

# Pierre Toussaint of New York

*Slave and Freedman:*



An Illustrated Study of Lay Spirituality in Times of  
Social and Religious Change

by Bishop Norbert Dorsey, CP

*Foreword by Fr. Victor Hoagland, CP*

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Passionist Congregation

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To visit the web site and read the full account of this extraordinary man's life, visit:  
<http://www.orlandodiocese.org>

Victor Hoagland, CP  
Lynn Ballas  
November, 2014

## Foreword

Some years before Bishop Norbert Dorsey, CP died in 2013, I mentioned to him that I appreciated the doctoral thesis he wrote at the Gregorian University in Rome on Pierre Toussaint and thought it should be published so that more could know this remarkable man who came as a slave from Haiti to New York City shortly after the end of America's Revolutionary War.

He told me to do what I could with it, and now it's available as an eBook, thanks principally to Lynn Ballas, who so competently and generously edited and formatted the bishop's work.

Toussaint deserves to be known. As a black man and a slave, he was part of New York City's population that went for years unnoticed and unrecognized. As a Catholic, he belonged to a church that was a suspect minority in New York City after the American Revolution.

Women belonging to New York City's Protestant establishment were the first to bring Toussaint's simple, delicate goodness to public attention. They noticed holiness in the hairdresser who had become a vital part of their lives and suggested to his church that there was a saint in their midst.

Toussaint's remains lie today in the crypt under the main altar of New York City's St. Patrick's Cathedral, an honored member of his church. It usually takes time before someone is canonized by the Catholic Church, but one requirement is that people be inspired by the witness of his or her holiness and drawn to become holy themselves.

As you read this book about Pierre Toussaint may his holy life inspire you and draw you to God who blessed this faithful man.

Fr. Victor Hoagland, CP  
November 11, 2014

## Chapter 1: The Life of Pierre Toussaint

The theologian Monika Hellwig gives a sense of the scope involved in the call to holiness and in the living-out of a spirituality in these few words: “Spirituality is the God-ward focus in a human life.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus, to study that “God-ward focus” as it was manifested in the human life of Pierre Toussaint, and to understand the shaping of his beliefs, priorities, and life-style, the first step is to know the details of his life. For Christian spirituality has very pronounced incarnational aspects. Consequently, the story of a person’s birth and education, of friends and work, of hardships, happiness and death, and all the other circumstances “from which the very web of their existence is woven,”<sup>2</sup> forms the context of growth in Christian holiness. Indeed, it is in that context, and in cooperation with the Holy Spirit working in the Church and in individuals, that God calls men and women to holiness and to live “as becomes saints.”<sup>3</sup>

Where, then, are the sources for the details of the human life of Pierre Toussaint, for his story?

### A. The Historical Sources of Pierre Toussaint’s Story

Right at the beginning there are some problems to be faced concerning the story of Pierre’s life. Precise information and dating for his early years is especially hard to come by. Most of the documentation one might seek was lost in the civil upheavals, fires and

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<sup>1</sup> Monika J. Hellwig, unpubl. MS, “Theology and Spirituality: A Crucial Relationship,” lecture delivered at the “Spiritualities for the 80’s” Convocation, Huntington, NY, June 23, 1980. Used with the kind permission of Dr. Hellwig.

<sup>2</sup> LG 31. This translation and all others of the texts of Vatican Council II used in this study are taken from: Walter M. Abbott, Gen. ed. and Joseph Gallagher, Trans. ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press/America Press/Association Press 1966), using the abbreviations for the Latin titles or opening words of the individual documents, and the paragraph or sectional enumerations of the original Latin texts.

<sup>3</sup> Eph 5:3; see also: Mt 5:48; 1 Th 4:3.

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earthquakes that befell San Domingo (or Haiti, as it is now called)<sup>4</sup> in the years following his birth and youth.<sup>5</sup> It takes a bit of detective work to put some of the pieces together. There are two primary sources and four secondary ones to assist the search concerning Pierre's life. It will be helpful to identify those sources more carefully and to comment on them, as they will be referred to frequently in the pages that follow. They are essential to acknowledge of Pierre, his life and spirit.

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### 1. The Primary Sources

There are two primary sources for a study of the life and personality of Pierre Toussaint: letters written by him, and his own Last Will and Testament, together with its Codicil.

#### a. Letters written by Toussaint himself

The few extant *letters* written by Pierre are conserved as part of the larger "Pierre Toussaint Papers" collection in the New York Public Library.<sup>6</sup> There are four such letters.<sup>7</sup> But since each of them treat of household details or express general greetings and affection, they are not of particular pertinence to this study. There is also one *document* written by Pierre, an agreement concerning the renting of a room in his house.<sup>8</sup> It must be noted, however, that there is an uneasy feeling that other letters written by Pierre have either been taken from the collection by souvenir hunters or otherwise lost. They are not in it at present.

For instance, at some point over the years a rather imperfect effort was made to catalogue all the letters in the collection.<sup>9</sup> In the listings made as part of that process, there are cited

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<sup>4</sup> For consistency, the present-day name of that country will henceforth be used in this study, except where the former name is used by others in quotations or references.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps that is why so many of the listings in Michel S. Laguerre's, *The Complete Haitiana: A Bibliographic Guide to the Scholarly Literature 1900-1980*, 2 vols. (Millwood, NY/London/Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus International Publications 1982) are from or dependent upon sources in France. See, e.g., sections on the history of Haiti and its culture: 177-368, 627-722 *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Acknowledgement is made of the kind permission granted by the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations to use and quote material from this collection. Henceforth in this study, foot note references to the Pierre Toussaint Papers will be designated as *PTP*.

<sup>7</sup> *PTP*, Pierre Toussaint to "Madame" (unknown), Sept. 9, 1807; Pierre Toussaint to William Schuyler, Nov. 3, 1823; Pierre Toussaint to Juliette Toussaint, July 5, 1833; and, Pierre Toussaint to Mary Ann (Mrs. Philip) Schuyler, Feb. 15, 1823. In future footnotes concerning correspondence: references to Pierre Toussaint will be abbreviated to *PT*, except for letters between members of the immediate Toussaint family such as "Euphemia to Pierre."

<sup>8</sup> *PTP*, Agreement between PT and G.S. Nexsen for the renting of a room for one year, Jan. 18, 1822.

<sup>9</sup> *PTP*, see occasional notes and listings, such as: "Box 2, Folder - 1837."

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two other letters of Pierre in July, 1833,<sup>10</sup> besides the one to his wife Juliette already noted above. A fragment of a letter quoted by the first biographer of Toussaint could easily be one of those two letters.<sup>11</sup> From comparison with other letters, it is obvious that they were written when Juliette was visiting her Noel cousins and Fanny Montpensier in Baltimore.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, in the 1955 biography of Toussaint by Arthur and Elizabeth Odell Sheehan, there are partial quotes from letters of Pierre to his sister, Marie-Louise Pacard, and to his aunt, Marie Bouquement.<sup>13</sup> Since the authors of those works are otherwise most faithful in their citations, it is reasonable to presume that such letters were in the collection when they did their research.

Furthermore, it would seem that those letters were written by Pierre Toussaint. This judgement comes from the internal evidence of the topics and places discussed in the letters, the addresses of the correspondents, a comparison with similar letters to the same persons around the same time, and, lastly, the fact that the biographers Lee and Sheehan, as well as the unknown cataloguer, were scrupulously precise in all their other citations from the Pierre Toussaint Papers. This means that there are three more fragments of letters written by Toussaint that are not presently found in the New York collection: one each to Marie Bouquement, probably summer, 1803; to Marie-Louise Pacaud, Pierre's sister, May 28, 1807; and to his wife Juliette, probably July, 1833.

### **b. Last Will and Testament, and Codicil**

Another prime source for understanding the story of Pierre Toussaint is his Last Will and Testament. It was written and notarized on September 15, 1842. A lengthy Codicil was added on December 3, 1852, since his wife and other beneficiaries had died in the interim.<sup>14</sup> Although not providing much information concerning Toussaint's early life, it is a rich source of evidence about his love and concern for relatives and friends and, more importantly, the longest document wherein he shares something of his relationship to God and to the Church.

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<sup>10</sup> *PTP*, Listing, Box 1, 1833 Folder: "July 8, 1833, New York, Pierre Toussaint...July 17, 1833, New York, Pierre Toussaint."

<sup>11</sup> Hanna Sawyer Lee, *Memoir of Pierre Toussaint, Born a Slave in St. Domingo*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Company 1854) 100-101.

<sup>12</sup> *PTP*, Fanny Montpensier to Juliette Toussaint, Philadelphia, June 25, 1833; Fanny Montpensier to Juliette Toussaint, Baltimore, June 30, 1833; Fanny Montpensier to PT, Baltimore, July 17, 1833.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur and Elizabeth Odell Sheehan, *Pierre Toussaint: A Citizen of Old New York* (New York: P.J. Kenedy 1955) 93,77; for confirmation and comparison, see: *PTP*, "Bonte" (Mrs. G. Nicholas, nee Bérard) to Marie Bouquement, n.d.; Marie Louise (Pacaud) to PT, New Orleans, April 30, 1810.

<sup>14</sup> County of New York, *Surrogate's Court*, Liber 106, 520-30, probated Aug. 2, 1853. Hereinafter this source will be footnoted as: PT, *Last Will and Testament*.

### 2. The Secondary Sources

There are four secondary sources to a study of the life of Pierre Toussaint: a biography or memoir published one year after his death, the numerous other letters and documents found in the Pierre Toussaint Papers, an article written by Emma F. Cary, and another article written by Henry Binsse.

#### a. The Biography or “Memoir” of 1854

Of all the biographies, articles and pamphlets that have been written about Pierre Toussaint, this study will rely most heavily on the earliest biography, a *Memoir of Pierre Toussaint, Born a Slave in St. Domingo*, by Hannah Sawyer Lee.<sup>15</sup> This work has unique advantages in that it:

- Was published the year after Pierre’s death, and thus was open to contradiction or comment if facts or even attitudes had been distorted, and there is no record of such;
- Was written by woman who knew Pierre personally and whose sister, Mrs. Philip J. (Mary Ann) Schuyler (+1852), was one of his closest friends;
- Contains direct quotations and reflections of Pierre;
- Was actually being prepared even before Pierre’s death, since the authoress acknowledges her sister thusly: “Mrs. Philip J. Schuyler...To her notes the author of this memorial is principally indebted;”<sup>16</sup>
- Is objectively ecumenical in the sense that the author, being a non-Catholic, witnesses to the outstanding Christian goodness and spirituality of Toussaint, without any implicit or explicit calls to consider him for “the honors of the altar;” and,
- Contains a valuable Appendix of three obituary notices and reflections that were published in different New York City newspapers in the days following Pierre’s death.<sup>17</sup>

#### b. The Pierre Toussaint Papers

When Toussaint died in 1853 the executors of his estate found various papers, documents and letters that had been kept over the years. Carefully preserved from then on by the Schuyler family, they all were finally given over to the New York Public Library in 1903 by Georgina Schuyler.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hannah Sawyer Lee, *Memoir of Pierre Toussaint, Born a Slave in St. Domingo*, 2nd. ed. (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Company 1854) pp. 124. Henceforth, this first biography, because of repeated references, will be simply footnoted as *Memoir*.

<sup>16</sup> *Memoir* 24, note. There is still another acknowledgement; see, *Memoir* 111: “...the sweet and noble lady to whose notes we are indebted.”

<sup>17</sup> *Memoir* 117-24.

<sup>18</sup> *PTP*, Georgina Schuyler to Dr. Billings, New York Public Library March 23, 1903.

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The documents in this collection are such things as declarations of freedom for slaves, records of business transactions, and church notices. More brief notes record the tallies of charity collections, receipts for pew rent, requests for favors, and so on.

There are also approximately eleven hundred letters in the collection, besides the few written by Pierre. Thus, the vast majority are letters written by others to Pierre or to his wife, Juliette. Of the at least one hundred and forty-five different correspondents, a high proportion were friends of long-standing such as Aurora Bérard, John and Caroline Sourbieu, members of the Schuyler family, Constantin Boyer, and Fanny Montpensier. While the letters date from 1802 to 1852, a fairly small number contain no date or are unsigned. Others are simply fragments or illegible. Consequently, it is difficult to make a precise tally.

Amid the Pierre Toussaint Papers is a quite distinct collection of mini letters within the larger collection. These are some four hundred or more letters written to Pierre by his adopted niece, Euphemia Toussaint. Usually written every Friday, and separately in English and in French, it is obvious that these “letters” were exercises to check progress in literary composition. They began when Euphemia was about eight years old and continued until her death six years later in 1829. Full of the sundry comments of a growing young girl, the value of these particular messages is that they bring today's readers right into the Toussaint home.

Evidently it was Pierre's own custom to write only in response.<sup>19</sup> But the value of all the letters from friends and acquaintances is in what they reflect of Toussaint's personality, circumstances and concerns, and religious attitudes.<sup>20</sup>

### c. The Article by Emma F. Cary

Any efforts to reconstruct the story and style of Pierre Toussaint are also enriched by a article published in “The Ave Maria” magazine.<sup>21</sup> It was written fifty years after his death by Emma F. Cary. As a young Protestant girl, she had known Pierre personally and later became a convert to Catholicism. Although Cary acknowledged a debt to the Lee

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<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., *PTP* Rosine Castor to PT, Havana, Jan. 16, 1834; George I. Paddington to PT, Pétionville, Nov. 28, 1837; B.D. Villegrand to PT, Botetown Spring, Oct. 30, 1839; Raymond Meetz to PT, Paris, Feb. 13, 1838.

<sup>20</sup> In 1970 all the papers in the PTP were microfilmed by the Archdiocese of New York and then transcribed by Sr. Marguerite Archambault, C.N.D. About one half of all this material was written in French. The translations used in this study were made by the present author, except for those already made in the Lee and Sheehan biographies and whose accuracy has been thoroughly checked. In the few cases where there might be doubt, the original French is also provided. Grateful acknowledgement is given to the officials of the Archdiocese of New York for the use of that transcribed documentation.

<sup>21</sup> Emma F. Cary “The Story of Pierre Toussaint,” *The Ave Maria* (Notre Dame, IN) 37 (1983) 546-49, 573-76.

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*Memoir*; her article offers judicious reflections and quotations from others who had also known Toussaint.

### **d. The Article by Henry Binsse**

Henry Binsse of New York City wrote an article on Pierre Toussaint that merits special attention because it is a later witness to the on-going tradition of veneration and affection for Pierre in the Binsse and LaFarge families.<sup>22</sup>

Binsse's grandfather had abandoned his plantation in Haiti and emigrated to New York in the 1790s. There he married Victoire Bancel de Confoulens, a French refugee whose family had been members of the royal guard of Louis XVI. The Binsse family ran a school and employed Pierre to cut the children's hair. Their daughter Louisa married a Jean Frédéric de la Farge. That man had been in the French forces trying to re-capture Haiti with General LeClerc, spent three years in captivity under the Emperor Christophe, and escaped to New York. Louisa's brother, Louis F. Binsse, later wrote a letter of apology to Toussaint on behalf of the Trustees of St. Patrick's Cathedral. In the next generation, a cousin, the prominent New York Jesuit, Fr. John LaFarge, served for many years as chaplain of the Catholic Interracial Council and the Pierre Toussaint League.

Thus the Binsse and LaFarge families knew Pierre for the greater part of his time in New York, and the article of Henry Binsse is a strong affirmation of that relationship.

Having thus concluded the listing of the primary and secondary sources for a study of the life of Pierre, it might also be appropriate here to identify two popular versions of his life. They are: *Pierre Toussaint, A Citizen of Old New York*, by Arthur and Elizabeth Odell Sheehan,<sup>23</sup> and, *The Other Toussaint: A Modern Biography of Pierre Toussaint, A Post Revolutionary Black*, by Ellen Tarry.<sup>24</sup> While following the general outline of Toussaint's life, each of these books is somewhat fictionalized and both would have been based on Lee's *Memoir*.

## **B. Outline of Significant Dates and Events in the Life of Pierre Toussaint and His Society**

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<sup>22</sup> Henry Binsse, "A Catholic Uncle Tom, Pierre Toussaint," *Historical Record Studies* 12 (1918) 90-101.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur and Elizabeth Odell Sheehan, *Pierre Toussaint: A Citizen of Old New York* (New York: P.J. Kenedy 1955). Henceforth this volume will be referred to as: Sheehan, *Pierre Toussaint*. This book was also published in England as *Black Pearl, the Hair-Dresser from Haiti* (London: Harvil Press 1956) and translated into Dutch as *De Vrome Kapper van Broadway* (Utrecht: Het Spectrum 1956).

<sup>24</sup> Ellen Tarry, *The Other Toussaint: A Modern Biography of Pierre Toussaint, a Post-Revolutionary Black* (Boston: St. Paul Editions 1981).



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Over one hundred and thirty years after the death of Pierre Toussaint, research into the events of his life and times is necessarily dependent upon historical sources. The following outline, composed from the sources already described and other works, merely provides a frame to help integrate some facets of those events. The most complete and reliable source for the life of Toussaint remains the Lee *Memoir*.

1766 - Pierre Toussaint was born as a slave in the country now known as Haiti and on a plantation belonging to the Bérard family.<sup>25</sup> Although near the city of St. Marc, the plantation was called L'Artibonite after the more eastward valley and river of the same name.

1786 November 4 - Dedication of St. Peter's church, the first Catholic parish in New York. From the very beginning the parish was plagued with difficulties from the lay trustees and personality differences among the clergy. This parish was to serve as the center of Pierre's church activities until his death.

1787 - Evidently sensing the future political upheavals, Jean Jacques Bérard made what was intended to be a temporary move to New York City, bringing with him his wife, two of her sisters, and five slaves. Among the latter were Pierre, then about twenty-one years old, his sister and an aunt.

1787 Formation of the Abolitionist movement in England, to be followed one year later by a similar one, *Les Amis des Noirs*, in France.

1787-88 - At the direction of his master, Mr. Bérard, and probably simply to have an in-house coiffeur for the elaborate hair styles of the day for the three white women, Pierre was apprenticed to learn the hair-dressing trade.

1789, April 30 - Not far from the Bérard residence, George Washington was inaugurated in New York City as the first President of the United States of America.

1789, September - The people in present-day Haiti learned of the fall of the Bastille in Paris on July 14th, further agitating the tensions between the white landowners, the mulattoes and the slaves, and naturally involving the future of the Bérard and Toussaint families.

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<sup>25</sup> One could be tempted to assign June 27th as Pierre's birthday, since his niece once wrote: "I wish you happy birthday and many happy returns" (*PTP*, Euphemia to Pierre, June 27, 1825). But neither the *Memoir* nor the Sheehan biography gives such a date. Possibly having discovered the Euphemia letter, ten years later Sheehan did write: "Pierre Toussaint was born in slavery on June 27, 1766 in Haiti" (Arthur T. Sheehan, "Pierre Toussaint," *Our Colored Missions*, May 1965, reprinted, c.d., by the Pierre Toussaint Guild, p. 2). Euphemia usually wrote her letters on Friday, but if they were actually presented to Pierre on Saturday the attempt at accuracy is voided in this instance. It seems better to leave the question unresolved.

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1789 - Jean Jacques Bérard, having returned to Haiti to assess the condition of his properties and the political climate, fell ill with pleurisy and died. The money he had invested in New York for the upkeep of his wife, sisters-in-law and slaves was lost through mismanagement. Pierre, the only man in the household, assumed the task of supporting his mistress and the rest.

1789, November 6 - The hierarchy of the Catholic Church in the United States was established by Pope Pius VII with the naming of John Carroll as bishop of Baltimore.

1790, October 21 - Ogé arrived back in Haiti from France to organize and lead a mulatto revolt, which resulted in failure and his own torture and death.

1791, August 22 - Another slave revolt in the northern part of the country, planned on a large scale by an escaped slave named Boukman, was detected at the last minute with brutal consequences; but the fire of revolution had been ignited.

1791, September/October - Toussaint Bréda, aged forty-five and later to be called “Louverture,” having protected his masters and their plantation for over a month, finally saw them to safety and then joined the slave revolution that he would eventually lead.<sup>26</sup>

1793, June - Torn between disagreeing French emissaries, hosts of new troops, and contention between the whites and mulattoes, the slaves swept into Le Cap François and two-thirds of the city was burnt in the ensuing destruction. Thousands of people, mostly white but not only such, sailed for refuge to the other Caribbean islands or the United States.

1794, February 4 - France decreed emancipation of all slaves, with consequent upheaval in Haiti.

1801, May 9 - Toussaint Louverture proclaimed a new constitution in San Domingue and became Governor General.

1802, February 2 - General Leclerc, Napoleon’s brother-in-law, arrived at the harbor of Le Cap with a formidable fleet and army to reclaim the colony for France, remove Toussaint and the black Generals, and restore slavery, but another burning of the city a few days later signaled the renewal of a war for independence.

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<sup>26</sup> Among the many biographies of Toussaint Louverture, see: C.L.R. James, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage/Random House 1963) 90-95, 143-62, 246-0; Ronald Syme, *Toussaint: The Black Liberator* (New York: William Morrow and Company 1971), 86-173. A particularly interesting aspect of Louverture is provided in: Francis S. Moseley, “The Catholicism of Toussaint L’Ouverture,” *Interracial Review* 10 (1937) 150-53.

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1803, April 7 - Toussaint Louverture, having been forced into exile, died in a French prison.

1803, November 18 - An armistice was signed between the French and the black leaders in San Domingue, and the remaining French troops evacuated.

1804, January 1 - Dessalines, successor to Toussaint Louverture, officially declared the independence of San Domingue, re-naming it Haiti.

1807, July 2 - Pierre Toussaint was declared “free of all servitude” in a document signed by his dying mistress and notarized by the chancellor of the French Commissariat in New York.

1811, May 2 - Pierre purchased the freedom of his sister Rosalie, and she married Jean Noel in St. Peter's church on May 27.

1811, August 5 - Pierre Toussaint married Mary Rose Juliette in St. Peter's church, with Fr. Anthony J. Kohlman, S.J. officiating.<sup>27</sup>

1812, June 18 - The United States declared war against Britain for “free trade and sailor's rights” and, although New York City was not to be one of the three major campaign areas, it prepared for invasion and blockade.

1812, August - death of Marie Bouquement, aunt of Pierre.

1815, May 4 - Dedication of the first St. Patrick's cathedral in New York City by Bishop Cheverus of Boston. This was only the second Catholic church in the city.

1815, early summer - In dressing the hair of a French woman tourist Pierre unexpectedly learned that she knew the Bérard family and their whereabouts. Aurora Bérard, Pierre's godmother, then wrote him from Paris on Nov. 27, beginning a correspondence that would last for almost twenty years.

1815, September 16 - A baby girl was born to Rosalie, Pierre's sister, whose husband had abandoned her. Pierre named the infant Euphemia, after the saint of the day.

1816 - Death of Rosalie Noel, Pierre's sister. Pierre and his wife formally adopted the infant Euphemia.

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<sup>27</sup> Grateful acknowledgement is made of the copy of the Marriage Register, notarized and sealed by the present Pastor of St. Patrick's, Rev. Robert M. O'Connell, April 8, 1985, and personally presented to this writer by Cardinal Terence Cooke of New York.

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1817, June - Three Sisters of Charity arrived in New York from Emmitsburg, Maryland, to open an orphan asylum near St. Patrick's cathedral. For many years Pierre would collect donations for this charity.

1829, May 11 - Death of Euphemia Toussaint, the adopted niece of Pierre and Juliette, at age fourteen.

1829 - Foundation of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore. The first members were also refugees from Saint Domingue, and Pierre and Juliette, as well as their friend Fanny Montpensier, assisted the community in its early years.

1834, May - Death in Paris of Aurora Bérard, Pierre's godmother.

1835, December 16 - As a result of the great fire that destroyed a great part of the New York business district, Pierre lost most of his savings.

1836, August 28 - Mass was celebrated for the last time in the old St. Peter's church, as it had been declared structurally unsafe. The new church would re-open in the same place on Feb. 25, 1838.

1841, February 21 - While preaching a mission in St. Peter's church, Bishop Forbin-Janson of Nancy, France encouraged the establishment of a French-speaking parish. Pierre made the first contribution of one hundred dollars for the new St. Vincent de Paul parish.

1842, May 7 - A disastrous earthquake hit Haiti, destroying most of the cities and killing thousands. Pierre and Juliette realized that relatives and friends would have been in danger and joined with others in offering prayers and seeking information.

1842, August 24 - Louis F. Binsse wrote to Pierre on behalf of the trustees of St. Patrick's cathedral to apologize for an insult that had been made to him and Juliette by one of the ushers.

1846, May - September - The first Catholic school for black boys and girls was opened in the basement of St. Vincent de Paul church.

1850, July 19 - Pope Pius IX raised New York to the rank of an archdiocese.

1851, May 14 - Death of Pierre's wife, Juliette.

1852 - Death of Mrs. Philip J. Schuyler (Mary Ann Sawyer), one of Pierre's closest friends.

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1853, June 30 - Death of Pierre Toussaint, followed by his funeral two days later in St. Peter's church and burial in the parish cemetery.

### C. Three Families, Their Relationships and Influence

In the eighty-seven years of the life of Pierre Toussaint, there were three families that had an especially constant and important influence. Each contributed to forming the “web” that wove his human and Christian experience. Amid so many friends and acquaintances, consequently, a study of his spirituality would be deficient if it did not include attention to these people. These families are: the Toussaints, Pierre's own family; the Bérards of Haiti and Paris, the owners of the L'Artibonite plantation and the slave-masters of the Toussaints; and, the Philip J. Schuyler family of New York City.

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#### 1. The Toussaint Family

It is interesting to note that mostly female names appear in correspondence or in the research of Pierre's family. Perhaps this was because the women were the letter writers, while most of the male slaves were assigned to manual labor and were illiterate. At any rate, the family tree, according to the documentation available, definitely shows more information concerning the feminine members of the L'Artibonite Toussaints.

If there was an outstanding person and influence in Pierre's early life it may well have been his grandmother, Zénobe Julien.<sup>28</sup> Either she was atypical of slave women or she at least serves to shatter a few of the preconceptions about the influence and education some of them had. From personal attendant to the mistress and wet-nurse to the children of the Bérard family, she seems to have gone on to a role as manageress for the house and plantation.

Although the two letters remaining are poor and almost illegible,<sup>29</sup> possibly due to her age when they were written.

Zénobe could read and write. She crossed the Atlantic six times between Haiti and France: twice as the trusted and loving bonds-woman to escort the younger Bérard children and see them safely settled in Parisian boarding schools, and once to accompany the senior Bérards when they went into retirement. Although Zénobe had been given her freedom, she voluntarily came back to the plantation in Saint Marc to serve under the eldest son, Jean Jacques Bérard, after he had become the master.

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<sup>28</sup> *Memoir* 2-5.

<sup>29</sup> *PTP*, Zénobe to PT, Artibonite, 25; Zénobe to PT, St. Marc, Jan. 28, 18??.

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Zénobe Julien's daughter, Ursule, had grown up to be trained as the "femme de chambre" of Madame Bérard. Having married a Mr. Toussaint, Ursule was the mother of Pierre.<sup>30</sup> Besides his parents, of the other immediate family members of Pierre Toussaint, notes are only found for an older sister, Marie-Louise Pacard;<sup>31</sup> for the younger sister who accompanied him to New York, Rosalie;<sup>32</sup> a brother, Guillaume;<sup>33</sup> and an aunt, Marie Bouquement,<sup>34</sup> who also came to New York.

Whether by choice or necessity, some of the Toussaints who were in San Domingue at the time of the revolution, left the island, while Pierre's grandmother and mother evidently stayed behind. Marie-Louise and her husband were in Cuba and New Orleans; Marie-Louise's son, Anthony, went to Portugal; the brother, Guillaume, was heard of at La Trinité near Santiago in Cuba.<sup>35</sup> When and if they returned, and what happened to the rest of the relatives, is not found in any documentation. The aunt, Marie Bouquement, returned to the island with the two sisters of Mrs. Bérard, who had granted her her freedom. When they died, she spent some time searching for her daughter and other relatives, but eventually returned to live with Pierre and the others in New York.

The Toussaints of New York struggled on. As already noted, Pierre's sister married as a free woman, but died in 1815 a few months after having given birth to a daughter Euphemia. Pierre himself had married Juliette Gaston in 1811, and they adopted their infant niece.<sup>36</sup> The child was weak and sickly in early years, but seemed to grow stronger through the care of Juliette and Pierre. As the *Memoir* assures:

How devotedly he loved his little niece, many will yet remember. She seemed fully to understand his affection, and clung to him as the vine clings to its support. She was delicately formed, and her figure slight; he would put his arm around her, and say, 'My Euphemia,' with a tenderness that was affecting; there appeared something sacred in his

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<sup>30</sup> *Memoir* 3-4.

<sup>31</sup> Sheehan, *Pierre Toussaint*, PT to Marie Louise Pacaud, May 27, 1807; Marie Louise Pacaud to PT, Cuba, July 12, 1807; *PTP*, Marie Louise Pacaud to PT, New Orleans, April 30, 1810.

<sup>32</sup> *Memoir* 5, 10-11, 13, 31-32, 36.

<sup>33</sup> *PTP*, Marie Louise Pacaud to PT, April 30, 1810.

<sup>34</sup> *Memoir* 27-30. Though there are many variations, the spelling of "Bouquement" is taken from one of the earliest letters: *PTP*, Marie Louise to Marie Bouquement, Feb. 7, 1803.

<sup>35</sup> These details are found in: *PTP*, Marie Louise Pacaud to PT, New Orleans, April 30, 1810.

<sup>36</sup> *Memoir* 36-37.

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love, as if he felt that God had intrusted her to his protection, and, by depriving her of all other earthly support, had made him responsible for her future welfare.<sup>37</sup> As Euphemia grew up, as is shown in her letters,<sup>38</sup> she was a very normal youngster. At times she could be either petulant or loving; she enjoyed the occasional party and the news of things that happened in the city; she took her studies and her music lessons seriously; she was devout but frank in her comments about church life; above all, she loved her aunt and uncle. She died after an illness of a few months, presumably tuberculosis, in May, 1829. While Juliette had her mother, Claudine Gaston, living with them, and some cousins in Baltimore, Euphemia's death left Pierre and Juliette as the only Toussaint family members known to be left in the United States.

There is little information about the rest of the Toussaint family and its later vicissitudes, whether in Haiti or other places. But there is ample evidence that Pierre loved them deeply, tried desperately to learn news of them and help them as the years went on, and that even his Last Will and Testament pathetically provided for a search and funds for any relatives who might be found.<sup>39</sup>

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## 2. The Bérard Family of Haiti and Paris

It must be kept in mind that, apart from any other considerations or comment, the lives and work of slaves was oriented primarily to the maintenance, comfort, and financial or commercial success of their owners. Thus, the few facts concerning the Toussaints were already necessarily interwoven with reference to their condition as slaves of the Bérard family, owners of the L'Artibonite plantation.

Pierre himself later recalled the comfort and luxury of the main buildings on the plantation, where even the dinner service was of silver lined with gold.<sup>40</sup> But it is impossible to know whether the senior Bérards had been born in Haiti, had inherited lands there, or whether, like so many other French people of the time, they had gone there to increase their fortunes and enjoy a pleasant life in a tropical climate. The latter seems more likely, though, since they did retire to France while Pierre Toussaint was still quite young. The senior Bérards died during the French Revolution as a result of shock and imprisonment, and the family lost its lands and fortune.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 55.

<sup>38</sup> *PTP*, Feb. 22, 1822 to March 21, 1829.

<sup>39</sup> *PT*, *Last Will and Testament* 521-22.

<sup>40</sup> *Memoir* 14.

<sup>41</sup> *PTP*, Aurora Bérard to *PT*, Paris, Nov. 27, 1815.

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Although there were several children in the Bérard family, there are two who have a special place in the story of Pierre.

The eldest son in the family was called Jean Jacques Bérard. He had been nursed by Pierre's grandmother, Zénobe, and she also took a mother's place in conducting him to Paris for his education. Some years later but evidently not long after his return to Haiti, he took over the leadership of the plantation from his retiring parents. Jean Bérard married a cousin, but she died within a year at the age of twenty-one. Pierre remembered the wedding and how later he and his sister, Rosalie, would gather flowers for the young bride, sing and dance for her, and then pull the strings of a magnificent fan of peacock feathers over a couch during her illness. When Jean married again it was to a young widow, Marie Elizabeth Bossard Roudanès.

When the political troubles began in Haiti, Jean Bérard "earnestly wished to preserve a neutral position; but he found this impossible."<sup>42</sup> He decided to spend a year or so in the United States and returned when the storm was over. Thus, in 1787 he arrived in New York with his wife, her two sisters (one of whom had married the French General Dessource), and also five slaves. Among the slaves were Pierre, his sister Rosalie, and his aunt, Marie Bouquement. They all settled into their new home and enjoyed "plenty of society and amusement."<sup>43</sup> Jean directed Pierre into an apprenticeship as a hairdresser, probably thinking more of the convenience for the white women in the house than of future crises.

Wanting to reassess the political situation and check on his properties, Jean Bérard invested money for the continuing support of his wife and household and returned to Haiti in 1789. He found the plantation and property lost forever. Planning to return to New York and make the most of the money he deposited there, he became ill with pleurisy and died. This shock was compounded when the young Mrs. Bérard learned that the company to which her husband had entrusted their finances had failed. She and her household were suddenly penniless.

Jean Jacques thus played a pivotal role in Pierre's life by bringing him to New York, apprenticing him as a hairdresser, and, by his sudden death, opening to Pierre choices of responsibility about what he would do concerning his own future and that of all the others in the Bérard home on Reed Street.

The story is well-known of how Pierre Toussaint, still a slave, generously and quietly took on the support of the whole house by his own earnings and shielded his mistress from the embarrassment of penury. While she trusted that one day her own personal

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<sup>42</sup> *Memoir* 14.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 15.



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fortune or part of her husband's properties in Haiti might be reclaimed and thus she could repay all, Pierre "only asked to make her comfortable, and I bless God that she never knew a want."<sup>44</sup> Mrs. Jean Bérard, eventually married another refugee from Haiti, Gabriel Nicolas, but as he had difficulty finding work, Pierre's increasingly successful hairdressing business was the mainstay of life.

By July 2, 1807, Pierre's mistress was dying of a throat malady. She was only thirty-two years old. She said to him:

'My dear Toussaint, I thank you for all you have done for me; I cannot reward you, but God will.' He replied, 'O Madame! I have only done my duty.' 'You have done much more,' said she; 'you have been everything to me. There is no earthly remuneration for such services.'<sup>45</sup>

She then told Pierre that she was giving him his freedom, which was witnessed by the chancellor of the Consulate of France. After also giving him a miniature of herself, there was one more request. Marie Bouquement, Pierre's aunt, had been nurse and attendant to the mistress and her sisters from their childhood. She had received her freedom from them. Mrs. Nicolas said to Pierre: "As you love my memory, never forsake her; if you should ever quit the country, let her go with you."<sup>46</sup> With the death of his mistress, contact with the Bérard family seemed to be ended for Pierre.

The other member of the Bérard family to figure very specially in Pierre Toussaint's life was *Aurora* Bérard, the youngest sister of Jean Jacque's. Although close to Pierre in age, she had served as god mother at his baptism and they had played together as children.<sup>47</sup> As with the other Bérard children, she was sent to France for her education and Pierre was never to see her again. Her own baptismal name had been DePoint, but her father had her change it to the less aristocratic sounding *Aurora* during the French Revolution.

Eighteen years after the death of Jean Bérard, Pierre learned the whereabouts of his godmother and the rest of that family in a most casual way. He was called to the City Hotel to dress the hair of a French lady visitor, Madame Brochet, who could speak no English. In the course of conversation she mentioned how much she missed a friend, *Aurora* Bérard. The family name triggered more questions. The outcome was a letter to Pierre written on November 27, 1815 in Paris and beginning with the words, "My dear

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 23.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 28.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 4-5.

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Godson.”<sup>48</sup> A continuing correspondence of mutual concern, affection and admiration lasted until Aurora's death in 1834.

What is to be said, then, of the relationship between the Toussaints and the Bérards, between the slaves and their legal owners?

The overwhelming evidence seems to indicate that the Bérards treated their Toussaint slaves with a definite measure of Christian justice and charity. There was a noticeable personal interest in the Toussaints and other slaves, and also a degree of true affection. This, notwithstanding the basic fact of the slavery itself, of the domination over another's life to the extent of deciding what education they would receive or what type of work they would do, and of the enforced separation of some members of a slave family from others. Perhaps the greatest evidence of the mutual respect and affection between the Bérards and the Toussaints was the fact that Pierre, learning of his godmother's poor health and financial circumstances, offered to move to Paris to help her. Aurora gently dissuaded him because, as she put it, “Although I have not seen you since my childhood, I love you like a second mother” and, in Paris, “I could not be useful to you and I fear you would not be so happy as you deserve.”<sup>49</sup>

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### 3. The Schuylers

When Philip Schuyler was appointed one of the four Major General's in George Washington's revolutionary army, his Dutch forebears had already been in New York State and City for four generations. Of the period when Pierre first would have met the Schuylers, Nathan Schachner mentions: “There were four great families in New York at the time -- the Van Rensselaers, the Van Cortlants, the Livingstons and the Schuylers. Of these not the least were the Schuylers.”<sup>50</sup> In fact, their influence was often strengthened as family members inter-married. The wife of General Philip Schuyler, for example, was a Catherine Van Rensselaer.

Philip Jeremiah Schuyler, son of the General, took as his second wife, Mary Ann Sawyer.

The presumption stands that Pierre Toussaint first met Mary Ann Schuyler and thus entered into the world of that prominent family and its friends through his hair-dressing

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<sup>48</sup> *PTP*, Aurora Bérard to PT, Nov. 27, 1815.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, Aurora Bérard to PT, Dec.1, 1818.

<sup>50</sup> Nathan Schachner, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York/London: D. Appleton-Century Company 1946) 103.

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work. It was an important art in those days, almost a profession.<sup>51</sup> This must have been quite early in his career, for Pierre spoke of knowing the Schuyler children “from their infancies.” He visited that home almost daily for over thirty years. A niece of Mary Ann's by marriage was Catherine Schuyler Cruger. Of these two women Pierre noted:

I appreciate the friendship and sympathy of my two friends Catherine Cruger (who has finished her life of constant benevolence and disinterestedness) and Mary Ann Schuyler now of the City of New York. Their friendship for many years has been more to me than that of any others, though there are many whose regard I highly value and appreciate.<sup>52</sup>

From the viewpoint of business or mere social awareness, Pierre could have gained mightily from the Schuyler contacts. This was especially true, as more and more refugees had come to New York from the revolutions in Haiti and France. Angelica Schuyler Church, sister-in-law to Mary Ann and living in England, helped people like Talleyrand, Beaumetz and Rochefoucauld-Liancourt to temporary havens in the United States.

Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury to both Presidents Washington and Adams, was married to Elizabeth Schuyler and thus a brother-in-law to Mary Ann. He housed George Washington Lafayette, the son of the General. The business partner of Mary Ann's husband was John C. Stevens, whose summer home has since become the Stevens Institute in Hoboken, NJ. His ventures in quarrying, steamboat ferries and yachting bound both families even into the next generation. Pierre was hair-dresser or barber to many Schuylers, their children and their friends.

But it was more than good business that bound the Schuylers to Pierre and his family. It was respect and a very sincere friendship. Philip Schuyler said of Pierre to his children: “I have known Christians who were not gentlemen, gentlemen who were not Christians - but one man I know who is both - and that man is black!”<sup>53</sup>

Although not a Catholic, his wife Mary Ann wrote to her son Robert from holiday in Baden-Baden, Germany:

They have an English service every Sunday here, to which I am now going all by myself. The service is performed in a Catholic chapel with all the insignia. I thought of my dear

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<sup>51</sup> Henry Knox, e.g., served as Secretary of War in the same Presidential Cabinets as Alexander Hamilton. Besides other social extravagances in the Knox home, “...almost a ninth of his salary went for wine alone. What with his own hair-dressing, and that of the expensive Lucy, who wore her hair, after the extreme fashion, ‘at least a foot high, much in the form of a churn bottom upward,’ the family account with Anthony Latour, hair dresser, was no small matter, and his annual deficit was a third of his salary.” Claude G. Bowers, *Jefferson and Hamilton: The Struggle for Democracy in America*, Sentry ed. (Boston/Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin 1966) 13.

<sup>52</sup> PT, *Last Will and Testament* 523.

<sup>53</sup> PTP, Georgina Schuyler to Dr. Billings, New York Public Library March 23, 1903.



**Elizabeth Hamilton**

Toussaint and I send my love to him - tell him I think of him very often - I never go into one of the churches of his own faith without remembering my own St. Pierre and nobody has a better saint. I am pleased to hear that he is better, and his good Juliette.<sup>54</sup>

Mary Ann Schuyler died in 1852, just one year before Pierre, but the family stayed close to him.

Eliza Hamilton, the granddaughter of Alexander Hamilton, married Mary Ann Schuyler's son, George. At the end of Pierre's life, it was Eliza who visited him during his last illness and wrote the details. In his Last Will and Testament, Pierre named George Lee Schuyler and his brother Robert, Mary Ann's sons, as the executors of his estate.<sup>55</sup> Thus the Schuyler-Toussaint friendship extended through the major portion of Pierre's time in New York and, in some ways, even beyond his death.

## **D. The Pierre Toussaints as Parents**

As already noted, Juliette and Pierre legally adopted Euphemia as an infant. But, as is evident from her letters, she always called them Uncle and Aunt. One day, in answering Euphemia's query as to what orphans were, Pierre was brought to tears of consolation

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<sup>54</sup> *PTP*, Mary Ann Schuyler to Robert Schuyler, Baden-Baden, Aug. 20, 1847.

<sup>55</sup> *PT*, *Last Will and Testament* 527-28.

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when she finally responded, “But have they no Uncle?”<sup>56</sup> The Toussaints truly loved their adopted niece as if she was their own child.

The three biographies of Pierre Toussaint all indicate that the couple was childless. The earliest even has this sentence: “Madame Toussaint loved Euphemia with the same affection that she would have bestowed on her own children, had she possessed any.”<sup>57</sup>

But for completeness sake, however, another important note of history should be added to this section on the life of Pierre, since it is not mentioned in any biography.

A couple named Sourbieu were friends of Juliette and Pierre for years. John Sourbieu had been one of the witnesses to sign the parish record of their marriage in 1811. After they moved to France in 1818, the correspondence of John and Caroline Sourbieu continued regularly until about 1829. In his letters, Sourbieu was constantly trying to entice Toussaint also to come to France, with reflections on the sad state of the church in New York and the contrasting beauty of the liturgical ceremonies in France.

Responding to Pierre’s letter of May 5, 1819, the usually complaining John Sourbieu wrote from Rouen: “I surely will not conclude my letter without offering you my congratulations on the occasion of your wife’s pregnancy.”<sup>58</sup> Caroline added in her section of the same letter:

My dear Toussaint, I congratulate you. Your dear Juliette is pregnant. So there you are, quite pleased, isn’t that so? I hope with all my heart that she is keeping well and that her delivery is happy. Tell her that I congratulate her on becoming a mother. It’s a joy to have children.<sup>59</sup>

Next, although the year is not indicated, John responds to a July 19th letter of Pierre’s in September saying:

My wife asks you to give her details about all that’s going on in New York...She says, why are you keeping quiet about the pregnancy of your good Juliette, whom they tell us

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<sup>56</sup> *Memoir* 52.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 58-59.

<sup>58</sup> *PTP*, John Sourbieu to PT, Rouen, June 21, 1819: “Je ne terminerai point ma lettre sans vous faire mes compliments à l’occasion de la grossesse de votre femme.”

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*: “Mon cher Toussaint je vous fais mon compliment votre chère Juliette est enceinte vous voilà bien content n’est-ce-pas. Je désire de tout mon cœur qu’elle se porte bien et que son accouchement soit heureux Juliette doit être bien contente dites lui que je la félicite devenir mère c’est un bonheur que d’avoir des enfants” (sic).

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is with child. She thinks that if that is really true, she will be either lying-in or delivered when you receive this.<sup>60</sup>

So what happened? The letter of June 21 had begun with John Sourbieu saying how delighted he was to learn that Pierre, Juliette and Euphemia were enjoying perfect health. The two sections from Jean and Caroline seem to be in response to news from Pierre that Juliette is pregnant. Everything known about Pierre indicates that he wouldn't be telling people that Juliette was carrying a child if such was not the case. Toussaint evidently felt confident enough of the fact and of the discretion and affection (and perhaps, distance overseas) of the Sourbieu's, parents themselves, to share the joyful news of Juliette's pregnancy with them.

If this hypothesis is so, then Juliette Toussaint had conceived a child, but there must have been a subsequent miscarriage.

The letter of September 2nd opens another possibility. It has that phrase, "whom they say is with child." If the section of the earlier Sourbieu letter was not in response to Pierre's mention of a pregnancy, then it came from rumors or the mistaken judgements of other friends. Perhaps Juliette had just put on weight.

The conclusion, for want of additional letters or circumstantial evidence, is simply that, in the judgement of two old and dear friends, the Toussaints were open to children in their marriage and would have been happy with such a blessing.

### **E. Toussaint's Relationships with His Own Black People**

Before concluding this chapter on the life of Pierre, there is another aspect that is usually either over-looked or presumed, but never studied directly: his relationship with people of his own race.

Here again there is a bit of a handicap in the documentation available. There is no life of Pierre written by a black contemporary. Perhaps that is just a reflection of the fact that literature by black authors was still fairly rare in the United States at that time. Certainly many, many of the letters to Pierre and Juliette were from people of the same color but, except for the more obvious instances, it would be hazardous at this point in history to guess exactly how many and from which writers. Black people, as well as white, were also remembered with gifts in Pierre's Will, but precisely how many, and what relationship did the gifts indicate?

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<sup>60</sup> *PTP*, John Sourbieu to PT, Sept. 2, —: "Ma femme vous prie de lui donner des détails sur tout ce qui se passe à New York. . . Elle dit pourquoi vous garder le silence sur la grossesse de votre boone Juliette qu'on nous a dit être enceinte, elle pense que si cela est vrai elle sera accouchée au reçu de la présente" (sic).

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What is true of the documentation is somewhat aggravated by Pierre's custom of not mixing the two races, at least for the early and middle portion of his life. The white author of the *Memoir* comments: "This might have been in some measure the result of early teaching, but there was evidently a self-respect in avoiding what he knew was unwelcome."<sup>61</sup> But that custom creates a disadvantage in knowing the reactions of some of the black people who did share his social, political or even spiritual life and who could serve as witnesses to those relationships.

The question here is not to doubt Pierre's own comfortable stance as regards his membership in the black race. Nor is it to wonder about his mind-set concerning his condition as a slave, which will be treated later. Rather, the intention is to face-up to the doubt that perhaps Pierre, having been accepted as a talented worker by so many influential white people and then as a friend, might have become less comfortable or less caring about the black people he knew and met. It is to wonder if Pierre had become "a saintly white man with a black face."<sup>62</sup> For, after all, there would be something strange about a spirituality that became willfully or even unconsciously exclusive in its outreach, especially if that meant avoiding neighbors or needy people of the same race. Ellen Tarry found it difficult to accept the version of Pierre's life that had been passed on by writers who had no blood ties to Africa. Before writing her own biography of Toussaint she had to know that "he thought like a man with African blood who rose above racial considerations in pursuit of his own salvation."<sup>63</sup> She made an excellent effort therefore to give her readers a lively sense of Pierre's relations with his fellow black people.<sup>64</sup> However, because of the fictional style of the work, one could still be left wondering.

What are the facts available?

Perhaps the most obvious fact gives the main clue: nowhere is there any evidence that Pierre was uncaring of his own people, superior, harsh, or lacking in good relations with them.

Of his time in Haiti, there are no real specifics concerning Pierre's relations with the other slaves, free blacks or mulattoes. Although he was obviously trained for house duties rather than field labor, that does not necessarily indicate a distancing from the others in personal or social relationships.

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<sup>61</sup> *Memoir* 100.

<sup>62</sup> Ellen Tarry, *The Other Toussaint: A Post-Revolutionary Black* (Boston: St. Paul Editions 1981) 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> This is especially true of Toussaint's early years in Haiti. See: *Ibid.* 8-76 *passim*.

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The great Toussaint L'Ouverture, for example, was also assigned to the special works of managing and over-seeing the Bréda plantation.<sup>65</sup> Yet that did not so separate him from the other slaves that they did not rally to his leadership in the revolution.

When Pierre first came to the United States, he was approached by some free black people and some Quakers with the idea of leaving his mistress.<sup>66</sup> Again, in 1800, he was approached by others and asked to take a prominent part in the parade to celebrate the new laws in New York giving slaves their freedom at the age of twenty-one.<sup>67</sup> Surely such people would not even have approached Toussaint if they felt that he was not truly one of them.

Once Pierre had his freedom and had arrived at the stage where he himself could lease the Reed Street house, it was definitely the home of black people. Besides the family members, including eventually his mother-in-law, there was the elderly Cabosse who was to live on for so many years. (Whether she was another of the original Bérard slaves is impossible to determine.) There was also a succession of one or two young black lads to whom Juliette and Pierre gave housing, education and the opportunity to learn a trade.<sup>68</sup>

Yes, while both blacks and whites would visit there socially and also rent rooms, Pierre's home was a place where black people lived.

Of the many letters that are more evidently from black friends, the following is especially telling both because of its very familiar tone and also because of the implied admiration for Pierre:

My dear old Companion:

I am glad to hear that your horrible winter has neither killed you nor given you any serious illness. Thanks to your regular habits and your fervent prayers, you are still in good health, and I hear very prosperous. But you are still a negro. You may indeed change your condition, but you cannot change your complexion, -- you will always remain black. Do they mistake you for a white man, that you have a passport everywhere? No; it is because you perceive and follow the naked truth. Many think that a black skin prevents us from seeing and understanding good from evil. What fools! I have conversed with you at night when it was dark, and I have forgot that you were not white. The next morning when I saw you, I said to myself, is this the man I heard talk last night?

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<sup>65</sup> C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage/Random House 1963) 90-93.

<sup>66</sup> *Memoir* 85.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 85-6.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 82, 71-2; *PTP*, Euphemia to Pierre, Sept. 12, 1828; Euphemia to Pierre, May 24, 1828.



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Courage! let them think as they please. Continue to learn, since one may learn always, and communicate your wisdom and experience to those who need it.<sup>69</sup>

Continuing in a humorous tone, the writer goes on to comment on the ladies in the city where he lives and on the possibilities for Pierre's business. But an interesting thing to note in the letter is that where this black man claimed to have forgotten that Pierre was black in talking to him, that he was not white, white people forgot that he is not white.<sup>70</sup>

The white author of the *Memoir* acknowledged weaknesses in describing Pierre's relationships with his own people:

When we speak of Toussaint's friends, we do not include his own people of color, though most gladly would we procure their testimony were it in our power.<sup>71</sup> We feel as if we have hardly done justice to the constant and elevated view which Toussaint took towards his own race.<sup>72</sup>

However, that confession of ignorance or omission seems to be more precisely an ignorance of the *extent* of Pierre's connections with his own people. For example, since many of the domestics in the wealthy homes would have been black servants, this comment may be helpful:

Although always received with gladness and respect by the heads of the houses, his humility, good sense, and kind feeling made him equally welcome to the domestics. He was often consulted by them...he excited in them no envy or ill-will, which it might have been expected would arise from seeing a colored man treated with so much more distinction than themselves. The truth was, that they respected him, they felt the value of his good opinion, of his recommendation and, above all, they confided in the kindness of his heart.<sup>73</sup>

The attitude behind Pierre's dealings with his fellow blacks is put in these words, condescending as they might seem:

He never forgot that his color separated him from white men, and always spoke of himself as a negro...He was a true negro, such as God made him, and he never strove to be anything else... It was a striking trait in Toussaint that he wished to ennoble his brethren by making them feel their moral responsibility as colored men, not as aping the

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<sup>69</sup> *Memoir* 96-97. This letter was written from "Chicago," and is undated and unsigned. Although it is not presently found in the PTP, the almost universal accuracy of Lee's *Memoir* in quoting letters affirms its existence when she was preparing her book.

<sup>70</sup> *Memoir* 84 quotes a "gentleman of the highest respectability" as saying: "I never met with any other of his race who made me forget his color."

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* 73.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 97.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* 76-77.

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customs, habits, and conversation of white men. He never forgot that he ‘lived in a black house,’ nor wished others to forget it.<sup>74</sup>

While it also has a tone of the hauteur of the social distinctions of the day, E.J. Tuckerman, a famous novelist of the day, wrote in an obituary notice of Pierre’s social relationships and charities:

...to his own race, the mass of whom were so much below him in tone of character and position, that only a fraternal sentiment truly Christian could have prompted his constant interest in their welfare and ready sympathy in their pleasures and griefs. By those so widely different classes Pierre was both respected and beloved...No familiarity ever made him forget what was due to his superiors, and prosperity and reputation never hardened his heart towards the less favored of his own class.<sup>75</sup>

But perhaps the true relationship of Pierre to people of his own race is best captured in a symbolic gesture. “When Juliette was buried, Toussaint requested that none of his white friends would follow her remains” to the cemetery.<sup>76</sup> In a special way he wanted that tribute reserved to their black friends and acquaintances. Present at Pierre’s own funeral was “likewise a most respectable collection of people of his own color, all in mourning.” The white people remembered his previous request and again respected it. They were at the funeral Mass and later gathered at the burial site. But, knowing Pierre’s special relationship with his own, it was the black people who had the honor of walking in procession with his body from St. Peter’s church to his “going home” in the plot at the cemetery of St. Patrick’s cathedral.<sup>77</sup>

So Pierre had not become simply “a saintly white man with a black face.” He was a black man who, besides having white friends and acquaintances, loved, treasured and helped his fellow black people all his life. They, in turn, loved, respected, and counted on him.

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 97-98.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* 122.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 144.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 114-15.

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Having outlined the story of the life of Pierre Toussaint and some of the families and events that figured most prominently in it, it is now time to enlarge the picture. Again, it is a matter of setting the context for the spirituality of Toussaint. For, just as the basic facts of his life helped to form the setting for his following of Christ, so; too, political, social and religious factors in Haiti and New York City influenced the daily lifestyle of his spirituality.

This chapter will be largely historical. The first part will endeavor to describe Haiti before and during Pierre's twenty-one years on the island. The second part will deal with Toussaint's sixty-six years in the growing city and Catholic community of New York.

### A. Haiti the Land that Toussaint Was Forced to Leave Behind

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#### 1. Background History of the Island

It was on December 6, 1492 that Columbus discovered the island on which present-day Haiti exists. He called it "La Isla Española." Later the island was called "Santo Domingo" after its principal city. By 1513 that city had a population of about fifteen hundred, and there were seventeen other Spanish settlements. In 1517 Charles V authorized the export of 15,000 slaves to the colony, thus radically changing its future. By the end of that same century the aboriginal Arawak and Carib Indians had been exterminated in battle or through the hardships of slavery.<sup>78</sup>

As the Spanish empire went on to extend itself to places like Mexico and Peru, many of the settlers moved there in search of gold and Incan and Aztec treasures.<sup>79</sup> But even with that the Spanish had never bothered much in developing the western third of the island, and the island of Tortuga just a few miles off the northwestern shore became a hide-away and launching pad for groups of French, British and even Dutch pirates and adventurers.

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<sup>78</sup> For the early history of Haiti, see: Rayford W. Logan, *Haiti and the Dominican Republic* (New York & London: Oxford University Press 1968) 3-23; T. Lothrop Stoddard, *The French Revolution in San Domingo* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin 1914) 1-12; H.P. Davis, *Black Democracy: The Story of Haiti* (New York: Dial Press 1929) 1-20; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 3rd ed. (New York: Vintage Books/Random House 1969) 60-69.

<sup>79</sup> George Amitheath Breathett, *The Religious Missions in Colonial French Saint Domingue*, PhD. diss. (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa 1954) 2.

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Eventually, after raids and counter-raids, and with the decline in Spanish power and Britain being occupied with its other territories, the French gained full title to the western third of the former Spanish colony by the treaty of Ryswick in 1697.

New white settlers and African slaves were moved to the island and throughout the 1700s. But the massive development that went on was built on a cycle of finance and control from Paris, the constant shipment of goods and produce back to France, and the on-going toil of the slaves. It was a kind of capitalism for colonies, and Haiti became “the laboratory, so to speak, for the first experiment in colonial government in the new world.”<sup>80</sup>

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### 2. The Richest and Most Beautiful Colony of France

Pierre Toussaint knew his homeland in its vaunted glory. One commentator gives this description just two years after Pierre had been taken to America:

In 1789 the French West Indian colony of San Domingo supplied two-thirds of the overseas trade of France and was the greatest individual market for the European slave trade. It was an integral part of the economic life of the age, the greatest colony in the world, the pride of France, and the envy of every other imperialist nation.<sup>81</sup>

Under certain aspects, yes, the colony was a paradise. The climate was tropical, crops responded quickly to cultivation, flowers and banana trees were abundant, and rain on the high mountains turned into rivers and springs. The northern part of Haiti was the more active and developed, with areas becoming less populated as one moved south. Good harbors and shipping insured not only contact with other parts of the country itself, but also lively commerce with other nearby islands, with Europe and America, and, above all, with France.

There were three main classes of people:<sup>82</sup> the predominantly foreign-born whites, the “affranchis” or mulattoes, and the slaves. Yet these groupings also had sub-divisions: among the whites there was the separate category of officials of the French government, and also much poorer people who had agreed to go to Haiti to merit freedom from debts

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 1.

<sup>81</sup> C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books/Random House 1963) ix.

<sup>82</sup> David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti* = Cambridge Latin American Studies: 34 (Cambridge/London/New York: Cambridge University Press 1979) 20-27; T.L. Stoddard, *French Revolution in San Domingo*, 19-27.

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or crimes; among the slaves, there were those who had escaped after crimes or to avoid harsh treatment and these were called “marrons.”<sup>83</sup>

About Pierre Toussaint’s time in Haiti, “the population was composed of roughly 450,000 slaves, 40,000 whites, and something over 30,000 free coloureds (or *affranchis*).”<sup>84</sup>

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### 3. Plantation System and Slavery

Some idea of the scope of the number of plantations and of commerce at the time when Pierre was taken from Haiti is neatly summarized by David Nicholls:

By 1789 there were approximately 790 sugar plantations, 2,000 coffee plantations, 700 cotton cultivators and over 3,000 small producers of indigo. Sugar exports to Europe from Saint Domingue were almost equal to the total exported from the British colonies, and she was the world's principal coffee grower...The life of the colony was dependent upon imports from France, though the metropolitan government found it increasingly difficult to enforce the prohibition of foreign trade.<sup>85</sup>

Obviously it was the larger towns and seaports like that of St. Marc that served as reference points for meetings, social and cultural events, commerce, and even church life for many of the people on the plantations. Things are relative, however, for even the city of St. Marc, nearest to the Bérard plantation, only consisted of about 150 houses in Pierre’s time.<sup>86</sup>

Perhaps the best way to glimpse the range of relationships between slave owners and slaves in Haiti during Pierre’s time is to read the first two chapters of C.L.R. James’ celebrated book on the Haitian revolution.<sup>87</sup> Written from a vast acquaintance with the sources, always noting the interplay of Haitian, French, British, Spanish, and even American politics and business interests, and granting the author’s Marxist orientation, the volume is filled with a sense of righteous rage at verified cruelties. The author’s

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<sup>83</sup> Mèdèric Moreau de Saint-Méry, “The Border Maroons of Saint Domingue: le Maniel,” in *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slaves Communities in the Americas*, ed. Richard Price (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday 1973) 135-42.

<sup>84</sup> Nicholls, *National Independence in Haiti* 19.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> James, *Black Jacobins* 31.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 6-60, passim.

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prejudices sometimes do lead him to sweeping judgements,<sup>88</sup> but there is a sense of background and fact that has to be integrated into the Pierre Toussaint story.

Both white and black people who were new to the climate of Haiti found it difficult to adjust. That process took a couple of generations. The richer whites, able to avoid heavy work, could recoup their energies with trips back to France. They also sent their children there at an early age both for their physical stamina during the growing years and for education. Thus it was that Pierre's grandmother, Zénobe, led Jean Bérard and then his brothers and sisters to Paris while they were still young, and Jean's first wife died when she was only twenty-one and his second wife, Marie Boussard, was already a young widow.<sup>89</sup> For most of the slaves, though, especially in the first and second generation, the long hours of supervised toil in the hot sun of the sugar cane or coffee plantations insured a state of weariness and physical debility that often brought disease or death at an early age.

There can be no doubt that for both blacks and whites, the very atmosphere could contribute to lassitude and licentiousness and that shocking degradations and inhuman punishments were inflicted on slaves by some master or overseers. Nicholls points out that, unlike other French, British, Spanish or even the American colonies, the massive number of the slaves in proportion to the whites or even the mulattoes spawned a fear of revolt in some of the civil authorities and owners and this, in turn, begot repression and severity.<sup>90</sup> Among the slaves themselves there could be crimes and injustices, often prompted by jealousy. There could also be great tension between field workers and their foremen or the house-servants, and between the seemingly more intelligent and industrious blacks of the earlier slave importations and those of later times.<sup>91</sup>

Reference should be made here to the *Code Noir* which, theoretically at least, governed the relationships between owners and slaves during the Toussaint/Bérard years in Haiti. Promulgated by the King of France in 1685, it was a brave attempt to covenant those relationships in a more humane and Christian way.<sup>92</sup> While slaves were still property or chattel, they were given acknowledged rights concerning their Catholic religion and

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<sup>88</sup> See, e.g., James, *Black Jacobins* 88: "From their masters they had known rape, torture, degradation, and, at the slightest provocation, death." Yet in the history of Pierre Toussaint or members of his family such outrages are not detected, nor do they appear in James' own appraisal of Toussaint Louverture's life on the plantation before joining the revolution at age forty-five (90-93).

<sup>89</sup> *Memoir* 2-3, 10-14.

<sup>90</sup> Nicholls, *National Independence in Haiti* 30-31.

<sup>91</sup> James, *Black Jacobins* 19.

<sup>92</sup> Breathett, *Missions in Saint Dominique* 46-56. For comments on the implementation of the *Code* and its relationship to other slave legislation, see: David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1969) 207-10, 250-60.

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practice, food and clothing, marriage and family life, a more moderate range of crimes and punishments, and even appeal in court for abusive treatment.

The fact is, however, that the *Code Noir* was so often left inoperative. It depended on the owners, with few of the magistrates taking the time to see to its implementation. Granting that fact and also acknowledging that C.L.R. James is right in declaiming for all history so many cruelties, what of the conditions on the Bérard plantation?

The *Memoir* gives a brief summary of the growing political and social tensions in Haiti in the 1780's. It recalls that people did not really fear the slaves for "they were considered as machines in the hands of the masters," that the attention and concessions the mulattoes received from France created a situation where "the hatred of the whites knew no bounds," that "the contest seemed to be between the nobility and the free people of color," and that the rights of all men are founded on the laws of God.<sup>93</sup> So when the troubles began and the plantation was being involved, Jean Bérard found himself unable to maintain a neutral position and left for New York.

The whole picture of the Bérard-Toussaint relationships in Haiti (and this material had to have come from Pierre himself), conveys the strong impression that the owners certainly treated at least some of their slaves, and possibly all, with even more personal concern and a sense of justice than the prescriptions of the *Code Noir* required.

The basic legal framework of owner-slave was always present, as is shown by the fact that Jean Bérard could up-root five slaves from their families to accompany him and the others to New York. However, that was intended to be a temporary stay. Furthermore, the only note of an owner-mentality comes in a letter that was written many years later by Pierre's newly re-discovered godmother:

Your friends have not left me ignorant of all the good you do, and that you are the support of the colored women of our plantation. You must induce them to work, for you should not give away all your earnings. You must think of yourself, of your wife and niece, whom you look upon as a daughter. I hear that Hortense is with you; she belonged to me, and must be young enough to work and support herself. You will do her a service if you induce her to work; tell her so from me. It gives me pain to find that you are still without news of your family.<sup>94</sup>

The correspondence indicates that the Bérards were devout Catholics, and that probably influenced their whole conduct with their slaves. While it may be almost impossible for later generations to conceive, the author of the *Memoir* sums up the Bérard-Toussaint

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<sup>93</sup> *Memoir* 12.

<sup>94</sup> *Memoir* 45-6.

## Chapter 2: Pierre Toussaint in Haiti and New York City

relationships by saying: “Slavery with them was but a name.”<sup>95</sup> The owners surely give evidence of a caring paternalism; the slaves responded with service, respect and affection.

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### 4. Church Life in Haiti at the Time of Toussaint

Although Catholicism came to Haiti with Columbus and the early Spanish settlers, its vitality waxed and waned throughout the subsequent political struggles and military incursions. It must be admitted also that both in the early years and later, some of the clergy reflected the same faults that the climate and social circumstances attributed to the wealthy whites, the mulattoes, and even the slaves and maroons—laziness, sexual immorality, and greed.<sup>96</sup>

French Capuchins of the Brittany province were assigned to renew the evangelization of the island and the organization of parish life in 1681. When they were recalled in 1704, they had founded six full parishes and many smaller missions. The Jesuits were then given charge of the area and remained until the suppression of the Society in France in 1763. The capuchins returned in 1768 and tried to continue, together with the Dominicans, Trinitarians, and some local clergy.<sup>97</sup>

As replacements came, they found that at least some of the faith and its practice had stood firm among each category of people; others needed to be educated away from the practices of the “Voudoun” folk-cult. But the newer slaves, coming in droves in those years and not resisting a new religion, needed basic catechesis.

On the whole, great credit is due to those missionaries. Not only did they attend to parochial work in the larger cities, but they also evangelized all of the social groups, including the escaped slaves who hid in the mountains. They saw education as a key gift to the slave children and, in so far as the owners permitted, saw some of them reach a level of spoken and literary French that compared with the best of the whites. In other instances, often incurring the ire of the civil authorities and the more blatantly cruel slave masters, they brought pressure to activate what humane laws there were to improve the lot of the slaves in general.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>96</sup> James, *Black Jacobins* 32; Breathett, *Missions in San Domingue* 109-115.

<sup>97</sup> Simon Delacroix, ed., *Histoire Universelle des Missions Catholiques* 3 Vols. (Paris: Librairie Grund. 1957) II, 302-05.

<sup>98</sup> Breathett, *Missions in Saint Domingue* 76-103, 118-128, gives many instances of this multi-faceted missionary activity, but especially compact and moving are the quotations from the Jesuit Père Margat in a report of Feb. 27, 1725 wherein he calls the labors for the slaves “notre couronne et notre gloire” (123-25).



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As part of its colonial policy, the same Gallican spirit that was known in France was extended to Haiti. This meant that while there was an ultimate respect for the Pope and decisions issuing from Rome, the civil and ecclesiastical authorities in France wanted most of the control.

Thus, at the time of Pierre Toussaint's growing up, the Church in Haiti was the victim of a triad of manipulatory forces that made its evangelizing work more difficult. These were: the royal decrees coming from France which embodied a heavy-handed and very detailed Gallican control; the royal appointees such as the Governors General, Intendants, and "marguilliers" or church-wardens who often went beyond their rights when it came to finance, lands and appointments of religious clergy; and, lastly, at the level of church itself, the ineffective Apostolic Prefects, constant difficulties in trying to communicate with religious superiors overseas, and jealousies and weaknesses within their own ranks that made it more difficult for the dedicated priests and religious.<sup>99</sup> Even before he begins to treat of some of those items in his study, it is not without reason that Breatheatt could write: "To understand Gallicanism is to understand the attitude of the Crown toward the religious mission in Saint Domingue."<sup>100</sup>

In 1775, for example, the government officials in Haiti had imposed new taxes on the celebration of Masses, funerals, baptisms and marriages, and then went on to reduce the small living wages of the priests by half. Previously, while offerings were regulated, the poor and the slaves were never expected to pay in money although they had their own custom of offering a candle or some food. Little by little, "...le marguillier devint l'administrateur non seulement des biens de l'Eglise, mais encore des fonctions ecclesiastiques."<sup>101</sup> The King issued new directives in 1781 concerning the missions themselves and church property. Both were received poorly in Haiti, and the civil authorities were considered as the "police" of the clergy.<sup>102</sup>

During the time of Pierre Toussaint in Haiti, all of these church needs and tensions abounded. He was at least of the fourth generation of his family there, so he would have shared the results of or the direct ministrations of the zeal of the Jesuits, Capuchins, or diocesan clergy. Because of their own French nationality or background, it is reasonable to assume that their work involved an adaptation of the prevailing French spirituality and

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<sup>99</sup> P.A. Carbon, *Notes sur l'Histoire Religieuse d'Haiti: de la Révolution au Concordat (1789-1860)* (Port-au-Prince: Petit Séminaire Collège Saint-Martial 1933) 9-28.

<sup>100</sup> Breatheatt, *Missions in Saint Domingue* iv.

<sup>101</sup> Carbon, *Notes sur l'Histoire* 19.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 26.

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pastoral practice.<sup>103</sup> The loss of documentation due to fires, earthquakes and revolution have made it almost impossible to find out the particular details of that pastoral life.<sup>104</sup>

But some of its depth and persevering devotion can be judged from the attitudes of the Bérard's as found in later correspondence, and from the subsequent life of Pierre himself.

### B. New York City During the Toussaint Years

Pierre Toussaint arrived in New York City in 1787 and was to live there for sixty-six years. At that time the city was the capital of the infant republic of the United States of



New York City map 1776

America.

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<sup>103</sup> This assumption is somewhat borne out by the study of Breathett. Even with the many reports back and forth from Haiti and France that he includes or describes, there are very few details of the pastoral or devotional life of the people. That seemed to have been presumed and understood by all the parties. On the other hand, there is a great deal of material about property rights, authority, fees, and other institutional concerns.

<sup>104</sup> E.g., Pierre Hamel, Jean-Guillaume Guerrier: *Un Constitutionnel luxembourgeois à Haiti et en Flandre* (Luxembourg: Section Historique de l'Institut Grand-Ducal 1969) 118-120, provides two lists of the Capuchin parishes in 1785-86 and also notes the "quartier Artibonite" (233), but it is still not known to which parish Pierre and the Bérards might have belonged or the pastoral style of that particular community.

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The Bérards and their slaves settled into a house on Reed Street. This was just a few blocks from Wall Street where George Washington would take the oath as the first President two years later on April 30, 1789. The population of the city was about 24,000.<sup>105</sup>



**Wall Street and City Hall 1797**

Sometime in that first two years Mr. Bérard arranged to have Pierre apprenticed to a hairdresser named Mr. Merchant. Given the elaborate hairstyles of the time, this was an artistic and important profession. But it had other benefits for Toussaint as he perfected his technique and Mr. Merchant turned over more customers to him: he became acquainted with the city area by walking it, learned the English language, saw some of the life-style of the Americans as hairdressing was often done in the home, and was also allowed to keep a portion of his earnings for himself.<sup>106</sup>

If there is one word that would characterize New York City during the Toussaint years that word is growth. Before the War for Independence from Britain it was merely one of the important harbor cities on the east coast, together with Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Norfolk and Charleston. Bérard was probably acquainted with New York because so many ships moved on the popular “triangle” from there to Haiti, on to

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<sup>105</sup> Florence D. Cohalan, *A Popular History of the Archdiocese of New York* = Monograph Series, United States Catholic Historical Society 37 (Yonkers NY: United States Historical Society 1983) 13.

<sup>106</sup> *Memoir* 16, 19-20; Thomas Sowell, *Ethnic America: A History* (New York: Basic Books 1981) 194-95.

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England or France, and then back again.<sup>107</sup> As the war itself progressed, the city had become a central axis for the moving of matériel and troops for both armies. As Wertenbaker points out:

To understand the American revolution one must know the part played by New York City. In the trading town at the toe of Manhattan resided the commander-in-chief of the British armies in America; here was the center of naval activities, from which many an imposing flotilla went out for expeditions to Pennsylvania or Virginia or the Carolinas or the West Indies; here the British generals and admirals sat around the council table to formulate their policies and plan their operations.<sup>108</sup>

The seat of the federal government would move back to Philadelphia in 1790, and then on to the new District of Columbia in 1800, but New York had been touched with a sense of internationalism, politics, finance and society that would continue to grow. The immigrations of the 1790s and again from 1830 onward provided the talents and the people to make it special. With the western and southern territories provided by the Treaty of Paris in 1793, the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, and the 1819 Treat with Spain, New York not only reflected much of what has been called “the expansionist era,” but continued to serve as a commercial and financial center while channeling its new peoples to those areas. From 1815 onward, it was the most populous city in the nation. Pierre lived as a New Yorker through all of it.

In order to focus better the Toussaint experience in New York, it will be helpful to consider three general aspects of his life there that are broad enough to cover those sixty-six years and yet allow for particular references to Pierre. Those aspects are: Toussaint as a slave and then a free black citizen in New York, as a companion to other French-speaking immigrants, and as a member of the growing Catholic community.

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<sup>107</sup> Robert Carse, *Ports of Call: The Great Colonial Seaports* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1967) 140-76, 270-72; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People*, 3 Vols. (New York: Oxford University Press 1965) II, 282-3; Davis, *Slavery in Western Culture*, 159-64.

<sup>108</sup> Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, *Father Knickerbocker Rebels: New York City During the Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1958) vii.

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### 1. Toussaint as a Slave and then a Free Black Citizen in New York

Pierre and the other four of the Bérard entourage were not the only slaves in the city when they arrived. The census records note 2,103 slaves in 1786, and 2,369 in 1790.<sup>109</sup> There were also other free people of black color.

New York City and State seem to have inherited a tradition of slavery which reflected the fact that it was certainly a business, and that both slave traders and owners could be cruel and unjust, or the opposite. The constant coming and going of the slave vessels and the arrival of new immigrant owners would have passed on customs and manners from other British, French, Spanish and Portuguese colonies, as well as from Virginia, Maryland, and other states. A.J. Northrup concluded his early study on slavery in New York with the general assessment that slaves there were treated much the same as in any other colony.<sup>110</sup>

Yet that whole tradition would also have involved some of the modifications implied in the Christian approach to slavery, as it came through the Catholic and Protestant religions of those older countries and colonies. While the Catholic presence was so small, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed Calvinists and other more prominent religions still had the Gospel as part of their inspiration.

For the Apostle Paul, as for the early church, slavery was an accepted social and economic institution. There could be cruelties, but there were also rights, sometimes a sense of “being family,” talents were developed, and there were forms of manumission. He certainly affirmed the “freedom which we have in Christ Jesus.”<sup>111</sup> But he preached that the Christian has abdicated his self centeredness by entering into the process of Jesus’ death and resurrection and thus has become a “slave of Christ.”<sup>112</sup> Christians should “become as slaves to one another through love.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Census of the State of New York for 1855, v11, ix, cited in Leo H. Hirsch, Jr., 11 “The Negro and New York, 1783 to 1865,” *The Journal of Negro History* (Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History Incorporated) XVI, No. 4, 391, n. 3. It might be noted here that Hirsch’s 90 page article was originally a thesis done at Princeton and was reprinted in the Journal because it included “facts which his predecessors in the field failed to note” (see, Introduction 382).

<sup>110</sup> Ansel Judd Northrup, *Slavery in New York* (New York: Grafton Press 1908) 286.

<sup>111</sup> Gal 2:4.

<sup>112</sup> I Cor 7:2.

<sup>113</sup> Gal 5:13.

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So the Church's understanding did not involve ushering in a new social, economic or political order, but, where it had influence through its members, in transforming the existing forms of slavery by giving them a new heart and spirit. It endeavored indirectly to bring about the abolition of what has been called "symbiotic" slavery by changing it from within with a new sense of mutual rights and duties motivated by love. On the other hand, the slave trade and the exploitation of slaves for private advantage and pleasure, "parasitic" slavery, were periodically condemned by the Church.<sup>114</sup>

New York's early history reflected all of that. The year 1626 provides the first record of eleven male Negro slaves in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, and three black women arrived two years later. They had rights and were treated more as indentured servants. Eleven such slaves were manumitted in 1644, and thus began the history of the first free black people in the city.<sup>115</sup> However, from 1664 onward, the treatment of the slaves was much harsher under the British, with a loss of rights, the uprisings of 1712 and 1741, frequent escapes to Canada, and a restricted manumission.<sup>116</sup>

But the atmosphere of the American revolutionary war and the doctrines of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights did have some modest collateral effect upon the status of and sentiment regarding the black people. There was an effort to put a "no slavery" clause in the national Constitution from 1775-87, but it was abandoned in a compromise with southern delegates and their economic and social fears. A similar clause for the New York State constitution was defeated in 1777 due to the opposition of the upper Hudson River delegates. They still used slaves in those areas for farming and lumbering.<sup>117</sup>

New York did not give up on the ideal, however. For example, Alexander Hamilton and his family were to feature in Toussaint's life. In March 1779 he wrote to the Continental Congress to urge the acceptance of slaves and other blacks into the army in this vein:

The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the blacks, make us fancy many things that are founded neither in reason nor experience...An essential part of the plan is to give them their freedom with their muskets. This will secure their fidelity, animate their courage, and I believe will have a good influence on those who remain, by opening a door to their emancipation. This circumstance, I confess, has no small weight in inducing

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<sup>114</sup> On this whole area of the Christian/Catholic approach to slavery, see, for example: Gerald Corcoran "Slavery in the New Testament," *Milltown Studies* (Dublin) No. 5 (1980) 1-40, No. 6, 62-83, *passim*; David Stanley, "Freedom and Slavery in Pauline Usage," *The Way* 15, No. 2 (1975) 83-98; Madeleine Hooke Rice, *American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy - Studies in History, Economics and Public Law* (Columbia University) 508, reprint (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith 1964) 11-24; Barnabas Mary Ahern, "Biblical Doctrine on the Rights and Duties of Man," *Gregorianum* 65 (Nos. 2-3) 316-17.

<sup>115</sup> James W. Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 5th printing (Boston: Atheneum 1977) 4-5.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* 6-11.

<sup>117</sup> Hirsch, *Negro and New York* 386.

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me to wish the success of the project; for the dictates of humanity and true policy equally interest me in favour of this unfortunate class of men.<sup>118</sup>

Also, the Quakers had been manumitting their slaves since 1767 and urging others to do so, and in 1785 a New York Manumission Society had been formed with John Jay as its president and Alexander Hamilton as secretary.<sup>119</sup>

From another side came the voice of a slave. In 1786 Jupiter Hammon, the earliest known black poet in the United States, wrote a frequently re-printed “Address” which counseled his fellow-slaves to stay faithful to their masters “not only because God commands, but because our peace and comfort depend on it.”<sup>120</sup> While admitting that “liberty is a great thing,” he rather devoutly advocated the “status quo” by adding that “Getting our liberty in this world is nothing to our having the liberty of the children of God.”<sup>121</sup> Yet, the New York Manumission Society reported that in 1796 they had received complaints from ninety slaves who claimed to be held illegally in New York. The Society was able to gain freedom for thirty-six of them.<sup>122</sup>

All this simply indicates that, allowing for the speed of his own ability to inculturate and be aware of trends, Pierre Toussaint’s early years in New York found the institution of slavery a moot topic of debate. Whatever he learned, he and the others of the Bérard household were still clinging to the hope of one day being reunited with family and friends in Haiti. Toussaint said: “It was a sad period for my poor mistress; but she believed -- we all believed -- that she would recover her property in the West Indies.”<sup>123</sup> Events moved quickly in the next few years, however, to change those dreams.

News from Haiti became worse after Mr. Bérard’s death. Meanwhile, a bill was passed in the New York State Legislature in 1799 whereby female children born to a slave-mother after July 4th of that year would be free when they reached the age of twenty-five; male children, at the age of twenty-eight.<sup>124</sup> Slavery was officially abolished in the State in

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<sup>118</sup> Quoted in Phillip T. Drotning, *Black Heroes in our Nation's History* (New York: Washington Square Press 1970) 27.

<sup>119</sup> Hirsch, *Negro and New York* 387.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 385.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. See also, Benjamin Brawley, *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States* (New York: Duffield 1930) 12-14.

<sup>122</sup> Hirsch, *Negro and New York* 387-88.

<sup>123</sup> *Memoir* 17.

<sup>124</sup> Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press 1973) 177.

## Chapter 2: Pierre Toussaint in Haiti and New York City

1817 when all the slaves, whether born in the State or not, would be free as of July 4, 1827.<sup>125</sup>

Since Pierre, and later Juliette and Euphemia, straddled these new laws their future years in New York were an accommodation to present needs and the changing city about them.

*Economically*, Pierre began at the bottom of the working scale as a slave and an apprentice, but he went on to the top of his profession. In 1797 the free blacks found employment as house servants, labourers, sailors, mechanics or had small trading

businesses. Many of them were property owners and “several were worth from three to thirteen hundred dollars”<sup>126</sup> Just how long Toussaint had to serve as an apprentice is not known, but part of his earnings would have had to go to Mr. Merchant and the rest was needed to support the Reed Street household.

Pierre’s own customers grew from a few to many. He received his own freedom in 1807 and was able to help or purchase that of others. Not long after his marriage and for some time after, his working life could be described this way:

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<sup>125</sup> James Grant Wilson, *Memorial History of New York*, 3 Vols. (New York: New York History Company 1892) III, 648.

<sup>126</sup> Hirsch, *Negro and New York*, 433.



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As a hair-dresser for ladies, he was unrivalled: he was the fashionable coiffeur of the day; he had all the custom and patronage of the French families in New York. Many of the most distinguished ladies of the city employed him.<sup>127</sup>



**A style Toussaint would have done**

One key to Toussaint's own good sense of economics and justice is, caught in the following:

Yet one rule I made to myself, and I have never departed from it through life, that of not incurring a debt, and scrupulously paying on the spot for everything I purchased.<sup>128</sup>

Partly due to the time at which he began to work and partly due to his own energy and talent, Pierre became economically comfortable. Later on, even with all his constant charities and the financial ruin to his investments in the great fire of 1836, he continued to work. When asked why, he responded: "Madame, I have enough for myself, but if I stop work, I have not enough for others."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> *Memoir* 34.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* 26.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* 87.

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**Hair Styles of the Day**

*Socially*, while there may have been other forms of discrimination, “until 1860 the race was infrequently segregated, and black and white were neighbors not only in their homes, but also in business.”<sup>130</sup> Thus, Pierre and the family had no difficulty in moving from 20 Reed Street to another house at No. 105, and he and Juliette took in both black and white boarders.<sup>131</sup> They entertained people of both races at their home, and were similarly invited by others.

The brief letters of Euphemia to her uncle are almost an on-going journal of neighborhood and city life. They mention the family’s awareness of or participation in such diverse social events as: walking Broadway to see the fashions<sup>132</sup> the coming of the circus,<sup>133</sup> the showing of Shakespeare’s “Richard III”,<sup>134</sup> a murder in the city,<sup>135</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Hirsch, *Negro and New York*, 439, quoting Mary C. Ovington, *Half a Man* (n.p) 26.

<sup>131</sup> E.g., *PTP*, Agreement between Abraham Bloodgood and PT for the lease of the house and lot for \$250 yearly, Nov. 18, 1817; Agreement between PT and G.S. Nexsen for “the front room on the first floor and a garret bedroom” at \$64 for one year, Jan. 18, 1822; *Memoir* 16, 82.

<sup>132</sup> *PTP*, Euphemia to Pierre, June 14, 1823.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* Sept 12, 1823.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* Nov. 30, 1826.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* June 17, 1825.

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attendance at the first Opera sung in New York by an Italian company,<sup>136</sup> a party at Mrs.



### Mocking the Fashionable People of the Day

Waldron's,<sup>137</sup> plans for the 50th anniversary of American independence,<sup>138</sup> and so on.

It would be interesting to know if Pierre ever exercised his voting rights, and whether he might have sided with Hamilton's Federalist party or Jefferson's democratic Republicans. Up until 1821, that right was granted to adult males who met property and financial requirements, with no distinction as to race. After 1821, a person of color could vote if he had been a resident citizen for three years (as against one year for whites) and held a freehold estate of over two hundred and fifty dollars in value.<sup>139</sup> Pierre met those requirements.<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, he was not ignorant of attending to civil requirements. This is evident from the fact that after purchasing Juliette's freedom, "he went immediately

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. Dec. 10, 1825.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. Aug. 25, 1826.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. May 26, 1826.

<sup>139</sup> Hirsch, *Negro and New York*, 417-20.

<sup>140</sup> Researches have failed to turn up documentation concerning Pierre's exact date of arrival in the United States, his naturalization as a citizen, and the legal adoption of his niece Euphemia (Letter, Kenneth R. Cobb, Municipal Archives of the City of New York, and also stating the findings of the New York County Clerk, to Norbert Dorsey, Jan. 8, 1985). If in no other and previous way, Toussaint's citizenship could have come from his proven residence and financial condition.

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after the ceremony to the City Hall to have the papers ratified.”<sup>141</sup> However, there is no indication as to whether Pierre ever voted. For whatever reasons, black people in New York City played a negligible role in politics: in 1819, for example, only 100 voted, and in 1821, only 163 out of 10,886.<sup>142</sup>

As Euphemia came into school age, the *educational systems* would have been of interest to the Toussaints. Up until 1813, all schools were under charitable, parochial, or private auspices. A white woman who boarded with the Toussaints conducted such a private school, for example, as did their friends, the Binsses.<sup>143</sup> Naturally, only some schools accepted black students and even then there was often discrimination against them socially. Later on there would be separate schools for blacks.

But the New York Manumission Society had sponsored and supported the New York African Free Schools since 1787, and by 1824, when Euphemia would have been nine years old, there were 700 students in one of its highly-rated schools.<sup>144</sup> Euphemia had private tutoring in French, English and piano, and Juliette made sure she learned all the domestic arts. At one point she was “at the head of the reading class,”<sup>145</sup> but there is no documentation as to the precise school.

Undoubtedly, the Toussaints shared some of the racial discriminations that arose from social custom or positive antipathy on the part of some whites. Perhaps that is why Pierre was especially protective of the young Euphemia; the possibility of kidnapping and being sold into slavery still existed.<sup>146</sup>

An example of such discrimination was the use of public transportation. Seeing the elderly Pierre walking on his errands of charity, a friend chided him: “‘Toussaint, do get into an omnibus.’ He replied with perfect good humor, ‘I cannot, they will not let me.’”<sup>147</sup> Although there was no actual legislation on the matter, the negro was frequently denied equal rights on public transportation, being rejected and forced to walk. This form of discrimination only ended in 1855 when a brave black woman, Elizabeth Jennings, took her case to court and was paid indemnity.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> *Memoir* 5.

<sup>142</sup> Hirsch, *Negro and New York*, 417.

<sup>143</sup> *Memoir* 54.

<sup>144</sup> Charles C. Andrews, *The History of the New York African Free School* (New York: Mahlon Day 1830) 42-3.

<sup>145</sup> *PTP*, Euphemia to Pierre, May 19, 1825.

<sup>146</sup> Hirsch, *Negro and New York*, 408-09.

<sup>147</sup> *Memoir* 105.

<sup>148</sup> Hirsch, *Negro and New York*, 424-25.





**Condescending View of the Negro People**

However, when true friendship broke through the bonds of social custom or positive discrimination, it was rather of note. Full of wonder and delight, a twelve year old Euphemia wrote to her uncle:

O how sorry I am that you was not there to see Miss Metz married; she looked like an angel; but what I think was so good in her, that she should come and kiss my aunt and me before all the company. I believe nobody would do it but her.<sup>149</sup>

Racial tensions would increase later on in the city as the new immigrants vied with the blacks for jobs, and in the mid-1830s the reactions to the Abolitionist agitation resulted in riots in which both the Abolitionists and the negroes suffered.

This left an “excessive negrophobia” in the city, and the sensitive Pierre must have been aware of and felt it.<sup>150</sup>

One final aspect of New York City life that should be noted during the Toussaint years is the recurrence of plagues and epidemics.<sup>151</sup> Those of 1793, 1795, 1798 and 1803, 1805, 1819, 1822, 1832 and 1834 were the most devastating. In the earlier years it was yellow

<sup>149</sup> PTP, Euphemia to Pierre, Feb. 23, 1827.

<sup>150</sup> Hirsch, *Negro and New York*.

<sup>151</sup> See: Susan E. Lyman, *The Story of New York*, rev. ed. (New York: Crown Publishers 1975) 107-08, 130-33; David Reese, *Plain and Practical Treatises on the Epidemic Cholera as it Prevailed in the City of New York in the Summer of 1832* (New York: Conner and Cooke 1833) frontispiece map and explanation; William Bixby, *South Street: New York's Seaport Museum* (New York: David McKay 1972) 21-23.

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fever, then typhus (or “ship fever” as it was called), smallpox and finally cholera. A description of the 1798 yellow fever epidemic records:

By the first of October, fourteen hundred had died in New York City... Soon thousands were encamped in tents on the common or the outskirts...an English traveler, entering in September, found the theaters, taverns, drinking-houses, gambling-dens, and dancehalls closed, hospital carts moving slowly through abandoned streets, the casket-makers alone busy. Sitting one night on the steps of a house in Arch Street, where most houses were deserted, he could hear nothing but the groans of the dying, the lamentations of the living, the hammers of the coffin-makers, the dismal howling of deserted dogs. Even the physicians took to their heels.<sup>152</sup>

Over 3,500 died in the cholera plague of 1832 and over 100,000, or nearly half the population, fled the city in panic. Pierre Toussaint was in the city for all of those afflictions and assisted the sick and dying in many of them.<sup>153</sup>

It was in the midst of all these changing elements of society that Juliette, Pierre, and Euphemia lived. Everything points to the fact that through it all they had become a beloved and respected American family, and Pierre had become a well-known and distinguished citizen of New York City.

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### 2. TOUSSAINT AS A COMPANION TO OTHER FRENCH SPEAKING IMMIGRANTS, EXILES AND REFUGEES

When John Bérard brought Pierre Toussaint and the others to New York in 1787 he did so to preserve a “Neutral” position between the growing tensions of the civil representatives of the French government, his fellow white plantation owners, and the mulattoes. As yet, in spite of the occasional uprisings, the massive slave population was not involved. Bérard obviously thought that the upheaval would quiet down, and planned to return.

But it was not to be. Although the government officials, the white land owners and the merchants held onto power until 1789, and then tried to influence the Paris leaders through their Assembly representations, the ripples of the French revolution had crossed the ocean. Under Vincent Ogé, the mulattoes, who owned about one-quarter of the slaves on the island, tried to assert their rights as free men. But Ogé and his companions were barbarously executed as the year 1793 ended. The black slaves then rebelled in August, 1791, and Toussaint Louverture was to become their outstanding leader. Slavery was finally abolished in Haiti in August, 1793. There were continuing struggles between white, mulatto and black forces, and even Spanish and British invasions. Louverture was tricked into captivity and died as a prisoner in France in 1803. But on December 31st,

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<sup>152</sup> Nathan Schachner, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York/London: D. Appleton-Century Company 1946) 380.

<sup>153</sup> *Memoir* 86.

## Chapter 2: Pierre Toussaint in Haiti and New York City

Louverture's successor, Dessalines, read a final Declaration of Independence and the country was called Haiti from the 1st of January, 1804.

In 1790, three years after the Bérards and Toussaint had arrived in New York, they were joined by some of the aristocracy, ex-constituents, non-juring clergy, army officers and intellectuals fleeing the French revolution. The estimates of how many refugees actually came to the United States vary from ten to twenty-five thousand.<sup>154</sup>

Six years after Toussaint was settled in the States, in 1793, "perhaps ten thousand" of his fellow countrymen came as refugees.<sup>155</sup> They came almost all together in convoys of ships, escaping from the fire and destruction of the capital city of Haiti, Le Cap Francois. That event symbolized the inability of coalition groups to agree, the difficulty of waiting for decisions from France, and the new zeal and power of the slave revolt. Although the historian DeCourcy is often accused of a Gallican prejudice in his judgements, he reported: "The annals of Baltimore say that on the 9th of July, 1793, fifty-three vessels arrived at that port, bearing about one thousand whites and five hundred colored people, flying from the disasters of St. Domingo."<sup>156</sup> The refugees settled in many seaports along the eastern coast, but principally in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York.

The Haitian refugees were different from those of the French revolution for, in addition to the upper classes, there were also merchants, tradesmen, artists, mulattoes and black slaves.<sup>157</sup>

Both the French and the Haitian refugees had some things in common as they settled into New York City: the same language, they were all exiles, most were Catholics. Economically, some had left their homelands with barely the clothes they wore, others did have some money or jewels they could sell, a few had even previously been to the States and invested in property. The poor among them received spontaneous and generous aid. People in New York City raised \$11,000, a sum that was matched later by the State legislature, and even opened a hospice for the Haitians on Vesey Street.<sup>158</sup> (Five years later it still sheltered some 50 people.) In 1794 the government of George Washington

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<sup>154</sup> Frances Sergeant Childs, *French Refugee Life in the United States, 1790-1800* (Baltimore/London: John Hopkins Press 1940) 63.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. 85.

<sup>156</sup> Henry DeCourcy and John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States: From the earliest Settlements to the Present time. With biographical sketches, accounts of the religious orders, councils*, rev. ed. (New York: P.J. Kenedy 1872) 74.

<sup>157</sup> Childs, *French Refugee Life* 23.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. 85.

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approved an appropriation of \$10,000 for the “refugees in distress”, and New York received \$1,750 for some 350 such needy people.<sup>159</sup>

With their mixture of talents and education and the pressure of immediate need upon them, Childs offers this overview of what the refugees did:

Enough came to set up presses, publish newspapers and pamphlets, support charitable organizations, social clubs and masonic lodges, to figure in American social and cultural life, to indulge in political agitation, to drive the French Ministers wild, and to worry American officials into passing the Alien and Sedition Acts.<sup>160</sup>

That Pierre, and later Juliette and Euphemia, came to know many of these refugees can be judged by the fact that much of the later correspondence in the PTP is to former New Yorkers who had returned to France or Haiti. Pierre’s own aunt, Marie Bouquement, went back to Haiti to look for her daughter, accompanying the two married sisters of Mrs. Bérard. The two sisters died or were killed; Marie did not find her daughter but returned to Pierre and the others in New York. She was given her freedom by Mrs. Bérard in 1796, and died in 1812.<sup>161</sup> Constantin Boyer returned to Haiti and began a correspondence with Pierre that continued from 1818 to 1842.<sup>162</sup> Jean Sourbieu, who had witnessed Pierre’s manumission and marriage, returned to France with his wife and children in 1817. Mrs. Larue, who would joke with Pierre that she was always writing him sermons because he was a devout man,<sup>163</sup> went to LeHarve in 1820. Another former companion wrote from one of the islands that he kept thinking of the streets of New York.<sup>164</sup> The prominent Languel family, which had a son graduate from West Point and another who was secretary to Baron Hyde de Neuville, wrote of disappointment in the new Paris.<sup>165</sup> Many, many would write to inquire after children who stayed behind in the States.<sup>166</sup>

Some returned, to Haiti or France, as soon as their seemed to be a chance of peace; others took their time deciding. “Some remained who did not plan to remain; those who planned

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<sup>159</sup> U.S. Department of State, Miscellaneous Letters, No. 208, 65, cited in Childs, *French Refugee Life* 89, n. 13.

<sup>160</sup> Childs, *French Refugee Life* 65-66.

<sup>161</sup> *Memoir* 28-30: PTP Document of Freedom for Marie Bouquement from the three Boussard sisters “especially for the attachment she showed to us at the beginning of the troubles which are afflicting Saint Domingue,” Jan. 29, 1796; Ibid. Joseph Juley, Receipt of burial fee for “Mary Boughment,” Aug. 30, 1812.

<sup>162</sup> See, e.g., PTP, Constantin Boyer to PT, Port au Prince, April 12, 1803.

<sup>163</sup> PTP, P. Larue to PT, Harve, Aug. 12, 1834.

<sup>164</sup> PTP, A. Daublas to PT, St. Thomas, Feb. 22, 1849.

<sup>165</sup> PTP, Numa Lagnel de St-Julien to PT, Aug. 19, 1828.

<sup>166</sup> PTP, among others: Jane Salles to PT, Paris, April 22, 1825; Sully Morin to PT, Paris, Oct. 13, 1837; B.D. Villegrand to PT, Oct. 1, 1839.



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to remain left.”<sup>167</sup> Just between July 14th and August 13th, 1798, eleven vessels were approved by the president “to aid the departure of French persons” to Haiti and four to cities in France.<sup>168</sup>

Pierre and his family stayed on in New York because there was no word that any of his family was still living in Haiti. He had his work to support the household, and there were growing relationships with the city and its people. Of the French and Haitians who remained in New York, most entered into the broader mainstream of American life by their work, their marriages and families. Of the 13,815 negroes who lived in the city in 1850, only 147 were natives of any of the West Indies islands.<sup>169</sup> Thus Pierre’s longest friendships in the city were not to be with the originally French-speaking, but with others like the Schuylers and the Crugers.

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### 3. Toussaint as a Member of the Growing Catholic Community

It is a much easier task to envision the Catholic community that Pierre entered when he came to New York City. It was fairly small, about 200 people and 20 actual communicants;<sup>170</sup> it had only one one-year old parish; it was not yet a diocese; and it was struggling. Due to some excellent and fairly recent studies, it may be sufficient merely to note Pierre Toussaint’s place within them. James Hennesey’s up-to-date study of American Catholics provides the overview of the development of the Church in that country up to Pierre’s time and during his life;<sup>171</sup> Florence D. Cohalan narrows the focus in his very readable and yet highly concentrated history of the Archdiocese of New York;<sup>172</sup> a special work on the Irish and German immigrant Church in New York helps one to relate Toussaint’s experience to that of others;<sup>173</sup> Leo Ryan’s detailed study of St. Patrick’s parish in New York almost brings its readers to church with Pierre.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Childs, *French Refugee Life* 61.

<sup>168</sup> U.S. Department of State, Domestic Letters, X, 422, cited in Childs, *French Refugee Life* 191.

<sup>169</sup> Hirsch, *Negro and New York* 416.

<sup>170</sup> Leo Raymond Ryan, *Old St. Peter’s: The Mother Church of Catholic New York (1785-1935)* = United States Catholic Historical Society: Monograph Series 15 (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society 1935) 40.

<sup>171</sup> James Hennesey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 1981) 9-171 passim.

<sup>172</sup> Florence D. Cohalan, *A Popular History of the Archdiocese of New York* = United States Catholic Historical Society: Monograph Series 31 (Yonkers, NY: United States Catholic Historical Society 1983) 3-7, 21-84.

<sup>173</sup> Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York’s Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1975) 11-91 passim.

<sup>174</sup> Ryan, *Old St. Peter’s* 30-195 passim.

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John Tracy Ellis sets the background against which New York's first Catholic Church was built in these words:

All things considered, then, the fortunes of the American Catholics took a turn for the better as a consequence of the revolution and the changes that it brought in its wake...the Catholics were now free to worship God openly according to their traditional faith; moreover, two states where they lived in greatest numbers had made them for the first time free to enjoy their rights as citizens.<sup>175</sup>

St. Patrick's church was dedicated on November 4, 1786 as the first Catholic parish church in New York city. Mass had been celebrated and the Sacraments had been administered in many places in the city and in the State for over two hundred years before, sometimes in spite of anti-Catholic legislation.<sup>176</sup> But now the Catholics had their own house of worship.

The small congregation was composed of Irish, French, Dutch, German, Portuguese and Spanish, and the early lists of spokesmen for the group and trustees reflect this mixture.<sup>177</sup>

Some may have been much longer in the States than others and formed a somewhat stabilizing influence in integrating Catholic life and religious practices; in contrast to the more aggressive later immigrants.<sup>178</sup>

The fact that New York was the national capital at the time helped to bring a grudging acceptance of Catholics in this now international city: people knew that Mass had been celebrated in the French and Spanish legations;<sup>179</sup> President Washington, several Cabinet ministers and Congressmen, as well as other State and international dignitaries had been invited to attend the banquet after the dedication of St. Patrick's.<sup>180</sup>

But there were already shadows to darken the happiness of the church dedication. A little over two months after the laying of the cornerstone on October 5, 1785 the congregation had split into two faction: one favored the resident pastor, Fr. Charles Whaelon, OFMCap, and the other sided with a new-comer of a priest in residence, Fr. Andrew

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<sup>175</sup> John Tracy Ellis, *Catholics in Colonial America* (Baltimore/Dublin: Helicon 1965) 415.

<sup>176</sup> Henry DeCourcy and John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (New York: P.J. Kenedy 1872) 337-46.

<sup>177</sup> Ryan, *Old St. Peter's* 43-44, 56, 63.

<sup>178</sup> Thomas T. McAvoy, "The Catholic Minority in the United States, 1789-1821," *Review of Politics* 39 (1952) 33- 50.

<sup>179</sup> Ryan, *Old St. Peter's* 37.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.* 53.

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Nugent, OFMCap. As Ryan sums up: “On December 18, ‘two adherents of Nugent, with his connivance, seized the collection taken up at Mass; and with money as the cause, the first schism in the American Church became a reality.’”<sup>181</sup> The Apostolic Prefect, Fr. John Carroll, prophetically protested the usurpation of authority by the trustees in disregarding Fr. Whaelan and in January 1786 wrote them:

If ever the principles then laid down should become predominant, the unity and catholicity of our Church would be at an end; and it would be formed into distinct and independent societies, nearly in the same manner as the congregational Presbyterians of our neighboring New England States...I could not but fear, that a step so violent, at such a time and place, and probably in the presence of other religionists would breed disunion among yourselves and make a very disadvantageous impression, to the prejudice of our Catholic cause, soon after the first introduction of public worship in your city.<sup>182</sup>

A year after the dedication of the church the Trustees again changed their minds and sent Carroll a list of complaints about Fr. Nugent. The Apostolic Prefect came to New York to investigate. There was a public tumult in the church as Nugent’s partisans claimed that Carroll’s authority was “foreign” and thus contrary to law. Carroll suspended Nugent who refused to leave St. Patrick’s, so the Apostolic Prefect and much of the congregation celebrated Mass on two Sundays at the home/chapel of the Spanish Chargé.<sup>183</sup>

At some time in that year Toussaint and the other members of the Bérard entourage would have begun attending St. Patrick’s. Whether they walked into the Nugent troubles or the early months of the twenty-year pastorate of the dedicated and zealous Dominican, Fr. William Vincent O’Brien, is unknown.

Later on, in treating of Pierre’s spirituality, there will be occasion to note some of the particulars of his parish involvement.

Here it may be sufficient to mention some of the particular strains and difficulties in the growing Catholic community in New York City that would be significant for a good part of Pierre’s life. There are four issues that might be mentioned among so many others: clergy leadership, trusteeism, unity in diversity, and anti-Catholicism.

### **a . Clergy Leadership**

All things considered, Pierre was fortunate in the priests who served as leaders of the St. Patrick’s parish community. For almost all his years as a parishioner, either the pastor or one of the assistants could speak or understand French, Pierre’s native language. The

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<sup>181</sup> Peter Gilday, *Life and Times of John Carroll, Archbishop of Baltimore (1735-1815)* (Westminster, MD: Newman 1954) 263.

<sup>182</sup> Ryan, *Old St. Peter’s* 50-51.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid. 53-55.

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historians agree that the first pastor he was with, Fr. O'Brien, was exactly that, a pastor.<sup>184</sup> Two other pastors who had significantly long terms and were each admirable under many aspects were Fr. Anthony Kohlmann, S.J. (1808-1815) and Fr. John Power (1822-1849). Both were also Vicar Generals of the diocese. While Fr. Power was twice the considered favorite of many as bishop of the city and reacted to the situation variously, no one accused him of pastoral negligence. He was a frequent visitor of the Toussaints all during Euphemie's last illness.<sup>185</sup>

The assistants or others who had short terms as pastors were a mixed variety. For example, there were the gentle and saintly Frs. Felix Varela and Louis Sibourd, the native American Benedict Fenwick, S.J., the aristocrat-turned-religious-turned rebellious, Fr. Anthony Malou, S.J., the flamboyant Fr. Charles French, O.P., and the scholarly Fr. Charles. Constantine Pise.

Yet, what is rather amazing considering the diversity of backgrounds, talents and personalities of the priest leaders in the Catholic community of New York is the fact that, apart from the arguments on the part of some with the bishop, their fellow priests or the trustees, most of them were truly concerned with the spiritual and temporal good of their very mixed flock. That itself is quite a compliment to the early church in New York.

Perhaps a small indication of Toussaint's own reflection on the priestly leadership of that burgeoning Catholic community was the fact that while his last pastor, Fr. William Quin, V.G., was to be in that office for a long time (1849-73), Pierre only knew him for three or four years. Yet in his Will, he remembered both the parish and the pastor.<sup>186</sup>

### **b. Trusteeism**

Just as difficulties with parish trustees began even before Pierre began attending St. Peter's, they were not to go away. They continued in the New York church as in other young American dioceses.<sup>187</sup> Pierre certainly would have been aware of these tensions, since they often became public and the bishop would have to intervene. Yet there are no indications that he ever took sides in those debates. The impression given is that his own religious faith and insight into the deeper realities of church life put the entering into the mysteries of the mystical body of Christ, loyalty to the larger obediences of faith, and a true charity above factionalism.

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<sup>184</sup> DeCourcy-Shea, *Catholic Church in the United States* 348.

<sup>185</sup> *Memoir* 61.

<sup>186</sup> PT, *Last Will and Testament*, 1, 3; Codicil 13.

<sup>187</sup> John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1956) 44-47; John Dubois, Pastoral Address to the Congregation of St. Patrick's Cathedral (New York: G. Mitchell 1836) 8-9, 13; Robert F. McNamara, "Trusteeism in the Atlantic States," *Catholic Historical Review* 30 (1944), 153-55; Hennessey, *American Catholics* 94-100.

## Chapter 2: Pierre Toussaint in Haiti and New York City

While there would be many instances of the difficulties of Trusteeism later in the American church, perhaps Ryan gives the most compassionate interpretation of the early difficulties in New York City.<sup>188</sup> Without an assigned priest or resident bishop, the Catholics had banded together to form the first formal congregation, had laid the corner stone of St. Peter's without ecclesiastical sanction or approved ritual, and elected trustees. Possibly tinged with the Febronism or Gallicanism of the home countries of some of them, the spirit of the American War of Independence, and the example of the non-Catholic churches around them would have influenced their lay initiative. It is easy to be under standing why they were “zealous and impatient in their endeavors to enjoy the benefits of their religion.”

### c. Racial Discrimination in the New York church community

Carter G. Woodson makes the general comment that “the attitude of the Catholic pioneers was not altogether encouraging to the movement for the evangelization of the Negroes” in the United States.<sup>189</sup> But a defense of that period is summed-up thusly:

The activities of the Catholic Church were always necessarily limited owing to the smallness of its members and the weakness of its influence. Besieged by enemies from without and torn asunder by schisms within, the wonder is that the Church survived those times at all. Even in settlements in which Catholics had some standing, and despite the good will of the Church, lack of priests and means with which to carry on an extensive missionary program prevented any notable advance in the evangelization of the Negroes.<sup>190</sup>

Where the Catholic presence was larger, as in Maryland and Louisiana, the Jesuits were especially notable for their spiritual care of the black people.<sup>191</sup> While there are few records of the response of Catholic or other slave converts, it is probably at least partially true that “the Christian religion...provided the new basis of social cohesion.”<sup>192</sup>

There is not the slightest indication that when Pierre and the other black Haitian refugees arrived at St. Peter's church they were not welcome. It is true that the Catholics provided separated pews and seating for them, but such was common practice in most churches

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<sup>188</sup> Ryan, *Old St. Peter's* 55-57.

<sup>189</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Washington: Associated Publishers 1972) 4.

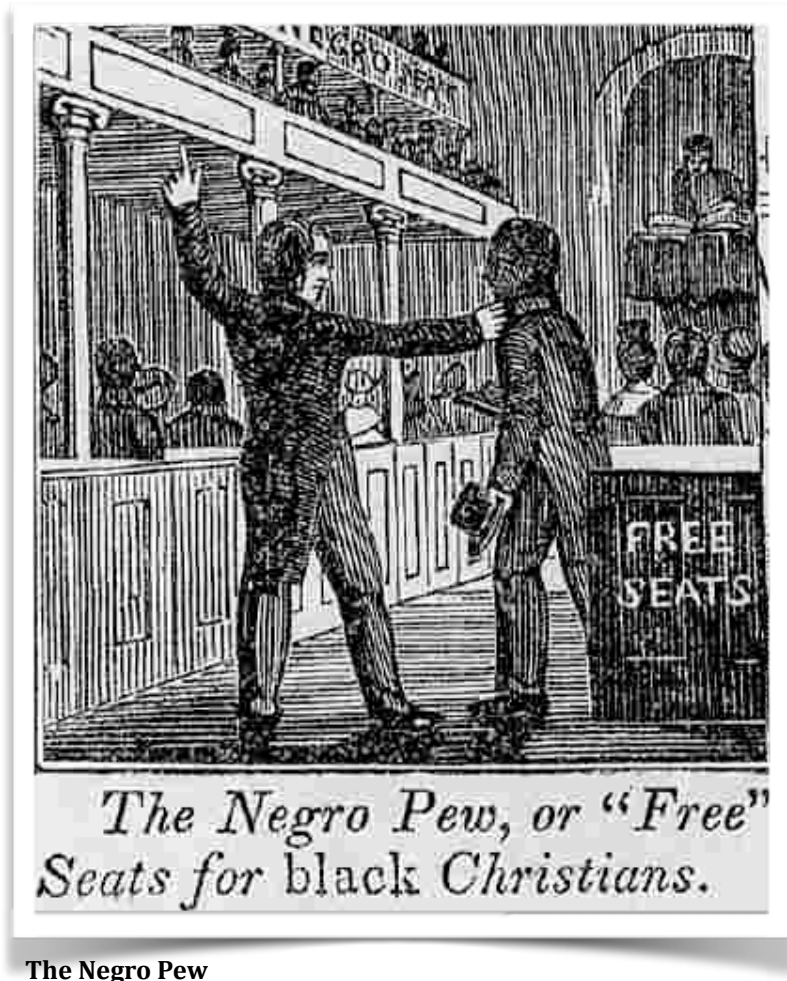
<sup>190</sup> John T. Gillard, *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* (Baltimore: St. Joseph's Society Press 1929) 13.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.* 14-31.

<sup>192</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 5<sup>th</sup> Printing (New York: Schocken Books 1978) 14.

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and possibly had been the same in Haiti. This form of discrimination probably did not



**The Negro Pew**

cease until the mid-1800s, and Toussaint did pay his pew rent.<sup>193</sup>

Also, where other groups with larger black memberships like the Episcopalians, Baptists and Methodists would separate into distinct churches based on color, the faith of the Catholic Negroes and the fewness of their numbers helped them to avoid that temptation.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> PTP Receipt, James Shell, Sexton, to PT for pew No. 25 for one year at \$14, Feb. 16, 1822. Leo Raymond Ryan, "Pierre Toussaint, 'God's Image Carved in Ebony'" *Historical Records and Studies* 27 (1941) 47, mentions another receipt of Feb. 26, 1832.

<sup>194</sup> Harry V. Richardson, "The Negro in American Religious Life" in John P. Davis, ed., *The American Negro Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1966) 396-413; Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism* = American Theological Library Association, Monograph Series: 7 (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press and American Theological Library Association 1975) 24-28, 110-135; Hirsch, *Negro and New York* 441-444.

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It would definitely seem that as the years went on at St. Peter's it was not tensions between blacks and whites that took predominance, but "all evidence points to the fact that these racial tensions between French and Irish were the major factor in the aggravation of an unhappy situation."<sup>195</sup>

Pierre would have been in the middle of it. John Sorbieu, a former parishioner of St. Peter's, often vented his dislikes in writing to Pierre after his departure for France and the "malheureux sauvages Irlandais" were among them.<sup>196</sup>

In the Catholic community, as in society at large, there must have been times when Pierre Toussaint felt the brunt of black-white racial antipathies, to say nothing of those between the Irish, German, Italian, or other immigrant parishioners.<sup>197</sup>

But the most obvious hurt through discrimination came when Pierre would have been an already well-established parishioner, Catholic and citizen. He went to some ceremony at the new St. Patrick's Cathedral. He was insulted by a young usher or master of ceremonies. An immediate letter of apology came from Louis F. Binsse, President of the Board of Trustees:

It would be difficult for me to express to you the grief which has been caused me by the insult which you have received in the Lord's house...You have been disgusted, my dear friend, by such an insult. I can well believe it. I should have been so, as much as you, and perhaps more than you, because you are human and I also...For my part, I should find myself more at ease seated in the house of the Lord between you and your wife, and the good Cabresse, than beside many other persons whose skin is as white as satin. In the house of the lord there is no distinction. God looks at the heart, but never at the color of the skin. These are the sentiments of all the Trustees, and of him who is most sincerely your friend.<sup>198</sup>

Whether it is a question of racial tensions or those among the various immigrant groups, Pierre gave a rather obvious indication of where he stood in 1841. He should have been tired of all the acrimony by that time. However, while he contributed the first one hundred dollars toward the new parish of St. Vincent de Paul for New York's French-speaking Catholics, he did not transfer parishes but remained at St. Peter's until his death.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Ryan, *Old St. Peter's* 155.

<sup>196</sup> *PTP*, John Sourbieu to PT, Rouen, June 1, 1820. Another letter of his, n.d., also refers to the "Malheureux Irlandais."

<sup>197</sup> Dolan, *Immigrant Church* 11-44 passim.

<sup>198</sup> *PTP*, Louis F. Binsse to PT, Aug. 24, 1842.

<sup>199</sup> Sheehan, *Pierre Toussaint* 207-08; Henry Binsse, "The Church of Saint Vincent de Paul (The French Church), New York," *Historical Records and Studies* 12 (1918) 102-114.

d. Unity in Diversity



St. Peter's NYC

Another strain in the growing Catholic community of Toussaint's time was caused by the complex issues that were also moving New York City into such national prominence. As immigration, educational opportunities, health care, transportation, commerce and so many other aspects of life changed, the Church could not help but be affected. Little by little the numbers of priests and religious grew to accommodate the Catholic population; Sisters and Brothers came ever increasing to help in the fields of education, relief care and nursing. The larger groups of Irish and German immigrants received proportionately greater attention; the French-speaking, Italian, and other smaller groups somehow found their place. National parishes helped to assuage particular needs and tensions.

But the amazing thing is that, amid such diversity, the bishops of the country endeavored to initiate uniform policies of church and sacramental life that operated in New York and the other struggling diocese, north and south. It was the faith, and unity in it, that was important above all the other differences. Jay Dolan rightly notes the characteristics that helped give a unity to the Catholic people amid such diversity: a respectful pride in the traditions of their former countries, eagerness to participate as dedicated citizens in the life of their adopted land, loyalty to the Pope as the Vicar of Christ and head of the



## Chapter 2: Pierre Toussaint in Haiti and New York City

universal church, and a solid transmission of the faith as accentuated in the Council of Trent.<sup>200</sup> Centralization, financial and property power, and separatism were the price paid for this unity. But “in a sense the conservatism of the church was its greatest strength: by remaining faithful to the past it succeeded in preserving the faith of the immigrants.”<sup>201</sup> The Catholic community, amid so many other elements that contributed to a lack of unity, had a solid unity in its religious faith.

### e. **Anti-Catholicism**

Mary Augusta Ray has recalled the prejudice and anti-“Popery” that had been kept alive against Catholics:

by the dominant influence for several generations of a clergy almost uniformly hostile to the Church of Rome; by an education system, equally antagonistic, from which Catholics were excluded except at the price of apostasy; by a press which catered to political, racial and religious antipathies; by colonial governments which, with few exceptions, would exclude the Catholic from the province or penalize him after he had entered.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Doolan, *Immigrant Church* 159-63.

<sup>201</sup> 124 Ibid. 169.

<sup>202</sup> Mary Augustina Ray, *American Opinion of Roman Catholicism in the Eighteen Century* (New York/London: Columbia University Press 1936) 394.

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There were generations of colonists who had never seen or met a Catholic and were susceptible to stories of intrigues by the “Papists.” But when Catholic blood flowed freely in the cause of the American Revolution, the old assumptions were more muted.



**Immigrants to the Colonies**

Yet, anti-Catholicism was never too far under the surface and it did not take too much to bring it forward. While President Washington and other leaders were invited to the banquet celebrating the dedication of St. Peter's church and the government officials would attend Catholic services in Philadelphia, Benedict Arnold reflected the opinions of still others in saying that they had participated in rites of a Church “against whose anti-Christian corruptions, your pious ancestors would have witnessed with their blood.”<sup>203</sup>

It was on Christmas Eve that a mob attacked St. Peter's in 1806 and tried to disrupt services, so that a special guard had to surround the church throughout the next day until the Mayor intervened.<sup>204</sup> The crisis over aid to Catholic school and the Abolitionist movements later would only accentuate a latent anti-Catholicism again in the 1830s and 1840s. Both the pastor of St. Peter's, Fr. Power, and Bishop Hughes, later archbishop, were powerful voices in stating the Catholic position on issues and in unifying Catholic

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<sup>203</sup> John Tracy Ellis, *Catholics in Colonial America* (Baltimore/Dublin: Helicon 1965) 410.

<sup>204</sup> Peter Guilday, *The Life and Times of John Carroll, Archbishop of Baltimore (1735-1815)*, Reprinted (Westminster, MD: Newman Press 1954) 672.

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opinion.<sup>205</sup> But it surely must have reminded Pierre that he was still part of a struggling group and, as a black, was even more of a minority.

Thus, from these strains even within the Catholic community and especially when joined to the other circumstances of a growing metropolis, it is remarkable how the New York church grew. From the one church of Pierre's time, at his death there were twenty-two parishes and the Catholics had been formed into an archdiocese. In his report to Propaganda in 1783, Apostolic Prefect John Carroll had worried about his Catholic flock losing its faith through such constant contact with non-believers and those of other faiths,<sup>206</sup> and it must have happened to an extent. The arrival of so many Catholic immigrants helped to balance that worry, but also brought new problems and squabbles. Yet the fact is that Pierre Toussaint, his wife and adopted niece grew with that church and persevered in its faith and practice.

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<sup>205</sup> Cohalan, *History of the Archdiocese of New York* 54-7, 72-5; Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860* (New York: Macmillan 1938) 46-64, 130-40, 185; Hennesey, *American Catholics* 118-27; Richard Shaw, *John Dubois: Founding Father* - United States Catholic Historical Society, Monograph Series 38 (Yonkers, NY/Emmitsburg, MD: United States Catholic Historical Society and Mount Saint Mary's College 1983) 135-43.

<sup>206</sup> John Tracy Ellis, ed., *Documents of American Catholic History* (Milwaukee: Bruce 1956) 461.

## Chapter 3: The Spirituality of Pierre Toussaint

By divine institution Holy Church is structured and governed with a wonderful diversity...If therefore everyone in the Church does not proceed by the same path, nevertheless all are called to sanctity and have received an equal privilege of faith...all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful.<sup>207</sup>

These inspiring words of Vatican Council II can serve as the departure point for this chapter. For in it we will be seeking to understand that “wonderful diversity” as it showed itself in the life of Pierre Toussaint. Indeed, although “all are called to sanctity,” not all “proceed by the same path.”

The two previous chapters were an endeavor to research the life story of Toussaint, and also the context of the social and ecclesial conditions of his years in Haiti and in New York City. Now, with that background and although distanced by over a hundred years, the questions in this chapter are: how did Pierre seem to respond to the call to holiness? how did he live out the “dignity” and the “activity” of a follower of Christ in the circumstances of his life? what was his spirituality like?

### A. A Working Definition of Christian Spirituality

The word “spirituality,” as Jon Alexander justly pointed out, has taken on many meanings in the last thirty years or so.<sup>208</sup> Recognizing this, and not wishing to delay unduly in reviewing even some of the significant contributions that have helped to clarify it,<sup>209</sup> it may be worthwhile to select one working definition for this study. In that way, these reflections will hopefully have a better focus.

Christian spirituality, to use the words of M.C. Reilly, “is the way a person lives in a definite historical situation according to his vision of faith, that is, according to his personal assimilation of the mystery of Christ under the direction of the Holy Spirit.” In

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<sup>207</sup> LG, 32.

<sup>208</sup> Jon Alexander, “What Do Recent Writers Mean by Spirituality?”, *Spirituality Today*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (1980) 247-56. A. Matanic, in his article, “Spiritualità,” *DES*, 1778-80, noted the difficulty of finding a universally acceptable definition, and yet notes the fact that there is an abundance of them.

<sup>209</sup> See, e.g., the by now almost classic articles by C. Duquoc *et al.*, *Concilium* Vol. 9, Nos. 1-7 (London: Burns & Oates 1965-71). Good overviews and bibliographies are in: B. Balati, B. Secondin, and T.P. Zecca, eds., *Spiritualità: Fisionomia e Compiti* = Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose - 45 (Roma: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano 1981) 263; S. DeFiores, “Spiritualità Contemporanea,” *NDS*, 1516-43; and, R. McBrien, *Catholicism* Vol. II, Part Four, Ch. XXVIII - Christian Spirituality (Minneapolis: Winston Press Inc. 1980) 1057-1099.

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even fewer words, it can be described as “the daily life style of the believing Christian.”<sup>210</sup>

Such a spirituality can be viewed theoretically or, more in line with the above definition, in the concrete. Theoretically, or as a field of research, it would be the study of the common elements, the trends, phases or patterns in the following of Christ. These, in turn, would be based on Scripture, theology, culture and tradition. In this sense, spirituality is the study of living the faith as culled from the Gospels and the life styles of other Christians, presented for guidance in the religious journey. Considered more practically or concretely, it is the personal life style of a believer.<sup>211</sup>

Any integral study in Christian spirituality will be harkening back and forth between the fonts and praxis. For there is a process involved that comes straight from the Gospel,<sup>212</sup> and a work of maturation or cultivation<sup>213</sup> that is both a response and a responsibility to the call of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. As Jan Kerkhofs puts it, holiness involves the dialectical tension between the experiences of *kenosis* and *pleroma*, “both being basic for every stage of growth towards a fuller humanity and in growth to the fullness of the life of the Kingdom.”<sup>214</sup>

Recent theological initiatives and debate have endeavored to broaden the sources of spirituality and ideological development with a search for pertinent data available in human and religious experience, individual stories, the histories of peoples, and culture.<sup>215</sup> This is laudable and will certainly continue. But Juan Luis Segundo offers a healthy caveat that is also applicable to such efforts in spirituality when he writes:

One can certainly move on to a new theology or a different tradition of ‘revelation.’ What seems odd to me is that any such new theology would continue to call itself ‘Christian,’

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<sup>210</sup> Michael Collins Reilly, S.J., *Spirituality for Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1978) 25.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. 25-45.

<sup>212</sup> See, Mk 8:34-36; Mt 10:38-39; Lk 9:23-25; Jn 12:24-25.

<sup>213</sup> See, Phil 2:5-7, 3:15; I Cor 2:6-7. The use of the word “cultivation” as found in R. McBrien’s definition of Christian spirituality (*op. cit.*, 1057-58) is especially appreciated because it implies the on-going development of a life style in harmony with the Christian call to holiness and our social context as humans and members of the Church.

<sup>214</sup> Jan Kerkhofs, S.J., “Introduction: ‘Kenosis’ and ‘Pleroma,’” *The Christian Quest for Holiness* (Brussels: Pro Mundi Vita Bulletin, No. 69, 1977) 3. See, Phil 2:5-8; Eph 1:15-23.

<sup>215</sup> The Journey, the Cosmic Person, and the Death/Rebirth Experience are suggestively noted by T. Berry, e.g., as three cross-cultural symbols of eastern and western spiritualities that might serve as a common human heritage for a contemporary spirituality. Cf. Thomas Berry, *Contemporary Spirituality: Its Global Context, Historical Dimensions and Future Vision as Seen from a Western Perspective* = Riverdale Studies No. 1 (New York: Riverdale Center for Religious Research 1975) 5-12. J.H. Cone, in his *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott 1970) 71-180, offered the experience of Black People as an integral theological source in relation to the revelation of Jesus Christ. Ecumenical comparisons, the cultural and religious experience of femininity, and theology as story are other recent approaches.

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as they often do. The designation seems to make sense in such a case only as an indication of the point of departure.<sup>216</sup>

This chapter will be an effort to bridge the traditional sources of Christian spirituality and the particular response or “way” of one man, Pierre Toussaint, in the following of Christ. For the Christian, Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life.”<sup>217</sup>

### **B. The Sources of the Spirituality of Pierre Toussaint**

Whether discussing the spirituality of Pierre Toussaint or that of any other follower of Christ, the prime source of all holiness is God. It is in response to God’s call and according to His own purpose and grace that Christians are justified in the Lord Jesus, and, through baptism sought in faith, that they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature, life, and holiness.<sup>218</sup> Then it is by fidelity to God’s gifts and to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit that the followers of Christ treasure and complete in their lives this holiness which they have received. They thus respond to the injunction of the Apostle: “This is the will of God, your sanctification,”<sup>219</sup> and learn to “walk by the Spirit.”<sup>220</sup>

But Christian spirituality has historical factors also, just as Christianity itself is an historical religion. It has to do with Jesus and His saving deeds<sup>221</sup> and our assimilation into His life and the perfection of charity. Thus down through the ages, “as is brilliantly proved by the lives of so many saints in Church history...one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the spirit of God.”<sup>222</sup> That is why, too, there have arisen identifiable and historical “schools” or traditions of spirituality, reflecting the ways and styles with which individual followers of Christ, groups, religious orders, and so on, have responded to the call to holiness given in Christ Jesus.<sup>223</sup>

How did a slave in Haiti or a slave-then-freedman in New York relate to all of this? Apart from the call of God to holiness in Christ Jesus and the Church, and a persevering

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<sup>216</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, Ltd. 1977) 55, note 57.

<sup>217</sup> Jn. 14:6.

<sup>218</sup> *LG*, 40.

<sup>219</sup> 1 Thess 4:3.

<sup>220</sup> Gal 5:16.

<sup>221</sup> Acts 10:34-44.

<sup>222</sup> *LG*, 40,41.

<sup>223</sup> See, e.g., Francois Vandenbroucke, OSB., “Spirituality and Spiritualities,” *Concilium* Vol. 9, No. 1 (London: Burns & Oates 1965) 25-33; Atanazije Matanic, OFM., “Il Problema delle Spiritualità Specifiche,” in *Spiritualità: Fisionomia e Compiti* = Biblioteca di Scienza Religiosa - 45 (Roma: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano 1981) 149-156.

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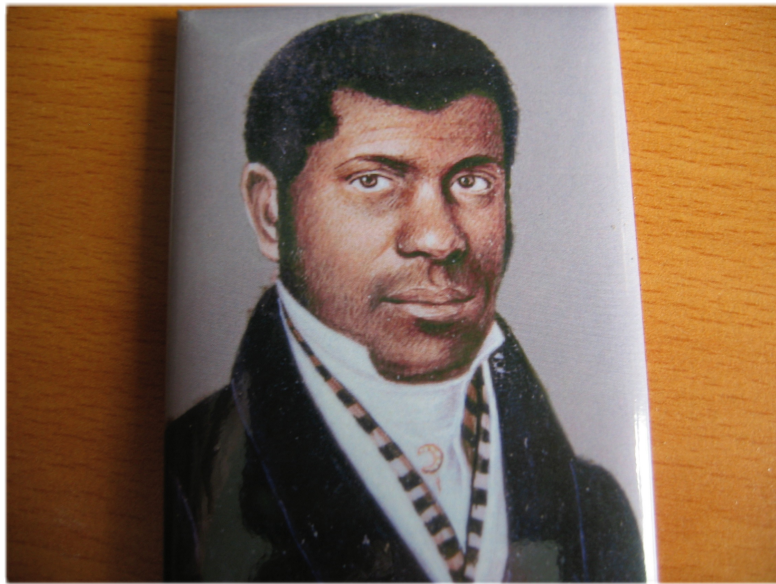
response to it, were there traces that connected Pierre Toussaint to other followers of Christ, to other “schools” of spirituality? What were the sources of his spirituality?

Within the context of faith and grace, those sources would seem to have been two-fold: the personality and character of Pierre himself, as providing the most immediate area of his response to the call to holiness and graces, external sources that he internalized and then other

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#### I. Internal Resources: The Personality and Character of Pierre

The Christian spirituality that seeks an interiorization of the Gospel of Jesus and His Spirit is an holistic endeavor, integrating harmoniously all the aspects of a human person and his or her life in a perfect charity. Recent trends have welcomed a better understanding of this process and the contributions which the behavioral sciences can contribute to theology and spirituality.<sup>224</sup> If the striving for holiness promotes “a more human way of life,”<sup>225</sup> then it behooves us to become acquainted with the humanity and



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<sup>224</sup> See, e.g., Josef Goldbrunner, *Holiness is Wholeness and Other Essays* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 1964) 1-34; Helen Thompson, *Journey Toward Wholeness* (New York: Paulist Press 1982) 3-9, 95-99, Fran Ferder, “Spirituality as Personal Integration: Wholeness and Holiness,” in *Dimensions of Contemporary Spirituality*, Vol. XIV of Theology Institute of Villanova University (Villanova, PA: The Villanova University Press 1982) 117-142; James J. Gill, ed., *Human Development*, Vol. I & II (Hanover PA: 1983).

<sup>225</sup>19 *LG*, 84.

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personality of Pierre Toussaint as a fundamental resource in the process of his movement in grace, his spirituality.

Simply put, we want to know what were the characteristics of body, mind, emotions, habits, attitudes, motivations and convictions that distinguished Pierre from others and yet formed what was obviously accepted as his personality and character? What were the qualities that even ordinary people saw as most typical of him? The following are the helpful and sometimes insightful comments of witnesses.

*Physically*, Toussaint was “tall and well made” and had a happy or “good tempered face.” While endowed with the “flexibility of limb which belongs to his race” (sic), he expressed himself in “the most courteous and graceful, yet wholly unassuming manners.” Until some months before his last illness, he “enjoyed perfect health.”<sup>226</sup>

But the first quality that might be mentioned to enliven that physical description would be *happiness of spirit* or *vitality*. Apart from the times of mourning for his dear ones, that seems to have been characteristic of Pierre from youth to old age. People refer to his “gayety and playfulness” and repeat that “his heart was gay and cheerful...and gave him the happy power of dispelling gloom and anxiety in others.” Reflecting on the life of Pierre, someone who had known him from their youth exclaimed: “You must not think that Toussaint was a grave, solemn man; he was full of spirit and animation.”<sup>227</sup>

The next attribute to be singled out would be his *industry*. Again, the whole sweep of Pierre’s life witnesses to the fact that whether in relation to his work or to his acts of charity, “his industry was unceasing.” Even as regards the issue of slavery, the author of the Memoir states: “In that, as in all things else, he acted rather than theorized.” Yet this busyness was not simply some activist itch in a person who temperamentally could not sit still or who was motivated by self-importance or aggrandizement. No, the industriousness that, as one obituary notice phrased it, had “made his life a constant round of acts of kindness and sympathy” came from Pierre’s concern that, “If I stop work, I have not enough for others.”<sup>228</sup>

But Pierre’s personality cannot be facilely summed up by leaving the impression that he was simply a happy extrovert. He had a *good* and *quick intelligence* and was given to *reflection* and *contemplation*. While we know nothing of any formal education, he could read in French and English, had a good and cultured writing style, and an excellent memory. If he “had no theories of philosophy,” nonetheless “Toussaint reflected deeply.”

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<sup>226</sup> For the descriptive quotations in this paragraph, see, in sequence, *Memoir* 78, 35, 119, 101. The same manner of reference will be found in the succeeding paragraphs of this section.

<sup>227</sup> *Memoir* 4, 103, 77, 109.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.* 20, 84, 118-9, 87.



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He admitted himself that, as he moved from house to house, the variety of human situations “makes me think a great deal.” “It was a striking trait in his character that everything in which he engaged was thoroughly done; there was a completeness in his plans, and their execution, which commanded confidence.” Of this busy man they could also say: “His whole life was one of thought and observation.”<sup>229</sup>

Then, too, while Pierre’s overall emotional structure was sanguine, confident and happy, he was also a man not ashamed to cry in grief or sadness. For example, Henry J. Tuckerman, the New York journalist, remembered Toussaint at the wake of a friend he had visited for over thirty years: “...there he sat, with his white head bowed in grief, and every line of his honest sable face wet with tears.” He could be hurt and feel insult or ingratitude, but he also delighted in the gracious gesture, signs of friendship and had “a wonderful tact” in all human relations. So he was sensitive, affectionate and kind-hearted. In this area of the emotions, though, the Memoir also notes this interesting and important fact:

Pierre said of himself that he possessed a quick temper, that he was born with it, and was obliged to bear it about with him. We doubt not that it was true, because he had a lively sensibility to everything, yet to those who knew his self-command and forbearance, this trait made him all the more interesting. One of his intimate friends, in alluding to his confessions and penitence on the subject, said: ‘I never heard him speak ill of anyone; if he could say no good, he was silent. Even those who were ungrateful to him met no angry rebuke; it seemed to be his object to forget all injuries.’<sup>230</sup>

To seek the spiritual path of an individual Christian, is to trace a cooperative venture: God’s initiative and human response. The human characteristics described above tell us something of Pierre as a human being and, whether seen as strengths or weaknesses, they are fundamental resources in the process of his maturing in holiness.

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## 2. External Sources

While there is an abundance of material for certain aspects of Pierre Toussaint’s life, there are only a few indications as to the external sources that nurtured his spirituality. Those that can be documented are: Sacred Scripture, the Imitation of Christ, various books of Church instruction and devotion, and the influence of the French school of spirituality in the sermons of Bossuet and Massillon. The task here is not to attempt a thesis on each of those elements, but to note their potential relevance as a “source” in one of “the thousand

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid. 72, 55, 72-3.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid. 123, 73, 81.

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ways of living according to the Gospel,” a way “that deals with principles, and with the lived experience of such principles.”<sup>231</sup>

#### **a. Sacred Scripture: the Beatitudes**

Besides the response that Pierre would have given to the Word of God in the liturgy or sermons, or even in other readings, someone who had known Pierre since her youth wrote:

He often quoted, in his native language, from the Sermon on the Mount, and the beatitudes seemed to have found their way into his heart.<sup>232</sup>

The beatitudes (Mt 5: 1-12, Lk 6:17-26), in summing-up the Sermon on the Mount, were in fact a synthesis of the spirit of a kind of “new decalogue” and the interior dispositions of one who welcomed the reign of God.<sup>233</sup> Indeed, the great preacher Bossuet, whose connection with Pierre shall be touched upon later, put it this way: “If the sermon on the mount is the précis of all Christian doctrine, the eight beatitudes are the précis of the whole sermon on the mount.”<sup>234</sup>

The beatitudes serve as the key-notes of a new mind-set and values system that should animate those who accept the invitation of Jesus to repent and to believe the good news that He brings as the way to the Father. For, as Dupont points out, in the Beatitudes Christ gives an early epiphany of the kingdom of God, by which we already glimpse the true nature of the divine reign.<sup>235</sup> But there is even more: Jesus’ beatitudes are different. They do not derive from common human wisdom, but are prophetic sayings, appeals and promises. In contrast with the Greek beatitudes, all worldly blessings and values recede before the good fortune of sharing in the kingdom of God. All values are reversed.<sup>236</sup>

Thus, they set the tone for the life style of the follower of Christ who dedicates himself to advancing the kingdom of God by the adoration of the Father and the works involved in living-out the Spirit-inspired sensitivities of “hesed” and “agape.”

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<sup>231</sup> Gervais Dumeige, “History of Spirituality -- A Key for Self-Understanding.” *Chicago Studies* 15 (1976) 57, 66.

<sup>232</sup> *Memoir* 72.

<sup>233</sup> See, Jacques Dupont, “Introduction aux Beattitudes,” *NRTh* 98 (1976): 97-108; C.W. Davies, *The Sermon on the Mount* (London: Cambridge University Press 1966) 33-35, 91-125, 135-150; Simon Legasse, *I Poveri di Spirito* = *Studi Biblici* 37 (Brescia: Paideia Editrice 1976); Giovanni Helewa, “Beatitudini evangeliche,” *DSL* I: 58-64, 75-76.

<sup>234</sup> Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, *Meditations sur l’Evangile*. (Paris: M. Dreano, 1966), 45.

<sup>235</sup> Jacques Dupont, *Les Beattitudes* Vol. 2. (Paris: Gabala, 1969), 380.

<sup>236</sup> Walter Kasper, *Jesus The Christ* (London: Burns & Oates, 1976), 84.

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Pierre Toussaint brought the faith of a Christian to the hearing and reading of that Word in the church of his time and its religious literature in Haiti and New York. But it is striking that in his response to that Word, even a non-Catholic would notice that the Sermon on the Mount and its beatitudes “seemed to have found their way into his heart” and, from there, were “often” on his lips.

There are only two other particular Scriptural references that are found as part of Pierre’s story. One which was to serve as a recurring theme in his life was the “Thy will be done” petition of the “Our Father” prayer. The other, and it is really only an allusion, refers to Phil. 2:5-9. Both references will be reflected upon more at length later in this chapter. Although there are so few specifics concerning Scripture as a source of the spirituality of Pierre Toussaint, the references to his favorites as passed on through history indicate that he treasured the quintessence of the Good News.

#### **b.       *The Imitation of Christ***

Evidently a second source of nourishment for the spirituality of Toussaint, and one that abounds with over one thousand quotations from Scripture, was the *Imitation of Christ*, still most often attributed to Thomas a Kempis. We are told of Pierre:

...the maxims of Thomas a Kempis were frequently introduced in his serious conversation.<sup>237</sup>

Although commentators point out that much of the four books that make up the work is unoriginal and that it is really a passing on of treasures from the spiritual writers of many centuries, the pages breathe with a gentle personal sense and devotion that gives them sincerity and authority.<sup>238</sup>

It is good to remember that the *Imitation of Christ* was written at a time when serious Christians had become wary of the excessive intellectualism of Nominalism and a decadent Scholasticism, and also of a morality that often was in flagrant contrast with virtue. Consequently, as F. Vandenbroucke points out:

even though the treatise "had the effect of isolating the science of theology from the life of the soul...it was a healthy and beneficial reaction to return to the absolute primacy of charity, to a simple conformity to Christ, to the practice of humility and detachment, to less word-juggling and subtlety: to a more realistic view of the demands of the Christian life.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> *Memoir* 105-06.

<sup>238</sup> Betty I. Knott, “Introduction,” *The Imitation of Christ* (Glasgow: Collins Fount Paperbacks 1963) 27-34.

<sup>239</sup> Jean Leclercq, Francois Vandenbroucke, and Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the Middle Ages*, Vol. 2 (New York: Seabury Press 1982) 439.

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Pierre Toussaint was an extremely busy man almost all his life. His “horizontal” relationships extended from family and friends, to business acquaintances and people who needed help, to perfect strangers. With that, and his seeming lack of formal theological training, it is understandable if the *Imitation of Christ* became a favorite companion to his prayer and charities. It provided a balance with its “vertical” and somewhat subjective piety. For “if the *Imitation* stresses certain perennial values of Christianity, spiritual writers today lay accent on others, equally valid. These different aspects need not be contradictory, but can be seen as complementary.”<sup>240</sup> Perhaps it was this need to balance the active element of the American approach to the life of the spirit that moved the great Fr. Anthony Kohlman, S.J., pastor of St. Peter’s for a time, to ask the General of the newly re-constituted Society to send him more copies of the book.

#### **c. Various books of Church instruction and devotion**

In researching the external sources of the spirituality of Pierre, perhaps the vaguest note of all is provided when it is simply affirmed:

Toussaint was a devoted disciple of his Church; her books of instruction were his daily food...his prayer-book was always in his pocket.<sup>241</sup>

The guesses, as to which books of instruction or devotion, are endless.

The pioneering Church in the United States contented itself for the most part with editions or translations of European, post-Tridentine catechisms and devotional books. The catechisms of Bishops Challoner of London and Butler of Ireland, for example, went through many editions in the States between 1786 and the 1860’s.<sup>242</sup> Toussaint would easily have had many works available to him in either English or French, books that had been imported or reedited in Haiti or the States. Such works might easily have gone from France to Haiti and from England or other countries to America. Also, the Toussaint home was a transit-station for new supplies of devotional books and catechisms from

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<sup>240</sup> Bernard Spaapen, “A New Look at an Old Classic,” in *Imitating Christ* by Edouard Cothenet el al (St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press 1974) 93.

<sup>241</sup> *Memoir* 105.

<sup>242</sup> See, Gerald S. Sloyan, “Catechism,” *NCE* 3:229; A.H. Songe, *A Bibliographical Survey of Catholic Textbooks Published in the United States from 1764 through 1865* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press 1956) passim. It is also interesting to note that a fellow parishioner of Toussaint’s, the future St. Elizabeth Bayley Seton (1774-1821), even before her conversion, had read George Hay’s works and Bossuet’s *L’exposition de la doctrine catholique*. See, *Sacra Rituum Congregatio, Baltimoren Beatificationis et Canonizationis servae dei Elizabeth Annae Bayley Viduae Seton, Fondatricis Congregationis Sororum a Caritate Sancti Iosephi in America (+1821). Positio super Virtutibus ex Officio Disposita*, Sectio Historica, no. 86 (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis 1957), Summarium, I, 33.

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Philadelphia and Baltimore, and priests and others would come to collect them there.<sup>243</sup> The important note is that the Church's "books of instruction were his *daily* food."

The same quandary arises relative to the prayer-book that Toussaint always carried in his pockets as he trudged the streets of New York.<sup>244</sup> One wonders was it the same *Imitation* mentioned above, or was it some totally different devotional book? All we do know is that there were many such devotional works available and Pierre obviously always kept one with him.<sup>245</sup>

#### **d. The influence of the French School of spirituality in the sermons of Bossuet and Massillon**

The last trace of what may have been a source of the spirituality of Pierre is left by a woman who had known him from her youth:

"Toussaint! Why, Toussaint was a household word with us, and is so still... He came every day to our house to dress my mother's hair, and our hair too. My sister and I loved him... He had taught himself many things; he had good taste and an excellent memory. He would quote for us whole pages of Bossuet and Massillon, — Massillon was his favorite author."<sup>246</sup>

Although these words obviously look back some years, they give us a clue that some aspects of Pierre's spirituality were grafted into the great Oratorian school of spirituality from France.

In concluding his study of that part of the Catholic Counter-Reformation and spiritual renewal, and referring to the element of Jansenism, Louis Cognet wrote: "By 1650 French mysticism is like a beautiful tree covered with flowers but wounded at the root."<sup>247</sup> However, it is worth recalling that, while attempts are made to place both the antecedents and even more the influence of any "school" within particular dates, it is a difficult task. Thus between books and the live influence of both Jesuit and Sulpician priests in Haiti or America it would have been easy for Francis de Sales, Lallement,

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<sup>243</sup> See, e.g., *PTP*, Fr. L'Homme to PT, Baltimore, Oct. 12, 1833, notifying him that a Fr. McCloskey will deliver "a box of books, a music book and six crucifixes" and enclosing the Bill of Landing from the skipper of the Schooner Celeste; Fr. Matthew Herard to PT, Bottle Hill, NJ, Dec. 24, 1833, asking the latter to forward the books sent by Fr. Deloud, Rector of the Baltimore seminary.

<sup>244</sup> *Memoir* 105.

<sup>245</sup> For an excellent overview and interesting critique of some of the material available, see: Joseph P. Chinnici, "Organisation of the Spiritual Life: American Catholic Devotional Works, 1791-1866," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979) 229-55.

<sup>246</sup> E.F. Cary, "The Story of Pierre Toussaint," *The Ave Maria* 37 (1893) 549.

<sup>247</sup> Louis Cognet, *Spiritualita' Moderna: La Scuola Francese (1500-1650)*. Storia della Spiritualità Cristiana: 6-2 (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1974), 361.

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Bérulle, deCondren, Olier, Vincent de Paul and others of that period of French religious inspiration to have touched the religious formation of Toussaint.

Pierre, it is said, could quote from memory sermons of the eminent orator and bishop, *Jacques Bénigne Bossuet* (1627-1704). This man typifies the inter-play of elements of spiritual renewal in his time: the Bible was always his chief source of inspiration, he was influenced by the life and works of Francis de Sales, his personal spirituality was definitely Berullian, and Vincent de Paul was his director for four years before priestly ordination. It may be true that “ideologically, ‘Providence’ as the center of his writings makes Bossuet the greatest representative of a teleological philosophy of history.”<sup>248</sup> However, “logic, indignation, sympathy and authority are the tools of Bossuet’s preaching,” and these, built on the solid bases of a “God-centered faith, fervent devotion to Jesus Christ, and belief in the Church,”<sup>249</sup> won him his place in history. Although he became embroiled in the disputes over Jansenism, both by study and temperament he was not truly adept in the field of mysticism.<sup>250</sup> Nonetheless, whether in sermons for Lent or Easter, on royal state occasions or feasts of saints, Bossuet combined elegance of language with a strong Christian call to “glorifier Dieu.”

A few years before he died, Bossuet had occasion to join the king in acclaiming the sermons of another man who had been trained in the Oratorian seminaries, *Jean Baptiste Massillon* (1663-1742). Although likewise accused of Jansenism later on, his whole life and work showed him to have been militantly the opposite. It has to be admitted, however, that his eloquence and zeal occasionally included some theological exaggeration.

“By temperament ... Massillon is a moralist,”<sup>251</sup> and that instinct brought a practicality and persuasiveness to sermons on Christ in His mysteries, the virtues, and other themes. As an orator he was a man “who is searching for the truth, stirs up the imagination, addresses himself to the heart, and wants to bring about a real decision.”<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Sister Georgiana Terstegge, *Providence as Idée-Maitresse in the Works of Bossuet*. Ph.D. dissertation (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1944), 243.

<sup>249</sup> Jacques Truchet, *La Prédication de Bossuet: Etude des thèmes* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1960), 279, 727.

<sup>250</sup> Jeremy Wilsington, “Bossuet, Jacques Bénigne,” *DS*, 2, 356-89.

<sup>251</sup> Paul Auvray, “Massillon, Jean Baptiste,” *DS*: 10, 754. Again there is a point of connection between Toussaint’s familiarity with Massillon and his contemporary and co-parishioner, the future St. Elizabeth Seton. After her conversion to Catholicism in 1805, Bishop Cheverus of Boston sent her five volumes of Massillon’s sermons for Advent and Lent. See, Annabelle M. Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton, 1774-1821* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons 1951) 116 and 332, note 79.

<sup>252</sup> A. Rayez, *Etudes sur Massillon: Actes des “Journées Massillon” de Clermont-Ferrand, 1974*, (n.p., Aurillac, 1975), 105, quoted in *DS* ut supra.

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If Pierre Toussaint was quoting Bossuet and Massillon from memory while doing his work as a hairdresser, we are certainly in the period after he came to the United States in 1784. The probability is that he had originally read their works in French as a young man in Haiti. Bossuet died in 1704 and Massillon in 1742. That Pierre considered them favorites and could quote whole pages shows how quickly those religious works had travelled across the ocean to other French-speaking people. The spirituality somewhat typified by these men had much that may have resonated in his soul. For example, “the heart of Berullianism and its freshness” consisted in making the mysteries of the life of Jesus live again, putting on and making one's own His dispositions or inner states. By grace a Christian is already in a state of adoration of the Father, and this “abnegation” and “servitude,” in union with Christ, sanctifies even the most domestic works.<sup>253</sup>

The fact remains that documentation doesn't indicate which sermons of Bossuet or Massillon may have been special favorites of Toussaint, or to what extent the attitudes and inspirations of the French school may have formed part of his spirituality.

But they definitely were in a kind of consecutive development with other elements such as his profound trust in an Almighty God, Heavenly Father, with the spirit of the Beatitudes, and the path of one who is walking in imitation of Christ.

### C. The Parameters of His Spirituality

Having touched upon some of the sources that influenced Toussaint's approach and response to God, it would be well now to indicate any possible parameters to that spirituality. By this are meant some of those elements that help us to situate, outline and define it a bit more clearly. There are four characteristics of the growth of Pierre Toussaint in holiness that seem worthy of special attention: its definite lay-dimension, its strong ecclesial and associative qualities, and marriage and family.

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#### 1. The Definite “Lay” Spirituality of Pierre Toussaint

If there is one very definite quality that shines forth in any attempt to study the spirituality of Toussaint, it is a thorough-going “lay” aspect. Although the related term

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<sup>253</sup> Jean Dagens, *Bérulle et les Origines de la Restauration Catholique (1575-1611)* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1952), 302, 368-69.

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“laity”<sup>254</sup> may seem awkward in describing a Christian believer’s context and condition in following the Lord, and even though the new Code of Canon Law still uses the word in describing the diversity of persons who make up the Church,<sup>255</sup> it is merely an endeavor to note that “a secular quality is proper and special to laymen.”<sup>256</sup> So what we are saying is that the spirituality of Pierre had a remarkably secular context and manner of expressing itself. People did not and could not confuse it, for example, with a spirituality of “those in holy orders and those in a religious State.”<sup>257</sup>

Recalling what has already been presented in Chapters 1 and 2 of this study, it should be sufficient just to list some of the elements that justify the adjective “lay” in relation to Pierre Toussaint:

- never once, either in his own words or writings, or in the writings of friends, do we hear of a vocation or even the thought of a vocation to the priesthood or religious life;
- he was married, and happily so, for over forty years, and that union was witnessed by all as one of deep mutual affection, collaboration in charities, and shared good humor or grief;
- while close friends of the Toussaints rejoiced at the news that Juliette was pregnant, for whatever reasons the couple remained childless; and yet Pierre was definitely “father” to his adopted niece, Euphemia;
- he lived in the social condition of both a slave and a freedman;
- he was a hairdresser, in times when the elaborate styles of the times demanded not only an apprenticeship but made it a profession of merit and importance;
- he was a household servant and manager and, as other situations arose, Toussaint nursed the sick, housed the homeless, found jobs for the unemployed, collected money for orphans, and comforted the dying;

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<sup>254</sup> See, Ignace de la Poterie, “L’origine et le sens primitif du mot ‘laic,’” NRT<sup>h</sup> (1980) 840-53; G. Giordano, “Appunti di Teologia Spirituale del Laicato,” (Roma, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Istituto di Spiritualità 1979-1980). For very thorough treatment and bibliography on the history and theology of the laity, see: A.M. Ebra, “Laico (storia del)” and Dionigi Tettamanzi, “Laico (teologia del)” in Ermanno Ancilli, ed., *Dizionario di Spiritualità dei Laici* 2 Vols. (Milano: Edizioni O.R. 1981) 360-93 and 393-410, respectively.

<sup>255</sup> For some of the expectations concerning this point in the proposed Code and post-promulgation commentary see: Salvatore Berlingo, “Lo Status di Fedele ed il Ministero del Laico nell’Ordinamento Giuridico della Chiesa, *Monitor Ecclesiasticus* 106, Series 16,A (1980-81): 437-445, and Lucas Moreira Neves, O.P., “Gli Statuti Giuridici delle Persone nella Chiesa: Presupposti Teologici, *Ibid* ut supra, 365-79; *Code of Canon Law*, Latin-English ed. (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis/Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983) nos. 207.1, 208-223, 224-231; Tarcisio Bertone, S.D.B., “Sistematica del Libro II - I ‘Christifideles’: Doveri e Diritti Fondamentali,” in *Il Nuovo Codice Di Diritto Canonico: Novità, Motivazione e Significato* (Rome: Libreria Editrice della Pontificia Università Lateranense), 96-106, and Pio Ciprotti, “I Laici Nel Nuovo Codice di Diritto Canonico, *Ibid.* ut supra, 107-117.

<sup>256</sup> *LG*, IV, 31.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*



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- he was a black man in a predominantly white society with restrictive laws and customs, yet “he never strove to be anything else” nor did he wish others to forget it;
- in his business and social life, Pierre never shied away from being known as a Catholic, and used the opportunities that presented themselves to explain the faith; and, he was a man of cultural refinement and musical ability, a faithful and caring friend to many, who mixed with people of all classes and won their respect.

A few of those elements might be more interesting than others in highlighting the “lay” dimension of the spirituality of Pierre Toussaint, but what is most striking is the whole ensemble: surely we have here the setting of that “secular quality” that is “proper and special to laymen.”

Nor was there any aping of a cloistered or withdrawn life style in the spirituality of Toussaint. True, we can only guess at the depth of his prayer and at the inspiration and motivation that moved his soul as he knelt at the prie-dieu outside his bedroom. True also, his daily activities began with attendance at Mass, in itself probably somewhat extraordinary for those times. But in all the writings and documentation we have, we never get the impression that Pierre's home took on the tone of a monastery or parish house nor that his devotion and religious dedication frightened people away. His spirituality was “in the world, but not of it.”<sup>258</sup>

Perhaps the greatest witness, however, to the definite “lay” element in the spirituality of Pierre Toussaint is given by those we might least expect: non-Catholics. The author of the *Memoir* and the writers of two of the newspaper obituaries published about him caught the connection between the qualities they admired in him, his many charitable works, and their religious inspiration. Though the writers wouldn't have known the phrase, they sensed his “lay spirituality.”

It is the *whole* which strikes me when thinking of him; his perfect Christian benevolence, displaying itself not alone in words, but in daily deeds; his entire faith, love and charity.<sup>259</sup>

...Thus goodness springing from refined and elevated principle, and from a sense of religious duty...formed the prominent feature of his character, and made his life a constant round of acts of kindness and sympathy. By such a life, governed by such principles of integrity, charity, and religious duty, Toussaint secured to himself the respect, esteem, and friendship of many.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Jn 17:15-16.

<sup>259</sup> *Memoir* 107.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.* 118-19.

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(Referring to Pierre's relationships and care for (other black people)...Only a fraternal sentiment truly Christian could have prompted his constant interest in their welfare, and ready sympathy in their pleasures and griefs.<sup>261</sup>

Thus there was a definite “secular quality” or “lay dimension” that is a parameter of Toussaint’s spirituality, and within it he was “penetrating and perfecting the temporal sphere of things through the spirit of the gospel.”<sup>262</sup>

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### 2. The Ecclesial Aspect

It would be almost impossible to think of Pierre Toussaint and not to think “Catholic Church” at the same time. His loyal and persevering faith was ecclesial in every sense of the word, built-up “on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone.”<sup>263</sup> There is therefore a certain ecclesial aspect that also forms a parameter of Toussaint’s spirituality.

It is in the Sacrament of Baptism that a person responds to the call of God to share in his life and holiness and becomes a member of the Church. Christian spirituality is basically founded on that event by which Christ made him his own, animates him with his Spirit, opens him to faith, hope and charity, and sends him into the world as a presence of the church in the realities of men.

In spite of researches, no certificate of the Baptism of Pierre Toussaint has been found . Indeed, it may as well be noted here, that also unable to be found were any documents relating to the reception of his first Holy Communion and the sacraments of Penance and Confirmation. But this should not cause undue dismay. If there had been such records, they may well have been lost with so many others during the fires and destruction of the revolution and later civil disturbances in 1789-92, or during devastating earthquakes like that of 1838. Nor should one be particularly shocked to discover that no such records were even made. Both government and church authorities frequently admonished the clergy in Haiti to be more faithful in writing such records and transmitting copies.<sup>264</sup> While nations like England or the United States would debate the appropriateness of baptizing slaves for years and suffer scruples with the implications of the “pro” and “con”

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid. 122.

<sup>262</sup> AA, 1,2.

<sup>263</sup> Eph 2:20

<sup>264</sup> See, e.g., the royal ordinance of July 13, 1763 and that of the Council of Cap Haitian, 1753, quoted in: Breathett, *French Missions*, 143 and 114. The American bishops also called for registers of baptisms, marriages and burials at meetings in 1791 and 1810. See: Peter Guilday, *A History of the Councils of Baltimore (1791-1884)* (New York: The Macmillan Company 1932) 65, 76.

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arguments, it seems that the priests and even most slave-owners in Haiti welcomed them to the sacrament.

When Pierre arrived in New York, though, the priest at the newly founded St. Peter's parish would have had no trouble in accepting his membership. Witnesses to the fact of his baptism could be found among the very people he was living with—his sister Rosalie, his aunt Marie, and their masters, Mr. and Mrs. Jean Bérard. It had been Jean's sister, Aurora, after all, who had served as godmother to Pierre. That fact is given touching testimony by Toussaint's own words and in the many letters to "my dear godson" that crossed from Paris to New York after they had rediscovered one another's whereabouts in 1815.

Nor do we know for certain when Pierre began his custom of daily Mass attendance. Henry T. Tuckerman, writing an obituary notice in the "Home Journal" a few days after Pierre's death, mentions as a public fact: "For sixty years he attended Mass at six in the morning, as punctual as a clock, until prostrated by illness."<sup>265</sup> The author of the *Memoir* helps us to pin-point more closely when this ceased:

His health was now evidently failing, yet morning after morning, through snow and ice and wintry frosts, his slow and tottering step was seen on his way to Mass, which he never once failed to attend for sixty years, until a few months before his death.<sup>266</sup>

So, if Pierre was no longer able to do this until a few months before his death in 1853, the sixty year old custom would have begun around 1793, some five or six years after he was brought to the United States. He was still a slave.

This testimony of Pierre's devotion to and participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church prompts other questions.

With his daily attendance at Mass, for example, how frequently did he receive Holy Communion? We have not a scrap of documentation about frequency. We can only conjecture from two considerations. First, witnesses are clear that Pierre considered the up-bringing of his adopted niece as "a sacred trust," and that he considered her religious training his prime responsibility. One of her letters gives a beautifully succinct understanding of the Eucharist after her first Holy Communion.<sup>267</sup> If for no other reason, then, it would seem reasonable that Toussaint gave good example by his own practice of the frequent reception of the Eucharist. Secondly, Fr. John Quinn, who was pastor of St. Peter's from 1784-1808, granted the recent convert and future St. Elizabeth Bayley Seton

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<sup>265</sup> *Memoir* 123.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.* 104.

<sup>267</sup> *PTP*, Euphemia to Pierre, Sept. 16, ?.

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permission to receive Communion every Sunday.<sup>268</sup> Since he was known as a dedicated pastoral man, would he not have extended encouragement to accept the same favor to a parishioner who daily attended Mass? The whole thrust of Pierre's life and his ecclesial sense lead us to conjecture that he received Communion as frequently as he was able.

We are in somewhat the same quandary if it is asked how often Pierre received the Sacrament of Penance. We have already noted that a friend alluded to "his confessions and penitence" concerning his quick temper. The only other reference we have would indicate that there was such a practice in his life and that he clearly perceived the theology of that sacramental encounter through the human instrumentality of the priest, but it tells us nothing of the frequency:

As he grew more feeble he was obliged to give up his attendance on the church. This occasioned him some depression. One of his Protestant friends who observed it said, 'Shall I ask a priest to come and see you? Perhaps you wish to confess.' After a long pause he said, 'A priest is but a man when I am at confession, I confess to God; when I stand up I see a man before me.'<sup>269</sup>

It was in that same St. Peter's church that Pierre was married to Mary Juliette Gaston on Aug. 11, 1811. It was from that same pioneer church in New York that he was buried after a Requiem Mass on Saturday, July 2, 1853. Lacking other evidence, since Viaticum registers evidently were not kept in those early days of the church in New York, we cite the words of a friend who visited him a few days before his death:

He (Pierre) told me he had received the last Communion, for which he had been earnest, and mentioned that two Sisters of Charity had been to see him, and prayed with him.<sup>270</sup>

One can also wonder about other aspects of Catholic practice such as the precepts of fast and abstinence. Judging from his care in other duties, if the church regulations at the time prescribed both Friday and Saturday as weekly days of abstinence, we would be inclined to believe that Pierre and his household kept the observance, especially since they lived in a port city and fairly close to the wharves. But there is no documentation.

There were other senses, too, in which the spirituality of Pierre Toussaint was ecclesial. For the first thirty-nine years of his life in New York City, there was only the one Catholic church, St. Peter's. Since the Catholic population was only about three percent of the total when he arrived, and since most of his working contacts would be non-Catholic, the local parish and its priests formed an almost natural center. Furthermore, it was helpful that most of the pastors and some of the assistant priests seem to have spoken

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<sup>268</sup> Joseph I. Dirvin, Mrs. Seton: *Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy 1962) 177.

<sup>269</sup> *Memoir* 106.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.* 112.

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French as well as English. While black people were seated separately from the whites at services and there are receipts of the Toussaint's pew rent, the parish church was still obviously the center of devotional life. The family took part in the special Holy Week ceremonies and, once there were other parishes, followed the custom of devotional visits to them.<sup>271</sup> They began their Christmas by attending the special early morning Mass.<sup>272</sup>

Furthermore, Pierre's ecclesial spirituality not only included cooperation with and the support of his pastors, but it went out to other priests in need and to assisting new religious communities like the Sisters of Charity and the Oblates of Divine Providence in their works.<sup>273</sup> He gave assistance to the foundation of new parishes, and to the educational and charitable projects begun by them. Indeed, "in the style of the men and women who helped Paul to spread the gospel (cf. Acts 18:18, 26; Rom 16:3), the laity with the right apostolic attitude supply what is lacking to their brethren, and refresh the spirit of pastors and the rest of the faithful (cf. I Cor 16:17-18)." <sup>274</sup> So it was with Pierre.

It may be worth remembering, at this point, that it is a black man in New York City in the years 1787 to 1853 that is under discussion. For most of those years he was busy working by day and doing errands of charity by night. Any correspondence or other documentation doesn't really begin until after Pierre was given his freedom in 1806. When he did write, it was usually in reply and evidently from an almost apostolic motive of giving encouragement and sharing news that would bring comfort and consolation to separated friends and relatives.<sup>275</sup> From the letters of others, we gather that he seldom shared the inner workings of his soul and even less publicized or flaunted his religious practices. While the somewhat contemporary St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's correspondence was very revelatory of her spirituality, and included the seeking and receiving of spiritual direction from several priests and bishops, it is not the same in Pierre. Whether this was from shyness, a sense of social "correctness" because of his color (although many of his correspondents were also black), or an instinct to keep his letters brief and to the point, is simply not known. But it has already been indicated that, even without precise documentation concerning his religious practices, people sensed that Pierre's "center" and his "way" in following Christ flowed and his membership in the Church.

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<sup>271</sup> See, e.g., *PTP*: Euphemia to Pierre: April 11, 1828; July 13, 1827; Oct. 19, 1827.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.* Euphemia to Pierre, Dec. 6, 1828.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.* Fanny Montpensier to Juliette Toussaint, Baltimore: Oct. 25, 1829; Fanny Montpensier to Juliette Toussaint, Baltimore, Feb. 21, 1848; Michael McDonnell to PT, Montreal, Oct. 29, 1840; Abbe Jules de Manip to PT, Oct. 29, 1847; Sister Cecilia to PT, Nov 14, 1821.

<sup>274</sup> *AA*, 10.

<sup>275</sup> See, e.g., *PTP*, Jane Salles to PT, Paris, April 22, 1835; Sully Morin to PT, Paris, Oct. 13, 1837: "It is you, my dear Toussaint, I repeat, it is only you who give me news of my children;" M. Navarre to PT, Paris, May 7, 1838.

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But if a sense of completeness concerning the ecclesial parameter of Toussaint's spirituality is somewhat frustrated by a lack of detailed information, perhaps it would be well to conclude this section with Pierre's own words and those of the pastor at Pierre's death.

In his last Will and Testament, Pierre left sums of money for the Eucharist to be offered for his soul, for the personal use of the pastor, and to St. Patrick's church:

as the gift of one whom all seasons of happiness or sorrow hath there sought the communion of his God in the form best suited to the feelings of his heart...<sup>276</sup>  
...where with my departed wife Juliette I have for so many years found encouragement, hope and consolation from our worship.<sup>277</sup>

There is, finally, the dramatic affirmation and witness given by the Pastor of St. Peter's church at Pierre's funeral. The church was "well filled" with mourners of all classes who would have scoffed at or later watered-down any hyperbole. But the record reads:

Mr. Quinn made a most interesting address. He did not allude to his (Toussaint's) color, and scarcely to his station; it seemed as if his virtues as a man and a Christian had absorbed all other thoughts...Mr. Quinn said, 'There were few left among the clergy superior to him in devotion and zeal for the Church and for the glory of God; among laymen, none.'<sup>278</sup>

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### 3. The Associative Parameter

It is worthwhile to indicate also the strong associative element that formed a parameter to the whole of Pierre Toussaint's spirituality. If one were to consider, for example, a spiritual life assisted by reading *The Imitation of Christ* as indicative of a more cloistered or "vertical" spirituality, one could misjudge the man. The same is true if one sees a somewhat restrictive catholicism in Pierre's devoted loyalty to St. Peter's. For, both by personality and by profession, he was a very social being and mixed easily with other individuals and groups. This was also part of his spirituality.

In one of the obituaries published after his death, it was noted that Pierre had a special relationship with three classes of people: the wealthy and prominent families for whom he worked, those of Haitian or French descent to whom he was bound by language and culture, and his own people of the same color.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> PT, *Last Will and Testament*, 520.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid. 529.

<sup>278</sup> *Memoir* 113-14.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid. 122.

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But from the correspondence he received, we know that Toussaint's associations were far beyond those categories. It is enough just to look at the internationality of the names that signed the letters.<sup>280</sup>

Again, Pierre Toussaint was associative as a neighbor and as a citizen of New York. Even from the early 1800s, documentation shows us how people turned to him for help, whether it was in obtaining wood for the fire in winter, nursing assistance for the sick, or finding employment.<sup>281</sup>

The obituaries of Pierre published in the New York papers not only praise his character but show him to be a man well known in city life.<sup>282</sup>

Indeed, there is almost no aspect of life that doesn't find Pierre associating with others outside of his own faith, family and friends, work situations, and language and cultural background. While his personality and profession may have provided a natural stimulus to be outgoing, the pioneering and adventurous immigrations and growth of the United States and New York City at that time probably contributed to it also. But both because it concerns the character of Toussaint and the way in which he lived, association with others is a significant parameter in his spirituality.

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### 4. The Parameter of Marriage and Family

The bond of marriage and family was also an important parameter to the spirituality of the married layman, Pierre Toussaint. For, ideally speaking, "Christian husbands and wives are cooperators in grace and witnesses of faith on behalf of each other, their children, and all others of their household," making of their home and relationships a "sanctuary of the domestic church."<sup>283</sup>

That Pierre felt a vocation to the married state is evident by his preparation for it. As a responsible brother and "because he wanted her to be able to take her place as a free-woman among the matrons of New York," Pierre saved for and then purchased the freedom of his sister Rosalie before her marriage to the freedman, Jean. That done, "he now had time to think of himself. He had formed an attachment for Juliette Noel."<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> PTP, *passim*, note: Diego Moya, P. Koven, Miss Phoenix, N. Bagioli, S.A. Moore, Sophia Keavoz, A. Golvera, N. McDowell, F.G. Waddington, M. Guttwald, M. McCarthy, Iovensca.

<sup>281</sup> See, e.g., *PTP*, Widow LeDuc to PT, June 3, 1804; M. DuBerceau to PT, n.d.; Miss Gillingham to PT, n.d.; L. Emmerling to PT, n.d.

<sup>282</sup> *Memoir* 117-124.

<sup>283</sup> *AA*, 11.

<sup>284</sup> *Memoir* 32.

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Juliette herself was a slave, “the daughter of a respectable woman named Claudine Gaston.” When Pierre purchased Juliette’s freedom, she was fifteen and he was thirty-seven. They were later married on August 16, 1811 and were to share forty years together.

Even granting the difference in age, the witnesses indicate that it was a good marriage right from the start:

His union with Juliette was happy...She was a judicious and affectionate wife, by her neatness and order making his house pleasant to him, and taking a more than equal share in the labors of the family...

Everyman must value the respect of his wife, and Toussaint could not but be gratified with the evident delight Juliette received from the attention paid him. When her friends congratulated her on having such a good husband, her frank, happy smile...gave a full assent to their commendations.<sup>285</sup>

There was often something sportive and paternal in Toussaint’s manner towards his wife, and when the difference in their ages was understood, it was easily accounted for...They were truly attached to each other. ‘Je ne donnerois pas ma Juliette,’ said he to one of his French friends, ‘pour toutes les dames du monde; elle est belle a mes yeux,’—I would not give my Juliette for all the women in the world; she is beautiful in my eyes.’<sup>286</sup>

After Juliette’s death, a friend who had known her for many years wrote: “It isn’t surprising that Juliette has left only sincere friends. She was one of those people who naturally delight the whole world...having always been so pious and so charitable, as know well.”<sup>287</sup> But Pierre’s view of their love for one another is perhaps best caught in a letter he wrote to Juliette when she was visiting friends in Baltimore:

I have this moment received your letter, my dear wife, and I answer it on the spot. Everything goes on well here. I have a great wish to see you, but I wish much more that you should remain as long as your are pleased to do so, for I love my wife for herself, not for myself.<sup>288</sup>

Yet their marriage was still the union of two different people, and there must have been the ordinary differences. Many years later a white gentleman “of the highest respectability” who had roomed for some months with the Toussaints at their new and larger home at 144 Franklin Street wrote:

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid. 80-81.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid. 101.

<sup>287</sup> *PTP*, Fanny Monpensier to PT, Jan. 27, 1852.

<sup>288</sup> *Memoir* 100-101.



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I remember how much I was pleased with his deportment and behavior towards his wife. Juliette was a good woman, but unlike Toussaint; she was flesh and blood, while he was possessed of the spirit of one man out of many thousands.<sup>289</sup>

Perhaps one key to their mutual respect and joy is found in the comment of another friend:

His deportment to his wife was worthy of imitation even by white men. She was twenty years younger than he was, and no doubt had a will of her own; but she always yielded it to Toussaint's, because she said she was not obliged to do it.<sup>290</sup>

An amusing story was passed on that is typical even of some modern husbands when they go shopping with their wives:

Juliette was about to purchase a mourning shawl, for she had just lost a relative. The shawls were exhibited. 'How do you like this for mourning?' said she to Toussaint. 'Very pretty,' he replied. 'I think,' said she, 'it is handsome enough for church.' 'O yes! Very good for that.' 'Don't you think it will do to wear if it rains?' 'O certainly!' 'I think it will do sometimes to wear to market, don't you?' 'Very nice,' he replied; 'pray take it, Juliette; it is good for mourning, for church, for rain, and for market; it is a very nice shawl.' Juliette secured it, much satisfied with her bargain.<sup>291</sup>

So while it seems that Pierre and Juliette were temperamentally quite different, they were truly devoted to one another and each easily made friends. Apart from Pierre's custom of daily Mass, both the *Memoir* and many, many letters make it obvious that they shared regular church attendance, civic and social events, and also were partners in their many works of charity.

Although the biographies describe the Toussaints as a childless couple, the possibility that there may have been the conception of a child of their own was treated in Chapter 1.

At any rate, the mutual love of the Toussaints welcomed their six-months old niece Euphemia, when Pierre's sister, Rosalie, became too ill to care for the infant. At Rosalie's death a few months later, they formally adopted the child. The family physician did not give much encouragement that the frail and sickly child would live. But the new parents were unremitting in their care and every day Pierre would carry the infant in his arms to the Battery Park in the hope that the fresher air would strengthen her lungs.

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid. 82-3.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid. 52-3.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid. 53.

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The first year of Euphemia's life was a struggle for existence, but their efforts were blessed. "No parents could have done more."<sup>292</sup>

The spirit with which Pierre and Juliette cared for Euphemia and brought her up was already described in Chapter 1. However, the weekly "letters" of Euphemia to her uncle tell even more of the family spirit that was present in the home, note the fact that there were the normal upsets, and that the Toussaints had passed on their own deep faith. Some examples, together with spelling and grammatical mistakes:

Dear Uncle,

I am very sorry that to please you I did not wish you a happy birthday as I had not a clear heart to wish it to you I feel very angry with myself to think that I had occasion to make you angry Dear Uncle will you be so kind if you please to forgive me this once and wait until New Years and then I hope I will be able to wish you a happy New Years and feel happy myself allways and learn well.<sup>293</sup>

I have begun to know how we must serve God I hope it will finish well and that I may always remember my duty towards God Dear Uncle after I have made my first communion I would like to have all the little orphans to come and drink tea with me I



**Orphanage for Negro Children**

<sup>292</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>293</sup> *PTP*, Euphemia to Pierre, Nov. 3 1825.

### Chapter 3: The Spirituality of Pierre Toussaint

dare say they would be very glad to come they do not often have an opportunity of having a good tea with some little delicacies.<sup>294</sup>

O how happy I feel to think that I am so near to make my first communion my conscience is so clear I hope it will always be the same we do not deserve the goodness of god but he is so good that he pardons all our sins we are his chindon he loves us and we ought to love him.<sup>295</sup>

O how sorry I am that you was not there to see Miss Meetz married she looked so sweet and beautiful she looked like an Angle but what I think was so good in her that she should come and kiss my aunt and me before all the company I believe nobody would do it but her...it will come quite difficult to me to call her Mrs. Moulton I have made that mistake already.<sup>296</sup>

Will you be pleased to accept of my most respectful compliments on the close of the old and the commencement of the Newyear as it has pleased God to give you good health during the course of the last year and I beseech him to grant you the same to the end of the present and many more this is a happiness your family have most earnestly to wish for and me in particular. Adieu Dear Uncle, Euphemia Toussaint.<sup>297</sup>

Every indication available points to the fact that marriage and family were truly characteristic elements of the spirituality of Pierre Toussaint. His love for his wife and adopted niece was enormous, and extended to other family members. In making

provisions in his Last Will and Testament and its later codicil, Pierre verified:

I desire to manifest to my beloved wife Juliette, for whom I have the most tender affection and love, the confidence which I repose in her and my consideration for her pleasure and happiness.<sup>298</sup> ...and though the pleasure of my heavenly Father has taken from me my beloved wife, Juliette, and her mother, Claudine Gaston, and thus all the provisions of my said will have become inoperative as to them, yet it is most congenial to my feelings to have the assurances of my deep interest and affection in these now departed ones, as I made them when they were the objects of my daily concern and care.<sup>299</sup>

Perhaps the mutuality of the love and concern that typified Pierre as a husband and father is best reflected in Juliette's concern for him. Two years before Pierre's death, she became ill and knew she was dying. But her worry was for Pierre. Pointing to the little room that was fitted out with a prie-dieu and crucifix outside the bedroom, Juliette said to a visiting friend:

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid. Euphemia to Pierre, July 21, 1826.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid. Euphemia to Pierre, Sept. 15, 1826.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid. Euphemia to Pierre, Sept. 15, 1826.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid. Euphemia to Pierre, Jan. 1, 1829.

<sup>298</sup> PT, *Last Will and Testament* 522.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid. 538.

‘Ah,’ said she, ‘he prays for me there,—is it all the comfort he has; he will soon be alone. Poor Toussaint!’<sup>300</sup>

## D. The Qualities of the Christian Spirituality of Toussaint

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### 1. Faith, Public and Persevering

#### a. Pierre's concept of God and Jesus Christ, and the essence of his spirituality

The God of Pierre Toussaint was a truly personal God. He was a Father whose Will, all holy and wise, works through the uncertainties of this life and calls us to our true home and life with Him. This relationship of Father and son would seem to have been the bedrock of Pierre's spiritual life, and would help to explain the faithful, patient, and trusting attitudes that marked his adult religion. Such is the picture that emerges from the few places where Toussaint directly alludes to his concept of God.<sup>301</sup>

In the writing that we have, Pierre not only refers to an “Almighty God” but also to “my heavenly Father.”<sup>302</sup> This use of the possessive in even a public document shows that Pierre was “at home” with his God, and reflects his internalization of the teaching of Jesus on prayer and its spirit: “Our Father.”

Moreover, this relationship between God as Father and Pierre as son resulted in a personal presence. This God was not only the One of whom was asked “daily bread.” This was the God whose bond with us was described in the teaching of Paul and would seem to have been welcomed and lived with a special sensitivity by the slave Pierre: “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”<sup>303</sup> So Pierre could walk through life and face death saying: “God is with me.”<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> *Memoir* 102.

<sup>301</sup> On this concept of a personal God, see: Raniero Cantalamessa, “The Development of the Concept of a Personal God in Christian Spirituality,” and Pier Schoonenberg, “God as Person(al),” in Edward Schillebeeckx and Bas van Iersel, eds., *A Personal God? = Concilium* 103 (New York: The Seabury Press, A Crossroad Book 1977), 57-65, 80-93.

<sup>302</sup> PT, *Last Will and Testament* 523, 527, 528.

<sup>303</sup> Rom 8:15-16.

<sup>304</sup> *Memoir* 112.

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Toussaint's faith also told him that this God, this heavenly Father, was a good Father. During the time of his adopted daughter's illness, he gave word to that trust when he said "God is good; we know that here on earth, but my Euphemia will know it first there," pointing upwards.<sup>305</sup> We are told that Pierre often used the expression, "I thank God for all his goodness."<sup>306</sup>

Because God is good, Pierre's faith also would have resounded fully in spirit to the proclamation of Paul that "for those who love God, all things work together unto good"<sup>307</sup> God's Will, manifested in the story of salvation and in the events of our human and personal stories, was thus to be discerned and welcomed as a sign of His goodness toward us. It was holy, and the Father fulfilled it with wisdom.

If the concept of God as an all-wise, good and provident Father was the bed rock of Toussaint's Christian stance, there are not as many references to precise his concept of Jesus. Whether in Haiti or in New York, Jesus as Saviour would certainly have been preached as the center of the whole Christian belief. Later in this chapter it will also be seen how thoroughly Pierre absorbed and lived the spirit of charity and its practical doing that was the good fruit of the teaching of Jesus.

One key phrase indicates that Pierre's faith had established a confident donation of himself to Christ, the Son of God, as his Saviour. Again it is to be noted that this was a personal relationship. He entrusted himself to Christ not just as "the Saviour," or even as "our Saviour," but to "my Saviour."<sup>308</sup>

The other reference to Toussaint's concept of Jesus is redolent of the teaching of the spirit of Paul and James:

He was deeply impressed with the character of Christ; he heard a sermon from Dr. Channing, which he often quoted. 'My friends,' said Channing, 'Jesus can give you

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid. 65.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Rm 8:28.

<sup>308</sup> PT, *Last Will and Testament* 523.

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nothing so precious as himself, as his own mind. May this mind be in you. Do not think that any faith in him can do you good, if you do not try to be pure and true like him.<sup>309</sup>

The earliest biographer of Pierre adds this editorial comment:

“We trust many will recognize the teachings of the Saviour in Toussaint’s character.”<sup>310</sup>

With full faith in his heavenly Father and trying to put on the mind of Christ and the attitudes of the Beatitudes, Toussaint lived out the connection between “Our Father” and “Thy Will be done.” He indicated his theological perspective when he wrote:

It was the holy will of God to take from me my beloved adopted daughter Euphemia and I submitted to the blow, with faith in the wisdom of my Heavenly Father, supported by my trust in my Saviour.<sup>311</sup>

This discerning, accepting and cooperating with the will of his heavenly Father became a hallmark of Pierre’s spirituality. There are innumerable indications, spread over many years, of how often Pierre sounded this theme of his religious life. For example:

...as you say very truly, we must resign ourselves to the will of God.<sup>312</sup>  
...But we have to will as the Lord wills, as I’ve heard my dear Toussaint say. I’ve listened to you and haven’t lost courage.<sup>313</sup>  
...You have the consolations of a Christian, my dear Toussaint, and I have no need to ask how you have borne this test. In each trial, haven’t you always said, Lord, thy will be done and not mine?<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> *Memoir* 58. This is one of the very rare times when Hannal Lee Sawyer, the author of the “Memoir” on Toussaint seems to have made a mistake. William Ellery Channing (+1842) “was the star of the church of his day” (Ralph Waldo Emerson), an outstanding preacher of the Unitarians in the United States, and a strong advocate of Abolition. With most of his preaching in Boston, research indicates that Channing only preached in New York three times during his lifetime: twice in April, 1809 and then on Dec. 7, 1826. On each occasion, the text of the sermon did not include the quotation mentioned by the *Memoir*. See: Jack Mendelsohn, Channing: *The Reluctant Rebel* (Boston: Little, Brown 1971) 83, and n.n., *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing, D.D.* (London: Christian Life Publishing Company, Routledge & Sons, London & New York 1884), “Contents”. Nor is it included in David Robinson, ed., *William Ellery Channing: Selected Writings* = Sources of American Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 1985). The quotation is found exactly in a sermon dated, by Channing’s own hand, in 1832 and is entitled, “The Imitableness of Christ’s Character.” See; n.n., *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.*, 6 Vols., rev. ed. (Boston: James Munroe 1841 - 43 ) V, 211; n.n., *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing, D.D.* (London: Christian Life Publishing Company, Routledge & Sons, London & New York 1884) 246. Since Pierre Toussaint seems never to have left New York City and Channing did not give the indicated sermon during his visits to New York, the conclusion might be that Toussaint read a printed text of Channing’s 1832 sermon and thus came to know the quotation.

<sup>310</sup> *Memoir* 58.

<sup>311</sup> PT, *Last Will and Testament* 523.

<sup>312</sup> PTP, Gabriel Nicolas to PT, Charleston, July 5, 1829.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid. Mrs. E. Dannenberg to PT, Baltimore, Jan. 1, 1818.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid. n.n. (references indicate a member of the Schuyler or Hamilton family) to PT, Middletown, Sept. 12, 1849.

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Indeed, this spirit of seeking and accepting the will of the Father in the working out of his kingdom seems also to have passed from Pierre to the members of his household, as well as to friends. Among many others, two comments from the “letters” of his young niece illustrate the spirit:

O we have had very bad weather all this week and I hope that it will not last any longer but we must take it as God gives it to us let it be good or bad if we bear it with patience for a little while God is too good to let his children suffer if they will try to serve him well.<sup>315</sup>

...but God knows better than we do he does everything for the best and it is singular that we cannot be contented.<sup>316</sup>

But another hallmark of the spirituality of Toussaint was his life-long effort to put on the mind of Christ by interiorizing the spirit of the Beatitudes and putting into practice the great commandment of love. So when Pierre repeated with Jesus, “Nonetheless, Father, not my will be done, but thine,” it was no merely passive attitude or process. Whether it was in seeking the proper medical care for Euphemia or in his endless acts of charity to alleviate and improve the social, religious or economic conditions of his needy contemporaries, Pierre’s sonship with the Father and the welcoming of His will seemed to inspire a positive approach.

It should come as no surprise, then, that these basic hallmarks of the spirituality of Pierre Toussaint reflect so well some of the themes that would be found in the external sources already identified as external sources of that spirituality—Scripture and especially the Beatitudes, the *Imitation of Christ*, books of the Church’s instruction and devotion, and the emphases and teachings found in the sermons of Bossuet and Massillon. Each and every one of them could easily have contributed to forming those hallmarks in Pierre’s spiritual personality. They would have helped him to set those basic attitudes to work in a context that involved the constant interplay of the parameters of secularity, church-relatedness, association with others, and marriage and family life. There was also a lifetime of listening to the sermons of his parish priests, as well as the shared inspiration of letters from friends like Mrs. Larue.<sup>317</sup> While the exact process of

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid. Euphemia to Pierre, Aug. 18, 1826.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid. Euphemia to Pierre, May 11, 1827.

<sup>317</sup> Mrs. Larue had obviously known the Toussaints in New York and then moved to LeHavre, France. Her letters to Pierre extended from 1821 to 1846. See, e.g., *PTP*, P. Larue to PT, LeHavre, Dec. 8, 1834: “So you see, my poor Toussaint, each of us has his sufferings and crosses to carry. Happy are those who bear them in a christian way and with submission. For they serve to purify us from past faults, to detach us from the present, and to make us hope for a better time. The other life is the one toward which we should aim all our desire, but for that we have to be courageous and to unite our sufferings with those of our Saviour Who gave us the perfect example of patience. But see, my poor Toussaint, I am always giving you sermons. Yet I don’t honestly think you mind.” Also, Ibid., Mrs. Larue to PT, n.d.: “My intention was not to preach for I know you have no need of such... You are always the same, that is, so devout and zealous for our holy religion. I will never forget the conversations that I had with you about that, and they were always a consolation to me.”

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the formation of that spirituality will never be known, it seems worthy of the Gospel yardstick: “by their fruits you will know them.”<sup>318</sup>

To sum up. The essence of the spirituality of Pierre Toussaint, at least from the documentation available, would seem to consist of these elements: a personal and persevering faith in God as a wise and provident Father and in Jesus Christ, our Saviour, and in his teachings; and both of these as inspiring a yearning to seek, accept and do the Father’s will and to make present his kingdom by unending acts of practical love for the neighbor. Such was “the Godward thrust” of the human life of Pierre Toussaint.

#### **b. Where are Devotions to Mary or the Saints?**

Chapter 2 of this study noted some of the elements that made for ecclesiastical and social tensions in the Haiti of Pierre’s time, as well as the growing pains of a new country and a new church in New York. It would be easy to comprehend, therefore, if those circumstances had left him with a high-profile “folk religion,” marked with only rudiments of the faith or catechism and a fervent sensitivity to devotions to the Mother of God or the saints. A lack of priests, poor preaching, un-organized religious instruction, illiteracy and other circumstances might easily have moved the Catholic faithful to seek more than ordinary consolation and religious inspiration in such devotions.

But the indications in the available sources show little. There is almost nothing in this regard.

One exception is a powerful one:

In speaking to a Protestant friend of the worship of the Virgin, he said, turning to a portrait of a near relation of hers in the room, ‘You like to look at this: it makes you think of her, love her more; try to do what she likes you to do.’ In this interesting manner he described his own feelings towards the pictures and images of the Virgin Mary.<sup>319</sup>

Does this mean that the spirituality of Pierre was of a kind of essentialist, abstractly theological type? Could a man whose spiritual inheritance might understandably include devotional prayers and practices from the so-called French school not include a special place or echo in his heart for devotions to the Sacred Heart, the Blessed Sacrament, Mary, or some of the saints?

The answer is given according to the documentation available. While we have so few indications available, it does not mean necessarily at all that Pierre’s spirituality was devoid of devotions or rigidly abstract. It is enough to recall the small room in the Toussaint house “fitted up with a crucifix, a prie-dieu, and many beautiful emblems of the Catholic faith”; the prayer book that “was always in his pocket;” or even the fact that the

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<sup>318</sup> Mt 7: 20.

<sup>319</sup> *Memoir* 106.



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family friend Sorbieu used exact accounts of fulsome liturgies and devotional services to entice the Toussaints to move to France.<sup>320</sup> The simple fact is that there is no ample evidence of precisely which devotions figured in Pierre's spirituality and to what extent.

#### **c. A Spirituality Without Extras**

A careful study of the life and spirit of Pierre Toussaint, together with reflection on the documentation available, also evokes this principle: his spirituality consisted in following Christ and the Gospels in an externally ordinary way. We find little that is commonly called extraordinary.

There are not, for example, signs of special charisms or extraordinary graces either in his inner life or in his service to others. Whether in the many letters or in the Memoir, one seeks in vain for word of visions, levitations, heroic penances, prolonged hours of prayers, or such things as gifted calls to leadership, administration, or teaching.

Possibly this could cause disappointment. Since Pierre obviously had a sensitive and refined nature, some might wonder why this never became the context for extraordinary gifts in prayer, in his most personal union with God. Maybe it did. Again, since he had influence among friends and neighbors, exercised some leadership and had a talent for explaining the faith, there might be a temptation to see in these gifts a call to special service. History and theology could be forced and twisted to make capitol of the true graces and talents that are evident in the life and spirit of Toussaint. But such effort would be a disservice to his true greatness and spirituality.

At the end of this chapter there will be occasion to search out the ways in which Pierre's spirituality may have been extraordinary. But for now, suffice it to say that his Christian life of prayer and charity were not marked with what are generally called extraordinary or miraculous manifestations of the grace of God working in and through him.

#### **d. A Faith, Public and Persevering**

An essential element in any evangelization, and generally the first one, is the witness of one's own Christian life. That involves presence, sharing, and solidarity.

Nevertheless this always remains insufficient, because even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified—what Peter called always having ‘your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have—and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus.’<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> See, e.g., *PTP*, Jean Sorbieu to PT, Rouen, May 8, 1819; May 20, 1819; August 23, 1819.

<sup>321</sup> Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*,” On Evangelisation in the Modern World, Eng. trans. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference 1976) 22.

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Instances have already been cited in which people specifically recalled Pierre as having shared his faith with quotations from Scripture, passages from sermons and religious writings and prayerful ejaculations, as well as explaining “often” Catholic beliefs and practices to those not of the same faith.

Again, the time perspective is important. We are talking about a time when Catholics were first a small minority and then a population phenomenon through immigration. A time when there was a strong anti-catholic bias in many quarters. A time when a black person did not have the same social, educational or civic opportunities as others. Yet Pierre’s faith, marked as it was with a total trust in the goodness of God our Father and His Will and in the saving power of Jesus our Saviour, was both public and inspiring. His first biographer could write:

His simple method of expressing his convictions was striking, and often instructive. He was enlightened in his own faith, not from reading, but from a quick perception of the truth...<sup>322</sup> His religion was fervent, sincere, and made a part of himself. It was never laid aside for worldly purposes.<sup>323</sup>

Upon hearing of his last illness, another person who had known Pierre from childhood wrote:

...It is the *whole* which strikes me when thinking of him his perfect Christian benevolence, displaying itself not alone in words, but in daily deed; his entire faith, love and charity.<sup>324</sup>

But there is another quality of the faith of Toussaint that deserves to be noted. It is *persevering*. Almost from the time of any documentation or witnesses, after Pierre had arrived in New York in 1787, there are traces of his steadfastness in the Catholic faith. In his 1785 report to Propaganda Fidel on the state of the church in the United States, the future bishop Carroll remarked that the faith of the people was in danger because they

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<sup>322</sup> *Memoir* 106.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.* 109.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.* 107

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were such a minority and without priests or schools and in constant association with non-Catholics, and that indeed many had fallen away.<sup>325</sup>

Another danger, especially to a sensitive and devout man, could have been from within the household of the faith, namely, the bickerings and differences among the priests at St. Peter's themselves or the factions and squabbles between them and the different immigrant groups or the trustees, or even the conduct of some of the parishioners.<sup>326</sup>

Instead, the faith of Pierre seems to have deepened and developed. It passed through those dangers and "From a quick perception of the truth," to his God like an arrow toward its target.

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### 2. A Hope That Cost Much

The Apostle Paul prayed that God would so gift the early Christians with faith that, "having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you."<sup>327</sup> Then he went on to affirm that, graciously saved by faith and having been made alive together with Christ, God will raise us up with him. Thus called to share God's life here and in the future, the Christian strives to overcome sin and difficulties in making present the kingdom of God not by counting on his own strength or merits, but solely on the promises and unfailing help of God. Even Toussaint's favorite Beatitudes,

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<sup>325</sup> John Tracy Ellis, ed., *Documents of American Catholic History* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing 1956) 461. This may be the place to note that, in the course of this study, a comment was made that someone "had heard" that Pierre Toussaint had attended services in a Protestant Church. There is no evidence to support such a statement. Indeed, it is precisely non-Catholics who attest to Pierre and Juliette's firm devotion to and practice of their Catholicism. This misunderstanding may well have arisen because the Toussaints did attend Catholic Holy Week services in "Christ Church," Ann Street. See: *PTP*, Euphemia to Pierre, April 11, 1828. "Christ Church" was formerly an Episcopalian edifice that the saintly Cuban exile, Fr. Felix Varela, had purchased in 1827 to accommodate the growing number of Catholics in New York. When that building developed structural problems in 1832, the regular parishioners were distributed among two new parishes, that of St. James, and Transfiguration. The latter building had formerly served as the Reformed Scotch Presbyterian Church. See: John Gilmary Shea, ed., *The Catholic Church of New York City* (New York: Lawrence G. Goulding & Co. 1878) 390-94, 687-89; Joseph and Mary M. McCadden, *Felix Varela: Torch Bearer from Cuba*, 2nd. ed. (New York: The United States Catholic Historical Society 1969 / San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ramollo Bros. 1984) 77-78, 99-100. For more information on the New York ministry of Varela, see: Felipe J. Estevez, *Spirituality of Felix Varela, An Historical-Spiritual Study of Felix Varela's Pastoral Services to the Catholic Church in the United States*, STD. diss. (Rome: Pontifica Universita Gregoriana 1980) passim.

<sup>326</sup> In a letter of 1815 to Fr. Simon Brute, the future St. Elizabeth Seton recalled her experience ten years earlier as new convert in the Toussaint's parish church of St. Peter. She recalls her sister-in-law as saying "Well, apostles or not apostles, let me be anything in the world but a roman catholic. A Methodist, Quaker, anything—a Quaker indeed I should like extremely, they are so nice and orderly and their dress so becoming...But Catholics—dirty, filthy, red-faced...the church a horrid place of spits and pushing, ragged, etc." To which Seton immediately adds, "Alas, I found it all that." See: Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, Md., No 1-3-3-12 #80. Grateful acknowledgement is made.

<sup>327</sup> Eph. 1:17-18.

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and the change of spirit and mind they imply, have not only a future orientation (“shall be...”), but also a present security (Blessed are...”).

So it was probably in this context of faith and hope that Pierre understood the invitation of Jesus to take up the cross daily and follow him. His meditations from the *Imitation of Christ* called this process “the royal road.”<sup>328</sup> Yet while Toussaint’s spirituality had a strong factor of seeking and adhering to the Will of his heavenly Father, good and wise, it also involved patient struggles with difficulties.

To give instances of this hope-filled fortitude in times of difficulty, there are there very personal areas that undoubtedly both hurt and cost Pierre: his searching for lost members of his family, the deaths of his dear ones, and his own final weakness and the approach of death.

#### **a. Searching for Relatives**

When Pierre was brought to New York as a twenty-one year old slave, the master Jean Bérard was thinking in terms of a temporary residence. Both the owners and slaves presumed on being re-united with family and friends back at the plantation of L’Artibonite in Haiti. The unexpected death of Jean, the impoverishment of his young widow, and the revolution and its aftermath in Haiti, postponed all those plans.

Among the very first letters available, it is obvious that Pierre has been looking for news of his family.<sup>329</sup> His sensitive heart and mind would have been dogged by questions such as: Were they all still alive? If so, how were they? Could he help their needs? was there any change of being reunited?

That sad search and hoping went on all his life. It was mitigated only by bits of rare news that some of the relatives had immigrated or died. It was a catastrophic wrenching of ties, and all of Pierre’s efforts were doomed to failure. In a sense, his searching event went on after his death. His Last Will and Testament provided money that two more years could be spent checking the one link or trace that was left, the possible children of his aunt, Marie Bouqueman.<sup>330</sup>

Why all the effort and the long hope? Because of Pierre’s well-ordered charity. They were family; they were undoubtedly in need; it was his duty to bring them, even now, some of the consolation promised in the Beatitudes. Like the shepherd looking for the lost sheep,

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<sup>328</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Betty I. Knott, trans. (Glasgow: William Collins & Sons 1963) Book 2, XII.

<sup>329</sup> See, e.g., PTP, Unknown to PT, Port au Prince, Nov. 27, 1868; J. Baptiste to PT, l ‘Amiel, March 26, 1822; C. Chardier to PT, Nov 26, 1829.

<sup>330</sup> PT, *Last Will and Testament* 521-22.

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he kept trying and hoping. But the disappointment of this attempts must have hurt so sensitive and caring a man.

#### **b. The Deaths of His Loved Ones**

It has been well-written: “The spiritual might of hope is revealed above all in facing the fundamental enigma of life represented by the mystery of death. Behind the mask of every outright early pretense is written: *memento moro*.”<sup>331</sup>

There were two events in the mature life of Pierre Toussaint that shook him in ways that nothing else had: the death of his young adopted niece in 1829, and that of his wife in 1852. Although both had illnesses that might have prepared him, Pierre’s emotional collapse was heart-breaking in both instances.

After the death of Euphemia his biographer recalls:

For a long while Toussaint could only say to those who came to comfort him, ‘My poor Euphemia is gone,’ and as his lips uttered these words, he covered his face with his hands. he grew thin, avoided society, and refused to be comforted.<sup>332</sup>

Juliette’s illness and death are summed up in these words:

Juliette’s health began to fail, and some alarming symptoms appeared. As in Euphemia’s case he was sanguine that she would recover. He said, ‘She is much younger than myself...she will soon be better.’ When her death came, it was a dreadful blow to him. He never recovered from the shock. It seemed to him most stranger that she should go first, and he be left alone.<sup>333</sup>

Humanly speaking, these two deaths brought Pierre to the breaking point.

Pierre was a very reflective man. He himself admitted that as he went on his rounds and found houses filled with love or worry, or the sadness of death, “it makes me think a great deal.” Thus, as he would have thought over and over about the ambivalence of life, the supernatural hope that is born of faith would have entered into those reflections. For

only hope gives man the capacity to live out the tension between the present and the risk of real failure, the insecurity in himself and a trust in the promise of a God who comes and who will come. In this sense, hope is the anticipated and permanent acceptance of death by abandoning ourselves to the God who raises from the dead.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> Giannino Piana, “Speranza,” *NDS* 1512.

<sup>332</sup> *Memoir* 65-66.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.* 101-102.

<sup>334</sup> Giannino Piana, “Speranza,” *NDS* 1513.

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So it was with Pierre. Through his mourning after the death of Euphemia, he exercised his hope:

But his mind was too pious and too rational to indulge long this excess of sorrow. He listened to high and holy consolations, and found resignation in the prayers of his Church. Those who witnessed his struggles to command himself at this time, and perform his daily duties, have spoken of him with reverence.<sup>335</sup>

This death-and-hope process was also evident in his reaction to the loss of his wife Juliette. Although seemingly stymied at first by the fact that one so much younger should die first:

...yet he constantly said, 'It is the will of God.' Soon after her death, his own health became impaired. The strong man grew feeble; his step, slow and languid. We all saw that Pierre had changed. Yet he lingered on...still continuing his works of beneficence.<sup>336</sup>

But it is Toussaint's own words that best express the faith that moved his deeply felt emotional reaction away from any grieving "as those others do who have no hope," to the love and trust that is born of hope and abides forever:

It was the holy will of God to take from me my beloved adopted daughter Euphemia and I submitted to the blow, with faith in the wisdom of my Heavenly Father, supported by my trust in my Saviour.

"So faith, hope, love abide, these three but the greatest of these is love."<sup>337</sup>

#### c. "Couldn't Be Better"

Pierre's strong fortitude and hope were also evident as he struggled to accept the weakness and loneliness of old age and prepare for his own death. He had lost his wife, the last relative.

The next year, in 1852, Mrs. Mary Ann Schuyler, whose home he had visited daily for over thirty years, died. She was one of two people of whom Pierre wrote: "Their friendship for many years has been more to me than that of any others, though there are many whose regard I highly value and appreciate." In his obituary notice of Toussaint, Henry Tuckerman wrote:

The last time I saw Pierre, he was seated among a group of mourners, beside the coffin of a lady venerated for years in the highest social sphere of the city. She was almost the last

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<sup>335</sup> *Memoir* 66.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.* 101-102.

<sup>337</sup> I Cor 13:13.

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tie that bound him to the past...and there he sat, with his white head bowed in grief, and every line of his honest sable face wet with tears.<sup>338</sup>

Hurtful as it was, Pierre accepted this detaching loss also and knew that his own time was growing close. He was 86 years old.

Toussaint continued his daily trip to Mass at St. Peter's "and later in the day, his aged frame, bowed with years, was to be seen painfully working its way to a distant part of the city on errands of love and charity." He was a Christian believing that "though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day," and "this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."<sup>339</sup>

His feebleness found him first in an arm-chair and then confined to bed. A house-keeper/nurse provided for his needs and friends came to visit. But it wasn't easy to accept. One visitor recalled: "When he saw me he was overcome by affecting remembrances...He trembled with emotion, and floods of tears fell from his eyes. 'It is all so changed! so changed!' said he, 'so lonely.'"<sup>340</sup>

But in the months that followed before his death—as had been true of his disappointment at not finding his relatives and with his grief at the deaths of those he loved—human hurt was the cost of a stronger faith and hope. He mentioned that he had received the Viaticum and said that "*Il ne peut pas etre mieux*" (It couldn't be better)... "All is well."<sup>341</sup>

The process of "seeking the things that are above" moved on his heart and mind. He had accepted the detachment of old age and weakness and imminent death. Four days before he died another friend found him full of faith, living in the presence of God, and looking beyond to the realization of his hope:

When I entered, he had revived a little, and looking said, 'Dieu avec moi,'—'God is with me.' When I asked him if he wanted anything, he replied with a smile, '*Rien sur la terre.*'—'Nothing on earth.'<sup>342</sup>

"With faith in the wisdom of my heavenly Father, supported by my trust in my Saviour," Pierre Toussaint's hope found him "with a smile."

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<sup>338</sup> *Memoir* 66.

<sup>339</sup> 2 Cor 14: 16-17.

<sup>340</sup> *Memoir* 110-11.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.* 111-12.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.* 112-13.

### 3. A Charity Without Measure

#### a. The “Perfect Gentleman” Question

Pierre Toussaint was a legend in his own times for his great charities. It is enough to read the first biography, the important Appendix of newspaper obituary notices, plus the correspondence and articles by people who knew him to certify the impression that “he went about doing good.”

But was this simply a human beneficence that is the sharing of gifts between friends or equals or just a condescending pity toward the unfortunate? Christ reminded us that “even the Gentiles do the same.”<sup>343</sup> Also, since the documentation of the life of Pierre was often written by or included comments by non-Catholics, their admiration for his charities was often phrased in words that might leave us only at the level of a “perfect gentleman,” a kindly philanthropist or a social *homme engagé pour les autres*. He was often called a “perfect gentleman,” so were his charities merely the application of the natural sensitivity and concern for others implied in that phrase?

Every morning as Pierre entered St. Peter’s church for Mass and looked up at the large painting of the crucifixion that captured all eyes, he would have seen a reminder to “be imitators of God as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” Being rooted in that great love, and sensing the incongruity of a responding love of God that would not extend itself to the neighbor, the Christian is implied to concretize his love and the attitudinal Beatitudes in practical deeds like those mentioned in Matthew 25.

It is in this context and against this background that some might question the depth of motivation in Pierre’s charities. Otherwise the same mistake might be made that was made by some of his contemporaries:

Because Pierre Toussaint was an unlettered man, many people who were surprised at his character, and at his numberless good deeds, attributed his excellence wholly to his natural disposition. They said, ‘He has the best *instincts*,—he was born good.’ Those who knew him better saw that he was governed by a high and noble principle...Toussaint reflected deeply...he understood the plain teachings of Christianity. He often quoted in his native language from the Sermon on the Mount, and the beatitudes seemed to have found their way to his heart.<sup>344</sup>

Other witnesses affirm of Pierre: “His heart overflowed with the Christian kindness which far surpasses mere worldly politeness,” and “his pity for the suffering seemed to partake of his character of the Saviour’s tenderness at the tomb of Lazarus.”<sup>345</sup> Of the

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<sup>343</sup> Mt. 5:47.

<sup>344</sup> *Memoir* 72.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.* 56.



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charities of both Pierre and Juliette it was said: “They were conscientious Catholics: charity was for them not only a religious duty, but a spontaneous feeling of the heart.”<sup>346</sup>

On the other hand, the “natural disposition” which people misjudged as the source of Pierre’s charity should not be discounted because it was not the sole source. Where he saw himself as naturally inclined to anger, confused by event and changes of life, and needing to do more for people, others judged differently. But

all of our legitimate human affections ought to become the material element which makes possible the incarnation and the manifestation of charity in us, in such a way that the whole person, not only in his divine charisms but also in his human resources, may be at the service of love.<sup>347</sup>

It was precisely because the whole of Pierre had been consecrated at Baptism and because, as witnesses have described, he responded to the promptings of the Spirit that his charity went out to people in New York and “into the world as a presence of the Church in the realities of men.”<sup>348</sup> Yes, Pierre Toussaint was a “perfect gentleman” and much more besides.

#### **b. Well-ordered and Well-diffused**

Even the best of Christians are sometimes confused by the myriad possibilities of putting into practice their love for God and neighbor.

How can we show ourselves attentive to so many complex shadings of virtue? Who can have such prudent ability as to balance in a particular action needs that are so diverse? Only the Spirit knows how to render our consciences capable of evaluating wisely the measure and the manner of fusing various conflicting virtuous positions.<sup>349</sup>

The Jesus who expects his followers to “bear much fruit,” also reminds them that “without me you can do nothing.” In faith, the Christian has received the Spirit of Christ by which the charity of God is poured forth into minds and hearts in order to enable His followers to discern and express the true spirit of the Beatitudes in their daily lives, to witness, and to do the appropriate thing in unfeigned love. But it is not easy.

Over the centuries theologians worked out a description of the “order of charity.” This was an attempt to guide formation in Gospel living and to clarify the sometimes seemingly conflicting claims of justice and love; for example, to discern what would be best, better, possible or tolerable considering the persons, moral acts, and circumstances.

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid. 48.

<sup>347</sup> Arnaldo Pigna, “Carità,” *DES* 311.

<sup>348</sup> Antonio Barruffo, “Laico,” *NDS* 818.

<sup>349</sup> Tullo Goffi, “Antinomie spirituali,” *NDS* 27.

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Today theologians speak of “proportionate reason” and “preferential option for the poor” in guiding our efforts.<sup>350</sup>

By delineating some of the myriad ways in which Toussaint put his charity into practice, there may be a better understanding of how he solved the challenge of the “order of charity” and its diffusion.

Since the second commandment is like unto the first, history shows how Pierre answered the question, “Who is my neighbor?” It began with the ones closest at hand. His love and care of his wife and adopted daughter, for example, are well attested. All in the same house where he lived also shared in that love in different degrees and at different times: his sister, aunt and mother-in-law; his master and mistress; his fellow slaves; visitors or tenants; and even those who never thought to give thanks.

Toussaint also carried his charity to work, for his clients at his hair-dressing or nursing of the sick came next in the hours of his day. Precisely, because of his sincere dedication to them, people went beyond his primary services to make him their confidant, counsellor, and teacher. From this network, Pierre extended his charity to all who came to his attention or sought it—whether they be individuals in need of food, housing, money, jobs, apprenticeship, or remission of debts, and whether or not the call came through organized charities such as the orphanage and small schools. A simple note left by someone for his attention typifies the practicality of his universal charity: “Mrs. Johnson needs fire wood.”

#### **c. Constant and Prudent**

There are two ways, especially, in which the charity of Toussaint was constant. It was enduring in the sense that, even if people moved away from New York, he continued his interest and willingness to help. A score of letters attest to that. It continued even when he left in death: His Will specified gifts to the poor and orphans, as well as to the less well-off.

But his charity was also constant in the sense that he never decided he had done enough. He only stopped his doing and giving when old age and illness made it impossible. An incident is told of someone who obviously was not too wealthy:

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<sup>350</sup> In this area of moral theology, among others, see: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a, 2ae, Q. 26, art. 9, in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols. (New York: Benziger Brothers 1947) 2:1301-02; Bernard Haring, *The Law of Christ* trans. Edwin G. Kaiser, 2 Vols. (Westminster, MD: Newman Press 1963) 363-64, 377-85; Philip Land, ed., *Theology Meets Progress: Human Implications of Development* (Rome: Gregorian University Press 1971) 145-170, 249-288; Richard A. McCormick, *Ambiguity in Moral Choice* (Milwaukee: Marquette University 1973), *passim*; James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective: Volume One, Theology and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1981) 307-17.

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A friend once said to him, 'Toussaint, you are richer than anyone I know; you have more than you want, why not stop working now?' He answered, 'Madam, I have enough for myself, but if I stop work, I have not enough for others.'<sup>351</sup>

Pierre lost most of his financial investments in the great fire of 1835. But he was the first one to visit many homes the next day and offer help to the devastated. Unbeknown to him and because he was already 70 years old:

Some of his friends, who knew of his slow, industrious earnings and his unceasing charities, thought it but just to get up a subscription to repair his losses. As soon as it was mentioned to him he stopped it, saying he was not in need of it, and he would not take what many others required much more than he did.<sup>352</sup>

Furthermore, it was probably not always easy for Pierre to carry on his charities. First because of his position as a slave, later on as one with entree to aristocratic homes, and finally as a person with a reputation for a kind heart. It left him open to social embarrassments, temptations to "use" his position, and the risk of being taken advantage of. A *prudence* was needed, counting on the same help of the Spirit that was promised to the disciples in testing situations.

Here it is enough to recall, for example, the delicacy with which he became the financial support of his impoverished mistress and others of the household. This was done confidentially to keep her from physical or psychic collapse and public embarrassment.

Likewise, even in society today both male and female hair-dressing salons are centers of chatter and news to familiar customers. The situation could be a trap for slips of speech. But as Pierre went about his rounds:

They talked to him of their affairs, and felt the most perfect reliance upon his prudence; and all they might, for never in this large circle was he know to give cause for an unpleasant remark. Once a lady, whose curiosity was stronger than her sense of propriety, closely urged him to make some communication about another person's affairs. 'Do tell me, Toussaint,' said she, 'I am sure you know all about it.' 'Madam,' he replied with dignity, though with the utmost respect, 'Toussaint dresses hair, he no news journal.'<sup>353</sup>

At another time he was requested to carry a disagreeable message. He immediately answered, 'I have no memory.'<sup>354</sup> In his charity, Pierre knew how to distinguish so that his memory was not made the porter of detraction, hurt or calumny.

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<sup>351</sup> *Memoir* 86-7.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.* 87.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.* 35.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.* 36.

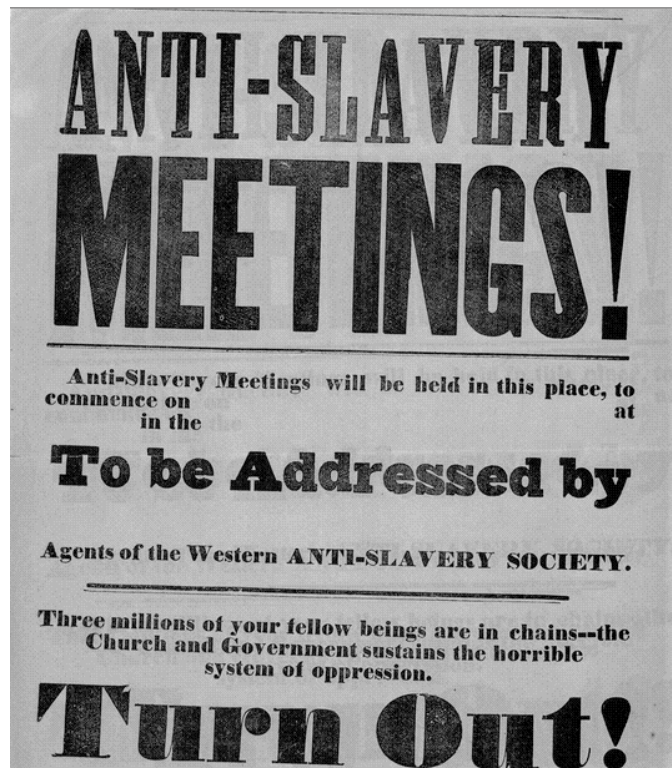
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Toussaint was also a prudent handler of social custom, although those customs seem strange today. When a white non-Catholic asked to attend St. Peter's, he gladly agreed and arranged for her special seating. When she commented after that she thought she would be seated with his family, he responded that such would not be right.<sup>355</sup> He was preserving her from awkwardness, for black persons were seated separately even in Catholic churches.

### d. The Problem of Toussaint's Relationship to the Abolitionist Movement

It is in the context of charity and prudence also that the niggling problem of Toussaint's relationship to the Abolitionist movement must be addressed. He turned down an invitation to have an honored place in a New York parade commemorating the first legal steps toward the abolition of slavery in 1880. In his life, too, there was evidently a lack of any aggressive participation in that and other civil movements relative to the race question. By standards of today, his conduct seems inconsistent with his great reputation for charity and almost incredible.

Two factors seem to be the major determinants of Toussaint's thought and conduct



Poster for an Anti-Slavery Meeting

relative to the race question: the general Catholic ethos or theological and social guidance, and Pierre's own experience and faith-response.

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid. 108-09.

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In trying to understand that general Catholic ethos during the Toussaint years (1766-1853), the original impression is of how similar conditions were to those of the time of the Apostle Paul. Then, in the New York context, there is a quickening pace of change, as has been noted in Chapter 2.

Once does not have to look far for the reasons why the Catholic Church of Pierre's time did not take a more provocative and advocative stance concerning the slavery issue. It was a minority religion in a new nation that featured separation of church and state. Catholic slaves were even a smaller minority in that minority. The Church and its people had already felt a fairly strong sentiment and some shocking instances of anti-Catholicism. Whereas the Church in the northern States could adjust more easily to abolition because there were fewer slaves and fewer Catholics among them, the Church in the South shared the preoccupation of many others due to the large number of slaves and the anticipated chaos of a sudden cultural, social and economic change. Thus, although there was correspondence between churchmen and articles in Catholic papers on all facets of the question, the first pastoral of the American bishops ever to acknowledge the slavery issue was after the Civil War in 1866. Then, it was a call to assist the uprooted or unprepared slaves with education and economic help in their new freedom.<sup>356</sup>

If that general context is granted, it still needs specification concerning Pierre Toussaint. The elements for this process are: Toussaint's own experience of slavery; the presumption that he knew of the cruelties suffered by others and reflected upon the meaning of their desires for social change and the methods suggested to achieve it; and that he himself esteemed freedom from the bondage of slavery.

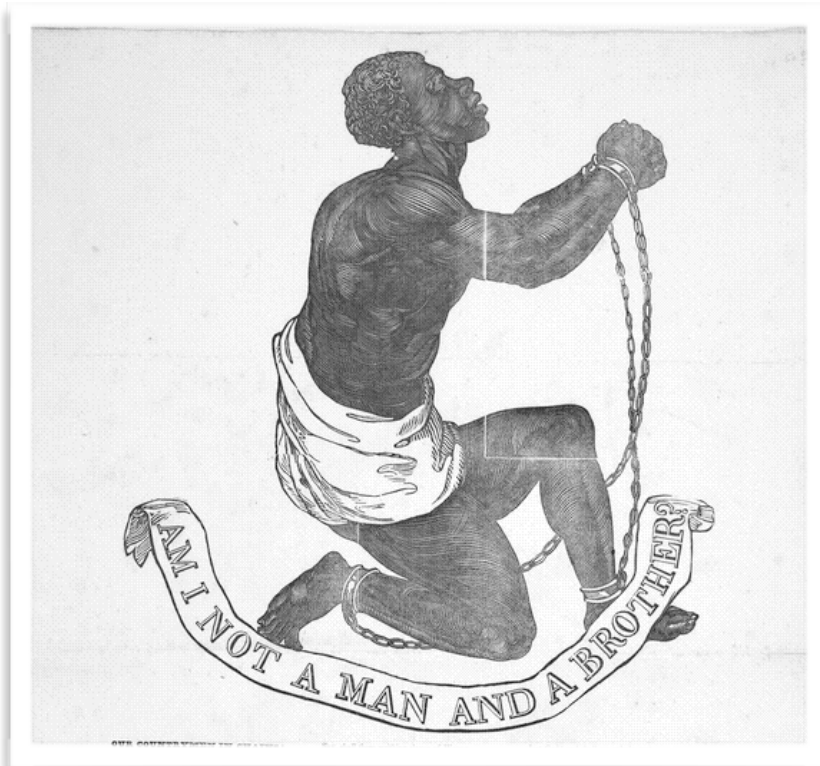
From all the indications available, the Bérard family seems to have treated their slaves not only in a humane, but in a Christian and kindly manner. This can be surmised, for example, from the position and influence of Toussaint's grandmother, Zenobie. Not only does she appear to have been the effective manageress of the plantation, but she was the trusted servant who crossed the Atlantic to Paris four times accompanying the children to school and the senior Bérards at the beginning of their retirement. Although later granted her freedom, she remained with the Bérards. Likewise, there are the happy memories Pierre and his sister Rosalie had of their years in Haiti. Finally, there is the clear note of respect and joy in the later correspondence of his godmother Aurora Bérard and her brother, not only at the reestablishment of contact with Pierre but also of concern for this relatives and the other former slaves of the plantation.

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<sup>356</sup> For the essential background to the position of the Catholic Church relative to slavery during Toussaint's time in the United States, see Madeleine Hooke Rice, *American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy* — Studies in History, Economics and Public Law, Faculty of Political Science of Columbia University, No. 508 (1944), reprinted (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith 1964), *passim*. Also see: James Hennessey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 1981) 143-53.

### Chapter 3: The Spirituality of Pierre Toussaint

In the case of Pierre himself it is clear that at least in his early years in Haiti he was



**Moving anti-slavery image**

trained more for household tasks. In that sense, he was somewhat sheltered from the more physically strenuous labors of other slaves in the fields, possibly his own father or brothers. He has also been taught to read and write, and to play the violin.

If Pierre himself, members of his family, or other slaves on the plantation had been the victims of cruel or abusive treatment, it is unlikely that they would have forgotten it. They might have planned to run-away. In New York, the sudden penury and illness of their mistress offered a tempting occasion, and the newspaper advertisements frequently witnessed to the fact of such escaped slaves. On the other hand, they could have heroically forgiven past injuries and continued service and contact with the Bérards in an atmosphere of grim charity. But all indications are otherwise. The conclusion is that Toussaint's experience of slavery was in a humane and Christian context.

Next, both the biographers Sheehan and Tarry presume that Toussaint was aware of the cruelties and indignities that other slaves had suffered, knew of previous efforts in Haiti at revolution or insurrection, and had pondered the causes and meaning. While the ways in which this awareness came about is fictionalized, it seems reasonable that Haitian slaves would at least have known some of the sufferings, reactions and hopes of their fellow-slaves, neighbors and countrymen. If nothing else, the decision of Jean Bérard to

## Chapter 3: The Spirituality of Pierre Toussaint

take his wife, her sisters, and five slaves to New York would have prompted an awareness of the troubles on the island.

Finally, we know that Pierre himself did esteem freedom from slavery from the fact that he saved his wages to purchase the liberty of his sister before her marriage and of his intended wife, Juliette. He treasured the freedom papers of his aunt, Marie Bouquement, and had himself paid by installments to purchase the freedom of a certain Jean Baptiste and possibly others. When abolition was passed by the legislatures in New York and the



Anti-slavery material

neighboring States, Pierre still helped. The now free black people were assisted by his charities and counsel, and he provided places in his own home for young boys to apprentice in a trade and improve their education.

But it is important to try and get an insight into Pierre's own mind concerning his experience of slavery and appreciation of freedom. The author of the *Memoir* of Toussaint tried to provide that:

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He never felt degraded by being a black man, or even a slave; for he considered himself as much the object of Divine protection as any other human being. He understood the responsibility, the greatness, of the part allotted him; that he was to serve God and his fellow men, and so fulfill the duties of the situation in which he was placed. There was something truly noble and great in the view that he took of his own nature and responsibility. No failure on the part of the master could in his opinion absolve a slave from his duty. His own path was marked out; he considered it a straight one and easy to follow, and he followed it through life. He was born and brought up in St. Domingo at a period which can never return. In the large circle around him there were no speculations upon freedom or human liberty, and on those subjects his mind appears to have been perfectly at rest.

When he resided in New York, he still preserved the same tranquil, contented state of mind, yet that he considered emancipation a blessing, he proved, by gradually accumulating a sum sufficient to purchase his sister's freedom. It was not his own ransom for which he toiled, but Rosalie's, as has been previously said, for he wished that she might take her station as a matron among the free women of New York. But he does not appear to have entertained any inordinate desire for his own freedom. He was fulfilling his duty in the situation in which his Heavenly Father chose to place him, and that idea gave him peace and serenity. When his mistress on her deathbed presented him his liberty, he most gratefully received it; and we fully believe he would not have suffered any earthly power to wrest it from him.

There are many in the present day who will view this state of mind as degrading, who consider the slave absolved, by his great primary wrong of bondage, from all obligation to the slaveholder. He did not ask, like Darwin's African slave, 'Am I not a man and a brother?' but he felt that he *was* a man and a brother. It was his high conception of his own nature, as derived from eternal justice, that made him serene and self-possessed.<sup>357</sup>

But there is a caution that must be made concerning this passing-on of the mind-set of Pierre: the words were written by a white person. It is true that person was of the more liberal north, had known Pierre and his acquaintances well, and completed the biography just one year after his death. Yet that was still almost fifty years after New York had abolished slavery and become more comfortable with free black citizens. It was also ten years before America went through the agony of its Civil War to grant at least the same legal freedom to hundreds of thousands of other black citizens.

For that reason, and although the story is fictionalized, Tarry's biography of Toussaint should also be read. It conveys a strong and dramatic sense of some of the sensitivity and mental torment or questioning that might well have been part of Pierre's "reflection." He was forming, before God, his own position on slavery and freedom and one that enabled him to be "serene and self-possessed."

From all of the above, these conclusions seem to be consonant with everything we know of Pierre Toussaint:

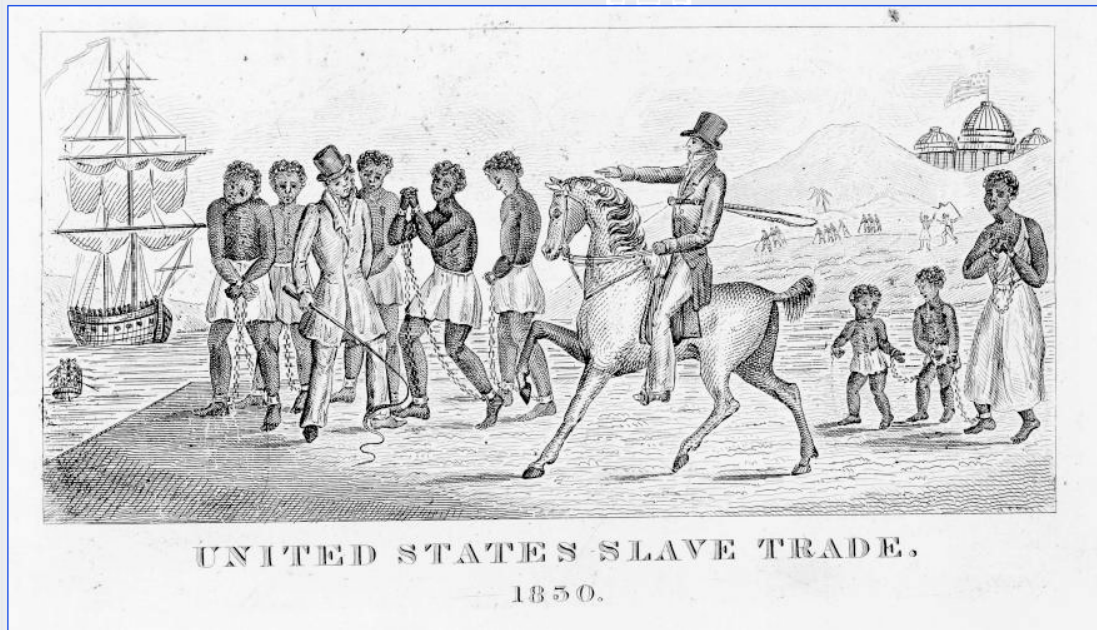
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<sup>357</sup> *Memoir* 56-58.



### Chapter 3: The Spirituality of Pierre Toussaint

UNITED STATES SLAVE TRADE. 1830.



Depiction of US Slave Trade

1. Pierre accepted his negritude and slavery as “the situation in which his Heavenly Father chose to place him,” and that he was “as much the object of Divine protection as any other human being;”
2. He considered “emancipation a blessing...but he did not appear to have entertained any inordinate desire for his own freedom;”
3. When Pierre was given his own freedom, “he most gratefully received it... and would not have suffered any earthly power to wrest it from him;” and,
4. Given his reflective and prayerful nature, and his habitually prudent assessment of persons and situations, Toussaint would have discerned a *modus vivendi* and *agendi* concerning the slavery/freedom issue that was, for him, a true faith-response.

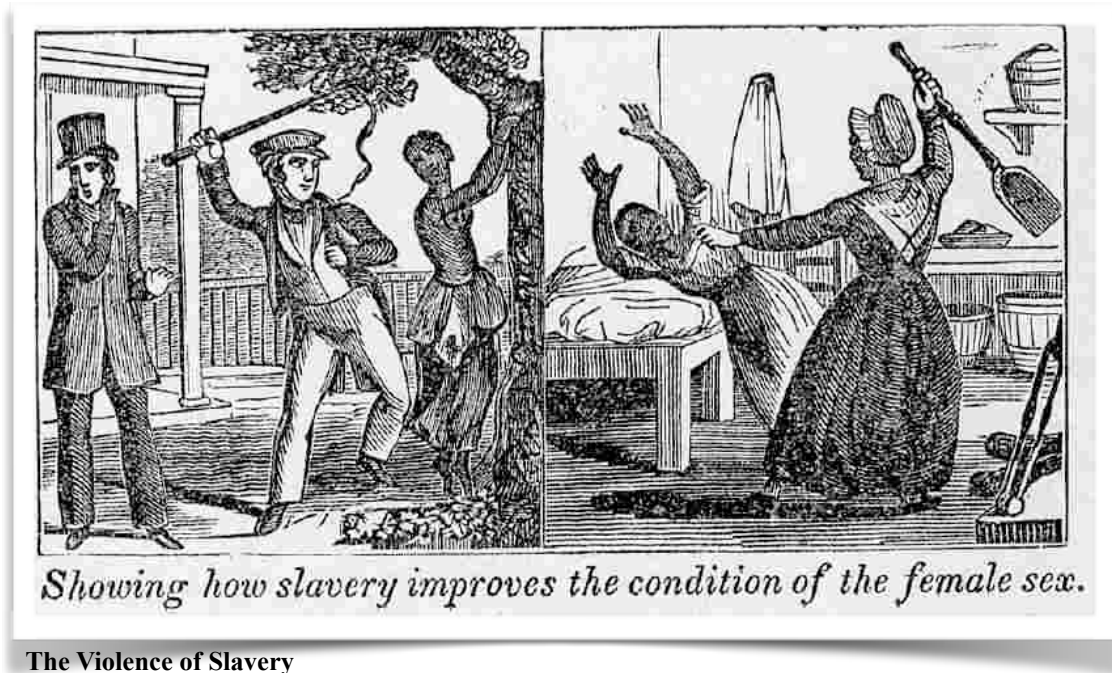
Recalling that Pierre bought the freedom of other slaves and, when the laws were changed, assisted the newly-freed people of his own race, there are two other pivotal instances of what he actually did. They are described briefly:

When the colored people in New York celebrated their release from bondage, on the 5th of July, 1800 they came to Toussaint to offer him a prominent part in the procession. He thanked them with his customary politeness, congratulated them on the great event of emancipation, but declined the honor they assigned him saying, ‘I do not owe my

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freedom to the State, but to my mistress.<sup>358</sup>

We cannot doubt how highly he prized liberty for the slave, yet he was never willing to talk on the subject. He seemed fully to comprehend the difficulty of emancipation, and once, when a lady asked him if he was an Abolitionist, he shuddered, and replied, 'Madame, ils n'ont jamais vu couler le sang comme moi;' 'They have never seen blood flow as I have and then he added, 'They don't know what they are doing.'<sup>359</sup>



Why did Toussaint act and respond in this way? To Catholics and others of over a hundred years later his position seems inconsistent with his usual prudence and charity and incredible.

The following interpretations of Pierre's words and conduct in the two instances cited above are offered as a possible rationale that would be consonant with a faith-response, given what we know of his spirituality and the times. They should be taken as an ensemble.

1. "They have never seen blood flow as I have." This statement is remarkable for two reasons:
  - a. it confirms the supposition of his biographers that he had seen instances of violence and bloody action or reaction in the slavery context; and,
  - b. it confirms the presumption that, given Pierre's reflective response to life

<sup>358</sup> Ibid. 85-86.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid. 85.

### Chapter 3: The Spirituality of Pierre Toussaint

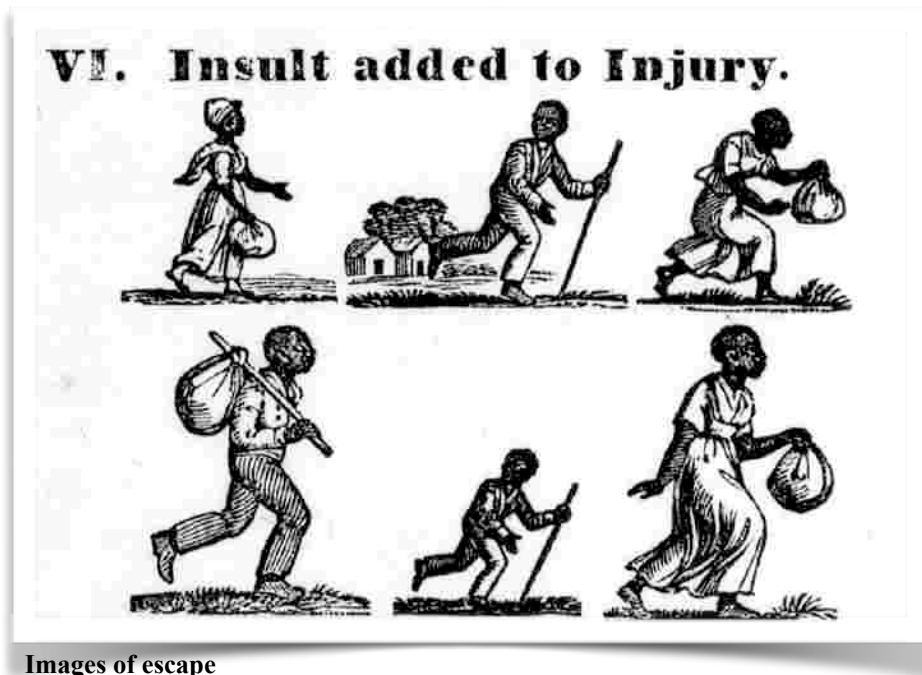
and events, he had formed a mind-set concerning the whole area of slavery, abolition, and race relations.

2. When Pierre made the statement about having seen blood flow, “he shuddered...” and then he added, “They don't know what they are doing.” He was obviously afraid, from his experience, of some form of bloody violence that could result in maiming or killing. For Pierre, it is a matter of the fifth commandment of God. His faith-response rebelled and shuddered.
3. Although most people thought Pierre to be ordinarily confident, gentle, cheerful and optimistic, he felt that his besetting fault was an inclination to anger: “Toussaint said of himself, that he possessed a quick temper, that he was born with it and was obliged to bear it about with him.” Thus here is a man who has seen blood flow and was afraid of civil disturbances that would directly or indirectly involve the fifth commandment, admitting an inclination to anger and repentance about it. On such an emotional issue and with that temperament, it could become an occasion of sin.
4. Next, there was almost nothing in the general American Catholic moral doctrine or pastoral practice of the time to encourage Pierre to be personally and publicly for the Abolitionist movement as such.<sup>360</sup>
5. Lastly, while there is no doubt about Pierre’s love of freedom and his desire to help others from the condition of slavery, there are prudential judgements involved in the methods of obtaining it. Thus Toussaint could rejoice with others at their emancipation by the State, but acknowledge that he owed his freedom to the manumission given by his mistress.

In sum, it seems that Pierre Toussaint, given the Catholic theological and social ambient in which he lived, having seen blood flow in relation to racial tensions, and knowing himself to be inclined to anger, opted against a public or personal witness lauding the successes of the Abolitionist movement. He may have done this in the judgement that it could provoke physical violence or killing that would offend against the law of God. As a Christian who treasured liberty, he chose other means to obtain it and to foster it once obtained.

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<sup>360</sup> Strangely enough, one of the most prominent advocates of Abolition in the United States, the same William Ellery Channing previously mentioned, was like Toussaint when it came to participating in organized groups: “The most puzzling aspect of Channing is his attitude toward social reform. He sympathized with the abolitionists, the pacifists, the prohibitionists...Channing could not bring himself, however, to join the organizations springing up all around him. His ‘Remarks on Associations’ (*Christian Examiner*, 1829) marshalls the arguments for and against the collective approach’ among the latter a still pertinent examination of the tendency toward bureaucracy in charitable agencies.” See: Theodore Hornberger, “Channing, William Ellery”, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1966) 5:274.



It is easy for people of today, especially American Catholics, to project backward the present status of both Catholic and civil law and practice, however admittedly slow such progress has been. By doing so they can be dismayed at the problem of Toussaint's stance as regards the Abolitionist movement in the United States. Yet it might also be seen as more evidence of his constant and prudent charity.

**e. A Charity That Was Inventive and Initiating**

In summing up the charities of Pierre Toussaint, one of the obituary notices published after his death put it this way:

"His days and nights were given to visits, ministrations to the sick, attendance upon the bereaved, and attempts to reform the erring and console the afflicted."<sup>361</sup> However, the author of the *Memoir* adds an important clarification:

It must not be supposed that Toussaint's charity consisted merely in bestowing money; he felt the moral goodness of doing good, of giving counsel to the weak and courage to the timid, of reclaiming the vicious, and, above all, of comforting the sick and the sorrowful.<sup>362</sup>

That is why the author of still another newspaper obituary also made the distinction that Pierre's charities were not of just a temporary or "band-aid" variety or of the type against

<sup>361</sup> *Memoir* 123.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.* 70.

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which the letter of St. James warns, but involved much more:

His charity was of the efficient character which did not content itself with a present relief of pecuniary aid, but which required time and thought by day and night, and long watchfulness and kind attention.<sup>363</sup>

But those general terms could cover over some of the spontaneity and out-reach of Pierre's concerns. His humor and good sense also had a role. Already mentioned were the black youths that he took into his home to learn a trade and help continue their education. When he also taught them the violin he said that "if they couldn't make a living from it, at least it would provide innocent amusement."<sup>364</sup> Then, too, a French refugee, having been reduced to poverty asked Toussaint for advice on how she could support herself. He suggested that she teach French, but she felt she lacked grammatical expertise. So he reminded her that he had heard frequent comments on her excellent spoken French, so she should advertise for lessons in "conversing in French" and that would be different "from teaching a language."<sup>365</sup> Another time someone asked him, concerning a particularly tragic death, what he had said to express his sympathy to the grieving wife. "Nothing," he replied, "I could only take her hand and weep with her, and then I went away; there was nothing to be said."<sup>366</sup> So Toussaint, in his charities, made do with what was at hand, whether that inventiveness involved humor, utter practicality, or shared feelings without words.

But if one is looking for the flash of drama in Pierre's life, there were also the charities that showed initiative and spontaneity, indeed even some heroism.

In Chapter 2 it was noted how New York, like other major American cities, was afflicted with periodic plagues of yellow fever. These produced a natural dread and fear of contagion, but also a willful non-involvement with the sick even on the part otherwise good people:

Nonetheless, such circumstances found Pierre again responding like the good Samaritan. Here are three instances from his first biography:

When the yellow fever prevailed in New York, by degrees Maiden Lane was almost wholly deserted, and almost every house in it closed. One poor woman, prostrated by the terrible disorder, remained there with little or no attendance; till Toussaint day by day came through the lonely street, crossed the barricades, entered the deserted house where she lay, and performed the nameless offices of a nurse, fearlessly exposing himself to the

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid. 118.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid. 68-9.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid, 70.

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contagion.<sup>367</sup>

At another time he found a poor priest in a garret, sick of the ship fever, and destitute of everything. He made his case known, procured him wine and money, and finally removed him to his own house, where he and Juliette attended upon him till he recovered.<sup>368</sup>

At a time when the yellow fever prevailed and the alarm was so great that many streets were deserted, Toussaint discovered that a man was left wholly alone. He was a stranger, but he took him to his house, nursed him, watched over him, and restored him to health. This stranger was a white man.<sup>369</sup>

Whether in ordinary or in heroic and dangerous situations, Pierre Toussaint associated himself with relieving human misery with a charity that was inventive and initiating. He did not wait for others, but gave of himself, his resources and his ingenuity.

### E- The Mission of the Spirituality of Pierre Toussaint

For the follower of Christ, his or her spirituality is a response to the universal call to holiness. This, in turn, involves a sense of mission, of “being” and of “being sent” in the name of Christ, for “the Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate as well.”<sup>370</sup> Indeed, the close relationship in a spirituality which both unifies and missions was hauntingly described by Christ himself in the teaching of the vine and the branches.

As members of the living Christ, all the faithful have been incorporated into Him and made like unto Him through Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. Hence all are duty-bound to cooperate in the expansion and growth of His Body, so that they can bring it to fullness as swiftly as possible (Eph. 4:13).<sup>371</sup>

But in entering into this mission, the Christian needs the inspiration and strength of the Holy Spirit, for it means entering into the self-emptying of Jesus, putting aside natural preferences and ways of acting, and becoming all things to all men.

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#### 1. The Essence of the Mission of Pierre Toussaint

Pierre sought to do the Will of his good and wise Heavenly Father in prayer and good works. Judging humanly, the interior life did bear much fruit in endless charities. Yet, there seem to be no signs of a special commission to this or that particular aspect of

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid. 86.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid. 71.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid. 86.

<sup>370</sup> AA, 2.

<sup>371</sup> AG, 36.

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human or ecclesiastical renewal. Toussaint's "mission" cannot be centered or specified as clearly as that of a Catherine of Siena or Joan of Arc in the political sphere, a Francis of Assisi concerning worldly values or standards, a Frederick Ozanam or Pauline Jaricot in relation to practical aid to the needy or help for the missions, or that of a Matt Talbot in struggling against addiction.

Toussaint's spirituality and mission seem to lack a sense of a charismatic call to a distinctive witness to particular groups or levels of society in a well-defined project or strategy. Instead, the mission seems to move across many levels of society and culture—family, friends, business acquaintances, church people, strangers, black and white, slaves and free, rich and poor. It moved with a constantly active presence of faith, witnessing and evangelizing, loving and inspiring.

In Pierre's story of following Christ, as in the study of any other study of a Catholic spirituality and mission, "the right foundation for a theological discourse on the laity is their baptismal state."<sup>372</sup> With that comes the participation in the prophetic, priestly and kingly powers of Christ, and also participation in the unity of the Church's mission vis-à-vis religious, moral and secular values. It is that vision which portrays the mission of the spirituality of Pierre Toussaint and which was aptly described by Pope John Paul II:

The laity, who by divine vocation participate in the entire reality of the world, instilling into it their faith, which has become a reality in their own public and private life (cf. James 2:17), are the most immediate protagonists of the renewal of men and of things. With their active presence as believers, they work at the progressive consecration of the world to God (cf. LG n.34).<sup>373</sup>

The mission of the spirituality of Toussaint, then, can perhaps best be summed-up in this way: it was to be the Church in the various circumstances and levels of society and culture in which he lived in Haiti and New York, and to be the "way" for the Church's daily life "to continue the redeeming and life-giving mission of Christ."<sup>374</sup>

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### **2. Was There an Element of the Extraordinary in the Spirituality/Mission of Toussaint?**

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<sup>372</sup> Domenico Spada, "The Laity and their Mission in the Development of Modern Theology," *Elements for a Theology of the Laity* = *Special Issue*, "The Laity Today," Bulletin of the Pontifical Council for the Laity: 29 - 1979 (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis 1979) 26.

<sup>373</sup> Pope John Paul II.

<sup>374</sup> Rosemary Goldie, "Lay, Laity, Laicity: A Bibliographical Survey of Three Decades," in *Elements for a Theology of the Laity* - *Special Issue*, "The Laity Today," Bulletin of the Pontifical Council for the Laity: 29 - 1979 (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis 1979) 125; Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, Eng. trans. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference 1979) 21.

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Biographies of the followers of Christ have often given space to the element of the extraordinary in such lives. This refers to facts or signs that go beyond the ordinary ambient of Christian life, and thus cause wonder and possibly either confusion or a desire for imitation. But the holiness that has been given in Christ is a gift that is in no way dependent on such things. Sometimes the relevance of these unusual phenomena are easy to verify in the Gospel context. For example, the radical witness given in martyrdom echoes the example and teaching of Jesus that “greater love than this no man has, that he lay down his life for another.”<sup>375</sup> But other elements of the extraordinary may or may not be charismatic interventions of the Spirit of God and are subject to the complexity of human receptivity, understanding and free-will. Thus a great care is needed in speaking of the element of the extraordinary or heroic in the life of a Christian.<sup>376</sup>

Given the somewhat traditional understandings of past authors, the documentation available about Toussaint provides no inkling of unusual or extraordinary phenomena in his devotional life. Apart from his personal relationship with God, of which so little is actually glimpsed, one item which might be raised is his daily attendance at the Eucharist for over sixty years. At that time in history such dedication and continuity probably was extraordinary for a layman, whether slave or freedman. But suppose there was another layperson or two who did the same? Was Pierre then not extraordinary, or were all two or three such? The matter is left aside.

Certainly there was an element of the extraordinary or heroic in the instances that are preserved when Pierre went to the aid of victims of the yellow fever. If there was not the factor of actually giving one's life for another, there was the Willingness to put oneself in circumstances whereby and as a result of infection one might make the ultimate sacrifice. Granted Toussaint's habitual Christian attitudes one might make an argument that it was surely out of the context of self-giving love that he did such things. This could be seen in contra-distinction, for example, to a few of the doctors who also stayed in the city during times of plague and assisted the sick, for they may have been responding from humanitarian or merely professional motivation. But that matter is left aside also.

Yet the spirituality and mission of Pierre Toussaint does seem to have a very strong element of the extraordinary in it. That element consists in a life-long effort of conformity to the Will of a good and wise Heavenly Father (which seems the outstanding note of his interior life), and which was expressed in a continuous and exact fulfillment of the duties of his state in life and even more. For as long as documentation details from at least shortly after the time of his arrival in New York until his death sixty-six years later, that is the picture that emerges and there is no reason to think it was otherwise in Haiti. The

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<sup>375</sup> Jn 15:13.

<sup>376</sup> See, Paul Molinari and Peter Gumpel, “Heroic Virtue: the splendor of holiness,” *The Way*: Supplement no. 39 (1980) 25-34; Michele Machejek, “Erocita,” *DES* 689-91.



### Chapter 3: The Spirituality of Pierre Toussaint

spirituality and mission of Toussaint thus cuts across nations and classes and made him an “immediate protagonist” in the religious, moral and secular transformation of the people, places and circumstances of his life. This constant giving of self was a “progressive consecration of the world to God.” It is in that context that one finds the element of the extraordinary or even heroic in his life and spirituality.

Furthermore, that basic context gives room to highlight the extraordinary *style* with which Toussaint illumined otherwise basic Christian truths and ordinary human events: an evangelical spirit of the Beatitudes and the desire to accept and do God’s Will, enhanced by the dialogues of the *Imitation of Christ* and the Christ-centered spirituality of the French School, yet also nourished by daily Eucharist and prayer, in ecclesial association with priests and parish, and moving out in a gentleness of manner and a variety of deeds that bespoke that sharing of divine love that is called charity. And this “style” in a man whose admitted weakness was anger, who had to suffer through civil and social discrimination because of color and class plus a sense of isolation through exile and the death of relatives and friends, for whom we can find no enemies and for those who hurt or disappointed him only forgiveness and good will, and whose cultural sensitivities to what was fitting never cause him to lessen his love for a church that was beset with in-house feuding and bickering. Yet he loved until the end. That is what might be seen as truly extraordinary in the life of Pierre Toussaint.



## Conclusions and Reflections

It is an awesome responsibility to attempt to describe the spirituality of another human being. Especially when that person has been dead for over a hundred years and has left no extensive studies that might serve as self-revelations. Just as God is the source of all holiness, so only God and the individual concerned could adequately describe the maturing of such a relationship of faith and love. Consequently, there has been a constant sense of dealing with the sacred, a sense of responsibility and reverence, throughout the writing of this study. The fear of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the life and spirit of Pierre Toussaint has only been balanced by the thought that the goodness that seems to shine from his life could be an inspiration to others.

When another layman, Francis of Assisi, determined to follow Christ, he looked at his world and its values and sought for ways to express his commitment. The first expression of his faith and love in action was so ordinary and obvious that historians sometimes overlook it: he began to repair broken-down and abandoned chapels.

Pierre Toussaint was like that. Whether in Haiti or New York, he also looked at his world—in slavery and in freedom, among people of all classes, in menial tasks or the most cultured circumstances and touched it with his Christian faith and love.

The preceding pages endeavored to describe that process, with some of the inner motivations, attitudes and convictions and the ever-changing external events. There are a few conclusions that are now offered for consideration.

1. At least from the documentation available, the essence of the spirituality of Pierre Toussaint would seem to consist of these elements: a personal and persevering faith in God as a wise and provident Father and in Jesus Christ our Savior and in his teaching; and both of these as inspiring a yearning to seek, accept and do the Father's will and to make present His kingdom by unending acts of practical love for the neighbor.
2. There were some external sources that may have influenced the formation of the spirituality of Toussaint. These were: Sacred Scripture, and especially the spirit of the Beatitudes; the classical *Imitation of Christ*; books of Catholic instruction and devotion; and acquaintance with the so-called French school of spirituality through the sermons of Bossuet and Massillon. However, documentation is insufficient to assess adequately the full extent of such influence.
3. There were four parameters or characteristics that can be noted as helping to provide the context and expression of Toussaint's spirituality: its definite lay-dimension, its strong ecclesial and associative qualities, and the condition of marriage and family.

## Conclusions and Reflections

4. While Toussaint was both a devout and reflective man, the most obvious and evident expression of his spirituality was an endless succession of acts of charity toward the neighbor.
5. If the life and spirituality of Pierre Toussaint is to be considered as extraordinary, then the basis for such an estimation, even with other possibilities, might best be found in the fact and style of his persevering faith and love.

There are other *reflections* that come to mind as this study moves toward its last page.

Some might find this work disappointing in the sense that the life and spirituality of Toussaint as herein presented seem to offer few easy “key” or “model” roles that might be exactly adopted by the laity of today. But times and circumstances have changed. Although the world still has areas of violence and oppression, for example, the attitudinal climate of most of the world toward slavery is completely different. Yet any such disappointment would seem to miss an underlying and outstanding lesson of Pierre Toussaint’s life: the extraordinary broadness of opportunity that every lay person has in taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ to heart and putting it into practice.

Indeed, there is an excitement in the whole Church as these pages are concluded, for the whole Church is preparing itself for the forthcoming Synod of Bishops. The theme of that holy event is to be: Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World Twenty Years after the Second Vatican Council. A reading of the “Lineamenta” preparing for that Synod, and of the preceding pages, cannot but move all Catholics in prayers of thanksgiving. The Spirit of God is so obviously moving among the People of God to encourage and animate new generations of Toussaints.

However, there is one surprising discovery in this study of the life and spirituality of Toussaint that still is difficult to accept from the documentation. At no point was there any link found between the teachings of St. Francis de Sales, who must have a special place in developing a spirituality of the laity, and the other sources active in influencing Toussaint. Objectively, they would almost seem as kindred spirits and Pierre appears as the embodiment of the Salesian dictum that, “There is nothing so strong as gentleness; there is nothing so gentle as real strength.” The fuller story of Pierre may well have included such a link, but it is not in the documentation.

Lastly, this study has willfully not overly stressed the fact that Pierre Toussaint was respected even in his lifetime as a holy man and that people sought out not only his counsel but also his prayers. Yet such was the case as is witnessed by many letters. On December 30, 1852, for example, a Mr. A. Briggs wrote to him: “...You are one of the small number who wish nothing for themselves...I would like to be a Christian the way you’re a Christian. Pray for me, because I have faith in the prayers of the just. And I want

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with all my heart to love God above all and to serve Him faithfully. It's a few days since I turned thirty-nine."

In addressing some religious at Altoetting, Germany, on November 18, 1980, Pope John Paul II said: "Mere human kindness is not enough. People have to feel that through you someone else is at work. To the extent that you live your total consecration to the Lord, you communicate something of Him and ultimately it is He for whom the human heart is longing,"



**Plaque Commemorating Toussaint on St. Peter's Church NYC**

Those words apply to the laity as well as to religious, and seem to have been fulfilled in the life of Toussaint. People felt his spirituality. Someday the Church may give its solemn judgment on the holiness and spirituality of Pierre Toussaint.

Norbert M. Dorsey, C.P.  
1986

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