

The Martyred Slave

Historians do not know a lot about Saint Julia of Carthage (sometimes her name appears as Saint Julia of Carthage and Corsica), but what is known reveals the strength and conviction of a martyr. Her story takes place in Carthage in North Africa (in present-day Tunisia). In 439 a tribe known as the Vandals invaded Carthage and began their barbaric reign over Europe and parts of Africa. Julia was sold as a slave by the Vandals. Her owner was a Syrian merchant named Eusebius who respected Julia and her Christian faith. When Eusebius sailed to Corsica, he took Julia with him but did not allow her to leave the ship. The governor in Corsica insisted that Eusebius bring Julia to the pagan festival but he refused, knowing that she would not participate in the pagan festivities. That night after Eusebius had fallen asleep, the governor had Julia brought ashore, but she refused to participate in their sacrifices. The governor ordered her execution at once. She was promptly crucified before Eusebius woke from his drink-induced sleep.

This is all we know about Saint Julia of Carthage. The information seems brief, but the impact of her life is significant as the church considers her martyrdom important. Her humility and strength in enslavement caused her owner to respect her as well as her faith.

SCRIPTURE

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you

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Saint Julia of Carthage

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Slave and Martyr

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Fifth Century

Feast Day

May 22

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but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

PRAYER

Saint Julia, your owner respected your faith but you were martyred by the hands of another authority. As a martyr of your time, you refused freedom and accepted death, even death on the cross. How did you do this? If only you performed one pagan sacrifice, freedom from slavery and a new life would have been yours, but you refused. Making such a choice must have been hard—or was it easier because of your faith? Dear Saint Julia, we face no forms of imposed slavery or torture but still look to you as a Christian witness who made a clear choice about the faith. Help us to make clear choices too, especially when we are alone, frightened or oppressed. Amen.

REFLECTION

Do you treat the faith like a smorgasbord dinner, selecting what's acceptable for you at the time? Or do you accept the full embodiment of what the church requires of you? How do you walk humbly with your God?

The Evangelization Saints

The story of Saint Charles Lwanga and the Ugandan Martyrs reaches out to us today with shock and horror, yet wonder and awe. It is truly difficult for us to imagine how young people could shoulder the experience of martyrdom so courageously. Charles Lwanga and companions, while still in their teens and twenties, embraced Christianity when it was dangerous in their country's history.

Their story begins in 1879 when King Mutesa of the Bugandan kingdom of Uganda accepted Christianity into the country. After his death the next king, Mwanga, began a policy of exterminating Christians, both Catholics and Protestants. The new king took Joseph Musaka Balikuddembe as his chief steward. Joseph, a Christian, took every opportunity to speak out against the king's behavior with the young page boys at the palace. These confrontations did not go well with King Mwanga, especially after Joseph spoke out against the murder of an Anglican missionary. Joseph was the first Ugandan martyr killed because he professed to be a Christian and refused to remain silent about King Mwanga's activities.

Charles Lwanga took Joseph's place at the palace. He did everything in his power to protect the young pages, but King Mwanga quickly became aware that the boys were receiving instruction on becoming Christians. Immediately, King Mwanga ordered all Christians to be rounded up. Charles Lwanga led everyone in prayer as he baptized the page boys himself. Eventually they were caught and placed before the king, who demanded to know who

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Saint Charles Lwanga
and Companions

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Youth Leaders and Martyrs

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1865–1886

Feast Day
June 3

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was a Christian. He ordered the young men, “Those of you who do not pray, stand by me. Those who pray [those who are Christians], go over there.” The king spoke to the group of Christians, “Then you shall all be burnt! Away with you, and you can eat cow in Heaven!”³²

The king ordered Charles and the boys to be burned alive. It is important to note that there were other martyrs—at least twenty-three Protestant young men. The Catholic martyrs are listed below.

Charles Lwanga, age 25
Matthias Kalembe, age 50
Joseph Mukasa Balikuddembe, age 25
Denis Ssebuggwawo, age 16
Pontian Ngondwe, age 35
Andrew Kaggwa, age 30
Athanasius Bazzeketta, age 20
Gonzaga Gonza, age 24
Noe Mwahhali, age 35
Luke Banabakintu, age 30
James Buzabaliawo, age 25
Gyavira, age 17
Ambrose Kibuka, age 18
Anatole Kiriggwajjo, age 20
Achilles Kiwanuka, age 17
Kizito, age 14
Mbage Tuzinde, age 17
Mugagga, age 16
Mukasa Kiriwawanvu, age 20
Dolphus Mukasa Ludigo, age 24
Bruno Serunkuma, age 30
Jean-Marie Muzeyi, age 30

The sacrifice of these young martyrs was recognized on October 18, 1964, as Pope Paul VI raised them all to sainthood. This pope of modern times signaled the rise of the Catholic church in Africa with the pronouncement that:

...We add to the glorious list of saints triumphant in heaven these twenty-two sons of Africa....

Who are they? They are Africans first of all. By their colour, race and culture they are true Africans descended from the Bantu race and the peoples of the Upper Nile....

Yes, they are Africans and they are martyrs....

[T]he injustice and violence which led to it tend to fade from human memory, while before the eyes of succeeding generations there remains ever present the shining example of a meekness which has transformed the laying down of life.... Such is the true meaning of martyrdom.³³

SCRIPTURE

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:14–17)

PRAYER

Saint Charles Lwanga, wow! How strong and brave of you to practice Christianity knowing the danger around you. You were young but possessed the wisdom of ages. All throughout your ordeal, you maintained your focus on the Risen Lord. *Bravery? Maturity? Strength?* What are the proper words to describe your resolve? Your actions showed us that you are a true child of God. Help us, especially when faced with difficulties, to know that we are children of God and joint heirs with Christ and you. Amen.

REFLECTION

How do you proclaim that you are a child of God and joint heir with Christ? In your lowest moments of despair, can you still show and proclaim this?

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Saint Martin de Porres

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Lay Brother and Visionary

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1579–1639

Feast Day
November 3

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The Humble Saint

A gentle, loving and happy demeanor is characteristic of Martin de Porres of Lima, Peru. From his poor beginnings as the son of Juan de Porres, a Spanish nobleman who abandoned the family, and Ana Velazquez, a freed slave, Martin was always a gentle soul. There are two possible reasons his father abandoned the family: His son looked African and did not have the lighter complexion that Juan expected; or because it was still illegal in Spain to marry Africans. Since Juan de Porres worked for the king, he probably believed it best for himself that he leave the family in order to secure his job. Once the money that he left for the care of Martin, his mother and sister, Juana, ran out, Ana set out to find work and young Martin had to help his struggling family.

Sometimes Martin was not so helpful as he had the habit of giving his family's meager food and funds away to anyone who seemed to be worse off. His heart could not let anyone or anything suffer if he had the power to help. Martin endured his mother's anger and punishments, as often his own family had nothing to eat. But this did not last for long as Juan de Porres returned to claim his children en route to Ecuador to assume his new position as governor. In Ecuador Juana and Martin received an education and had plenty to eat.

When Martin turned twelve, his father arranged an apprenticeship for him as a barber-surgeon. This was a great opportunity for Martin to use his skills to help those in need. In this new trade Martin could cut hair, nurse the sick and give out medicine. He remained in his

apprenticeship for approximately three years before he petitioned the Dominican Order to accept him as a “simple servant.” (Sources vary as to his exact status within the Dominicans.)³⁴ Though his father wanted Martin to become a brother, Martin refused since he wanted only to serve others.

Martin was accepted into the Dominican Order and assigned to sweep the monastery. He was also assigned the jobs that no one wanted, like cleaning the toilets and washing dishes. Of course, Martin performed his duties with a smile, always thanking the good Lord for the chance to serve. Because he was a trained barber, Martin was also assigned to cut the brothers’ hair and work with the sick. This he did prayerfully and without complaint. Even when the brothers did not appreciate Martin’s contributions and resorted to rebuking him and calling him names, Martin would only reply, “You have only spoken the truth. Please forgive this miserable sinner.”³⁵

In addition to his other duties, Martin served the community as the gardener, cook and helper to the poor. He always made a special effort to feed those in need. There is a story of Martin feeding the crowds of Peru: One day Brother Sebastian was portioning out servings and realized that there was not enough for the poor. Brother Martin came to help and said, “There’s no need to worry.... Doesn’t God provide for the flowers of the field? He’ll take care of us as well.” There was barely enough soup for six people but Martin served everyone in the crowd. He even had enough for the dogs and cats.³⁶

This great saint serves as a model for our time. He provided an example of friendship, humility and service to a world that did not always appreciate his gifts. Martin de Porres’s pleasant manner and dedication to duty can assist us, even in our twenty-first-century world.

It is also fascinating to note Martin’s special abilities, which were observed in the monastery. The brothers reported numerous miracles, healings and Martin’s special ability to bilocate and levitate. These astounding stories include one in which a visitor to the monastery recognized Martin from when he appeared to him as a prisoner in Algeria. The other brothers were amazed because Martin had never traveled outside of Peru.

Even the animals listened to Martin. Once an angry bull was running through the monastery. Martin talked to the bull saying,

“Brother Bull, you are causing havoc here. Return to the street where you belong.”³⁷ At these words, the bull departed. Another account has Martin instructing mice to stop eating holes in the altar cloths. They, too, obeyed his request since Martin spoke out of love for the mice as well as all animals.

After a life of fasting, poverty and extreme mortification, Martin de Porres died at the age of sixty with his brothers around him lovingly chanting the *Salve Regina*. He continued to perform miracles immediately after his death for the brothers and the people of Peru. At his funeral so many mourners tore off parts of his habit for relics that his habit had to be changed several times. It was reported that a sweet odor emanated from his body throughout his burial services. Some regarded this as the “odor of sanctity.”

During his life Martin de Porres healed the sick, comforted the dying, fed the poor and housed the orphans, all the while remaining joyful that God provides for and blesses God’s people. For his holiness and devotion to others, he was declared venerable in 1763, beatified in 1837 and canonized in 1962.

SCRIPTURE

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:5–10)

PRAYER

Good and humble Saint Martin de Porres, we need your help! How could you take on the most menial of jobs? It seemed that you loved the tasks that no one else desired. Always you decreased yourself, but God, in God’s wonderful wisdom, increased your gifts. God blessed you with so many spiritual abilities that others flocked to you with the hope of a blessing. Thank you for your example of humility and

quiet service to others. We pray that we can do likewise for our neighbors and friends. Amen.

REFLECTION

How do you react when hateful words and actions are thrown your way? What steps can you take to be a spiritual and physical servant to others? How can you be careful not to boast about your every achievement and blessing?