



**St. Peter Claver
(1580-1654)
Slave to the Slaves**

Born in Catalonia, Spain, on June 26, 1580, Peter was influenced to become a priest while a college student. He entered the Jesuit novitiate at the age of 22 and took his final vows two years later. At that time he was inspired to be a priest in the Americas.

In 1610, he arrived at Cartagena, in modern day Colombia, south America, which was then the center of the slave trade in the New World. Each month a thousand men, women and children came by ship, having been taken from their homes in West Africa to

be forced into slavery for the Spanish colonists. The conditions on the voyage across the Atlantic were so bad that as many as one-third died in route. The slave trade had existed for more than a century before Peter's arrival in Cartagena and continued to flourish in spite of the condemnation of the popes of the time.

Horrified by the injustice and brutality of slavery, Peter followed the example of other Jesuit priests who were ministering to the slaves. He made a special vow to serve the Africans, saying that he would be, "A Slave to the Black Slaves Forever". Ordained a priest at the age of 36 in 1616, Fr. Peter would spend the rest of his life fulfilling this promise.

Boarding the slave ships as they entered the harbor, Fr. Peter would bring food and drink to the exhausted passengers. When they were herded like cattle into open pens before being sold to the nearby plantations, he would bring food and medicine, and through interpreters evangelize them to Christianity. He baptized and estimated 300,000 of the Africans over a thirty-year period.

Fr. Peter continued to minister to these converts by visiting the plantations to which they were sent. During these visits he made a point of staying when possible in the homes of the African slaves rather than the Spanish masters. He encouraged the slaves to live Christian lives and the masters to treat them humanely. He also called for the abolition of the slave trade. For these efforts he was ostracized by many of the Spanish colonists.

The last years of his life were marked by illness and neglect. After his death on September 8, 1654 at the age of 74, however, city leaders buried him with great ceremony and respect the following day. Canonized in 1888, he is the patron of missionary efforts in Africa. In 1909 the Knights of St. Peter Claver were formed in Mobile, Alabama, as a fraternal order of African American Catholic men. A women's auxiliary, the Ladies of St. Peter Claver, were formed in 1926. His memorial day is celebrated on September 9. St. Peter Claver, pray for us!