

MARTIN DE PORRES

BY

VIOLET CLIFTON



MARTIN'S father was irked by Martin's lowly profession and the friars agreed with Don Juan that Martin, being lettered and well versed in medicine as well, should be received as a brother-professed.

But because of his humility Martin would not agree to become even a lay-brother, and he never rose above the degree of a donator, a tertiary. The only privilege to which, some fifteen years later, he joyfully assented was to be allowed to take the solemn vows for life whilst he remained a tertiary: this was indeed a rare privilege. During the whole of his religious life Martin wore a white habit with a black *cappa* or cloak.

That many-sided humility of Martin, I see it thus. I see it in its least spiritual part as resulting from Martin's probable self-disgust at being, in his flesh, the result of fornication—'Is it not enough that you are mulatto, must you also be a thief?' he will cry in reproach to his sister. And in this lesser part his humility was a shield needed against vanity for if many called Martin 'dog of a mulatto' so also many called him 'Son of a noble Spaniard', 'Friend of the Archbishop', and later 'Friend of the Viceroy'.

And in its higher part this humility surely resulted from the grace Martin had whereby he saw men as souls moving, and revered them for their formal or their eternal essence.

And Martin's special grace it was to see his nothingness in relation to the allness of God, and to tremble at the awful disparity between his soul and God.

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Don Lorenzano is harassed by the needs of the sick of the Community, the money at his disposal is not sufficient. And Martin, on his knees before the Father Provincial, cries out excitedly, 'May I tell your Paternity of a plan I have thought of by which the sum required, it is not very big, can be found?' 'What is it that you propose, my son?' 'That you sell me for a slave. I shall fetch a good price because I am strong: I shall at last have served the brothers. Lay labour here is not enough to give me right to the food I eat. I need a master who shall treat me as I deserve instead of with benignity.'

Don Lorenzano answered, 'I judge that we shall be best served by keeping you so in obedience, Martin; no more of this idea'.

And at another time Don Lorenzano found a wounded Indian

labourer in Martin's own cell. And he punished Martin because he had already forbidden the mulatto to hide the sick. Martin suffered the punishment in silence. And afterwards the Provincial sent for him and asked Porres why he set his orders at naught thereby violating holy obedience. Martin, humble but eager, answered, 'Because I cannot understand how charity can take a second place. Will Your Paternity explain to me if obedience does indeed rank before charity?'

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The pink flowering creeper called *bellissima*, most beautiful, hung scentless in the quiet air of the monastic enclosure, a fountain sparkled and rippled, when suddenly the peace was shattered by the angry voices of two students. Instead of pondering the divine obscurity or musing over the Dionysian names of God, the one asserted with a shout the predominance of the essence of God, the other with an oath ascribed a greater glory to God's existence.

Martin de Porres was passing across the court and paused and said, 'Dear children, to our poor mortal knowledge there can be no conception greater than that of the divine existence because that one conception contains the Being of the I-That-Am. And this is what the angelic dove taught.'

And afterwards Master Francis of the Cross, their teacher of theology, told those students that the mind of Martin was infused by the science of the Saints.

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Often in pictures and statues (alas! too often they will not satisfy any canon of art) Martin de Porres has been and will be shown holding a broom; he is the infirmarian but carrying a basket full of rats and mice.

Marcelo de Ribera, for fifty years a friend of Martin, was the chief witness at the Trials on the occasion imaged by these representations. The event happened in this way, or nearly enough.

It was the day of the week when Martin carried baskets of fresh coverings to the infirmary; he was very tender to the sick, he would warm their garments over a brazier, sweeten them with rosemary and fold them away with herbs. But on this day he saw some of the clothing frayed and soiled by mice.

The friars had complained of late of the rats and mice. 'In the kitchen, in the store-room, the mulatto is to blame. He teaches gentleness to the cat so that the mouse no longer fears to eat from the dish which the dog and the cat are sharing. The cat should be left hungry so as to return to her useful hunting. Martin quite overturns the natural order.'

A father, angered by these new ways, set a trap in the linen room,

and now behind its osier bars Martin saw the small imprisoned creature.

Martin was unaware that Marcelo de Ribera was in this linen room. Marcelo, from his vantage, saw Martin take up the osier trap and heard him say to the mouse: 'Thou and thy friends do much harm but I shall not kill thee. I shall free thee. And then thou must call thy kin to the bottom of the vegetable garden. I shall bring food every day and leave it at the far boundary of the garden. But none of you must enter the courtyards or buildings of the convent.'

The people of Lima told each other the tale in various ways—some had it that Martin had carried the rats away from the Rosary; his charity 'to creatures without reason' stirred their wonder.

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Into my mind comes the saying of some saint; was it Augustine of Hippo or another?

'The work of the Word is the word for us.' And seeing rose and rainbow I was glad of the saying for it added great glory to the rose and to the rainbow. But then logic whispered: 'If rose then also rat, *all* the works or else *none* of the works are the expressions of the Word'.

Martin de Porres and Rose of Lima (it seems that they never met) both of them elucidate that saying. Each of them was blessed with the 'single eye' that fills the whole body with light. In that light: 'Thy creature they be'. Thy creature rose and rat—each one, every one, is seen to be good.

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Of course the holy, wonder-working and moneyless Martin was freed of many limitations as for instance those of time and of place. He healed, he foresaw, he duplicated his presence, he was levitated because his 'love was his weight'. Animals were sensible to the meaning of Martin, and he, or angels at his beck, quelled the flooded river Runiac for created things are not impenetrable to their Maker. But when the friars talked of such things Don Lorenzano would say: 'You are beguiled by wonders. Ponder the greatest wonder of all—and the cause of all—the love of Brother Martin for God. Look behind the prodigies to the love.'

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By day and by night Martin de Porres strove in ways in accord with his genius for the purification of love, for that *instant of pure love* to come about, of which John of the Cross was just at this time speaking, 'Such an instant is more precious in the sight of God and more profitable to the Church than all other good works put together though it may seem as though nothing were done.'

For years Porres trained and pruned the natural so that the supernatural might flower, then one morning with a sudden shock he experienced the obduracy of the flesh, knew how it remains lustful, choosing this, rejecting that, not attuned to holy detachment, quite unfit for the light of glory.

This was the event: a man in the infirmary was very sick, Porres was to nurse him. Some disgusting liquid drawn from the dropsical man was in a vessel at the sufferer's side; so offensive was it that Martin shuddered. Then he must have realised his lack of love which now became subordinate to the niceness of his senses. And because he had shuddered away from his brother instead of having yearned with pity towards him, Martin seized the glass left by the surgeon and drained it for his own correction.

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I like some of the sayings of Martin. He made a pleasure ground which I have seen in Lima, called *Las Amank'ais* because he planted it all gold with the *amaryllis aurea*. Martin said, 'Men seeing the flowers will praise God'.

He used herbs for the sick and he had a great belief in water; some of those that survived him had heard him say often, 'Water does that illness good'. He cared very greatly for animals; he begged Juanna to set aside a room for those he was tending. 'I will take thy creatures', said Juanna. 'The creature is of God', corrected Martin. 'Little red sister', he called the tabby cat when he tied on her bandage with a pretty bow; and brother-bull and brother-dog, and he had much pleasure with such creatures and taught them and healed them.

I like Martin's words when the sore filthy fellow that he had laboured for in his cell and lain on the sheets was roughly taken away. Seeing him carried away, and being himself sharply punished for adopting the festering stranger, Porres cried out, 'Soap and water will wash the sheets but only bitter tears can cleanse the stain of cruelty from the soul'.

He said a mysterious thing to Juan vas Quez, a poor boy who for years freely used Martin's cell as his. Only Juan knew of the terrible self-discipline of Martin and that three times in the course of the twenty-four hours he scourged himself with three chains and cruel rosettes of metal. 'The bad thoughts are three', Martin said to Juan.

This Juan who witnessed Martin's penances said at the Trials that of all the people he had ever met Martin was the most happy. He told how the Saint once romped in a field with a couple of calves. Juan was frightened by the rough play and he called out

to Martin to stop. 'Oh, let me play with them', Martin called back, 'I have not been so merry since I was a child.'

I like what Martin said to a friar who was shocked to see the mulatto pray with eyes tight closed. He was kneeling before a statue of our Lady which the Conquistadores had heaped with treasure. 'Fray Martin, why shut your eyes against the glory of our Lady? Her coronet, her emeralds and her silk, her tassels and her girdle should remind you of the glory of the Queen of the Angels —yes, even of the magnificence of God.' Martin answered, 'Fray, of that splendour I am aware. But whilst I pray I have no need of eyes nor of looking. Behind the lowered lids I can behold all that I believe.'

At the Trial the friar who told that story added, 'Martin we all knew was aware of God: often Martin was in ecstasy'.

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And then in 1639 Martin de Porres put away the clothing he had worn to rags and dressed himself in a new habit and went about his work fresh and as if in festival spirit. The brothers thought that he did this because they knew that the Archbishop had invited Martin to accompany him to Mexico but the dusky-one answered, 'I am wearing this habit for my death', and very soon afterwards Martin was stricken with his last illness. The death of Martin was an act of beauty; the infirmarian, Antonio, offered Porres a draught mixed with the blood of pigeons and that of small dogs because the physician said that this compound would give Martin strength. Porres said, refusing the potion, 'Holy Providence has decreed that I shall die; do not kill these creatures to waste their blood'. Antonio wept at that. 'My little angel, why weep?' The young friar answered, 'Because you are my father and my life and you say that you will die of this fever. You have helped me in life and loved me, but will you love me after death?' Martin answered; 'Maybe I shall profit you far more than now'.

Martin wept for his sins, his nothingness, for the hours that he thought he had wasted: 'I should suffer more; I wish I might suffer more'. And when, at his last hour, he knew that an African, his head full of lice, sat within the gate asking for comfort, Martin moaned often and murmured to himself, 'Where now Martin is your charity?' and, 'Can it be you will leave him unkempt?'

Count de Chinchon, the Viceroy, came to the door of the cell leaving those that accompanied him at the gates of the monastery. He knew the cell for he had visited it several times to ask some guidance from the mulatto. He waited for half an hour because Martin, who was in ecstasy, had given a sign that no one must

enter. When the door was opened Count de Chichon went in and kissed the hand of Fray Martin.

But when the Viceroy had left the Prior reproved Martin angrily for having allowed his majesty of Spain to wait at the door of his cell. Martin said nothing and Don Lorenzana ordered him under obedience to explain this lack of respect. Pointing towards where the altar lamp of the church was shining the dying man said, 'My Lady Mary and my Father Dominic, Vincent Ferrer and other Saints with angels too were by me. With visitors so holy I had no power to receive any other.'

Then came the mystery of a bitter secret struggle with the power of darkness and afterwards, the friars being with him in the cell, Martin asked each one pardon for the scandal he often had given. Then taking a crucifix Martin died kissing the wounds of Christ.

The rose-filled vales of Persia are no more fragrant than was the church where Martin's body lay. Before he died a friend embracing him had sensed the sweetness of that overwhelming fragrance of roses.

In the church packed with people Cipriano de Medina, the Dominican, cried out in a loud voice of despair a rebuke to the dead man, 'Martin why art thou all untouched, so cold, though all these covers have come to thine honouring?' At that demand the heart of the brother quickened, his body became pliant, the blood glowed again in the dark flesh. Martin lay lapped in fragrance—all debonair in death.

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Later at the Trials the witnesses will be asked: 'Can you swear that after the death of Martin de Porres many came and kissed his hands and his feet? Can you swear that after death his body was seen as gay, as beautiful as it had been during life? Was it also for this cause that men and women kissed him, honouring him as a saint? Did great ones of the land, Viceroy, Archbishop and Governor, carry his body to burial?'

'Since Martin's death has God allowed at his intercession cures and miracles worked in Martin's name? Are these things of the people's common knowledge, spread about and believed?'