

Racialized Humility: The White Supremacist Sainthood of Peter Claver, SJ

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Peter Claver is commonly remembered as a patron saint of ministry to black Americans as well as the “saint of the slave trade.” Partially by comparing him with Saint Martin de Porres, the only African-descended American saint, this article argues that rather than lauding Claver as a racial hero, we ought to recognize him as deeply complicit in the sins of white supremacy. This article aims to help the church more honestly reckon with its white supremacist past.

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WHEN the Catholic Church elevates a certain person to sainthood, it does more than express its belief in the holiness of an individual human being. The church also tells a story about who it believes itself to have been during the life of this saint and who it believes itself to be today. Sometimes, though, these hagiographical narratives reveal not so much who the church was, but who the church needs to be.¹ This holds especially true in the case of the church’s vicious collusion with black

¹ As the controversy surrounding the canonization of eighteenth-century Spanish missionary Junipero Serra demonstrates, the contours of the church’s corporate memory matter a great deal. Those who protest Serra’s sainthood do so not only because they believe him morally unfit for the position, but also because they believe that his canonization falsely portrays the church as not a collaborator in the oppression of indigenous people but their savior.

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slavery and the regime of white supremacy that sustained it.² In order to demonstrate this, I reexamine the lives of the only two Americans canonized for their relation to black slavery: Peter Claver, the white Jesuit minister to black slaves, and Martín de Porres, the mulatto son of an enslaved mother. The church hails both men, and by extension itself, for their displays of counter-cultural humility. Against this, I contend that rather than upending white supremacist norms, their sainthood helps to affirm them.

Born into an aristocratic family in Spain, Peter Claver (1581–1654) spent the bulk of his adult life in the port city of Cartagena, in modern-day Colombia, living out his vow to serve as the “slave of the slaves forever.”³ Remembering him for the deep humility he purportedly displayed in baptizing thousands of newly arrived African slaves, the Catholic Church has proclaimed this Jesuit saint “the patron saint of African missions and interracial justice.” Hagiographers have long deemed him “the saint of the slave trade.” In light of these declarations, many contemporary US Catholics similarly celebrate him as an ally of black slaves and, for this reason, an inspiration for racial justice. For example, the popular Jesuit James Martin calls Claver “one of my favorite Jesuit saints.”⁴ The Catholic Worker House located on the predominantly black west side of South Bend, Indiana, bears his name, as do black Catholic churches in places like Lexington, Kentucky; New Orleans; and Baltimore, to name but a few.⁵ On its parish website, St. Peter Claver Church in Los Angeles describes Claver as a racial visionary and emancipator in the style of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. They contrast the “brutal dehumanization [done] by slave masters” with the “self-respect, dignity, and worth” that Claver conferred on the slaves he encountered. He acted as the enemy of “traders and planters.”⁶

But these perceptions, however sincere, are mistaken. In this article, I wish to argue that, despite his veneration as “the saint of the slave trade,” Claver in fact acted more like a slave master than a slave. Rather than protecting black

² More than simply a slogan of neo-Nazis and Klansmen, the phrase “white supremacy” names the method of social organization that continues to accord white people, both as a group and as individuals, more power than peoples of color. The regime of white supremacy operates even if most whites disavow “white supremacy” as an explicit ideology.

³ Longaro Ignatio degli Oddi, *Vida del gran siervo de Dios el V.P. Pedro Claver, de la Compania de Jesus* (Madrid: Don Eusebio Aguado, 1851), 6.

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/FrJamesMartin/posts/10151575590066496>.

⁵ <http://www.cdlex.org/index.cfm?load=page&page=615>; <http://www.stpeterclaverneworleans.org/>; <http://www.josephites.org/parish/md/spc/page2.html>.

⁶ <http://www.saintpeterclaver.org/saint-peter-claver>.

slaves from the violence of slavery as his many champions claim, Claver helped to incorporate them into it. In order to make this argument, I draw upon several popular English- and Spanish-language hagiographies composed in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, the *Proceso de beatificación y canonización de san Pedro Claver*, the collection of testimonies before Claver's 1657 beatification proceedings, and secondary research into the political and social life of Cartagena.⁷

Some may accuse me of being unfair to Claver, dismissing my critiques as a case of ahistorical moral haughtiness. Indeed, we should not condemn our antecessors simply because they express moral beliefs that have fallen out of fashion. Sensitive to these concerns, this article does not take Claver out of his context. In fact, placing Claver more firmly in his context makes his collusion with white supremacy more evident, not less. And rather than seeking to blame Claver for his white supremacy, I strive to name it as such. I leave the question of the extent to which Claver is culpable for his racial conditioning to others.

In saying this, I do not claim to take a view from nowhere; I evaluate Claver through the lens of my own particularity as a white, female, millennial cradle Catholic from the United States. But this is how all Catholics have considered the saints, from the perspective of their own particularity. Thus, sainthood always operates as a relational endeavor between the person being remembered and the community who remembers her. And it could not be otherwise. This holds especially true in the case of Claver, a man whom we know by way of the stories others have told about him. As Paola Vargas Arana explains, our knowledge of Claver comes almost entirely from the testimony of those who participated in his beatification processes. There is no historical Claver apart from our memories of him.⁸ The story of his life has always been filtered through the particular subjectivities of those communities who have remembered him.

Despite historical distance, Claver's sainthood means that his holiness has been deemed relevant to Catholics in all historical and cultural contexts. Affirming this, Catholics have continued to remember Claver across several eras. Interpreting him in light of the facts of their day, his memory has not faded. His sainthood therefore makes moral judgment necessary: if we ought not condemn Claver for holding views common among his contemporaries, then how can we celebrate him for them? If we can pass moral

⁷ *Proceso de beatificación y canonización de san Pedro Claver*, trans. Anna María Splendiani and Tulio Aristizábal Giraldo (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2002), xxii.

⁸ Paola Vargas Arana, "Pedro Claver y la evangelización en Cartagena: Pilar del encuentro entre africanos y el Nuevo Mundo, siglo XVII," *Fronteras de la Historia* 11 (2006): 298.

judgment on historical figures only when they act against the grain of their historical context, we dissolve the communion of saints.

There is yet another reason we ought to reject attempts to exonerate Claver that cite the purported commonness of his racial views. This defense unwittingly asserts the normativity of whiteness and erases black people from the historical record. Indeed, few of Claver's white contemporaries have left a written record of opposing black slavery.⁹ But many of Claver's black contemporaries left evidence of opposing slavery, despite their lack of access to the written word. *Palenques*, stable settlements of escaped black slaves, dotted the countryside surrounding Cartagena even before Claver's arrival there. African-descended residents of Cartagena declared their condemnation of slavery every time they ran away from their master, fought to preserve the independence of their communities, or wrested a shred of independence from their masters by outwitting them. Evidence of dissent lay all around him. Indeed, during Claver's ministry in Cartagena, the black population outnumbered the white.¹⁰ Therefore, it may actually have been the case that acceptance of slavery was the minority view, and condemnation of it the more common one. To defend Claver in this way does not simply insist that the views of only white people matter; it also assumes that the views of black people did not exist. Why should the moral beliefs of literate Spanish and creole colonists carry more weight than those of their black contemporaries?

This move also falsely makes the establishment of white supremacy seem like an unavoidable inevitability rather than the consequence of countless human choices. During Claver's lifetime, Catholic moral theology already possessed the theoretical framework to condemn black slavery.¹¹ When white Spaniards used Christian theology to defend the slave trade, they did so only by ignoring certain aspects of long-standing moral theology, such as the rules that limited slavery only to those "captured in just wars," enslaved as "punishment for serious crimes," or "sold by their parents."¹² Only the invention of racism made such selective interpretation feasible. While the "discovery" of the "New" World did present Spanish Catholics with new theological problems that required theological innovation, this was not the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 254–55.

¹⁰ Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, Matt D. Childs, and James Sidbury, ed., *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 151.

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 68, a.10; Luis N. Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 233.

¹² David G. Sweet, "Black Robes and 'Black Destiny': Jesuit Views of African Slavery in 17th-Century Latin America," *Revista de Historia de América* 86 (July 1, 1978): 93–94.

case with African slavery. In order to condemn African slavery, a cleric like Claver trained in Catholic theology would need only to apply existing moral frameworks, not devise new ones. Claver's support for the slave trade was not inevitable: his enthusiastic embrace of slavery reflects not so much the limitations of the medieval Catholic tradition he inherited as his decision to interpret that tradition through the lens of the colonial innovation of white supremacy.

Although they did so on only one or two occasions, white people could condemn black slavery, even in Claver's lifetime.¹³ Indeed, more than a half century before Claver began his ministry, another Spanish-born Catholic priest, Bartolomé de las Casas, would recognize (albeit belatedly) the unjust character of the slave trade that Claver celebrated.¹⁴ In 1573, again nearly a half century before the start of Claver's ministry, the Spanish-born lay lawyer and émigré to Mexico Bartolomé de Albornoz condemned black slavery and insisted that not even baptism made enslavement something that was in an African person's best interest.¹⁵ Thus even if we grade on a historical curve, Claver falls below the benchmark set by other white Catholics.

Contemporary Catholics also ought to ask how Claver can be considered the "patron saint of racial justice," when other racially flawed and limited white men like Las Casas or Antonio de Valdivieso, the bishop of Nicaragua who was assassinated by white settlers in 1550 because of his defense of Indians, are not even saints.¹⁶ What is equally disturbing is that, for his condemnation of slavery in pursuit of evangelization, Albornoz received not sainthood, but a place on the Inquisition's Index of banned books. Church authorities considered theological speculation by a layman more offensive than apologies for racial slavery penned by clergymen.¹⁷

But just as things have changed, they have also stayed the same. Shape-shifting according to the historically and geographically specific needs of white supremacy, whiteness in contemporary North America undoubtedly differs from whiteness in seventeenth-century Cartagena. But the Spanish-descended residents of Cartagena were no less white than the author of this article just because their whiteness was not identical to hers.

¹³ Ibid., 92.

¹⁴ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 136; Lawrence A. Clayton, *Bartolomé de Las Casas: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 426.

¹⁵ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 190.

¹⁶ Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism*, 269.

¹⁷ Sweet, "Black Robes and 'Black Destiny,'" 92.

Already Claver would have been habituated into white supremacy even before he set foot in America: “By the second half of the fifteenth century, the term ‘Negro’ was essentially synonymous with ‘slave’ across the [Iberian] Peninsula.”¹⁸

Claver helped to sustain the social order that accorded whiteness its so-far-uninterrupted inertia: conquest and sovereignty over indigenous people and their land as well as participation in and immunity from the slavery imposed solely on people of African descent. Even more, Claver’s contemporaries, including those who testified in his beatification proceedings, classified human beings according to a color-coded taxonomy. In addition to calling people of African descent “blacks,” they called those of European descent “whites.” For example, Nicholas Gonzalez calls people of African descent “blacks” more than he categorizes them by ethnicity, homeland, language, nativity, religious status, or any of the other terms available to him. When describing the greeting Claver gave the blacks upon their arrival, Gonzalez recalled this:

Through the interpreters, he told them that they had come to them to be the father of all them and to make sure they were well received in the land of the *whites* where they had just now arrived. He would give them many other reasons and words of love and fervor in order to alleviate them of the fear that...the *whites* had brought them to their lands in order to kill them and make butter from their flesh.¹⁹

This racial self-identification recurs throughout his testimony. In calling Claver “white,” I do not impose upon him an identity that he had not claimed for himself.

I. Slavery and Belonging

Contemporary Christians identify Claver as a racial hero partially because they misunderstand the relation between baptism and slavery. After all, baptism claims to incorporate individuals into the life of Christ in order to liberate them and grant them new life, while slavery captures its victims in order to deprive them of both freedom and true life. Claver’s

¹⁸ James H. Sweet, “Spanish and Portuguese Influences on Racial Slavery in British North America, 1492–1619,” *Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference at Yale University: Collective Degradation; Slavery and the Construction of Race* (November 7–8, 2003), 7, <http://www.yale-university.org/glc/events/race/Sweet.pdf>.

¹⁹ *Proceso de beatificación y canonización de San Pedro Claver*, 87 (my translation and emphasis).

commitment to bringing enslaved women and men into the church seems a type of protest of, or at least protection against, the degradation inflicted by slavery. But we misunderstand the relation between baptism and chattel slavery because we misapprehend the intimate relation between belonging and enslavement. Slavery makes its victims not “outcastes” so much as bodies bound perversely to the persons of their masters. As Orlando Patterson explains, a master accrues his power by holding his slave close and placing her under surveillance; as a result, “there was almost perverse intimacy in the bond resulting from the power the master claimed over his slave.”²⁰ For this reason, “any notion of ritual avoidance and spatial segregation would entail a lessening of this bond.”²¹

Before the slave can be subsumed into the personhood of her master, she must be uprooted from her community of origin and the protection it offers. As Patterson explains, slavery necessarily strips the slave of “all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and descendants.”²² Natal alienation differentiates slaves from other human beings, for slaves alone “were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory.”²³ In this way, slavery renders its victims socially dead. As performed by Claver, I would argue, baptism served as an essential link in a long chain of slave-making processes that began in Africa and continued even after an individual slave’s death. This owes as much to the specifics of Claver’s ministry as it does to the way that slavery conscripted the sacrament of baptism into its service, over and above the intentions and actions of individual priests.

First, because the baptismal rites Claver performed helped to strip African captives of all ties of kinship and natal connection, they served the interests of slaveocracy. When Claver heard news of a slave ship’s arrival, “he was positively transformed with delight.”²⁴ Gathering up gifts of “canned food, fruits, lemons, perfumed water, [and] licorice,” the father went to the slave ship to extend a reassuring welcome and paternal care to the miserable

²⁰ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Maude Dominica Petre, *Aethiopum Servus: A Study in Christian Altruism* (London: Osgood, 1896), 152.

beings still trapped inside.²⁵ He would baptize some slaves, particularly the sick and newly born, on the slave ship. Claver would visit these women and men again after they had been transported to a warehouse, which held them until they could be delivered to their owners. There, Claver would catechize the slaves he had not yet baptized, in preparation for baptism.

In so doing, Claver helped to ratify the natal alienation of the African women and men he claimed as children. Following the example of Ignatius of Loyola, he believed that “evangelizing new populations consisted in destroying all reason or prior practice.” In order to become Christians, they had to cease being whoever they had been before they were kidnapped. Claver desired that they become a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on which he could write.²⁶ To his captive audience of slaves languishing in filthy warehouses for the several days of uncertainty between Middle Passage and final sale, he preached, “I have said to you all that just as a serpent sheds his skin, you all ought to change your life and customs, stripping yourselves of gentleness and its vices until you can forget the memory of all of these things.”²⁷ Indeed, baptism confers upon all of its recipients a new identity and requires from them some sort of break with the past. But only Africans were compelled to leave not just sin, but also their social identity behind them.

Further stripping them of their individuality, Claver would baptize newly arrived Africans in groups of ten so that he could assign to each batch the same baptismal name. As slaves, not even the adoption of Spanish names could make them individuals. He would then “make them repeat it... putting aside and forgetting the name they had in their own country, because it was the name of a Moor or Gentile and a devil’s child.”²⁸ Here, Claver embodies a script of slave ownership, “obliging the new slave to make a symbolic gesture of rejecting his natal community, kinsmen, ancestral spirits, and gods...in favor of those of his master.”²⁹ As Patterson explains,

²⁵ Pietro Adamo Brioschi, *Vida de San Pedro Claver: Heroico apóstol de los negros* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 1889), 96 (my translation).

²⁶ Arana, “Pedro Claver y la evangelización en Cartagena,” 310 (my translation).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 316 (my translation). The Spanish word *gentilidad* is often translated as “heathenish” in English translations of this text; however, I have chosen this translation in order to underscore the connections between the origins of white supremacy and Christian supersession that have been demonstrated by J. Kameron Carter in *Race: A Theological Account* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Willie James Jennings in *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

²⁸ Angel Valtierra, *Peter Claver: Saint of the Slaves* (New York: Newman Press, 1960), 114.

²⁹ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 52.

“The changing of a name is almost universally a symbolic act of stripping a person of his former identity” in order to capture him within “the creation of fictive kin ties.”³⁰

Upon the completion of the rite, Claver then would both place “a pretty rosary around the neck of each them with a metal as a pendant” and wrap a “strong thread...round their necks to fall down on their chests so that they may be recognized as baptized.”³¹ The testimony of one of Claver’s slave interpreters, Andres Sacabuche, speaks with particular insight about the way in which this rite operated as a type of branding. After baptism, he explained, Claver’s slave assistants would “put around the neck of the recently baptized a medal of lead with a thread or something similar that was a signal that they had been baptized at the hands of the father.”³² Sacabuche suggests that Claver bestowed upon them a medal to signify their status as not just Christians, but his spiritual property. In becoming Christians, they also became his. Further severing slave-family ties, Claver would baptize babies born during Middle Passage without asking their parents’ permission. In so doing, I contend, Claver colluded in the kidnapping of black children from their parents.

Second, after helping to sever their original ties of kinship, Claver sought to initiate them into a new family, one organized around the Fatherhood of God. Violently ripped from their natural families, they could be conscripted into a new one. As Arana argues, “Claver sought to line the Africans in a new lineage where the Christian God was Father, Jesus was their brother, and Claver was the father figure on earth.”³³ But as with merely human families, the slaves’ kinship to other Christians was more fictive than actual. Just as they could not choose their own names, the kidnapped Africans baptized by Claver could not make spiritual families by themselves. Baptism transpired through a translator who either acted as the baptized slave’s godparent or selected for the slave a “Spanish speaking negro or negress of [his or her] own tribe.”³⁴ As Claver’s enslaved interpreter Andres Sacabuche recalls in his testimony, after administering baptism, Claver “assigned godparents to each one, sometimes the godparents were one of the slave interpreters or whatever other person.”³⁵ Another enslaved interpreter, Ignacio, corroborates this,

³⁰ Ibid., 55.

³¹ Valtierra, *Peter Claver*, 114–15.

³² *Proceso de beatificación y canonización de San Pedro Claver*, 104 (my translation).

³³ Arana, “Pedro Claver y la evangelización en Cartagena,” 311 (my translation).

³⁴ Valtierra, *Peter Claver*, 114.

³⁵ *Proceso de beatificación y canonización de San Pedro Claver*, 103 (my translation).

recalling that Claver “had a list of names [of prospective godparents] and when he ran short [Ignacio] and the other interpreters filled in.”³⁶

The testimony of Claver’s slave interpreters suggests that the seven of them acted as godparents to hundreds, if not thousands, of enslaved women and men. In addition to lacking the social capital to act as unenslaved godparents would, one person certainly could not act as godparent to so many people in any meaningful sense. Their natal alienation extended even to their membership in the church: like slaves in all times and places, the women and men Claver baptized could not make their own families, even when these families were spiritual. Their families were instead assigned to them, in accordance with the workings of white power and as a result of the will of white masters. They belonged to whomever Claver said they belonged.

Indeed, Claver “did not only show that God was a Father and Jesus was a brother, but also that he himself could occupy the place of a father.”³⁷ Boarding the slave ship, “he put himself in the middle of the ship surrounded by the slaves, and through an interpreter, he told them that he had come to be the father of all of them so that they would be well received in the land of the whites.”³⁸ Rather than an act of loving heroism, Claver’s claim of paternity serves the interests of slavery. To begin with, Claver could claim paternity over these women and men only because they had been deprived of their natural fathers. Calling himself their father further severed their link to their communities of origin and ties of kinship.

Third, Claver’s paternal pretensions also infantilized the enslaved. Claver would tell newly arrived slaves that they “are very fortunate that [they] have been brought to the countries of the Spanish, that it was a grace that God had done to us, because we could become Christians and his children.”³⁹ But being children of both God the Father and Father Claver meant being slaves. And slaves can be children in name only. Instructing them in docility and dependence, Claver “would get up on a table” in one of the fetid slave warehouses and fervently preach “about the use of their souls and that they seek to be good and to serve with all attention both God and their masters.”⁴⁰

Claver also catechized them as though they were children who had not yet reached the age of reason. His use of interpreters would have seemingly rendered his reliance on sign, picture, and gesture as pedagogical tools

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 107 (my translation).

³⁷ Arana, “Pedro Claver y la evangelización en Cartagena,” 317 (my translation).

³⁸ *Ibid.* (my translation).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 310 (my translation).

⁴⁰ *Proceso de beatificación y canonización de San Pedro Claver*, 133 (my translation).

unnecessary. Claver avoided appealing to their intellect, not because he did not speak their language, but because he believed them incapable of philosophical thought. Claver's champions similarly emphasize the dullness of his African students. One commentator marvels at "the inconceivable" amount of "care and trouble" required to "make [his slave interpreters] fit to teach other" slaves.⁴¹

Claver's desire to act as their father accompanied a strong desire that they remain like children, docile, obedient, and dependent on him. Claver's hagiographers as well as many of the white witnesses who testified in the canonization process possessed a deep investment in Claver's capacity to elicit docility from black slaves. In his 1920 hagiography, William Morgan Markoe tells the story of a newly arrived ship fully of "desperate" African Negroes whose "rebellious spirit...the traders could hardly control." Although these men "had never heard of Father Claver...at the very sight of him they seemed to lose their fury. When the aged man stood in their midst, he pressed them separately to his heart, gave them his blessing, and comforted them. They were suddenly changed from men infuriated by their wrongs into docile children of the common Father."⁴² As a result, "they meekly knelt at his feet and submitted themselves to his loving care and guidance."⁴³ Another hagiographer, John Richard Slattery, extols the way in which "the mere sight of him would check the most unruly [slave], and even the vicious when they met him, knelt down to ask his blessing."⁴⁴ In treating even adult black women and men as his children, Claver colluded with the white supremacist desire for black docility.

While always fraught with peril, social belonging ordinarily offers human beings access to protection and life. But for the slave, belonging brings social death, vulnerability, and unmitigated susceptibility to violence. When assessing the relational dynamics of slavery, we ought not to mistake closeness for community or intimacy for love. When Claver baptismally incorporated slaves into Christian community, he helped to consolidate their place in the racialized hierarchy that structured life in the Catholic Americas.⁴⁵

But Claver's alliance with the slave trade does not qualify as a tragic case of unintended consequences. Claver was not merely used by slavery; he

⁴¹ John Richard Slattery, *The Life of St. Peter Claver, S.J.: The Apostle of the Negroes* (Philadelphia: H. L. Kilner, 1893), 139.

⁴² William Morgan Markoe, *The Slave of the Negroes* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1920), 56.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Slattery, *The Life of St. Peter Claver, S.J.*, 70.

⁴⁵ Herman L. Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 13.

intended to incorporate African women and men more deeply into enslavement. Twisting baptism to perverse purposes, Claver's baptismal ministry ushered black slaves not from death to life but from social life to social death. As a sacrament, baptism deploys the specific, historically particular waters of the River Jordan and the Red Sea as potent symbols of liberation, and so draws upon water itself as a symbol of life.⁴⁶ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* recognizes that "since the beginning of the world, water, so humble and wonderful a creature, has been the source of life and fruitfulness."⁴⁷ But white supremacy distorted the meaning of baptismal waters. Boarding docked slave ships still brimming with human cargo, Claver used water to initiate African slaves not into life but into American slavery.

Further uncovering the conscious and intentional character of his baptismal collusion with slavery, Claver assigned soteriological value to the Middle Passage. Claver catechized the survivors of the Middle Passage with this explanation:

Like those who because of their weak capacity could not understand how they arrived in the land of the whites by traveling on a sea so big that it did not have a street or pathway on which to walk or even a signal lighting the way, but only the strokes that whites made on parchment, so it went with those things of our holy faith, that while with your little capacity you could not understand, you ought to believe them and observe how God commanded it.⁴⁸

Navigated by the unfathomable and therefore god-like power of the whites, Middle Passage mediated the mystery of salvation to the Africans who were made to travel it. But Claver says more than this. Only white people make the ocean a passage to salvation; Africans reach the promised land only by being taken there by whites. In Claver's white-supremacist cosmology, white kidnappers do not merely execute the divine will; they seem like gods in relation to weak, unenlightened, and lost blacks. In baptizing newly arrived Africans, Claver did not attempt to wrest some measure of good from an otherwise evil situation. Nor did he baptize them as a protest against their dehumanization. To the contrary, Claver perceived the transatlantic slave trade as both the manifestation of God's will and the precondition for black salvation.⁴⁹ He meant to make them slaves of white masters.

While Claver asked the still-shackled slaves he encountered for their permission before baptizing them, their status as kidnapped victims limited their

⁴⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1218, 1228.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1218.

⁴⁸ *Proceso de beatificación y canonización de San Pedro Claver*, 93 (my translation).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

capacity to consent.⁵⁰ Held in a position of powerlessness, these slaves felt their dependence on white power deep within their ocean-rocked bodies. In saying no to the “requests” of those who owned them, they risked further, more brutal, corporal punishment. Those who cannot say no cannot say yes. Rather than simply joining the body of Christ, these coercively baptized black slaves were penetrated by it.

Baptism ought to pronounce liberation and life as kindred spirits, essentially connected.⁵¹ But slavery severs this connection, keeping its victims alive only so that they may toil as slaves. Rather than bringing liberation and life, the water that Claver offered ushered the baptized person into slavery and social death. Claver stood guard at the tomb.

II. Claver’s Racialized Humility

Because he engaged in acts of service and self-debasement, we proclaim Claver “slave of the slaves.” Claver similarly called himself “the slave of the negroes forever.”⁵² But, unlike the slaves whose souls he claimed to serve, Claver chose his slavery and could exit from it at his own discretion: as a Spanish-born white man, he enjoyed a freedom he deemed unnecessary for the blacks he served. Declaring Claver “the slave of the slaves,” we speak the impossible. Slaves are slaves only to masters; one serves as a slave to another human being only if that human being can in turn act as her master. For Claver to qualify as a slave of the slaves, black people would have needed to be allowed to act as Claver’s master. The socio-political conditions of seventeenth-century Cartagena rendered this racial role reversal inconceivable, however. Black slaves living in Claver’s Cartagena were not masters of white women and men.

Nor was Claver’s body treated like the body of a slave. Hagiographical sources typically recount the story of Claver’s abuse at the hands of a rude and rough black caretaker in the months before his death as evidence of Claver’s saintly capacity to endure any humiliation and suffering in imitation of Christ. But we should read these accounts with some measure of suspicion. First, this story portrays Claver as not just suffering saint, but civilizing hero. One hagiographer describes Claver as “the victim of the base instincts of one of those in whom it had been his constant endeavor to rouse high and holy feelings.”⁵³ Even if true, we also ought to ask whether this story demonstrates

⁵⁰ Valtierra, *Peter Claver*, 111.

⁵¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1221.

⁵² <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11763a.htm>.

⁵³ Petre, *Aethiopum Servus*, 205.

what Claver's hagiographers claim it does. If Claver, despite being elderly and bed-ridden, possessed the ability to repel his abuser, then his experience of abuse was not slave-like at all: slaves who resist their masters risk beatings, dismemberment, or death. If his frailty limited his capacity to resist, then Claver experienced his abuse involuntarily; he is a victim rather than a hero. In this story, Claver can be savior or he can be slave: he cannot be both. Regardless of how we interpret this story, one fact remains indisputable: a relatively brief episode of abuse does not even come close to approximating the suffering inflicted upon enslaved women and men over the course of their lifetimes.

Further differentiating him from a slave, Claver chose to bind himself in vows of obedience. Because he was used only if he allowed himself to be used, Claver was not really used in the way a slave is. Even his self-flagellation resulted from an assertion of his own will. In contrast to the slave who is whipped against her will so that she will submit to the will of a master, Claver flagellated himself in order to make himself the master of his own body. And, unlike the millions of Africans who died in stinking slave ships on transatlantic passages or in the sweltering cane fields of the Caribbean or under the searing sharpness of a slave master's whip, Claver received a lavish funeral mass that was filled with admirers. John Richard Slattery describes the treatment his corpse received: "From all the churches in the town were sent beautiful tapestries and hangings to decorate the altar and tomb"; civic leaders fought for the honor of carrying the "precious burden" of his body; assembled crowds "rushed...to kiss his hands and feet."⁵⁴ Unlike the abused bodies of black slaves and unlike the bloated corpses of transported Africans lining the floor of the Atlantic like litter or that were shredded as shark fodder, Claver's corpse was adored and cared for.⁵⁵ When a white man playacts the degraded status of a slave, we honor him as a saint. When black women and men languish as true slaves, we disregard them.

In kissing the oozing boils of the sick, Claver did exhibit a certain type of humility. But his humility looks almost nothing like discipleship. The gospel proclaims socially shocking reversals: the rich shall be poor, and the meek will be owners of the earth. But Claver did not reverse unjust power dynamics; he affirmed them. And our interpretation of Claver's actions can go even further. His piety, in fact, depended upon the preservation of black enslavement. Claver could qualify as a "slave of slaves" only if those he served remained in shackles. If black people had not been perceived as degraded and

⁵⁴ Slattery, *The Life of St. Peter Claver, S.J.*, 232.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 232–34.

stigmatized, Claver would not have seemed heroic for interacting with them. When Claver is revered, the body of Christ turns evangelical poverty into a self-aggrandizing boast. Claver's humility operates as an exercise of white privilege and power.

Further underscoring the white supremacist character of his sainthood, Claver's humility appears heroic largely because the black body seems so grotesque. The purported repulsiveness of the black body recurs as a central theme of those who testify to his holiness. Several witnesses recall Claver's encounter with vomiting and defecating bodies of newly arrived slaves. His friend, the Jesuit Nicolas Gonzalez, described Claver's ministry as heroically humble "due to the grand stench and bad smell that the blacks expelled," which, he surmised, was "caused by the many contagious diseases they carried with them upon their arrival to Cartagena."⁵⁶ One of Claver's hagiographers locates Claver's heroism explicitly in his ability to continue ministering to black slaves despite their bodies' repulsiveness.⁵⁷

The social milieu that undoubtedly shaped Claver's racial imagination believed the black body more than merely circumstantially unattractive.⁵⁸ And while Claver did not leave behind a written record of his racial beliefs, his mentor did. As Nicole von Germeten notes in the introduction to her English translation of Alonso de Sandoval's work *De instauranda Aethiopia salute*, Sandoval "judges the Spanish to be more physically attractive and appealing" than Africans.⁵⁹ Ignoring or perhaps oblivious to routine Spanish rape and sexual abuse of their black slaves, Sandoval assures his audience that "if there is temptation in seeing the blacks naked, that very nakedness and the disgust that goes along with it are a very effective remedy against temptation."⁶⁰

Reflecting Sandoval's influence, Claver vowed himself *aethiopia semper servus*. English sources typically translate this appellation as "slave of the slaves forever" or "slave of the blacks forever." But if we place Claver's words in his historical context, we ought to instead translate this phrase as "the slave of the Ethiopians forever." In so doing, Claver adopted the racial taxonomy of his mentor, in which "the *etiopia*...was associated with physical and spiritual monstrosity."⁶¹

⁵⁶ *Proceso de beatificación y canonización de San Pedro Claver*, 85.

⁵⁷ Petre, *Aethiopia Servus*, 152.

⁵⁸ Arana, "Pedro Claver y la evangelización en Cartagena," 307.

⁵⁹ Alonso de Sandoval, *Treatise on Slavery: Selections from "De instauranda Aethiopia salute"*, ed. and trans. Nicole von Germeten (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 97.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Arana, "Pedro Claver y la evangelización en Cartagena," 309 (my translation).

III. Not Humble, but Privileged; Not a Slave, but a Slave Master

More than merely failing to truly exist as the “slave of the slaves forever,” Claver acted like a type of slave master. Rather than descending into degrading humility as his hagiographers claim, Claver enjoyed the privileges, pleasures, and honor of white mastery. Claver did not serve Cartagena’s slaves; he demanded that they submit to his will. First, Claver owned slaves. His interpreters were his slaves, purchased by the Jesuit Colegio at his command and for the purpose of serving his needs. Claver did not receive these slaves passively. Experiencing the pleasure of surveying black flesh, he picked his slaves himself. Historian Paola Vargas Arana details Claver’s slave-picking process: “The juveniles, all boys, were selected by the Jesuit, before the boats would anchor in the port. Together with a group of interpreters, he would enter in the slave hold and ask them to ask which of the slaves could speak more than two languages. This is how he determined who would serve him.”⁶² After Claver had made his selection, “he would request that the Colegio purchase that slave with the unique purpose of serving his evangelizing project.”⁶³ Other times, Claver would rent out slave labor, “paying to their owners the salary for the days that they were employed in this ministry.”⁶⁴

Claver in fact participated in both ends of the slave trade. Perhaps unsatisfied with the linguistic abilities of the slaves who happened to arrive in his city, Claver “gave to one of his friends, who was going to Guinea, sufficient money to purchase three of the most docile and intelligent Negroes he could find.”⁶⁵ In addition to purchasing slaves already stolen, Claver acted as their trafficker. Belying claims of his humility, Claver in fact possessed power that the majority of even white men lacked. Like a consummate slave master, Claver made slaves an instrument of his will, making them into whatever he needed them to be.

Claver also exercised another prerogative of slave mastership, the right to violently discipline his property however he saw fit. Believing himself the master of black flesh, Claver began to violently discipline enslaved Africans almost immediately after their arrival in Cartagena. As Claver’s slave Andres Sacabuche recalls, “To those [slaves] that learned better and more rapidly [than the others] he would give a gift of snuff and to those who were slow in learning he gave them a blow to the head with the stick of the cross that he had in his hands.” At other times, “he would command that

⁶² Ibid., 311 (my translation).

⁶³ Ibid., 312 (my translation).

⁶⁴ *Proceso de beatificación y canonización de San Pedro Claver*, 86 (my translation).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 138 (my translation).

some of [his slave assistants] give [this slow learner] a blow to the head in penance for his poor attention and lack of diligence.”⁶⁶

Claver wrought violence on black flesh even after the moment of baptism. When Claver “encountered dances of black males and black females,” he would take out his whip-like *disciplina* and bronze crucifix, and, hitting them with the former, he would “disperse them with the crucifix raised in his hand.” If he saw any black woman or man carrying on what he called “the vices of your heathenish traditions from the land of your birth,” he would “get infuriated and take out his whip and whip from his horse whoever would get in his path.”⁶⁷ Sacabuche recounts the way in which Claver would visit the homes in which young slaves lived and ask “the owners if they had among them anyone who had the custom of swearing or saying bad words.” If the white owners said yes, Claver first “reprimanded him severely” and then “ordered him to kiss the ground.” While the slave “was kissing [the ground], he put his foot on his head and encouraged the most responsible person of the house to let him know if any black little boy or girl started swearing again.”⁶⁸ Rather than acting as a deeply humble “slave of the slaves,” Claver in fact demanded for himself the privileges and powers of whiteness.

IV. The Racialized Humility of Saint Martin de Porres

The white supremacist and racialized character of Claver’s humility grows more apparent in contrast with Martin de Porres (1579–1639), the church’s only American saint of African descent. The church recognizes de Porres, like Claver, as a model of humility and selfless service. Yet while Claver appears humble despite his willfully occupying a position of racial power and aggrandizement, de Porres qualifies as humble precisely because he accepts his status as less than white. The son of a Spanish nobleman and a formerly enslaved black woman from Peru, de Porres’ humility remained within the limits of blackness as defined by a white supremacist society.

Peruvian law barred people of African and indigenous descent from becoming full members of religious orders. Claver began his ministry in the Americas as an ordained priest, but de Porres entered religious life as servant boy to the Dominican friars in residence at the Convent of El Rosario in Lima. While the order accepted him as their servant, they rejected

⁶⁶ Ibid., 101 (my translation).

⁶⁷ Arana, “Pedro Claver y la evangelización en Cartagena,” 318 (my translation).

⁶⁸ *Proceso de beatificación y canonización de San Pedro Claver*, 193 (my translation).

him as their equal, “initially refusing to give him the habit” on account of his blackness.⁶⁹ Prevalent notions of humility seemed to convince de Porres that his racially subordinate status qualified as a blessing and pathway to piety rather than an injustice. For example, when his priory was burdened with seemingly insurmountable debt, he reportedly told his superiors: “I am only a poor mulatto. Sell me. I am the property of the order. Sell me.”⁷⁰ Claver, on the other hand, committed himself to telling other women and men to be content with being sold.

Pursuing a racialized version of humility, de Porres strove to be humble not despite his racial identity but precisely because of it. For example, while he was working as El Rosario’s barber-surgeon, many of his white patients spat vicious racial slurs at him. Rather than turning the other cheek, de Porres punched himself there: “When he disciplined himself late into the night, [he] could be heard repeating the same injurious words hurled at him during his rounds in the infirmary.” His colleague and biographer recalls how de Porres “treated his body like a rebel slave or mortal enemy,” seemingly believing himself guilty not of a generalized concupiscence but of a racially specific sinfulness.⁷¹

De Porres also sought to impose this mentality on other people of color, including the black slaves he taught. While de Porres certainly believed his enslaved students in possession of a human soul, he taught them not so much to lift them up but to hold them down. In this way, “when slaves working in the Dominican plantation at Limatambo complained about the lack of adequate food,” de Porres “would tell them that he, too, had not eaten because he did not yet deserve to eat.”⁷²

Even though he is celebrated as the patron saint of black and mixed-race people, one struggles to understand how de Porres’ story conveys good news for people of color striving to live beyond the confines of white supremacy. Even more troubling, of the hundreds of millions of African-descended Catholics who have lived in the Americas, de Porres stands as the only American saint of African descent.

In the light of the church’s racially specific standards of humility, white people appear saintly when they descend below the racially pristine status

⁶⁹ Omar H. Ali, “The African Diaspora in Latin America: Afro-Peru and San Martín de Porres,” *New African Review* 2 (Summer 2013): 3.

⁷⁰ John F. Fink, *American Saints: Five Centuries of Heroic Sanctity on the American Continents* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2001), 11.

⁷¹ Chris Garces, “The Interspecies Logic of Race in Colonial Peru: San Martín de Porres’s Animal Brotherhood,” in *Sainthood and Race: Marked Flesh, Holy Flesh*, ed. Molly H. Bassett and Vincent W. Lloyd (New York: Routledge, 2014), 96.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 97.

automatically accorded them, while people of color appear saintly only when they embrace the racial limits imposed upon them. But white people can never truly relinquish the prestige their bodies bring them while living within a white supremacist society. For this reason, we ought to question whether white people inhabiting white supremacist societies can ever display the humility of true saints. We ought to at least wonder whether white people can exercise such humility without seeking to dismantle regnant structures of white supremacy in both the church and society. White supremacy cloaks white people in honor, and not even the most extreme display of evangelical charity can strip them of it.

Just as white supremacy makes white people seem more humble than they really are, so it makes black struggles for justice, freedom, and dignity seem threatening rather than righteous. Would de Porres have been recognized as a saint if he had protested the church's racially exclusionary practices? It seems unlikely. In counting de Porres as its only black American saint, the church expresses implicit displeasure with those people James Cone describes as "'uppity' slaves, those who openly expressed their discontentment with servitude."⁷³ This uncritical Catholic celebration of humility also kept the church from "pronouncing God's judgment on human servitude and affirming that God created black people for freedom."⁷⁴ In reality, black people most invert the sinful order of a fallen world not when they descend into debasement but when they assert their self-worth, social equality, and status as beloved creatures of the God of justice. Operative Catholic ideologies of humility combine with pervasive white supremacy to diminish the church's collective capacity to recognize the black saints in its midst. In failing to understand the way notions of humility as debasement intersect with white supremacy, the church struggles to recognize black assertions of freedom and self-worth as saintly.⁷⁵

V. "A Way Out of No Way": The Knights of Peter Claver and Ladies Auxiliary

The existence of the Knights of Peter Claver and Ladies Auxiliary, the oldest black fraternal organization in the United States, may seem to discredit

⁷³ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 193.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁷⁵ This helps explain why Catholic theology has failed to engage with figures like Malcolm X, despite the fact that "he speaks on behalf of those whom he calls the victims of America's 'so-called democracy.'" Bryan Massingale, "Vox Victimarum Vox Dei: Malcolm X As Neglected 'Classic' for Catholic Theological Reflection," *CTSA Proceedings* 65 (2010): 63.

my arguments entirely. Indeed, if black Catholics decided to name themselves after Claver, how can he be what I say he is? Ought we not trust the historical judgments of generations of black Catholics over the opinion of a single white theologian? We should accord a certain epistemological privilege to the Knights and Ladies of Peter Claver; however, their selection of him as a namesake does not qualify as an exoneration of him.

In seeking a saint to model their lives after, Catholics of African descent living in the Americas had few choices. When the organization's founding members sought to select a "patron saint who would have a divine interest in the progress of this Organization for the advancement of the African American people," whom else could they have selected?⁷⁶ At the organization's founding in 1909, the church had yet to canonize even a single American saint of African descent. Martin de Porres would not receive canonization until the late date of 1962. Peter Claver truly was the best choice that the church had to offer them. This fact should disturb us. African-American Catholics who joined the Knights and Ladies of Peter Claver did not capitulate to the church's regnant white supremacy; they instead sought to "make a way out of no way."⁷⁷ Just by claiming their place in a church that often did not want them, those who belonged to the Knights and Ladies of Peter Claver paradoxically subverted the racial order that Claver condoned.⁷⁸

The corporate conduct of the Knights and Ladies of Peter Claver also undermines the racial ideology of their namesake. In seeking to build a

⁷⁶ Theda Skocpol and Jennifer Lynn Oser, "Organization despite Adversity: The Origins and Development of African American Fraternal Associations," *Social Science History* 28, no. 3 (2004): 367–437, at 391.

⁷⁷ Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). As Coleman explains, "Making a way out of no way' means that the way forward was not contained in the past alone, the only way that was known. A way forward, a way toward life, comes from another source. It comes from unforeseen possibilities. These possibilities come from God" (34). Coleman relates this phrase to womanist theology: "'Making a way out of no way' is a central theme in black women's struggles and God's assistance in helping them to overcome oppression. [It] can serve as a summarizing concept for the ways that various womanist theologians describe God's liberation of black women" (9).

⁷⁸ Albert J. Raboteau, "Relating Race and Religion: Four Historical Models," in *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, ed. M. Shawn Copeland, LaReine-Marie Mosely, and Albert J. Raboteau (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 1–6; Cyprian Davis, "The Holy See and American Black Catholics: A Forgotten Chapter in the History of the American Church," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7, no. 2/3 (1988): 157–81; Lincoln R. Rice, "Confronting the Heresy of 'The Mythical Body of Christ': The Life of Dr. Arthur Falls," *American Catholic Studies* 123, no. 2 (2012): 59–77; John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998).

brotherhood that “would assure [African Americans] a measure of financial strength in times of sickness and death,” the founders already disobeyed Claver’s desire that black people remain unnaturally dependent on white masters for survival and salvation.⁷⁹ Further discrediting Claver’s belief that black people ought to be catechized like dim-witted children through pictures and signs, the Knights and Ladies hosted “study clubs and discussion groups on the church and its doctrines as well as topics concerning the common welfare of men and nations.”⁸⁰ While Claver insisted that black Catholics remain always under white supervision, the Knights and Ladies possessed an all-black leadership team, elected by them and for them. Unlike Claver, who desired that black adults remain forever his children, in 1939 the Knights and Ladies began to demand that black Catholic men also be allowed to be priests.⁸¹ Further differentiating themselves from their patron saint, since 1953 the Knights and Ladies have pursued an explicit, corporate commitment to racial and social justice.⁸² While Peter Claver strove to save black souls by enslaving their bodies, the Knights and Ladies of Peter Claver seek justice for the entire human person. They reflect not so much the saintliness of their namesake but the “uncommon faithfulness” of black Catholics.

VI. In Search of the True “Saints of the Slave Trade”

Despite his veneration as “the saint of the slave trade,” Peter Claver’s sainthood signifies not the Catholic Church’s corporate opposition to the transatlantic slave trade, but its terrible collusion with it. Claver’s celebrated status also raises uncomfortable questions about the way that Catholic notions of saintly humility prop up and affirm the white supremacist order that has structured life in the Americas for more than five hundred years. He further exemplifies the church’s captivity to a racialized conception of baptismal freedom.⁸³

In lauding Claver uncritically, the church asserts his innocence in order to demonstrate its own. In celebrating Claver, the church seeks to acquit itself of the interrelated sins of racial slavery and antiblackness. Rather than insisting

⁷⁹ Emanuel Jordan Abston, “Catholicism and African-Americans: A Study of Claverism, 1909–1959” (PhD diss., The Florida State University, 1998), 94.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁸¹ Skocpol and Oser, “Organization despite Adversity,” 391.

⁸² Abston, “Catholicism and African-Americans,” 212–13.

⁸³ Michael J. Walsh, *Book of Saints* (Ellicott City, MD: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), 103.

on the church's innocence, the church ought to accept its responsibility for and participation in the Americas' white supremacy in general and its perduring antiblackness in particular. The true saints of the slave trade, I argue, lie at the bottom of the Atlantic and in the long-untended graves of slaves. They include those who protested it and refused to profit from it. Above all, they number those who resisted it, ran away from it, and strove to live a life of love and dignity despite its degradations. But we do not remember their names, and we do not ask them to pray for us. The church has canonized Claver, but it has not elevated either an enslaved black American or a person of any color who fought to eliminate slavery. Not just our most ignominious sinners, but also our most celebrated saints are guilty of the sins of white supremacy. Why does collusion with the demonic power of white supremacy seem a type of saintliness?