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## **Saint Martin of Tours**

*c. 316-397*

The feast of St. Martin of Tours falls on what used to be Veterans' Day, and there could be no more appropriate patron for such a celebration than this soldier-peacemaker of the fourth century. He was born of pagan parents around 316 in Pannonia, in what is now Hungary, his father was a superior officer of the Roman legion who had risen from the ranks.

Early in Martin's childhood, they moved to Pavia, in Italy, where he was drawn to the teaching of Christ. The story is told that as a boy, taking refuge in a church during a storm, he heard a bishop speak to a group of catechumens about Jesus, and he joined them. He determined to become a hermit but his father and the state had other plans. Universal military training was mandatory for the sons of officers, and both his father's anger at Martin's new religious bent and the law of the empire prevailed.

He was chosen for the elite cavalry corps of the imperial guard, officers who were not supposed to fight save

in the emperor's presence, and whose dazzling uniform included gleaming armor and a great white cloak lined with Lambskin. As an officer, Martin was entitled to two horses, double rations, and a servant, but to the amusement of the garrison, he reversed the roles. He served his servant even to cleaning his shoes. He ate the poorest of food and gave away what he did not need. And he neither drank nor mixed with women; instead he prayed and read and visited the sick. In the army Martin not only remained an aspiring Christian but became a better one.

Now comes the most famous story of all about Martin of Tours. He was eighteen and quartered in Amiens during a severe winter. One day, after making the rounds, he was about to reenter the city gate when he saw a naked beggar shivering on the roadside. He took his sword, rent the beautiful cloak in half and gave part to the beggar, wrapping himself in the remainder. That night in a dream he saw Christ as the beggar, wearing the half-cloak, saying: "Look, Martin has given me half his cloak and he is not even baptized." His biographer writes, "He flew to be baptized."

By the time Martin's corps was called into battle, he had already asked to be released from the army to become a monk. Standing before Constantine II to receive the customary money paid to soldiers before battle, he stated that he could not take it because he could not go into battle and kill. Enraged the emperor said he *would* go, but with a sword at his back, and Martin agreed to go but unarmed. He was cast into prison for the night where he prayed until dawn,

and to the astonishment of everyone, envoys came from the enemy to ask for peace.

Now twenty-five, Martin sought out the hermit bishop of Poitiers, St. Hilary, to be his mentor. Refusing ordination, he studied, took minor orders and then felt called to cross the Alps to see his parents again. He converted his mother but not his father, and as he was about to return, he ran afoul of the Arians in the vicinity. He preached against them so eloquently that he was beaten and driven away. Reaching Milan he took refuge on an island until Hilary, temporarily exiled, was permitted to return to Poitiers, and there Martin once again joined him. He lived for ten years in a hut, first as a hermit, then, joined by others, founding the first monastic community in Gaul. Eventually, he accepted ordination.

In the year 371, the bishop of Tours died and his people set about to choose another bishop. Martin, famous for his holiness and love for souls, was their choice, much against the judgment of some of the more worldly clergy who objected that he was too unkempt and shabby, with hardly a bishop's style. The people replied that they wanted a holy bishop, not a stylish one, and were determined to have Martin. Horrified, he refused, and the people, resorting to a ruse, captured him and forcibly made him bishop of Tours. A charming legend tells that Martin hid from them between two farm buildings, but his pet goose followed and honked at him and gave his hiding place away which explains the

presence of a goose in so many representations of Martin of Tours.

Martin took his place as bishop wearing his monk's robe, sitting on a wooden stool, and carrying his wooden staff for a crozier. At first he lodged in a room off the apse of the church, but the unending interruptions forced him to move to a cave on the outskirts of the town where he was soon joined by others. In time their hillside was honeycombed with cells and they formed a religious community. He shepherded his flock ceaselessly, traveling by foot, by donkey, by boat, until he finally conceived an orderly plan for visiting each settlement by dividing them into what he called *parishes*. We owe the idea of parishes to Martin of Tours.

He cured, healed, counseled, preached; and he traveled all over Gaul converting pagans, interceding for prisoners, rebuking rulers. He was far from home when his last sickness came upon him and at the age of eighty he died. A friend of saints, he was an uncle of another, St. Patrick (through his sister), and he is called the patron, some say the father, of Catholic France.