

Ven. Pierre Toussaint

Biography

Venerable Pierre Toussaint was born into slavery in 1766 in what is now Haiti and raised as a Catholic. He and his sister, Rosalie, were brought to New York City by their enslavers, the Bérard family, originally of French descent, in 1787 as they fled unrest in Haiti.

Upon arrival in New York, Pierre was set up to apprentice to one of New York's leading hairdressers. Pierre learned quickly and started doing the hair of rich women all over New York. When Jean Bérard later died, Pierre was already in a position to support himself and Bérard's widow with the earnings he made from his hairdressing work. He voluntarily took on support of her until she remarried. Pierre was eventually able to purchase the freedom of his sister Rosalie and Pierre was freed by his enslavers in 1807.

Upon gaining his freedom, Pierre took on the surname of Toussaint, in honor of Toussaint Louverture, a Haitian revolutionary leader who helped transform the fledgling slave rebellion in Haiti into a successful revolutionary movement. Pierre Toussaint continued to work among the elite in New York as a hairdresser and, as his success grew, he began to use his wealth for several philanthropic causes.

In 1811, Toussaint purchased the freedom of Marie-Rose Juliette Noel — now we know her as Servant of God Marie-Rose Juliette Toussaint — and they were married. When Pierre's sister Rosalie died of tuberculosis, they adopted her only daughter, Euphemia, and raised her as their own. Alongside Euphemia, the Toussaints sheltered orphans and fostered numerous New York street children. They purchased a house on Franklin Street where they supported orphaned boys, getting them educations, helping them learn trades, and sometimes even setting them up with their first jobs.

The Toussaints became a charitable tour de force and well known among New Yorkers. They began an employment agency, a credit bureau, and a refuge for traveling priests and immigrants. During the cholera outbreak in New York City Pierre and Juliette would cross quarantine barricades and nurse sick people back to health in their own home. They raised money to build what is now Old St. Patrick's Cathedral on Mulberry Street and helped found the first black Catholic school in New York City — St. Vincent De Paul on Canal Street.

During all of his philanthropic work, Pierre continued to work as a hairdresser and support his family. He died two years after his wife Juliette's passing in 1853, at the age of 87 and was buried alongside her and Euphemia in the cemetery of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral in New York. When the investigation into his life for the cause of sainthood started, Pierre was exhumed and reinterred in the main cathedral. He was the very first layman to be honored by burial in the crypt below the main altar of St. Patrick's, an honor usually reserved for bishops of the Archdiocese of New York. He was declared Venerable by Pope John Paul II in 1996.

Prayer

Lord God, source of love and compassion, we praise and honor You for the virtuous and charitable life of our brother in Christ, Venerable Pierre Toussaint.

Inspired by the example of our Lord Jesus, Pierre worshipped You with love and served Your people with generosity. He attended Mass daily and responded to the practical and spiritual needs of friends and strangers, of the rich and the poor, the sick and the homeless of the 19th century, New York.

If it is your will, let the name of Venerable Pierre Toussaint be officially raised to the rank of Saint, so that the world may know this Haitian New Yorker who refused to hate or be selfish, but instead lived to the full commandments of heaven and the divine law of love — love for God and for neighbor.

By following his example and asking for his prayer, may we, too, be counted among the blessed in heaven.

We ask for this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Prayer Source: <https://nolacatholic.org/news/black-catholic-history-month-pierre-toussaint#:~:text=Prayer,served%20Your%20people%20with%20generosity>)

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