



SECRETARY OF THE PROVINCE

## REDEMPTORIST PROVINCIAL RESIDENCE

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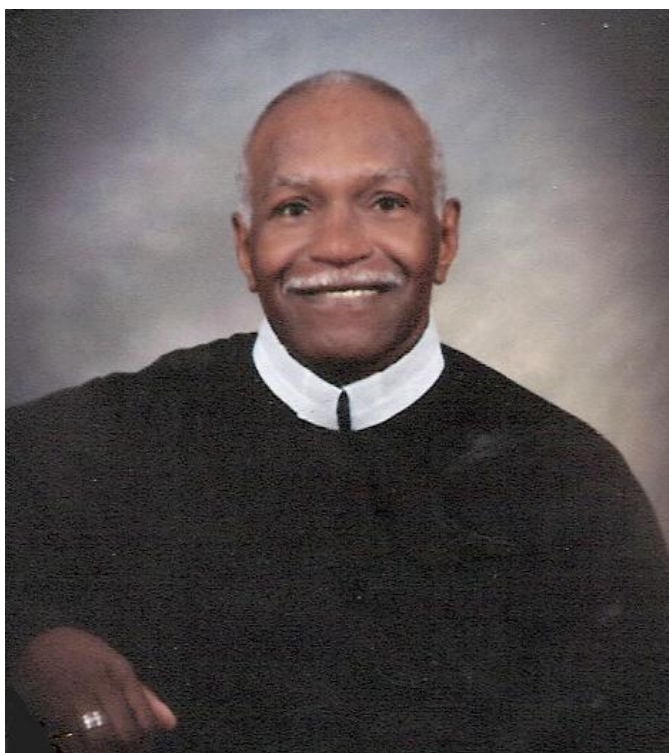
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# Brother Martin: Free at First and Free at Last

Even when he was just a seventeen-year-old youth, William Smith demonstrated an extraordinary carriage of confidence and, as he himself admits, expressed his first declaration of freedom: "I went to see Father Raymond Schantz and said, 'I have decided to become a brother.' I was accepted for the next entrance class but never told my parents until a week before I was to leave for Ephrata, PA. They didn't object. They supported my decision."

That was then. Now our Redemptorist brother, Martin de Porres Smith, has died peacefully in the Hospice Unit of Saint John Neumann Residence at Stella Maris in Timonium, Maryland. He was one month shy of his seventy-fourth birthday. And so he is free at last from the debilitating illness which succeeded in holding his body captive for many years, but never, even for one moment, managed to weary his blest spirit or dampen his joyful soul.

A viewing and wake service will be held from 6 to 7 PM on Wednesday, June 25, at the March Funeral Home in Richmond, VA. A Mass of the



***Brother Martin de Porres, C.Ss.R.  
(William Grant Joseph Smith)***

*Brother de Porres 1*

Resurrection will be concelebrated at 11:00 AM on Thursday, June 26, at the Holy Rosary Church followed by interment in Mt. Calvary Cemetery.

Brother Martin was born on July 17, 1940 in Richmond, Virginia. A convert to Catholicism, he professed his first vows as a Redemptorist on August 2, 1959 at the Novitiate in Ilchester, Maryland, made his final vows on August 2, 1963 also in Ilchester, and died on June 18, 2014.

Following his first profession, the nineteen-year-old religious brother continued to immerse himself fully into his community life—like so many Redemptorist brothers before him—by praying and working and then praying and working some more.

His ministry began as a “dairyman” at the major seminary in Esopus. This meant lugging dozens of ten-gallon containers, each weighing over eighty pounds, as they were delivered from the farm. In the secluded, subterranean structure which was an entire level beneath the kitchen basement, it was his task to water-chill the 102-degree fresh milk from the cows down to 50 degrees. This was work that had to be done twice each day, 365 days a year! And he did this dutifully for more than three years. Perhaps he was assisted in his perseverance by recalling how his patron, Saint Martin de Porres, the first black saint of the Americas, became affectionately known as “the Saint of the Broom” because he considered all work to be sacred, no matter how menial.

After completing his second novitiate—Marty was the first brother candidate to have Father Joseph Kenny as a Novice Master for *both* novitiates—the now finally professed Brother Martin worked in the kitchen at various Redemptorist formation houses from 1963 until 1972. Subsequently, however, his ministry took on an added, more penetrating dimension.

Here, for example, is a simple sequence of other locations where he was stationed: For 9 years he served at the Redemptorist parish of St. Mary’s in Buffalo, NY. Then he went to the Bronx for 3 years, followed by 2 years at St. James in Baltimore. He came back to NYC to help for 2 years at Most Holy Redeemer in Manhattan, only to return to Maryland, this time at St. Wenceslaus parish, for the next 11 years. In 1999 he was transferred briefly to the Vice-province of Richmond to assist at Holy Rosary parish in Jacksonville, Florida but quickly returned to the Province and to Saratoga Springs, NY due to ill health. Eventually he was moved to the St. John Neumann Residence in Timonium to perform the final “prayer ministry” of his life.

These geographic cities aside, the scope of Brother Martin’s apostolic endeavors broadened over the years (far beyond physical labors) to include educational tasks, social reforms, and vocation work.

In 1971 he was appointed Assistant Vocation Director for the Baltimore Province. He completed his BA degree in 1984 and went on to earn his first Master's degree in social work in 1988 from Loyola University in Chicago. The following year he became a member of the Advisory Council for the Archdiocese of Baltimore and worked in the Johns Hopkins University Community Outreach Program. In 1990 he was selected by the Redemptorist General Government in Rome as one of only 5 Brothers from the entire Congregation to attend the 1991 General Chapter. At this Chapter he represented all of the Brothers in North America. This was the same year he was awarded his second Master's degree, in Black Studies, from Xavier University in New Orleans. While he was teaching religious education at St. James School, the Archdiocese of Baltimore selected him as Campus Minister for Morgan State College in 1992. In 1996 Brother Martin was called upon to serve on the Provincial Secretariat for the Brothers and also to assist both the Secretariat for the Apostolate and the Sub-committee for Social Justice as well.

During his lifetime he held memberships in the Pan-African Roman Catholic Clergy Conference, the Religious Brothers National Institute, the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus and the Black Catholic Congress. He was instrumental in founding the Black Redemptorist Caucus. While stationed in Baltimore he worked through Catholic Charities as a Social Worker to enable "at-risk" children to succeed in school. On July 25, 2000 he received the *Brother Joseph Davis Lifetime Achievement Award* from the National Black Conference—an award which represents the highest honor that can be bestowed on its members.

When he was working at St. Wenceslaus in the late 1980s, Brother Martin was diagnosed with degenerative Multiple Sclerosis. Although such a devastating affliction might stop most people in their tracks, Marty managed to find ingenious ways around his encroaching disabilities and continued serving as long as he could. "Even when it was excruciating for him to walk," declares his confrere, Father Michael Sergi, "he still managed to drive a van to take some of our kids to school and transport our poor elderly parishioners to their doctors' appointments."

"We've been the best of friends for 45 years," says his vacation buddy and fellow Redemptorist, Brother David Skarda. "So I can tell you, and this is the absolute truth: Brother Martin suffered with MS for 23 years, and on top of that, about 12 years ago, he had to begin dialysis 3 times a week. But in all that time I never heard him complain, not even once. Instead he was always upbeat, always positive. When Father Glenn Parker asked me if I had heard that Martin died, I nodded. And then he added, 'Our Brother Martin is walking again, only now he is walking in Heaven.' But I shook my head and said, 'No, Glenn, he is not walking. He is dancing!' Not many people know this, but Brother Martin actually danced

when he was cooking at Suffield...especially when the Tina Turner song, ‘Proud Mary’ would come on the radio. She’d be rollin’ down the river and he’d be rockin’ ‘round the stove. And now he’s dancing again in heaven. I’m sure.”

Perhaps Brother Dee’s greatest gift was his ability to combine this playful exuberance with the pride of his heritage and the solemnity of the Lord’s message, and still put a smile on the faces of the people he served. Confrere and fellow missionary, Father Maurice Nutt testifies to this when he tells us, “Brother Martin de Porres Smith was a brother beloved who was faithful to his Redemptorist vocation and embraced and shared his African American culture and spirituality in an authentic way. He brought joy and a hearty laugh to all who knew him. He will be greatly missed.”

“He was a delightful confrere,” attests a former rector, Father James Geiger. “He worked very hard at whatever task that came his way both for our CSSR community and for the faith community... He was very supportive during difficult times. He had a wonderful laugh, was fast with a quip, and took being a Redemptorist and living the vows very seriously. He had such talent: music, cooking, and far too many other gifts to even mention. He was devoted to prayer and to Our Mother of Perpetual Help...oh, and to his cat! The parishioners and confreres liked him very much.”

This last sentiment was echoed in a letter to the Provincial from a former principal at St. James & John school in Baltimore, Ms. LaUanah King, who wrote, “...It has been my pleasure to work with Brother Martin Smith and to witness his devotion to the students... We have felt his concern expressed in his willingness to prepare our students for Mass, his helpfulness in coordinating religious activities and his dedication to the inner city... His thoughtfulness and commitment to the students is something we will cherish forever.”

In a profile article, focusing exclusively on Brother Martin de Porres, which appeared in the February, 1990 issue of the *Liguorian Magazine*, Marty himself is quoted as saying:

*“Over the years, my different ministries—parish ministry, hospital ministry, homeless ministry, catechetical ministry, recovering alcoholics ministry, teen ministry, social work and even music ministry—have all given me a greater insight into life, suffering, poverty, richness, sickness, and abandonment. They have helped me to grow in all the aspects of my life as a religious and as a Christian.”*

And when he was asked, “What was the most important part of being a Redemptorist?” he answered:

*“Belonging to a community. Community means a great deal to me.*

*I feel my Redemptorist Brotherhood is a precious gift from God and a call I have answered and continue to answer each day to the best of my ability – to ‘brother’ those I live with, and also the brothers and sisters I meet each day.”*

Confined to a wheelchair during the latter years of his life—as was his founding father, St. Alphonsus Liguori—we might assume that Marty Dee devoted many of his private meditations to recalling his own struggles in advocating for equality and social justice for the poor and most abandoned. Surely the following story of his religious namesake must have brought him consolation and comfort as he reflected on his own efforts and ministry for Black Catholics, disadvantaged children and the unjustly oppressed wherever he met and served them.

*St. Martin de Porres was once admonished by his Dominican brothers for bringing an elderly, dirty beggar off the streets and allowing him to take the saint’s own bed while he cared for the sick man. In response to their rebuke, St. Martin said: “Compassion, my dear Brothers, is preferable to cleanliness. With a little soap I can easily clean my bed covers, but even with a torrent of tears I would never wash from my soul the stain that my harshness toward the unfortunate would create.”*

St. Martin de Porres, pray for us.