

Venerable Pierre Toussaint (1766-1853)

by Sister Elizabeth Ann, S.J.W.

Pierre was born into slavery on the island of Haiti. His master, Jean Berard, encouraged the young Pierre to learn to read and write. Pierre was a house slave, so he escaped the brutality and harsh work of the fields. Pierre's mother and grandmother were devout Catholics who passed their faith on to Pierre and his younger sister, Rosalie. Jean Berard seemed to realize that there might be troubled times on Haiti. In 1787, he moved his new wife and several slaves, including Pierre and Rosalie, to New York City.



It was in New York City that Pierre learned to become a hairdresser. In those days, wealthy women had their hair decorated in elaborate fashions, and a good hairdresser could make a nice sum of money. Not only did Pierre have a natural gift for dressing hair, he possessed a "quiet wit and gaiety". Pierre was also discreet, and these qualities endeared him to his clients who often sought him out for advice. These same clients supported Pierre in his charitable works.

As Pierre was establishing a good reputation among New York's elite, the increasing number of Haitian refugees brought reports of murder and devastation from the island. Jean Berard returned to Haiti to try to protect his property, but died of pleurisy shortly after his return. The widowed Madame Berard, grieving over her husband's death, was also confronted with the news of her new poverty; the revolution on Haiti had destroyed her livelihood. Pierre made a decision to discreetly support the Berard household. The faith he had learned from his mother would sustain him as he sacrificed his own freedom to help others achieve theirs. He bought his sister's freedom but decided to remain a slave, thinking he could better care for Madame Berard.

Pierre always began his day with Mass. After working sixteen hours a day, he would return to the Berard house with a treat for Madame Berard, who in her grief was shutting everyone out. Pierre was gently trying to encourage her to return to the world. In spite of the long hours he worked, Pierre was generous with his money and his time; giving away all he had to care for the poor.

Eventually, Madame Berard's health gave way and on her deathbed she gave Pierre his freedom. At last, at the age of forty-one, Pierre was free. It was as a free man that he married the woman he loved, Juliette Noel, a Haitian slave, whose freedom he had purchased. Together, they continued the charitable work Pierre had begun. The couple helped refugees find jobs, cared for

orphans, and opened a school to teach black children a trade. They also provided financial help to the Oblate Sisters of Providence. When the plague struck the city, Pierre personally cared for the victims. When Pierre's sister, Rosalie, died leaving a young daughter, Pierre and Juliette welcomed her into their home. They cared for Euphemia like their own daughter, and she was a joy to them. When Euphemia died at fourteen years of age of tuberculosis, Pierre was overcome with grief. But unlike Madame Berard, who withdrew from life when sorrow struck, Pierre remained in the midst of his work.

In 1851, Pierre who was eighty-five years old suffered the last and greatest sorrow of his life when his beloved Juliette died. Although he again refused to withdraw from the world, his own health began to fail. He died two years later on June 30, 1853, and was buried next to Juliette and Euphemia. A friend of Pierre said of him, "I have known Christians who were not gentlemen, gentlemen who were not Christians. One man I know who is both and that man is black."² In 1968, the process to canonize Pierre Toussaint began. In 1990, Pierre's body was moved to a crypt under the main altar of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. In 1996, he was declared Venerable. Currently, the seemingly miraculous cure of a six year old boy with severe curvature of the spine is being investigated as a possible miracle. If approved, this event could lead the way to the beatification of Pierre Toussaint.



Pierre Toussaint and Elizabeth Lange and her Oblate Sisters of Providence "proved that virtue and intelligence know no race, sanctity heeds no color, and determination has no end. They demonstrated courage and tenacity in perilous times and gave hope to their persecuted race."³ May their lives be an example and an inspiration to those who work to end racism.



Haiti

The country of Haiti is familiar to most Americans as an island of great poverty. But it was not always like that. In the 1700's, Haiti (then known as San Domingo) was the most prosperous French colony in the western hemisphere, supplying other parts of the world with sugar and coffee grown on its large plantations. Unfortunately, the prosperity and power enjoyed by a small percentage of wealthy landowners came at a high price: the enslavement of thousands of black men, women, and children.

The slaves on Haiti, like slaves everywhere, had no protection from daily brutality and degradation. In 1791, the frustration and bitterness of the slaves exploded into a civil war. The slaves lashed out against their former masters in a revolt that caused bloodshed and destruction throughout the island. In large numbers, black and white Haitians fled the country, often settling in the United States.

Not until 1804, did Haiti become an independent country. However, being a "black" republic resulted in the other slaveholding areas of the Americas isolating the country. This isolation would last for many years and caused a once prosperous colony to become poor and impoverished. However horrible the revolt, it resulted in many blessings to the new country of the United States. Fleeing the terrors of the Haitian Revolution, a man and a woman came to America and became Saints. They were black refugees in a country that tolerated slavery. Both rose above their situation and chose the "more excellent way" of St. Paul, the way of love. **Elizabeth Lange** founded the first black Roman Catholic women's congregation in the United States. **Venerable Pierre Toussaint** purchased the freedom of many slaves, while he himself was still a slave.

FOOTNOTES:

- 1: Boniface Hanley, OFM, Ten Christians (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1979), 21
- 2: Hanley, 37.
- 3: Hine, 2.