

Saint Businessman

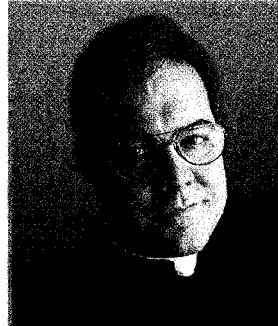
WHAT DO YOU THINK OF WHEN YOU PICTURE a "saint"? Someone like Francis of Assisi, perhaps, who gave up his worldly goods. Or a Mother Teresa, making her life's work the rescue of India's outcasts. One type that does not come to mind is an entrepreneur. But think about this for a moment: Is there any law that says a saint cannot hold a regular job, excel in marketable skills or build a business?

We forget that the apostles in the New Testament were fishermen first, who learned about hard work and diligence in a market setting. We forget, too, that for many centuries, and even today, monks have had to market goods like wool and honey to the outside world to support their lives of prayer, reflection and contemplation.

Thus I see nothing strange in hoping for the eventual canonization of a New York hairdresser, a man named Pierre Toussaint. He overcame incredible odds to become one of America's first rich, black professionals. In his life we see capitalistic achievement and personal piety coexisting. Pope John Paul II has already declared Toussaint "venerable," the first step in the process of recognizing a saint.

Born into slavery on a sugar plantation in Haiti in 1766, Toussaint was brought to New York by the son of his owner in 1787 to escape the bloodshed of the Haitian slave revolts. Upon arrival, he began an apprenticeship with a hairdresser. Toussaint was so good at his work that clients were soon asking for his services.

Toussaint attended daily Mass, and was known for his piety, honesty, charity and integrity. People said he radiated a serene and joyful faith. After his owner died, Toussaint earned enough money to provide the widow, Marie Bérard, with the New York socialite's lifestyle to which she had become accustomed. Toussaint paid the bills and issued the invitations to her parties. Freed when Mrs. Bérard died, Toussaint became a wealthy benefactor to Catholic charities in New York. He and Juliette Noel, the woman he married when he was 45, took in homeless immigrants



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and other unfortunate people to live with them.

Toussaint paid for the reconstruction of St. Peter's church after it burned and helped raise money for the construction of the old St. Patrick's Cathedral in lower Manhattan. None of this protected him from being turned away from the cathedral one day in 1836 by an usher who

didn't like the color of his face. A scandalized trustee of the church heard about the insult, rebuked the usher and apologized to Toussaint. When Toussaint died on June 30, 1853, the New York press devoted numerous respectful obituaries to him.

John Cardinal O'Connor, Archbishop of New York, who is a backer of Toussaint's canonization, had his remains moved from the cemetery of old St. Patrick's into the crypt below the main altar of the Fifth Avenue St. Patrick's. No layman has ever been similarly honored.

What a magnificent example Pierre Toussaint is for us all. And yet he is not usually listed in the pantheon of great Americans. Is it because he doesn't fit into either stereotype? Neither the saint in sackcloth nor the profiteering businessman?

I don't know the answer, but there's truth to the complaint I hear from businessmen that the practical virtues are not celebrated enough in contemporary religious culture. Have you heard it said that "money is the root of all evil"? This is a misquote. I Timothy 6:10 says something very different: "The *love* of money is the root of all evil." Money is not evil; it feeds and clothes us and it makes possible charity for the poor. It is the worshiping of money that is evil.

Norman Darden is a black New York entrepreneur of humble beginnings who has built a business of floor care services. Darden is writing a biography of Toussaint. He says Toussaint's example inspired him to persevere in both his faith and his business. That, in a nutshell, is why I am hoping for the canonization of Pierre Toussaint. It would remind people that capitalism and Christianity are not incompatible. Venerable Pierre Toussaint is dramatic proof that doing business and doing good are not at all mutually exclusive. **F**

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