
Sainthood and Historical Memory

To many, it may seem as though this book judges all of these holy men, but especially Claver, too harshly. In particular, some may doubt our capacity to make moral critiques of those who lived before us. They would not be the first to do so. In this way, for example, in her 1896 hagiography, the English nun Maude Dominica Mary Petre sought to acquit Claver on the grounds of historical context when she explained that “even among the most famous philanthropists of the day, there is no positive condemnation of slavery as such.”¹ Ultimately, she concludes, “It is always a difficult and doubtful matter to compare the tendencies of different ages.”² Petre is right. We should not condemn our antecessors simply because they express moral beliefs that have fallen out of fashion. Sensitive to these concerns, this book does not take any of these saints out of his context. In fact, in the case of Claver, accounting for his historical context does not soften our assessment of him; when we attend to his historical context, Claver appears more culpable, not less so. Ultimately, however, this book is

1. Maude Dominica Mary Petre, *Aethiopum Servus: A Study in Christian Altruism* (1896; repr., Memphis, TN: General Books, 2010), 86.

2. *Ibid.*, 175.

uninterested in determining the extent to which Claver is culpable for his own racial conditioning. More than it wishes to blame Claver for his antiblackness supremacy, this book strives to name it as such.

In saying this, I do not claim to take a view from nowhere; I admittedly evaluate all of these men through the lens of my own particularity as a white, U.S.-American, female, cradle Catholic. But have not all Catholics considered the saints from the perspective of their own particularity? It could not be otherwise. Sainthood stories are filtered through the particular subjectivities of the communities that tell them. In this way, sainthood always emerges as a relational endeavor between the person being remembered and the community that remembers her.³ We do not receive the saints as though they were fragile collectibles preserved forever behind packaging that can never be opened. We inherit them by reinterpreting them; we inherit them *only* if we reinterpret them. This holds especially true in the case of Claver since we know him almost exclusively from the stories others told about him after his death.⁴ We do not receive the saints as though they were fragile collectibles preserved forever behind packaging that can never be opened. We inherit them by reinterpreting them; we inherit them *only* if we reinterpret them. Recognizing this, successive generations of Catholics have adapted Claver to their particular sociohistorical contexts. We cannot then exonerate Claver's sainthood simply by pointing out that he inhabited a world that differs from our own. Besides, if we cannot make negative judgments about saints who inhabited foreign cultural contexts, then how can we make positive claims about them? If cultural difference barred us from condemning Claver for his vices, then how could we praise him for his virtues? If historical distance makes a human life untranslatable, then how can Claver's sainthood mean anything to us at all?

We should disregard what I term the historical-context defense for another reason as well. Especially in the post-Tridentine era, individual

3. 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.

4. Anna María Splendiani, "Un jesuita y una ciudad: Pedro Claver y Cartagena de Indias," t.l, mecanografiado (Bogotá: Colciencias, 2000), 28.

women and men have been elevated to sainthood precisely because they possessed extraordinary virtues. Saints could do what everyone should do better than anyone could. We cannot therefore defend a saint by labeling her a woman of her time. This would be like arguing that a certain basketball player should be elected to her sport's hall of fame because, although she was not that great at many parts of the game, she was no worse at these skills than the average woman of her era. Perhaps even more importantly, this strategy confuses the answer and the question. Rather than simply pointing out that many whites in Claver's day harbored antiblack sentiments, we ought to ask both why what Vincent Lloyd terms "proper racial practice" has not been considered a core saintly virtue, and why the church has so often mistaken racial vice for racial virtue.⁵ Put another way, why must Claver be extraordinary in certain ways, but not in the case of his racial comportment?

1.1 Whose Norms? Antiracism Supremacy and Historical Judgment

We ought to reject calls to exonerate Claver by citing the purported commonness of his racial views for still another reason. 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.⁶ But many of Claver's black contemporaries left evidence of opposing slavery, despite often lacking access to the written word.⁷ In this way, *palenques*, which were stable settlements of escaped black slaves, dotted the forested countryside surrounding Cartagena even before Claver's arrival there.⁸ African-descended residents of Cartagena

5. Bassett and Lloyd, *Sainthood and Race*, 4.

6. Arana, "Pedro Claver y la evangelización en Cartagena," 254–55.

7. This does not mean Cartagena's African-born residents were illiterate. Many of them brought their ability to read and write, sometimes in more than one language, over with them from their communities in West and Central Africa. Pablo Fernando Gómez Zuluaga, "Bodies of Encounter: Health, Illness, and Death in the Early Modern African-Spanish Caribbean" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2010), 79.

8. Marco Palacios and Frank Safford, *Colombia: País fragmentado, sociedad dividida. Su historia* (Bogotá,

denounced slavery every time they ran away from their masters or fought to preserve their independence. Serving as confessor to a group of recaptured *palenqueros* before their execution, Claver knew these places existed.⁹ More subtle evidence of black dissent—acts of resistance and creative survival—lay all around him. Indeed, during his 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. To defend Claver in this way is to say that only the views of white people matter. 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 antiblackness supremacy seem like an inevitability rather than the consequence of countless human choices. Even during Claver's lifetime, Catholic moral theology already possessed the theoretical resources to condemn black slavery as unjust. In fact, while the so-called discovery of the so-called New World did present Spanish and Portuguese Catholics with new theological problems that required theological innovation, this was not the 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. For example, although no Christian author had yet issued a categorical condemnation of slavery *per se*, Catholic moral codes condoned slavery, only under a very specific set of rules, which specified that human beings could be taken as slaves justly only as punishment for conducting an unjust war, committing a capital offense, or falling into debt.¹¹ Yet many of the women and men who were kidnapped and

Colombia: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2005), 132; Jane Landers, "La Cultura Material De Los Cimarrones: Los Casos De Ecuador, La Española, México Y Colombia" in *Rutas De La Esclavitud En África Y América Latina*, ed. Rina Cáceres (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial de la Universidad de Costa Rica, 2001), 150–52.

9. Arana, *Pedro Claver y la evangelización en Cartagena*, 312.

10. Zuluaga, *Bodies of Encounter*, 2, 22.

11. John T. Noonan, *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 80–86; David G. Sweet, "Black Robes and 'Black Destiny': Jesuit Views of African Slavery in 17th-Century Latin America," *Revista de Historia de América* 86 (1978): 93.

trafficked to Cartagena fit none of these categories and were snatched up from the ordinary rhythm of their everyday lives, including children who were stolen away while playing. When Claver's white contemporaries 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 concerning slavery.

Despite Claver's presumed familiarity with Catholic moral theology, we have no record of Claver's ever wondering about the legitimacy of even a single African person's enslavement. Claver's lack of concern about this matter distinguished him from his mentor Sandoval, who at least "was puzzled over whether or not African slaves were taken captive in a just war" and therefore felt moved to "consult [one of] the leading Jesuit moral theologians of his time," Fr. Luis Brandon, rector of the Jesuit College in Luanda, Angola, about the status of these arriving captives. Father Brandon warned Sandoval that "no Negroe will admit to being a just captive, so [you] ought not ask them whether they are fair captives or not, because they will always say they were stolen or captured under a bad title, understanding that in this way their liberty will be granted."¹² Seemingly, for Claver as for Sandoval, the word of a white man was all that was needed to make a black man a slave. Claver's enthusiastic embrace of slavery reflects less the limitations of the medieval Catholic tradition he inherited than his decision to interpret that tradition through the lens of the relatively recent innovation of antiblackness supremacy.

But even if we were to grade on a historical curve, Claver still would fall below the benchmark set by other white Catholics. Although they almost never did, white people could condemn black slavery, even in Claver's lifetime.¹³ Indeed, more than a half century before Claver initiated his ministry, another Spanish-born Catholic priest, Bartolome de las Casas, would recognize, albeit belatedly, the unjust character of

12. Kristen Block, "Faith and Fortune: Religious Identity and the Politics of Profit in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2007), 92.

13. Peter Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 30. Martin A. Klein, *Historical Dictionary of Slavery and Abolition*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 39.

the slave trade that Claver celebrated. One also wonders how Claver can be considered the “patron saint of racial justice,” when other racially flawed and limited white men like Las Casas and 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.¹⁴

1.2 Apologizing for Claver: Anachronism and Exoneration

Claver’s hagiographers further excuse his acceptance of the slave trade by insisting that he did so only out of a fervent love for the well-being of black souls.¹⁵ In this way, Petre contends that Claver was “so consumed with the desiring of raising and ennobling individual hearts and minds, that he thought little of the social question” surrounding slavery’s morality.¹⁶ But Claver’s purported dedication to saving souls does not make his embrace of black slavery more acceptable. At least one other prominent Spanish Catholic cleric, Bartolome de Albornoz, recognized that not even the soul-saving gift of baptism could justify African enslavement.¹⁷ Even the Portuguese bishop of the Cape Verde Islands, Frei Pedro Brandão, attempted to end the slave trade; while Claver baptized Africans into slavery, Bishop Brandão “proposed that blacks should be baptized and then set free.”¹⁸ Further debunking the myths of moral progress that undergird hagiographical excuse-making, these protests occurred at least twenty and sometimes as many fifty years before Claver began his ministry.¹⁹ But we do not remember any of these men as heroes. Indeed, if it truly was nearly impossible for white people to recognize that Africanized slavery was

14. Luis N. Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 269. The Nicaraguan bishops did not begin promoting the memory of Valdivieso until the year 2000. Hans-Jürgen Prien, *Christianity In Latin America* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 124.

15. For a very recent example of this defense, see Ondina E. González and Justo L. González, *Christianity in Latin America: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 91.

16. Petre, *Aethiopum Servus*, 74–75.

17. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 190.

18. Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Trade, 1440–1870* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1997), 147.

19. Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 189; Thomas, *Slave Trade*, 147.

evil as Claver's defenders insist, then should these men not be among the church's most revered saints?

These exemplars notwithstanding, Claver's single-minded concern for the souls of black slaves also seems and well-intentioned, if misguided, largely because we project contemporary understandings of the relation between church and state back onto seventeenth-century imperial Spain. In truth, when Claver sought to Christianize African souls, he was not acting with holy disregard for the things of this world in the way that modern interpreters have tended to assume. While medieval Christians believed "spiritual goals . . . [to be] superior to temporal and civil ones," they did not deem them unrelated. This holds particularly true in the case of missionaries like Claver.²⁰ For him, there was no pure religion: in defending Catholic orthodoxy, he believed that he was also defending Spanish sovereignty. For the Spanish state, Christianization and conquest were deeply aligned and interdependent projects.²¹ Evidencing this understanding, one of Claver's peers explained that "heresy . . . is such that if it is not stopped and uprooted altogether when it is first germinating, it would not merely be harmful to religion, but could totally pervert and subvert the political state." For this reason, he concluded, "In no republic that is Catholic and well governed should diversity of religions be allowed."²²

This background helps to explain why the Spanish monarchy paid for Claver's initial voyage to Cartagena.²³ In addition to "giving economic aid to the missionaries who penetrated the New World," the Spanish government also paid for Claver's initial voyage from Spain to Cartagena.²⁴ Claver likely did prioritize the spiritual over the temporal as his hagiographers claim, but his spiritual activities undoubtedly served to consolidate Spanish imperial power. Those who attempt to exonerate Claver by portraying him as single-mindedly devoted to the

20. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 17.

21. Rivera, *Violent Evangelism*, 54.

22. *Ibid.*, 54–55.

23. Arana, *Pedro Claver y la evangelización en Cartagena*, 310; Emanuel J. Abston, "Catholicism and African Americans: A Study of Claverism, 1909–1959" (Florida State University, 1998), 81.

24. Emanuel J. Abston, "Catholicism and African Americans: A Study of Claverism, 1909–1959" (Florida State University, 1998), 81.

salvation of souls rather than the establishment of a certain political order, interpret him not charitably, but anachronistically.

We also interpret Claver anachronistically when we interpret his zeal for the liberation of black souls as evidence of his opposition to racial hierarchy either in this world or the next. Just because Claver believed that the slave master's authority did not extend to his slave's soul did not mean he considered black slaves the masters of their own souls. Just as the church's sovereignty over the spiritual realm did not lessen but actually worked in concert with the state's sovereignty over the temporal, Claver's mastery over the souls of black slaves lent support to laymen's ownership of their bodies. Claver worked in cahoots with slave owners and was loved by them. As a friend to slave masters, he was an enemy to the enslaved.

1.3 The Flexible Persistence of Antiblackness Supremacy

But while Claver's context differs from ours in important ways, it also shares much in common with it. Claver's sainthood proves particularly relevant to contemporary Christians precisely because antiblackness supremacy still holds the world together.²⁵ Shape-shifting according to the historically and geographically specific needs of racialized power, 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 I am just because their whiteness was not identical to mine. Claver would have been habituated into white supremacy even before he stepped foot in America: "By the second half of the fifteenth century, the term 'Negro' was essentially synonymous with 'slave' across the [Iberian] Peninsula."²⁶

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

25. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 58.

26. James H. Sweet, "Collective Degradation: Slavery and the Construction of Race," *America* 1492 (2003): 7.

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 referred to those of European descent as "whites." For example, Claver's best friend and fellow Jesuit Nicholas González names people of African descent as "blacks" more frequently than he identifies 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, González recalls how "through the interpreters, he told them that they had come . . . to make sure they were well received in the land of the *whites*."²⁷ This racial self-identification recurs throughout his testimony. In calling Claver "white," we do not impose upon him an identity that he had not claimed for himself.

Nor have Claver's ecclesial advocates believed him to be racially irrelevant. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, Claver's proponents have promoted him precisely because they perceived an analogy between the racial circumstances of seventeenth-century Cartagena and the United States.²⁸ Even if these hagiographers defined antiblackness too narrowly, they implicitly conceded the similarities between the racial injustice of Claver's day and that of their own. And they were correct in doing so. All of the Americas suffer from a common antiblackness supremacy, albeit in geographically specific ways.²⁹ Black slavery and its ongoing afterlife connect our context to Claver's.

27. Anna María Splendiani and Tulio Aristizábal, *El proceso de beatificación y canonización de San Pedro Claver* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2002), 87. Italics mine. My translation.

28. Nicole von Germeten, "A Century of Promoting Saint Peter Claver and Catholicism to African Americans: Claverian Historiography from 1868–1965," *American Catholic Studies* 116, no. 3 (2005): 23–38.

29. For more on this history, see Walker Grimes, "*Christ Divided:*" *The Church and the Corporate Vice of Antiblackness* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017).