

Pierre Toussaint (1766-1853) Paolo Molinari SJ

As Postulator of the Society of Jesus I have been aware of the urgency of placing my energies and expertise at the service of the Church by promoting the Causes of lay-people, men and women who are truly exemplary and greatly loved and venerated by the faithful. For this reason it was a source of joy to receive, some twenty years ago, a request from His Eminence John Cardinal O'Connor, Archbishop of New York to accept the role of Postulator in the Cause of Pierre Toussaint, who died in that American city in 1853... and whose Beatification is now very close at hand.

What always attracted me to this figure was precisely his humble origin, the fact that he was of African-American descent. Being actually a slave, he belonged to a class, which, until the first decades of the twentieth century, had no standing whatever in the United States. Yet I knew that Pierre Toussaint, a Catholic, with his graciousness, his spirit, his availability to whoever was in need, had touched the hearts of his contemporaries.

Pierre Toussaint was born a slave in Haiti in 1766 but spent most of his adult life, from 1797 to 1853, in New York City in the United States of America. The French family in Haiti who owned him, Bérard by name, treated him much more humanely than other slave owners: they gave him the chance to learn to read and write and made him learn the art of hairdressing.

Foreseeing the tragic development of the situation in Haiti, M. Bérard decided in 1797 to move to New York with his family and some of his slaves, among them Pierre Toussaint and his sister Rosalie. Pierre's training enabled him to practise his trade as a hairdresser and he became well known among the ladies of the most respected social circles of the city. He earned stipends and tips to the point that he could open a bank account. But Pierre used the money thus earned chiefly to support people in need, black or white. Touchingly significant is the fact that when the Bérard family lost all their fortune, Pierre Toussaint supported Madame Bérard financially till the end of her life.

Just before dying, she wanted to show him her gratitude and, though feeble and frail, went to the French Consulate in New York to sign the document of "manumission" which made of him a freeman: this was on July 2, 1807. All through his time in New York, Pierre Toussaint devoted most of his energies, time and money to support poor people and sustain works of charity. Among these works was the setting up of an orphanage for white children and contributions to the building of the Catholic Church of St Vincent

de Paul in New York. His charity was not limited to donations of money alone. Even more remarkable than his financial largesse was the personal attention that he gave to the sick and dying. Often enough these people were strangers to him, victims of the ubiquitous and contagious diseases that plagued New York through most of the century. In pursuing this personal apostolate to the sick and dying, Toussaint repeatedly exposed himself to dangerous infection, a fact that was not lost on those who watched and admired him from a distance.

When, in the middle of the 19th century, the unrest among the coloured people began to manifest itself and became increasingly radical, Pierre Toussaint – guided by the principles of the Gospel – distanced himself from any movement that was ready to use violence. When asked if he was an “abolitionist”, Pierre replied with a shudder: “Lady, they have never seen blood running in the streets as I have seen it”. He was referring to the experience that he had had in Haiti during the racial riots.

He prized freedom and acted accordingly to promote the equality of all human beings and the outlawing of slavery. As he belonged to a special minority of blacks whose cultural roots were French and Catholic, he was, to some extent, alienated from the majority of African-Americans; yet Toussaint treated the members of such groups with the same cordial respect that he showed to everyone else.

On the basis of documents which have been preserved and testimonies given by those who knew him personally, it is evident that Toussaint was a person who responded readily to the movements of grace, fulfilled the responsibilities of his walk of life and profession and lived the ordinary events of life in an extraordinary way. It is not surprising that those close to him, people of every religious belief as well as non-believers, described him as a “perfect gentleman”. But what is astonishing is that such an appellation was used to describe a person whose skin was black, and who was in addition a Catholic, and was used by people who lived in an environment not at all favourable to people of colour or to Catholics.

From where did Pierre Toussaint derive the strength to live as he did? The animating principle of the life of Toussaint and the force behind his activity was the intensity of his living faith in Christ, a faith permeated by a charity nourished by his love for the Eucharist. It is clear then that this man of God was like a light that illuminating a path, a path since travelled by contemporary Americans – unfortunately amidst tension and violence – toward achieving justice and recognition of the rights of the African-Americans.

Pierre Toussaint, living in the Spirit of the Gospel, contributed, for his part, to a peaceful and harmonious change of attitudes. He demonstrated by his life the truth of the words spoken by Jesus Christ:

Blessed are the poor in spirit...

Blessed are the meek...

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice...

Blessed are the peacemakers... (cf. Mt. 5, 3 ff)

These words from the Gospel were often quoted by Pierre Toussaint.

Paolo Molinari SJ
Curia Generalizia
Rome, Italy