



VENERABLE PIERRE TOUSSAINT

No matter who you are or where you are in life, you can love God and love his people. Our saints let us see this clearly, because they come from all walks of life and from all over the world. One such saint is the Venerable Pierre Toussaint, who began his life enslaved.

Born in modern-day Haiti and brought to New York City as an enslaved person, Pierre died a free man, a renowned hairdresser, and one of New York City's most well-known Catholics.

Plantation owner Pierre Bérard enslaved Toussaint and allowed his grandmother to teach her grandson how to read and write. In his early 20s, Pierre accompanied his master's son to New York City because of political unrest at home. Apprenticed to a local hairdresser, Pierre learned the trade quickly and eventually worked very successfully in the homes of rich women in New York City.

When his master died, Pierre was determined to support himself and assumed responsibility for his master's widow, and the other enslaved people of the house. He was freed shortly before the widow's death in 1807. Four years later, he married Marie Rose Juliette, whose freedom he had purchased. He attended daily Mass at St. Peter's Church on Barclay Street, the same parish that Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton had attended.

Pierre donated to various charities, generously assisting blacks and whites in need. He and his wife opened their home to orphans and educated them. The couple also nursed abandoned people who were suffering from yellow fever. Urged to retire and enjoy the wealth he had accumulated, Pierre responded, "I have enough for myself, but if I stop working I have not enough for others."

Pierre originally was buried outside St. Patrick's Old Cathedral, where he was once refused entrance because of his race. His sanctity and the popular devotion to him caused his body to be moved to the present location of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue.

All of us wonder sometimes whether we can make a difference when we're just one person and the world is full of so many people who need God's love. The story of Venerable Pierre Toussaint teaches us to not be discouraged by how the world sees us.

He was born enslaved in the world's eyes, but through the virtue of charity that he shared with all he met, he brought the warmth of God's love into countless lives. No matter who we are or where we are, no matter how small the world tries to make us feel, we can always and everywhere practice the virtue of charity and share God's love with everyone in our life.

Pierre Toussaint was declared Venerable in 1996.

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Excepted from [Fr. Don Miller, OFM](#) on franciscanmedia.org and [Loyola Kids Books of Heroes](#)