remains to the chapel newly built on the site of his cell in the convent infirmary, beneath an altar dedicated to the central icon of Christianity and a devotion particularly dear to Fray Martín: the Holy Cross.<sup>2</sup> By the time Juan Criollo imbibed the dirt containing remnants of Fray Martín’s flesh, the authorities in Lima had already sent reports of his virtues and miracles to the Vatican’s Congregation of Rites in the hope that the men in Rome would take the case further and order another, more complete inquiry into Martín’s heroic fulfillment of Christian virtues. Those present at the exhumation knew that, if all went well, Martín would soon be proclaimed a venerable of the Catholic Church and, pending the verification of a couple of miracles, a *beato*, or blessed. Their ultimate wish, of course, was that he might one day transcend Lima’s boundaries and become an official saint of universal Catholicism. The exhumation was only the first step on the long road to his inclusion on the calendar of saints, but the discovery of the wondrous condition of his remains kindled the hope that his relics would always be a local fount of miracles.

The state of Martín’s bones was also evidence that his flesh had permeated the soil of Lima. To his community of devotees, this meant, both literally and figuratively, that the grace of a powerful friend of God had left its indelible mark on their city.

This book explores the life, the saintly reputation, and the intercessory actions of Martín de Porres, an intriguing figure of seventeenth-century Lima. The unlettered offspring of an unmarried couple of vastly different social origins, Martín de Porres was a radical nominee for sainthood by the standards of the time. His father, Juan de Porras, was a well-connected Spanish American, while his mother, Ana Velázquez, was a former slave of African descent born in Panama. In the nomenclature of colonial Peru, Martín was a *mulato*, a term rarely used today but one that was commonly

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spoken in Lima, even by Martín and others who shared his mixed origins. As we shall see, although his African heritage and illegitimacy narrowed some of his life options, being a mulatto was no barrier to his saintly career. On the contrary, Martín's life demonstrated to colonial limeños that Africans and their descendants were included in the claims of Christian universality made by Saint Paul, and that their evangelization by clerics in the ports and cities of Spanish America was bearing fruit. What's more, it seems quite clear that even well-born limeños embraced the cult of Fray Martín de Porres precisely *because of* his mixed racial origins; for them and, later on, for Catholic men and women across the Americas, his mingled African and European heritage was central to his allure as an intercessor and it was a critical factor in the endurance and ultimate success of the canonization campaign.

Less than twenty years after Martín's death, Lima's archbishop opened an inquiry into his life, virtues, and miracles, and the case for his elevation to sainthood moved in a series of stops and starts through the many stages of Vatican scrutiny and partial recognition until he was finally declared an official saint of the Catholic Church in 1962. Over the years his devotees penned many accounts of Martín's life and they registered how limeños kept alive his memory and prayed for his intercession. These accounts certainly provide us with some insight into the local legend of his saintliness, but because he left no writings of his own and kept most of his thoughts to himself (reportedly out of his intense desire to avoid any action belying even a hint of vanity), it is particularly difficult to bring Martín into focus as a historical figure. We are left to reconstruct his engagement with the world through the very few archival documents that give us clues about his activities as a man, a friar, a brother, and a friend. We can complement these with the stories of his life, death, and afterlife as they were told and retold by some of the city's elite, who worked very hard for many years to solidify his reputation and spread his fame, and to identify him as a saint. Some visual images can also guide our understanding of his devotees' regard for him. But the sources are virtually all attributable to a relatively small circle of men and women who revered him and through him sought divine assistance for their problems. If, as his devotees claimed, the stories of his life and miracles were public knowledge (*voz pública y notoria*), only a limited and clerically mediated part of their comments have reached us today.

While Martín de Porres stands at the center of this book, it is not my purpose to extol his virtues and his rare divine gifts. Readers who seek a faith-based biography of Fray Martín may consult the immense literature

produced since his death by generations of admirers. I have little to add to their work. Rather, I propose to bring Fray Martín down from heaven to reconstruct his life as he participated in the daily rhythms of urban Lima, first as a healer and later as an intercessor, to examine how his personal story and his cult interweave many strands of the city's dense and dynamic social and cultural milieu in the century that followed the turbulent years of conquest.<sup>3</sup> The period I focus on begins at the time of Martín's birth, near the end of the sixteenth century, when the leaders of the Church were defining a new set of pastoral and evangelizing practices in accordance with the edicts of the Council of Trent (1545–63), the great European conclave that revitalized early modern Catholicism. At the same time that Peruvians were enacting the reforms mandated at Trent, they were giving shape to two key social institutions that would endure for much of the colonial period. During his tenure Viceroy Toledo (1569–81) forced the consolidation of the declining Andean population into *pueblos de indios*, Indian settlements, so they might be better evangelized and organized to serve out the *mita*, the controversial labor draft that fueled the extraordinary silver production at Potosí. And, as a way to supplement the Andean labor pool, decimated by disease, dislocations and overwork, African slavery was becoming commonplace in Lima.

My study continues beyond his death to reconstruct the afterlife of Fray Martín de Porres. It reaches into the middle of the eighteenth century, when the Vatican recognized Martín as a hero of virtue and designated him a venerable of the Church, and continues on through his beatification in 1837 and his canonization in 1962. By definition, a biography is the story of someone's life story up to and including his death. With Martín, I have had to deviate from the norm by choosing a time frame that extends beyond the lifespan of my subject, because it was not until the years *after* Fray Martín's death that the community of the devout worked out and expressed their understandings of what was important to them about his life and how his intercession in heaven was successfully channeled into their city. It took decades to articulate the subtle shades of these meanings and convey them to Catholics of all backgrounds in Lima and to the saint-makers at the Vatican. Never truly carved in stone, these understandings continued to shift and change over the next two centuries throughout the Catholic world, until Fray Martín was canonized as the universal patron saint of social justice.

The book looks at the life and afterlife of one holy man within a landscape of complex and highly dynamic cultural and social processes. It traces the beginnings of the devotion to Fray Martín de Porres and follows its growth,

but it also uses this cult as a lens through which we can see more closely and, I hope, more clearly broader notions of faith and society in the colonial world. During the seventeenth century – the relatively stable and little-studied mid-way point between the tumultuous era of contact between the native peoples of America and Europeans and the quest for independence from the Spanish Crown – the inhabitants of Peru formulated attitudes and behaviors in response to the particular conditions they confronted: the need to secure adherence to Christianity among the Andean subjects of the Spanish monarchy was one such concern; the need to integrate the growing number of African slaves into urban life was another. Limeños spoke of these objectives through the language of their faith, and so these goals are highly relevant to the study of all aspects of religion in Peru, including the cult of local saints. But the devotion to Fray Martín speaks to issues of particular saliency in a society marked by the presence of large numbers of African slaves and their descendants, almost half the city’s population. I contend that through the textual and visual language they used to portray the saintliness of Fray Martín, limeños, particularly members of the local elite, thought about some of the meanings of African origins and mixed ancestry, even as they reflected on the nature of death and the sacred body, approaches to healing, and, ultimately, claims to Spanish control over the Peruvian landscape. I also show how the cult took root over time both within Lima and outside the geographic confines of Peru, and how the final impetus to canonize Fray Martín was bound up with the twentieth-century struggle for racial justice, especially in the United States.

My study of Fray Martín owes a great deal to the work of a group of historians of sainthood in early modern Europe, who have seen in holy Christian heroes indications of a society’s values and aspirations on a variety of issues, ranging from idealized gender roles to the nature and forms of divine intervention in the material world.<sup>4</sup> At the heart of this approach is the idea that religion is a cultural system in which sacred symbols synthesize a group’s ethics and worldview, embodying in a material way the divine order and thus projecting it onto the natural world.<sup>5</sup> Saints may be thought to fulfill an important symbolic role because in their lives and through their relics they form hinges between heaven and earth, personifying God’s expectations for human virtue and channeling his sacred power to the material world. It is in this sense that saints have been described as “good to think with.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, they are not simply objects of devotion to Roman Catholics but devices by which believers can reflect on what constitutes heroism and the ideal ways to confront the universal difficulties of daily life as well as the challenges and

temptations particular to a given setting and circumstances. Seen in this light, the question becomes one of understanding the means and signs by which a community recognizes a saint's special aptitude to link the divine and the human. This process can be, as we shall see, quite dynamic, especially during the early years of a cult of a holy man or woman, when the meanings and representations of the hero of virtue are being crafted individually and collectively. While not all limeños would think of the saint in precisely the same way, their ideas about Martín's particular forms of virtue and his skills as intercessor tended to converge and stabilize over the course of the seventeenth century.

While we most certainly must focus closely on the meanings of the cult of Martín de Porres to the men and women of his city, it is equally important to view the cult as a manifestation of the multifaceted revitalization of Catholicism in the face of reformist challenges. During the Council of Trent, the Church of Rome, daunted by the Protestant criticism of the cult of saints, halted almost all canonizations, and then instituted strict procedures for assessing the suitability of new candidates.<sup>7</sup> In the ensuing century, the Church conferred sainthood on a carefully selected group of just fourteen sterling nominees. Figuring prominently among the new saints were Spanish and Italian bishops, founders of religious orders, and missionaries.<sup>8</sup> When viewed alongside some members of the cohort such as Teresa of Avila, Ignatius Loyola, and Charles Borromeo, Martín de Porres stands out for his modest role in his religious order, his ancestral links to the European slave trade in sub-Saharan Africa and the ignominious Middle Passage, and his life lived in a colonial outpost of the Spanish empire, far removed from the traditional sources of Catholic inspiration and centers of its organization.<sup>9</sup>

Creating new saints was only one aspect of the Catholic revival, a project that coincided with the global expansion of the Catholic monarchy during the dynastic union of the crowns of Spain and Portugal between 1580 and 1640. The vast geographic reach of Iberian Catholicism created the possibility of installing in new settings and among new communities of believers the fundamental dogma of transubstantiation, that is, the belief in the real presence of Christ in the Mass, through the sacramental re-creation of his sacrifice to redeem mankind. It was also a chance to bring to new peoples the devotion to the Virgin Mary and the cults of the Church's traditional saints. Ceremonies to celebrate these time-honored heroes of Catholicism bound subjects of the Spanish monarchy to their faith and to each other. At the same time, the Crown strove to propagate New World devotions in Spain and among the colonies, and exerted

its influence in Rome to support the advance of canonization cases of the saints that emerged in its overseas possessions.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the Spanish empire, a literature circulated of the holiness of a surfeit of pious and charitable bishops and priests, abbesses and missionaries, as well as humble and obedient convent servants and laypeople, some of them Europeans of old Christian origins, others the offspring of African or Indian “infidels” recently converted to the faith.

In the New World, the promotion of old and new devotions to Christ, the Virgin, and the saints reflected a dialogue with local peoples and social circumstances, an illustration of how Christianity was “remade on American soil.”<sup>11</sup> Colonials expressed tremendous allegiance to the mother of God and to Christ on the cross, their devotion intensified by miraculous origins or lifelike behavior of an image that moved, shed tears, or perspired at certain moments. The best-known and most enduring advocacy of the mother of God in Mexico was the Virgin of Guadalupe (originally known as the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception), whose image believers thought was miraculously emblazoned on the cloak of the Indian convert to Christianity, Juan Diego, proof to seventeenth-century Mexicans that their homeland was uniquely blessed.<sup>12</sup> In Peru, a series of wondrous images of the Virgin Mary became famous in the colonial period as well. Among them was the Virgin of Copacabana, a graceless statue carved by a devout Indian that was miraculously and artfully reshaped in the late sixteenth century, and thereafter ensconced on the site of a pre-Columbian temple on the shores of the Andean Lake Titicaca.<sup>13</sup> In both viceroyalties, the Tridentine cult of the passion of Christ was immensely popular, and Holy Week processions and countless representations of Christ on the cross, often made with movable limbs and human hair, presided over religious practice.<sup>14</sup> Certain men and women acquired reputations for their extraordinary virtue and inclination to emulate the suffering of Christ on Calvary. Cults to such holy figures developed in many towns and cities of Spanish America, but especially in Lima, the fervor for local saintly heroes became and remained strong enough that religious authorities obtained steady, if slow, success among the saint-makers at the Vatican.

The cult of Fray Martín and other reputed saints is closely associated with the Spanish American baroque, a cultural style of the midcolonial period that, like its European counterpart, attempted to represent and evoke heightened emotional states around the sacred by means of striking visual images, elaborate and vivid language, and lavish decoration.<sup>15</sup> During the Peruvian baroque, a handful of men and two women closely linked to the city’s most influential religious orders captured the attention of their

contemporaries for their fulfillment of Christian values, and inspired cults that brought them to the attention of the Vatican. They ranged from a Spanish bishop to a reclusive laywoman, an evangelizing friar and a saintly native Andean.

Scholars have recently looked at the cult of saints in Lima, especially Saint Rose, as a phenomenon strongly linked to efforts by Creoles to prove to the Spanish Crown and lay Europeans their worth as members of the universal Catholic community. It was their way of challenging what they considered metropolitan scorn for and discrimination against Spanish Americans.<sup>16</sup> Through the saints, many believed, the Catholic community of Lima kept up with and even surpassed Spain as a center of religious blossoming. The flowering of religious sentiment and observance showed the world that the viceregal center was an “orderly and pious city” and created new collective identities in the face of a series of profound social and economic changes.<sup>17</sup> But how does the emergence of a cult of local saints relate to broader religious contexts, such as the rivalry among the male religious orders? Probably the greatest contest for influence at the time was for assignment to the Indian parishes in the sierra beyond the city, the *doctrinas*, critical sites of the spiritual and political control over the tribute-paying Andean population. The elevation of saints from their order was another high-profile arena in which the orders competed for prestige among Catholics throughout the colony.<sup>18</sup>

No less important is the way the local cults of saints connected to the providential mission of the Spanish monarchy: the clergy and lay believers in Lima saw their saints as the “spearheads” of universal militant Catholicism.<sup>19</sup> They were also useful tools for reinforcing locally the imperial and Catholic claims of sovereignty over a conquered land and people. Through the legends of their lives, their images, and the objects associated with their bodies, these saints – sacred ancestors of the young city – allied themselves with Creoles in the ongoing efforts to establish a monopoly on sacred power in the Andes and to implant Catholic moral standards in colonial soil. Thus, Fray Martín’s first biographer, Bernardo de Medina, wrote that the Lord sent to the newly established American Church men of great virtue who worked marvels in his name so that they might “fix the faith of the Catholics and convince the gentiles of the truth.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the Creole hagiographer of another of Lima’s holy figures explained that one of the great effects wrought by the presence of the bodies of saints was their “temporal defense and perpetual patronage” of the towns and cities in which they were venerated, as seen in the infinite miracles worked through their intercession “in those places where their

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bones rest.”<sup>21</sup> Martín de Porres and the other local saints should be viewed, then, not only as the means to build imperial hegemony and local identity, and to create models of Christian behavior, but also as tools of evangelization in the midst of a resilient Andean cosmos and the introduction of thousands of African slaves in the archdiocese of Lima.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to understanding the trends underlying this urge to create a local cadre of saints in Lima, it is equally important to trace the process by which limeños so swiftly and confidently tagged certain people as special friends of God and their advocates before him. The cases need to be analyzed individually because each one appears to respond to a unique combination of factors. Saint Rose (1586–1617) is by far the best studied of Lima’s saints, and researchers have devised a wide range of interpretations for the formation and popularity of her cult, ranging from the resonance in Lima of the European models of female spirituality practiced by Rose to the malleability of her image that allowed it to meet the diverse symbolic needs of the faithful.<sup>23</sup> Other putative saints, less well studied than Rose, appear to follow closely models of holiness prevalent in Spain and Italy at the time. For example, the archbishop of Lima, Toribio Alfonso de Mogrovejo (1538–1606), was deeply committed to reforming and supervising the clergy, and he took quite seriously the redefined Tridentine duties of a Catholic bishop in the contentious climate of the ongoing economic and religious pressures exerted on the Andean population.<sup>24</sup> Francisco Solano (1549–1610), a missionary like several of the most important early modern saints, devoted much of his life to spreading Christianity among the indigenous population of Tucumán before spending his final years in Lima, where he was famous for his dramatic calls for repentance among the urban population.<sup>25</sup> Not all the putative saints in Lima followed European models, however. The hispanized – and married – Indian tailor Nicolás de Ayllón (1632–77) was the subject of an inquiry whose results were presented to Vatican authorities with the purpose of opening a beatification case. Persuaded by the merits of what they saw, the Congregation of Rites ordered Lima’s bishop to conduct on their behalf a second, more exhaustive trial. Although the Inquisition later halted the cause, Nicolás’s cult can be read as part of the debates over the conversion of the native population and Andean engagement with Hispanic Catholicism.<sup>26</sup>

Martín de Porres similarly broke traditional saintly models. Perhaps most striking about the story of Fray Martín de Porres is the way he is constantly referred to, and refers to himself, as a mulatto, the descendant of peninsular Catholics and enslaved Africans. This word itself leads us to consider how the devotion to Martín de Porres was an expression of conditions particular to

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Lima where from the mingling of people of Indian, Spanish, and African ancestry emerged the mixed groups, or *castas*. As the son of a former slave and a Spaniard of some standing, Martín's life story compels us to consider how men and women of blended parentage, the *castas*, occupied an ambiguous position in the interstices of the "republic of Spaniards" and the "republic of Indians." The local devotion to Fray Martín after his death illustrates how colonial limeños used religious concepts to think about these social complexities, presenting him as a model for other men and women of his station in life in particular, as well as for all Christians.<sup>27</sup> But Martín was far more than merely a "social construct." Rather, he was a complex man of flesh and blood who was seemingly always in motion, working among people of all social conditions, criss-crossing the streets and hillsides of the city, aware of its natural landscape and concerned for the human and animal life that inhabited it. By scouring the record for evidence of his earthly life, and of his family history, his choices, and his actions, we can more fully understand the meaning of the overturned hierarchies implicit in the saintly fame of a black convent servant.

I have attempted to read the pious accounts of Fray Martín's life with the disciplined eye of the historian. In pulling in and fitting together the fragments of his biography, I have sought to balance faith-propelled testimonies with a variety of notarial documents concerning his life, sources that often corroborate the hagiographic record and occasionally correct it. Taken together, the evidence suggests that Fray Martín's racial origins were critical to how he was viewed in life and as an intercessor. Like him, many men of African descent were born free; but, descended from slaves, they inhabited an equivocal position in the social realm of Spaniards. While it is true that in the stratified world of colonial Peru, an illegitimate mulatto faced a reduced number of life opportunities, it is equally true that he could circulate among the local religious and lay elite and eventually win their sponsorship, deep esteem, and, posthumously, their devotion.

Although the cult of Fray Martín de Porres gradually expanded to include many segments of the population, his biography comes to us mostly in the words of privileged limeños. These somewhat rarefied testimonies serve as our primary guide to understanding the early appeal of Fray Martín as saint and intercessor. One voice of the many Creole propagators of Fray Martín's cult stands out particularly: that of Fray Cipriano de Medina (1594–1664), someone whose life was so closely bound up with Fray Martín's that he almost becomes a second protagonist in this story. Fray Cipriano de Medina was a brainy, strong-willed,