

St. Martin de Porres (1579-1639) Lima, Peru

Love for others is more important than cleanliness.

St. Martin and his sister are children of a Spanish nobleman and an African slave. Spanish Catholics consider him less valuable as a person because of his color. Young Martin learns to be a barber and a medic (in Peru at that time it is one job). Instead of starting a family or pursuing a career, he wants to serve God with all his heart. He joins a community of Dominicans. As a mulatto, he can only be a humble servant there.

Q1. How can people claim to be Catholic and yet reject others based on their skin color? Could it be that you treat others unjustly for some reason?

Until about two hundred years ago, there were no medical facilities. There were no universities for doctors, nurses or paramedics. Sick people were taken care of in their homes by their families. Witch doctors or shamans were called to come and do their best. If their families would not do it, sick people stayed neglected in bed until they died. The Church was the first to organize care for the sick. In St. Martin's times, it meant that religious men (monks) and women (nuns) devoted their lives to caring for the sick in special houses called "infirmaries", usually built next to convents or monasteries – places where those monks or nuns lived.

Q2. Why has God put you on this planet in times when there is developed medical care, insurance, specialists, pharmacies, etc.? Millions of people for thousands of years could not have access to medical care as you have now. Does it mean that you are smarter or better than those people in the past?

St. Martin is a very skillful medic so the Dominicans ask him to take care of their infirmary. Over many years, countless sick people are helped thanks to St. Martin's skills and thanks to his decision to devote his life to helping people instead of pursuing a career or making money. St. Martin often leaves the infirmary and looks for poor sick African slaves who are badly treated by everyone including by many people who go to church. Sometimes he brings in homeless people to the infirmary. But he is not allowed to. Such people cannot pay for their stay. Once St. Martin puts a dirty sick homeless man in his bed. His superior gets very angry at St. Martin. He replies: "I can wash my sheets. I would not be able to wash my heart from the pain if I left him there in the street. Love for others is more important than cleanliness."

Q3. Love for others is more important than cleanliness. Where in my life may God be calling me to live according to this sentence?

Today, rather than taking homeless people home, we can help them better by volunteering in shelters. But we have a lot of hurting people around us who are not homeless and yet who are in need of our help. This can be a kid in our school whom no one talks to. Their bodies may be clean but their clumsiness and their being bad at sports make them unpleasant to hang around with. This can be our old aunt who has no children. She may have a lovely home but it is hard to patiently listen to her boring, repetitive stories. This can be our little brother who is clean but nags us to play with him his silly, childish games.

Ask St. Martin to pray for you so that you can be as loving to your "patients" as he was to his.

Thank you God for the good and caring people in my life who responded to my needs.