Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

Pierre Toussaint: Pioneer in Brotherhood (by Arthur and Elizabeth Odell Sheehan)

Most Americans know that, for the last few years, the hottest musical on Broadway, sold out months in advance, is *Hamilton*. Although the story line is based on an authoritative biography of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, the show's multi-racial casting and hip-hop musical numbers have made the younger generations of all ethnicities suddenly excited about early American history and persons who have sometimes been dismissed as "dead white males." Young *Hamilton* fans who read about Toussaint will be delighted to discover the connection between the Venerable Pierre and his more famous clients, Angelica Schuyler Church and Eliza Schuyler Hamilton. It's interesting that in the musical, the Hamilton sisters sing about enjoying night life in "the greatest city in the world." Certainly New York City of the 1790s was not yet any such thing. And yet, just as an acorn in some sense contains a mighty oak, much that would enable New York to eventually claim that title was already there in embryonic form. As a center of commerce, shipping, and briefly, federal government, New York was certainly the greatest city in the young United States even then. Cultural diversity was there from the start. Leading wealthy families of original Dutch and English stock rubbed elbows with thousands of French refugees who fled revolutions at home and in their Caribbean colonies. Poorer immigrants from Germany and Ireland, and of course, the many black slaves and freedmen all contributed to the variety and ever-striving energy of Manhattan. Social strata and strictures or not, these groups were all in close contact with one another. Both tensions and harmonies among them gradually sculpted the unique character of New York City.

Pierre Toussaint—a black slave in a French colonial family seeking refuge in America—embodies that cultural diversity of New York in several ways. But just like his Savior before him, Pierre is a "sign of contradiction," especially to modern sensibilities. We don't want to hear about a slave who willingly remained a slave in order to care for his impoverished owner. We want heroic slaves who yearn for freedom, struggle to achieve it, then go on to spend their lives seeking justice for other slaves. We want Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, not a docile hairdresser building bouffant hairdos for society matrons. Yes, of course we admire Pierre's care for abandoned plague victims, his work to found an orphanage, his taking in foster children. But even as we admire Pierre, we want him to have asked—no, demanded—that he be set free as a condition to maintaining the Bérard household in comfort. Thoughts of "Uncle Tom" and "Stockholm Syndrome" flit through our minds. We bask in our righteous indignation. From our distance of 200+ years, we know how all these people *should* have acted, thought, and felt.

Perhaps this attitude does some credit to our sense of justice. But it also blinds us to Pierre Toussaint's mercy. His love. His patient endurance that keeps the message of "love one another as I have loved you" from languishing on "inspirational" posters and coffee mugs. Pierre's life throws Christ's command in our faces as a challenge. He convicts us of our own deficiencies, leaving us with two choices: to deflect our guilt by finding ways to criticize Pierre, or to ask ourselves how we might imitate his valiant charity. Of course Pierre desired his freedom. If he hadn't valued liberty he would not have sacrificed to purchase the freedom of other slaves. At the same time, he clearly possessed an interior freedom—the freedom that came from awareness of being God's adopted son—that kept him from seeing legal freedom as "something to be

grasped at" (cf. Philippians 2:6). This awareness enabled him to rise above his restricted status and actually pity those who held him in legal bonds. Those we pity ultimately have no real power over us. In this sense, fewer men have walked this earth who were freer than Pierre Toussaint.

Topics for further discussion could begin with the complicated moral problems of both slavery and violent revolution. Our authors go out of their way to tell us how kind, just, and clear of conscience the Bérard family was when it came to treatment of their slaves. Certainly, they did much to mitigate the misery of the slaves' lives. When the Bérards' slaves observed the difference in their lives compared to that of slaves on other plantations, they must have been relieved and even grateful. At the same time, it must be said that the Bérards were ignoring or rationalizing a grave evil in which they were participating for the sake of material gain. A fruitful discussion with students would not center so much on judging these people as on identifying areas of moral blindness in our own times, where it is easy for otherwise "good" people to participate in some personal or institutional evil. And even more to the point, ask how we ourselves can be tempted to overlook or minimize the wrongness of some action—or lack of action—simply because everyone else does it.

The revolution in Haiti that led to freedom for the slaves via a river of blood is another area to research and discuss. Slaves have revolted *en masse* at other times in history (the Spartacus rebellion in ancient Rome is a famous example), but the rebellion in Haiti is believed to be the first one that was permanently successful insofar as it resulted in the creation of an independent state. In the insight essay for *Padre Pro: Mexican Hero* we discussed some of the pitfalls of Mexico's revolution. There are some parallels between events in these two nations. Haiti's two centuries of independence have been scarred by almost constant political unrest, natural disasters, disease outbreaks, and heartbreaking poverty. It is ranked as the poorest country in the western hemisphere. Yet there are many bright spots in Haiti. One of them is the College Pierre Toussaint, a new secondary school in the village of Sassier in southwest Haiti. With strong ties to the Archdiocese of New York, and funded largely by American donors in honor of Venerable Pierre, it prepares young Haitians to go on to university studies. These students have committed themselves to serve their people as doctors, nurses, building engineers, and other positions that are desperately needed to stabilize Haiti.

Declared "Venerable" by the Church in 1996, Pierre's cause will hopefully progress and his story will become better known. At this point in time, no miracle credited to his intercession has been officially accepted by the Vatican—a prerequisite for beatification.

Pierre's unique charisms speak to all of us. He could look beyond, in fact ignore society's obsessions with race, class, and status, dedicating his life to loving others in whatever way he could. That might be hands-on care of the suffering. It might be giving of his means, or begging/organizing/encouraging others to do the same for any number of good causes. It might be no more than lending a sympathetic ear to those who were unhappy. Perhaps there is not a better project to do in conjunction with this, his life story, than to discover new ways for our school group or family to do the same in our own communities.

Note: modern research makes it likely that Pierre was born later than the 1766 date given by our authors (which they in turn took from Hannah Lee Sawyer's 1854 biography). The birth dates for Pierre's sister Rosalie and his godmother Aurore have been firmly established as 1786 and 1776, respectively. Since Pierre was five years older than Rosalie and five years younger than his godmother, Aurore, it would establish the year of his birth as 1781. This would make him 26 years old when he received his freedom, and would eliminate the great age discrepancy between Pierre and Juliette.