Saint Martin of Tours

Feastday: November 11
Patron: of the poor, soldiers, conscientious objectors, tailors, and winemakers
Birth: 316 or 336
Death: 397

Saint Martin of Tours was born in in Savaria, Pannonia in either the year 316 or 336 AD. That region is what is today the nation of Hungary. His father was a tribune, which is a high-ranking officer in the Imperial Horse Guard. Martin and his family went with his father when he was assigned to a post at Ticinum, in Northern Italy. It is here that Martin would grow up.

Just before Martin was born, Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire and the bloody persecution of Christians soon came to an end. It was not the official religion of the State, but it could be practiced and proclaimed openly. The Gospel message soon flourished in ancient Rome, transforming the empire. Martin's parents were pagans, but at the age of 10, Martin chose to respond to the call of the Gospel and become a Christian.

At the age of fifteen, Martin was required to follow his father into the cavalry corps of the Roman military. By the time he was 18, Martin is believed to have served in Gaul, and also eventually Milan and Treves. Scholars think he served as part of the emperor's guard.

As a young soldier, Martin encountered a beggar in Amiens. The beggar was un-clothed and it was very cold. Martin removed his cloak and with his sword, he cut it in half. He gave this half to the beggar and dressed himself in the remnant. That night, Martin had a vision in which Christ appeared to him. The vision spoke to him, "Martin, a mere catechumen has clothed me." A catechumen is one who is being instructed in the Christian faith. In the early centuries of Christianity, that was a long process of instruction - and Martin was deeply dedicated to it.

About the age of 20, Martin made clear to his superiors that he would no longer fight, following his formed Christian conscience. He refused his pay prior to a battle and announced he would not join in the combat. He became the first recognized conscientious objector in recorded history. His proclamation occurred before a battle near the modern German city of Worms. His superiors accused him of cowardice and ordered that he be imprisoned. Martin offered to demonstrate his sincerity by going into battle unarmed. This was seen as an acceptable alternative to jailing him, but before the battle could occur, the opposing army agreed to a truce and no conflict took place. Martin was subsequently released from military service.

Now out of the military service, Martin could fully dedicate himself to service of Jesus Christ and the Church. He travelled to Tours where he began studying under Hilary of

Poitiers, who is now recognised as a doctor of the Church. Martin's studies lasted until Hilary was forced into temporary exile, likely because of his refusal to participate in a political dispute.

Martin then travelled to Italy. According to one account, Martin was confronted by a highwayman and led him to faith in Jesus Christ. Another account tells of Martin confronting the Devil. While on this journey, Martin had a vision which compelled him to return to his mother in Pannonia. He did so and led his own mother to faith in Jesus Christ. Martin attempted to persuade his father to embrace faith in Jesus Christ, but as far as we know, his father refused.

After bringing his mother to the Church, Martin then turned to confronting a growing heresy which was afflicting the faithful and sowing confusion. He became involved in countering the Arian heresy, which denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. The reaction against him was so violent from the Arian leaders that he was compelled to flee. Martin took up residence on an island in the Adriatic where he lived as a hermit for a time.

Martin's teacher Hilary returned to Tours from temporary exile in 361 so Martin travelled there to work and study. Hilary gave Martin a small grant of land where he and his disciples lived.

Martin established a monastery which would be inhabited by the Benedictines. Established in 361, the Liguge Abbey was destroyed during the French Revolution, then re-established in 1853. The abbey remains to this day. From the site of his abbey, Martin worked to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ and Baptism into His Church in the surrounding areas. He was an extraordinary evangelist.

In 371, the city of Tours needed a new bishop and the people decided to call Martin to the office. Martin did not want the job so the people decided to trick him into the office. The people insisted he was needed to administer to someone sick, so he came out as quickly as he could. He did not even bother to improve his appearance. When he learned it was a trick to make him a bishop, Martin actually tried to hide. He was quickly discovered and the people called him forward to be ordained to the office of Bishop. Even though he did not really want the office, he was ordained - and he became a holy and hardworking Bishop.

As a Bishop Martin established a system of parishes to manage his diocese. He made a point to visit each parish at least once per year. In addition to his appointed rounds, Martin combated paganism, particularly the Druid religion which was still prevalent at the time. He passionately and faithfully proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ and won many to the Christian faith.

Yet, he longed for more prayer and wanted to pursue a monastic life. In the year 372 Martin established an abbey at Marmoutier so he could retreat there and live as a monk with the many disciples he had attracted.

In the following years, a heresy broke out in the church. An aesthetic sect called the Priscillianists after their leader, Priscillian, had developed in Spain and Gaul. The First

Council of Saragossa condemned the heresy, but the Priscillians did not change they practices. This prompted one bishop, Ithacius of Ossonoba to petition the Roman Emperor Magnus Maximus to put him to death. Martin was opposed to the sentence of death, and was joined by Bishop Ambrose of Milan in his opposition. Martin travelled to Trier where the Emperor held court. Martin was able to persuade the Emperor to refrain from putting Priscillian and his followers to death. However, after Martin left, Ithacius persuaded the Emperor to change his mind again and Priscillian and his followers were executed in 385.

Martin was so upset by Ithacius, he refused to communicate with his fellow bishop until the Emperor pressured him to resume communicating with his colleague.

Martin died in Candes-Saint-Martin, Gaul in 397.

The Hagiographer Sulpicius Severus, knew Martin personally and wrote about his life. Many miracles and the casting out of demons were attributed to Martin during his lifetime. According to one account, Martin, while trying to win Druids to follow Jesus Christ and renounce their pagan beliefs, was dared to stand in the path of a sacred tree that was being felled. Martin agreed and was missed by the falling pine, although standing right in its path. This was widely seen as miraculous and a symbol that the message he proclaimed about Jesus Christ was true. Many were converted to the Christian faith.

Veneration of St. Martin became popular in the Middle Ages and was popular with the Frankish kings.

Saint Martin is the patron of the poor, soldiers, conscientious objectors, tailors, and winemakers. Many locations across Europe have also been placed under his patronage. His feast is on November 11. He commonly appears on horseback and is shown cutting his cloak in half with a sword.