Meet Venerable Pierre Toussaint • Saints for kids

LIVED: Pierre was born into slavery on June 27, 1766, in Haiti. His master brought him to New York City in 1787, shortly after the Revolutionary War ended. He died there on June 30, 1853, at the age of 84.

MISSION: Even when he became a well-to-do free man, Toussaint continued working in order to support those in need: “I have never felt I am a slave to any man or woman, but I am a servant of the Almighty God who made us all. When one of His children is in need, I am glad to be His slave.”

STORY: After his master moved his family from Haiti to New York City, he encouraged Pierre to apprentice to a hair stylist. Toussaint did, and soon became one of the most popular hair stylists among the city’s most wealthy and fashionable women. They liked him because of his talent, and the special touches he brought to his work, like secretly incorporating fresh flowers into their hair as a surprise. (They didn’t have large mirrors to watch him work!) But they also liked him because he was a kind and holy man. He never missed morning Mass, and had a gentle and peaceful bearing. He listened to their worries and troubles, gave good advice, and never gossipped. And as one of his friends later said, he knew that despite being a slave, nothing could take away his God-given dignity.

Toussaint was allowed to keep some of the money he earned, and he saved it up to purchase the freedom of his sister, who was also a slave. Before he could reach this goal, however, his master died, leaving his wife deep in debt. Toussaint voluntarily used his savings to pay her debts and to support her household. In gratitude, she set him free after her death. Now Toussaint bought his sister’s freedom, along with that of

his wife, Juliette.

They made a happy family, and devoted themselves to caring for others in need. They opened their home to black orphans, paying for their education and helping them find their first job. They opened another home for priests and poor travelers, and began a credit union to give loans to poor black people. He raised money to build a Catholic church, plus the city's first Catholic school for black children. Toussaint also crossed barricades to visit victims of a cholera epidemic, at great risk to himself.

Toussaint and Juliette even helped their rich white friends. Once, an elderly gentleman lost everything. Knowing he would be too proud to accept help from a black couple, they prepared his favorite foods and left them on the porch in secret. When they visited him later, he boasted of the generosity of his white friends, who surely had hired an expensive French cook to prepare such delicious meals for him. Toussaint and Juliette just nodded and went along with the idea—until they got home, where they burst into joyous laughter. M:C

Learn more

Memoir of Pierre Toussaint, born a slave in St. Domingo by Lee, Hannah Farnham Sawyer
This contemporary biography contains many interesting stories from those who knew him, as well as Toussaint himself. Written in 1854 in a simple, straight-forward style, the stories are probably best re-told by a parent in a more modern style. Be aware that the biography is also unsullied by modern sensibilities about race and slavery.

Pierre Toussaint at Wikipedia

Introduce your kids to Pierre Toussaint with this short (2 minute) video: