

## MARTIN DE PORRES: LAY-BROTHER (1579-1639)

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**T**HERE is so sharp a glare of the miraculous about Blessed Martin of Lima, and sometimes such a haze of mere emotionalism, that it is hard to see the man as he was, the hard-working, patiently enduring Dominican lay-brother in the flesh. What follows is an attempt to depict him as he appeared to his contemporaries, and is based on ten of the seventy-six accounts given twenty years after his death at the Diocesan enquiry by people who knew him.<sup>1</sup>

The background needs to be realised: a huge old Spanish-style convent, its several hundred religious occupied in all the work needed in a city of the New World: preaching, teaching, care of orphans, children, poor, sick. Lima, even when Martin died at the age of sixty, had existed a bare hundred years, a city of Spanish immigrants or first descendants of the *conquistadores*, merchants, soldiers, religious of every description. Side by side with these lived the dispossessed Indians, the imported Negro slaves. In the priory were not only religious, but the boys they looked after, and men staying there on retreat or learning a trade. There were Negro servants in the kitchen and the laundry and at all the menial tasks in the place. The Dominicans themselves comprised priests, student-novices (from fourteen and upwards), lay-brothers, and *donados* (not strictly religious, but 'familiar' living in the house).<sup>2</sup> They had their cells; not necessarily small rooms, but places with alcoves and closets off them shared by visitors and children. Martin's own cell was near the infirmary. It was the clothes-room of the priory, a kind of almoner's store-room and dispensary where he kept mattresses and sheets for the sick, and clothing and money and food for the poor. To him here came down-and-out Spaniards, Indians, Negroes. His other friends came, too, and the

1. These ten accounts have been printed in English in two collections of articles published by the Blessed Martin Guild of New York, *With Bl. Martin de Porres*, pp. 132-168, and *The Fifteenth Anniversary Book of the Bl. Martin Guild of New York*, pp. 130-158.

2. Blessed Martin was at first a *donado*, and is several times so described in these accounts. But one of the ten, Parra, expressly says he 'was a regular lay-brother of the Dominican Order'.

novices 'after the afternoon class in theology to get some lunch' or to have their hair cut or to be bled.

The priory had its country house, the *hacienda* at Limatambo, a mile or two from the capital, farmed by the Negroes whom it was Martin's pleasure to visit. He would call them his uncles and aunts and loved to share their work and care for them. They used to give him money to say Masses 'for the souls of their parents and grandparents', and he had to tell them that he 'didn't say Masses', but they would insist that he should have them said. It was at Limatambo that he spent towards the end of his life two months with his friend Parra planting a wonderful new olive-grove of a thousand trees or more 'from the Royal Highway to the Mill', a service (he said) to God 'to afford food and a place of recreation for the novices during their time of probation'.

This Juan Vasquez Parra was fourteen, fresh from Spain, when Martin found him homeless and dejected outside the Dominican church. He taught him his own skill as surgeon barber, had him as his constant companion for the last four years of his life, and finally procured for him a commission as army barber at Callao, Lima's sea-port. In Parra's account Martin appears at his most practical, planning his distribution of moneys daily collected, getting together (in only three days) a dowry of 5000 pesos for his niece Catalina, incidentally using the occasion to raise besides 7000 pesos for the poor, arranging for the marriage banns to be read, showing Parra how to sow chamomile in the 'footprints left by the cattle' (was it the manure that made it grow so well?), planting fig-trees and olives, remembering everything from chickens to candles that a poor sick negro woman might need. There was nothing ruthless about Martin's efficient ways. He was always human. How human, his niece in her very domestic memories recalls. There was the day her father and mother (Martin's sister) quarrelled and quite spoiled a day out in the country; and then Martin came 'carrying meat pies, fancy bread, food and wine' and put it all right. And another day she and her mother quarrelled, and Martin took her side, sensibly, because she had only been standing up for her husband: 'he advised me always to stand up for my husband'. He provided her with a new cloak for a *fiesta*; he looked after anyone ill in their house (there were plenty, for they kept open house to all and sundry); he rebuked her mother for getting a key to pilfer her husband's money-box;

he sent them all his stray dogs until they protested ('They are a perfect nuisance, they dirty up the whole house'), and then he trained them to better house manners by speaking to them. Of course, nearly all the witnesses tell of his astonishing way with animals. The stories are too numerous and too well-known to enumerate. One of the pleasantest is of the Procurator's dog, 'old and mangy' with a nasty smell, which its master tired of and had destroyed, only to see him resuscitated by Martin, who was careful to keep him well away afterwards from the Procurator's office. And there is the story of the cat and the dog with their litters all eating in peace together with a rat, and so delighting Martin that he called his fellow lay-brother over to come and see. 'Mules and other beasts would come to him, giving him singular signs of affection and devotion'; tame animals were 'impetuous in their attempts to draw his attention, giving whatever signs they could of the joy they had in seeing him by touching and licking him and kissing his clothes'. Parra recalls an afternoon when 'he began to play toreador with the little calves, shaking his mantle at them; and they came running to him and rubbing themselves against him'—very different from the poor half-starved bulls brought in to the priory at Lima for the sport of the novices there, and secretly fed and watered by Martin at midnight.

It was all part of his delicate charity for every one of God's creatures—delicate to all but himself. He never spared himself pitiless scourgings, but when the mosquitoes made his wounds fester, and his friend protested, he laughingly answered: 'We must feed also the little creatures of God. Now wash my back with vinegar.' The transition from his playful tenderness towards the mosquitoes to his fierce pitilessness to himself is characteristically violent. He was a man of terrific austerity, avid for suffering, in union with Jesus in every part of his body ('Let us make a present of our bodies to the Lord', he would say to those chosen friends of his with whom he shared his mortifications), and yet it never robbed him of his almost womanly tenderness to others. Rather it seems to have been the explanation of that tenderness, that in the distress of his own flesh he carried the distress of others. And it never spoiled his playful cheerfulness. He knew the art of coaxing. There was the dying man whom he persuaded to take a little almond milk 'spoonful by spoonful'. The patient moaned that he would die. 'Well, my friend', said Martin,

'thank God fervently, for we were born to die'. And then: 'My friend, just as truly as we were born to die, so also is it true that he who doesn't eat will die. Look how I eat', and he set the example.

No wonder that every kind of man was drawn to him—the surgeon de Rivero, slightly younger than himself, who knew him for fifty years and 'in all that time found much virtue in him'; the lawyer Horasco who, proud Spaniard though he was, begged Martin to adopt him. ('Why', asked Martin, 'do you want me, a mulatto, for a father? That would not look well.' 'Who', retorted the lawyer, 'will say that I have a mulatto for a father, and not rather that you have a Spaniard for a son?'); the merchant Ortiz who had travelled in Manila and knew Chinese and caught Martin miraculously talking it; the soldier de la Torre who at some time shared his cell and saw him in ecstasy and under the physical onslaughts of the Devil; the soldier Juan de Granido who was brought up in the priory and had an eye for all the things that a boy would find memorable—Martin's poverty ('he was so poor that never did he possess anything of his own'), his continuous hard work day and night, his generous devotion to those whose training his own labours made possible: 'I saw that he always loved and cherished the students and especially the preachers, because they made known the law of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . He made many little presents to them, and spurred them on to make progress in their studies and become good preachers.' Nobody resisted Martin's goodness, not even his own father, to whom he and his sister were born unwanted; he was asked: 'Why do you burden yourself with these two mulattoes?' and said simply: 'They are my children . . . I must rear them'.

But the picture of Martin in his day-to-day life of a brother serving the sometimes all too human priests and students of his Order takes clearer shape in accounts given by two witnesses, both Dominicans from his own priory. First, the Very Reverend Father Cypriano de Medina, Master of Sacred Theology, Censor of the Holy Office, Professor of Theology in the Royal University, subsequently Bishop of Huamanga. He had a nice sense of his own dignity and worth, and it is not always to the self-important that it is easiest for those in Martin's position to devote themselves. Fr Cypriano recalls the time when his fellow novices were making fun of him as they waited for Martin to cut their hair. 'At that time I was very small and fat and had so much hair on my face that it

made me very ugly. That is why I was called "Ugly" by all in the convent.' (He is careful to put it all in the past tense!) Martin, thirty-six years old at the time, was well able to keep the peace amongst these boys. He took Cypriano's side, and prophesied that he would grow both in stature and dignity. Sure enough the young novice was later ill, and rose from his bed 'a foot taller than I was before'. And 'by my work and study I have arrived to the titles and positions mentioned above, rewards granted to me by God and my Order for my continual service'. Ten years later, when Fr Cypriano was twenty-four, a young lector and already preaching to audiences that by his own account 'included some of the most learned and influential members of the ruling class', he came near, as he thought, to dying; at any rate, he was bad enough to be given up by five doctors and to receive the last Sacraments. It was therefore too bad to find 'between three and four in the morning' when 'I thought I was going to die in that hour', that Martin (whom you might expect to have about at any time of day or night!) was not at his side. When he did come 'I began with great love . . . to complain about not seeing him. . . .' Perhaps there was something a little teasing about the 'peacefulness and modesty' with which Martin reassured this very indispensable young Dominican: 'From this very fact of my absence your Reverence could have known you were not to die. When I frequent the cell of a sick man it is a bad sign. . . . You will not die because God wants you to live to serve him and be an honour to religion.' And so again Fr Cypriano is able to put in a note about his services to the Order: 'God has given me health that I might make use of it in the classroom and the pulpit for more than twenty-eight years'.

Nor was Fr Cypriano important only in his own right. His uncle was 'the Most Illustrious Don Feliciano de Vega, former Bishop of La Paz and then Archbishop of Mexico', who fell dangerously ill at Lima on his way to his see. It was Fr Cypriano who thought of getting Martin, then within a few months of his own death, to help. It was Fr Cypriano who arranged it with the Provincial, and Fr Cypriano's idea that when they failed to find Martin they should put him under obedience to appear, which he did. The Archbishop was of the same stamp as his Dominican nephew. He scolded Martin for keeping him waiting. So Martin ('it is the custom and rule in our Order to receive reproof in this

fashion') made the *venia*, prostrating himself on the floor without a word. It is a touching scene, the tired old lay-brother taught by a lifetime of humble service to be perfectly patient with the imperious ways of great ones, even when they loved him a little inconsiderately. The archbishop commanded him to lay his mulatto's hand on his breast and keep it there as the pain receded. This was the only thing that could upset Martin's tranquil soul; 'Recognising what was happening, Martin was very much disturbed: his face became very much coloured, he began to perspire heavily and he said: "Is it not already enough, your excellency?"'

Even at Martin's death, Fr Cypriano remained both important and importunate. He was disappointed to find Martin's corpse hard and stiff, so: 'I said in the presence of all, and in a loud voice heard by many: "How is it, brother of mine, that you are so stiff and rigid?"' Even to this Martin proved docile, and his body became as supple as in life! But it is pleasant to know that Martin had the last word. Three or four years later 'I had been sent by my Province as Definitor for several important affairs in Spain . . . when I fell ill of another very serious disease'. Imploring Martin's aid, 'I saw him seated at the foot of my bed, with his hands in the sleeves of his habit, looking at me in his usual modest way, and smiling'. Fr Cypriano began scolding: 'How have you forgotten me so thoroughly? Occupied solely with the comfort you enjoy with God in glory, you have left me here on earth without help. . .' But a saint can take liberties even with a Master of Theology. 'Casting his eyes on me and smiling again, he wagged my ear, and said: "You will not die".' Fr Cypriano was well again next morning—for his important business.

A very different person was the second of our witnesses, Fr Fernando de Aragoncs. There is something altogether simple and direct about what he says, perhaps because he was himself for fourteen years a lay-brother along with Martin. He had charge of the infirmary with Martin to help him. He knew what the work meant, and what a life of self-sacrifice and utter humility it was. In fact, he for his part broke down under it. 'While I was a lay-brother and companion of the servant of God, I had a quarrel with my Superior, which upset me and incited me to plan how I might be ordained priest.' Martin consoled him, told him he would get his way, and in fourteen years be a priest. So it came about a little before Martin's death. All the same, Fr Fernando

seems to have been a man with a real desire and love of holiness. Perhaps it dated from a vision he had of St Dominic who told him to live a holier life, and Martin's prompting on that occasion: 'Love our Patriarch much. He is a good friend. Keep your promise.'

Be that as it may, Fr Fernando tells in plain practical language all that Martin's life of work and pains really involved, and he makes the spiritual motive and force of it perfectly manifest. 'Many were the offices to which the servant of God, Fray Martin de Porres, attended, being barber, surgeon, custodian of the clothes, and infirmarian. Each of these duties was enough for any one person, but he alone filled all of them with great liberality, promptness and carefulness, without being weighed down by any of them. It was a cause of wonder, which made me realise that, in as much as he clung to God in his soul, all these things were effects of divine grace.' 'He spent his whole life serving the sick; all he did was for the love of God and in all things he found God. . . . So great was his charity that there was nothing imaginable to which it could not extend itself and which his affection would not undertake. All day and all night long he practised charity, bleeding and doctoring the sick, giving alms to Spaniards, Indians, Negroes. All that he could he loved and doctored with singular affection and charity; he found homes for orphans, dowries for young girls, clothed the poor, supplied needy religious with habits and other necessities; no one came in vain to beg anything of him for the love of God.' Martin rose to every occasion. Once 'a pest occurred in this city called "the carpet" or measles, during which period I had sixty sick friars in my infirmary, most of whom were young novices. This sickness was accompanied with such violent fever that they became delirious, almost wild, impeding us in the administration of suitable remedies. At this time the servant of God was up and around without ceasing day and night, attending the sick, giving enemas, administering compresses, dispensing cordials, bringing them also at midnight sugar, sponge-sugar, gourds with water in order to refresh them in their torment. . . . In the morning I would learn . . . how he had given drink to those freed of their fever, changed the garments of those drenched with perspiration and rearranged the beds of all.' 'To the sick he seemed to be a spirit, or just hands or help from God. To the poor he was compassion and mercy itself, and for those in

trial sweet consolation.' Meanwhile Martin was unsparing to himself: 'He wore next to the skin a tunic of very rough heavy serge and a shirt of horsehair . . . he gave himself each night . . . a discipline with a rough double hide over his whole naked body . . . he fasted whole Lents on bread and water. . . . With these penances he inflamed the fire of his love for God in order to increase it. . . .' But the sure secret of it all was his continual union with God in never-ceasing prayer. 'While he would be performing the aforesaid duties, the Spirit would call him, and the servant of God would go to a room, close the door, and kneel down in a corner where he remained in prayer as if his previous work were merely a preparation for it.' 'In him the two virtues of the active and contemplative life were so thoroughly united that, when he exercised charity in the service of the sick, his spirit remained recollected, composed, and devout, because he kept himself in the presence of his Creator, conversing with him in his soul and sighing after him. He was always praising and blessing the Lord.'

Such was the lay-brother Martin, exactly fulfilling the Dominican vocation of contemplative life overflowing into active apostolate, set by Providence to be a consolation to the broken bodies and tortured souls of our own age in our own new world.