

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Peter Claver

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: September 9

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IN BRIEF

Saint Peter Claver

Jesuit priest from Catalonia, apostle of the enslaved Africans brought to Cartagena de Indias, patron saint of Colombia.

Feast day	September 9
Born	1580, Verdú, Catalonia, Spain
Died	September 8, 1654, Cartagena de Indias, Colombia
Canonized	January 15, 1888, by Pope Leo XIII
Era	17th century
Patron saint of	Colombia, missions among Black peoples, enslaved people, African Americans

In this booklet

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Shrine of Saint Peter Claver in Cartagena de Indias

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Peter Claver

Saint Peter Claver was a 17th-century Jesuit priest from Catalonia who spent nearly forty years in Cartagena de Indias, in present-day Colombia, serving the enslaved Africans brought ashore in that great slave-trading port. He met them as they came off the ships, fed them, nursed them and announced the Gospel to them. He died in 1654, was canonized in 1888, and is the patron saint of Colombia and of missions among Black peoples. His feast day is September 9.

Who was Saint Peter Claver?

Pere Claver was born in 1580 in Verdú, a village in Catalonia, into a family of Christian farmers. He lost his mother at thirteen. Drawn early to the clerical state, he received the tonsure at fifteen, then went to study in Barcelona with the support of an uncle who was a canon. There he met the Jesuits, and on August 7, 1602, he entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus in Tarragona.

Sent to study philosophy in Palma de Mallorca, he became friends with the porter of the college, an elderly and very humble Jesuit brother, Alphonsus Rodríguez, who would be canonized on the same day as him. The old brother often spoke to him about the missions of the New World and the immense need for apostles there. The young Peter asked to be sent.

Key dates in the life of Saint Peter Claver

- **1580**: Born in Verdú, Catalonia.
- **August 7, 1602**: Enters the Jesuit novitiate in Tarragona.
- **1605-1608**: Studies in Palma de Mallorca and friendship with Brother Alphonsus Rodríguez.
- **1610**: Arrives in Cartagena de Indias, in the New Kingdom of Granada.

- **March 19, 1616**: Ordained a priest in Cartagena.
- **April 3, 1622**: Solemn profession; he signs himself "slave of the Africans forever."
- **1650**: Struck by an epidemic, he survives but remains paralyzed and infirm.
- **September 8, 1654**: Dies in Cartagena, at seventy-four.
- **July 16, 1850**: Beatified by Pope Pius IX.
- **January 15, 1888**: Canonized by Pope Leo XIII, together with Alphonsus Rodríguez and John Berchmans.
- **1896**: Leo XIII proclaims him patron of missions among Black peoples.

Cartagena, a slave-trading port

At the beginning of the 17th century, Cartagena de Indias was one of the main ports of arrival for enslaved Africans in Spanish America. Every year about a dozen slave ships unloaded captives who had been crammed for weeks in holds without air or light. Many arrived sick, starving and terrified. Some missionaries who protested against this treatment were persecuted or expelled.

Since 1605, a Jesuit, Father Alonso de Sandoval, had been caring for these men and women and studying their peoples and languages. Peter Claver became his disciple and continued his work. On the day of his final vows in 1622, he added to the Latin formula of his profession a phrase that sums up his life: *Petrus Claver, Aethiopum semper servus*, "Peter Claver, slave of the Africans forever."

Forty years in the service of the enslaved

As soon as a ship was announced, Peter Claver went to the port with food, water, medicine and fruit. He went down into the holds, washed and nursed the sick, and embraced the dying. He returned day after day to the warehouses where the captives waited to be sold. Using pictures, he taught them the great

truths of the faith, and he baptized those who asked for it. His biographers credit him with hundreds of thousands of baptisms; the figure belongs to tradition, but it shows the scale of his work.

To make himself understood, he depended on interpreters who spoke the captives' languages. The sources show that these interpreters, some of whose names have come down to us, were themselves enslaved people belonging to the Jesuit college. This reality is a reminder that Peter Claver lived inside a system he did not abolish, and from which his Church and his order also profited. Yet within that world he refused to treat the enslaved as merchandise: he looked on them as brothers and sisters, children of God with full dignity.

His dedication did not stop at the port. He visited hospitals, lepers and prisoners, and accompanied condemned men to their execution. For himself he kept almost nothing.



The Church of San Pedro Claver in Cartagena de Indias.

The last years

In 1650 an epidemic struck Cartagena. Peter Claver fell ill; he survived, but remained paralyzed and could no longer work. He spent his last four years in the infirmary of the college, often forgotten and sometimes poorly cared for. He died on September 8, 1654. His death caused great emotion in the city, and his tomb quickly became a place of prayer. His body now rests under the high altar of the church that bears his name.

Why is Saint Peter Claver the patron saint of Colombia and of missions among Black peoples?

Peter Claver spent his whole priestly life in Colombia, and Leo XIII, who greatly admired him, proclaimed him patron of missions among Black peoples in 1896. The pope is reported to have said that no life, after that of Christ, had moved him so much. In 1985, Colombia made September 9 its National Human Rights Day in his honor.

In the United States, his name is carried by the Knights of Peter Claver, a Catholic fraternal order founded in 1909 in Mobile, Alabama, by and for African American Catholics. More broadly, he is prayed to for victims of human trafficking and exploitation, for migrants, and for all whose dignity is trampled.

He did not give great speeches: he fed, washed, nursed, listened and consoled, for forty years, in the same place. To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Peter Claver and follow the novena to Saint Peter Claver from August 31 to September 8.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Peter Claver in art

Peter Claver is shown in the black cassock of a Jesuit, often holding a cross. He is usually depicted bending over enslaved Africans to help them, giving them water, nursing them or baptizing them. Some images show him at the port of

Cartagena beside a ship, or with a staff and a bag of provisions for the captives.

Where to pray to Saint Peter Claver

- **Cartagena de Indias** (Colombia): the Sanctuary of San Pedro Claver, in the walled old city, where his body rests under the high altar. In the former Jesuit convent you can see the cell where he lived and the room where he died. Pope John Paul II prayed there in 1986.
- **Verdú** (Catalonia, Spain): his birthplace, now a museum.
- **Tarragona and Palma de Mallorca** (Spain): the places of his Jesuit formation.
- **Brazzaville** (Republic of the Congo): the Church of Saint Peter Claver, built in 1963.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Peter Claver for Victims of Slavery

Saint Peter Claver left no prayer that has become traditional. But one phrase in his own hand sums up his whole life: the words he added to his signature on the day of his final vows. You will find it below with its source, followed by an original prayer to Saint Peter Claver.

Words of Peter Claver to meditate on

> *"Petrus Claver, Aethiopum semper servus." ("Peter Claver, slave of the Africans forever.")*

Source: formula of solemn profession signed by Peter Claver in Cartagena de Indias on April 3, 1622. The Latin word *Aethiopes* was then used for Africans in general.

Prayer to Saint Peter Claver for victims of slavery and exploitation

> *Saint Peter Claver, you went down into the holds of ships to reach those whom no one wanted to see: teach us to go toward the most humiliated people of our time.*
>
> *You washed wounds, shared bread and water, and comforted captives in their own languages: make us attentive to those who suffer near us.*
>
> *Pray for the victims of human trafficking, forced labor and every form of exploitation. Obtain freedom for them, and conversion of heart for those who exploit them.*
>
> *I also entrust to you migrants, prisoners, the sick who have been abandoned, and my intention: (name it in silence).*
>
> *You made yourself a servant forever: teach me to serve without counting the cost, and to see in every person a brother or sister loved by God. Amen.*

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Peter Claver's feast day is September 9, the day after the anniversary of his death on September 8, 1654. In Colombia, that day is also National Human Rights Day. You can pray to him at any time for victims of trafficking and forced labor, for migrants and refugees, for prisoners, and for all who work to defend human dignity.

His example also invites a personal examination: who are the people I do not want to see? Praying this prayer can lead to a concrete step, such as supporting an organization that fights trafficking or visiting someone who is isolated.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Peter Claver, and discover the life of Saint Peter Claver.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Peter Claver

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Peter Claver. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast on September 9, begin on August 31; it ends on September 8, the anniversary of his death.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day.

The novena follows Peter Claver's path from his call in Mallorca to his last years of illness in Cartagena. Its themes are service, human dignity and care for the poor. It can be prayed alone, in a family, in a parish group or with a community engaged in the service of migrants and the poor.

Day 1: Hearing the call

In Mallorca, the old porter, Brother Alphonsus Rodríguez, spoke to the young Peter about the missions of the New World. A simple conversation can change a life. God often speaks through the people he places on our path.

Prayer: Lord, make me attentive to the calls you send me through others.

Today: Thank someone who has mattered in your life of faith.

Day 2: Leaving

In 1610, Peter Claver left Spain for good. He would never see his homeland again. His departure was not an adventure but a gift of his whole life.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to leave my comfort to go where you send me.

Today: Pray for missionaries far from home, and for those who have had to leave their own country to survive.

Day 3: A slave forever

On the day of his vows, he signed himself "slave of the Africans forever." He chose the last place, beside the least of all. The word he chose was strong, almost shocking: he did not want to be a benefactor looking down on others, but a servant bound to them for life.

Prayer: Jesus, you took the form of a servant: teach me the humility that serves.

Today: Do a task nobody wants to do.

Day 4: Going down into the holds

When a ship arrived, he went down into the holds, where there was hardly any air and the suffering was extreme. He did not look on from a distance. Compassion, for him, meant going physically to the place of pain, sharing its smell, its heat and its fear.

Prayer: Lord, help me to draw near to those who suffer, instead of looking away.

Today: Visit someone who is sick, elderly or isolated.

Day 5: Caring for bodies

Before speaking about God, Peter Claver brought water, bread and medicine. Charity begins with the needs of the body. The Gospel he preached was first made visible in the care he gave.

Prayer: Lord, make me generous toward those who lack what they need.

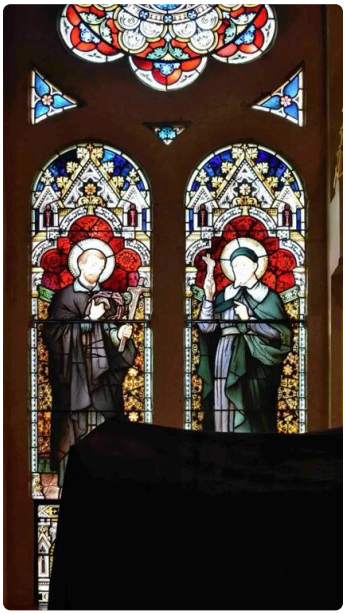
Today: Give food, or support a local food bank.

Day 6: Speaking the other's language

To make himself understood, he surrounded himself with interpreters and used pictures. He wanted each person to receive the Gospel in their own language. Those interpreters were themselves enslaved, and he depended on them: even the work of a saint is never done alone.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, teach me to listen to others and to find the words that reach them.

Today: Take time to truly listen to someone from another country.



Saint Peter Claver in a stained glass window.

Day 7: A dignity nothing can erase

In a world that treated captives as merchandise, Peter Claver looked on them as children of God. He embraced them and called them by name. Today, millions of people are still bought, sold and forced to work against their will. Their faces are often hidden from us, but they are just as close to the heart of God.

Prayer: God, Father of all, deliver the victims of trafficking and exploitation, and convert the hearts of those who enslave them.

Today: Learn about human trafficking today and support an organization that fights it.

Day 8: Accompanying to the end

He also visited hospitals, prisons and lepers, and accompanied those condemned to death to their last moment. No one was too far gone for his compassion.

Prayer: Lord, be close to prisoners, to the sick and to the dying.

Today: Pray for people in prison and for those who visit them.

Day 9: The forgotten servant

Paralyzed during his last four years, Peter Claver was often left alone. The man who had served so many accepted in his turn to be weak and dependent on others. His last years teach that holiness is not measured by what we can still do, but by the love with which we receive what comes.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Peter Claver, teach me to serve when I am strong and to let myself be loved when I am weak. Amen.

Today: Check in on a sick person you have somewhat forgotten.

Closing prayer

Saint Peter Claver, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have presented. Pray for all whose dignity is trampled, for migrants and for the captives of today. Obtain for us the heart of a servant, eyes that do not look away and hands ready to help. May we learn from you to see Christ in every face. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Peter Claver and the prayer to Saint Peter Claver.

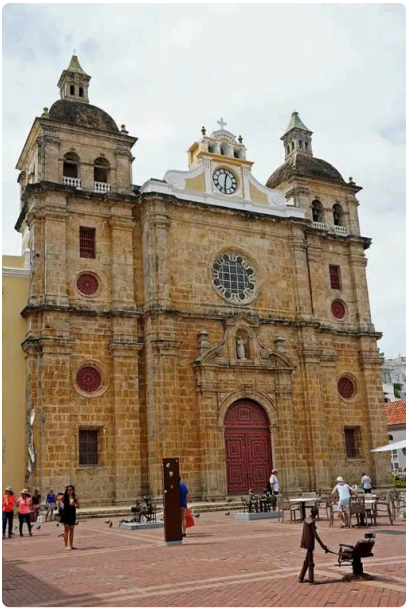
PILGRIMAGE

Shrine of Saint Peter Claver in Cartagena de Indias

The Shrine of Saint Peter Claver is in the walled old city of Cartagena de Indias, on Colombia's Caribbean coast. It brings together the church where the saint's body rests and the former Jesuit convent where he lived and died. It is the main pilgrimage site dedicated to the apostle of the African slaves.

The Jesuit church and convent

The Jesuits settled in Cartagena in the early 17th century. Peter Claver lived in their college from 1610, and from there he set out, for nearly forty years, to the port and the warehouses where captives were held. He also spent his last years of illness there and died there on September 8, 1654. The neighboring church now bears his name.



The Church of Saint Peter Claver in Cartagena de Indias.

The saint's tomb

The body of Saint Peter Claver rests in a shrine beneath the high altar of the church. In 1986, Saint John Paul II, on a trip to Colombia, came here to pray. In the former convent, around the cloister, you can see the cell where the saint lived and the room where he died, as well as a museum devoted to his work and to the history of the city.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Peter Claver. At his shrine, entrust to his intercession the victims of exploitation and trafficking, then say the prayer to Saint Peter Claver. You can also follow the novena to Saint Peter Claver before his feast on September 9. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places connected with Saint Peter Claver

- **Verdú** (Catalonia): his birthplace, now a museum.
- **Tarragona** (Catalonia): the city where he entered the Jesuit novitiate in 1602.
- **Palma de Mallorca**: the Jesuit college where he met Brother Alphonsus Rodriguez.

Practical information

The church is in the historic center of Cartagena, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a few steps from the city walls. The church remains a place of worship: modest dress is required. A visit to the convent and museum may require a fee and follows its own hours. Check the shrine's official website or the tourist office before you come.

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