

Blessed Pierre Toussaint



A society hairdresser who is already “Venerable” and who, many people hope, will soon be “Blessed” and eventually “Saint” – that’s Pierre Toussaint. His story is worth telling during Black History month. Pierre Toussaint is not the simple, “humble servant” kind of saint like Martin de Porres, according to Sister Jamie Phelps, OP, who is professor of systematic theology at Chicago’s Theological Union. However, she believes, he is the kind of saint/rolemodel African Americans really need. Pierre was born into slavery in Haiti – at that time called Saint Domingue, the wealthiest colony in the western world -- and brought to the new United States when George Washington was president. Pierre, along with his younger sister, Rosalie, an aunt and two other house slaves came to New York City when it was the capital of the new country. His French owner, Jean Jacques Berard, had decided to move his wife, her two sisters, and their slaves to this country because of violence in Haiti in 1793. The Catholic Berard family was extremely rich, and their slaves were baptized, catechized and well-educated. With three wealthy, society women in New York at a time when women wore elaborate hair styles; Monsieur Berard made a practical decision: he apprenticed Pierre to a local hairdresser. After putting his money into investments in New York, Monsieur Berard then returned to Haiti to see what was happening with the plantation he had left behind. Almost immediately, however, he died of pleurisy, never returning to New York. The New York businessmen with whom Monsieur Berard had invested soon informed Madame Berard that all his money had been lost. His grieving young widow was suddenly bankrupt, with no means of support for herself, her sisters or her slaves. She turned to Pierre, the only one among them with marketable skills. First with tips and then with wages, Pierre managed to keep the household financially afloat, supporting himself and the seven women as a budding society hairdresser. In 1807, Madame Berard, who by then had remarried, later freed Pierre as she lay dying. Pierre made a good living, serving wealthy clients on Wall Street, and saving all the money he could in order to buy the freedom of his sister Rosalie and another woman, Marie Rose Juliette. Pierre and Juliette were married by Jesuit father Anthony Kohlman in St Peter’s church in 1811, the same church where Elizabeth Seton had become a Catholic in 1805. As a couple, Pierre and Juliette devoted their lives to people in need. They nursed the sick, raised orphans and housed refugees. They rescued abandoned boys and found them jobs. Pierre worked constantly, walking to his clients’ houses and earning as much money as he could. He used his money to help slaves buy their freedom and raised funds for the first orphanage of the Sisters of Charity. He made substantial financial contributions toward the building of the original St Patrick’s in Manhattan – but then got turned away from attending Mass there by a racially prejudiced usher. Pierre risked his life to nurse abandoned plague victims. An extremely devout person, he could recite from memory long passages from

scripture, from the Imitation of Christ, and from sermons of famous French preachers. He would talk about the Sermon on the Mount and about Mary, the Mother of God, even to his wealthy Protestant clients. He would also quote at length from American Protestant preachers about the abolition of slavery. Even though he was a freedman, he was never allowed to ride the public, horse-drawn omnibuses because he was black. Plagued with arthritis in his old age, he still walked the streets of New York to his wealthy clients' houses. Pierre Toussaint inspired a whole generation of new Yorkers by his life of service and philanthropy, in an age when even bishops and religious orders owned slaves. Hundreds of letters left from that period attest to the respect he generated from those who knew him. Able to hear the voice of God above the deafening noise of his own enslavement, Pierre was driven by his faith to respond to the needs of those suffering around him. He was an articulate man who spoke out against injustice, a practical man who worked to earn all the money he could, just to use it to bring the Good News to the poor. A century and a half later, New York's Cardinal Spellman blessed a plaque on his headstone. His successor, Cardinal Cooke, decided Pierre deserved to be canonized and started the long process, which Cardinal O'Connor continued. Today Pierre Toussaint's remains are interred next to those of cardinals in a crypt in St Patrick's Cathedral. Currently his supporters are waiting for a first miracle to be approved, which is now under consideration at the Vatican. It would take a second approved miracle before he could be officially named a saint. Pierre Toussaint stands as an inspiring model for all Christians – not just during Black History month, and not just for African Americans.

Byenere “Pie Touden” fet kom esklav nan peyi Dayiti – 1766, li mouri nan Nouyok – 1853. Li te renmen fe byen ak tout moun e li te fonde anpil enstitisyon katolic ki la pouf e zev.

“Mwen pat jan-m santi mwen te esklav peson-n moun, men mwen se yon sevite Gran Met la, li men-m ki kreye nou tout. Le youn nan pitit li yo nan bezwen, mwen kontan poum tounen esklav-li”.

Kom esklav, Pie Touden te soti Ayiti ale Nouyok. Li te apran-n fe cheve nan men yon gran kwafe kit e tre koni nan lavil la. Ala fen, lakay li vi-n tounen kote medam gro zouzoun yo te pi renmen al fe cheve yo.

Le met li vi-n mouri, li te gen libete-l e li te gen anpil sikse kom youn nan premye Om dafè nan peyi-a e konsa, li te vi-n rich. Men olye li te ap plede depanse lajan-l pasi pala pou pouf e tet li plezi, li te prefere sipote legliz ak pov yo. Li men-m ak Madanm li te kon-nakeyi lakay yo, ofelin-yo, refijye yo, ak lot moun-n ki lage nan lari yo.

Li te fonde youn nan premye ofelina nan vil Nouyok e sitou li te ranmase lajan pou te ede bati premye katedral ki nan lavil la.

Menm pandan te genyen epidemic lafyev jo-n, Touden te riske lavi-li pou ede lot moun, nan pran swen malad yo ak nan lapriye ak sila-yo kite pret pou mouri yo.

Lapriye pou Byenere Pie Touden

Pie Touden, oumen-m ki pitit te Dayiti, e ki tap viv jan Levanjil la mande pou nou viv. Tanpri, priye pou tout pov yo ak tout moun ki dekouaje-yo.

Priye espesyalman pou tout fre-w ak se-w yo ki nan peyi Dayiti e ki ap chache kase chen-n lamize ak kalamite kap kraze yo. Gras ak lapriye-w, se pou sila yo ki feb jwen fos; se pou pov yo jwen-n sa yo bezwen pou yo viv; se pou sila ki abandone yo jwen rekonfo anfen se pou sila yo ki pedi lespwa yo jwen-n fos ak kouraj pou batay chak jou ak lavi-a! Amen.