

CONVOCAION of CATHOLICS of AFRICAN DESCENT

April 13, 2024

with

ValLimar Jansen

celebrating

Six Black Catholics on the Road to Sainthood



All Saints Parish
Syracuse, NY



CONVOCAATION of CATHOLICS of AFRICAN DESCENT

April 13, 2024

In All Saints Church

- 9:00am-9:30am:** Registration
- 9:30am-9:55am:** Welcome
Opening Prayer with Bishop Douglas Lucia
- 9:55am-12:00pm:** Keynote Presentation – ValLimar Jansen
Six Black Saints on the Road to Sainthood

In Bishop Harrison Center

- 12:00pm-1:00pm:** Lunch
- 1:00pm-1:15pm:** Brief history of Black Catholic Ministry in Syracuse
- 1:30pm-2:15pm:** Small group breakouts
*Possibilities for ministry with Catholics of African Descent
in the Diocese of Syracuse*
- 2:30pm-3:00pm:** Reporting back discussion and ideas to whole group
- 3:00pm-3:15pm:** Call to leadership commitment
- 3:15pm-3:30pm:** Closing Prayer

In All Saints Church

- 4:00pm:** Anticipated Mass for the Third Sunday of Easter
with Gospel & African Choirs

The History of Black Americans in the Catholic Church is one of Neglect, Apathy and Racism. by Toni Guidice

Only 4 percent of American Catholics are black, compared to about 66 percent of U.S. blacks who identify as Protestant. The numbers reflect the sad history of the Catholic Church's early treatment of Africans, a people brought to this country in chains and treated as a commodity. From the beginning of this nation, the American Catholic Church missed numerous opportunities to swell its ranks with a people who have a long and storied history in Christianity.

By the 4th century, Ethiopia was a Christian nation. Nubia, the celebrated nation of artists and pyramid builders (Nubians built more pyramids than the Egyptians), was a Christian nation by the 6th century. The Spanish, French and Portuguese who were the first Europeans to come to the "New World" brought along black slaves, all of whom were baptized Catholics.

In 1575, the Spanish established St. Augustine in Florida, the first colony and the oldest non-Indian settlement in the United States. Inhabitants were both black and white. In 200 years of parochial registers, blacks are mentioned in all of them. By the 1700s, several settlements, mainly comprised of blacks, were established: The town of Santa Teresa de Mose in Florida was established for freed black slaves who had converted to Catholicism. Los Angeles was settled by blacks and Indians from Mexico, and Haitian refugees settled at Fells Point near Baltimore. Those early settlements were promising examples of what could have been.

Slavery, however, created a powerful and extensive system that carved out huge plantations and settlements, made many people rich and shaped a culture that turned a blind eye to the treatment and plight of African Americans. Sadly, the Catholic Church participated in this culture.

Clergy and religious as defenders of slavery and slaveholders

Before the Civil War, bishops and archbishops in the South defended slavery, saying it was a disguised blessing. They argued — much to the displeasure of Rome — that through slavery, the "children of the race of Canaan" received the faith and other advantages. Taking care of these "unfortunates" was "eminently Christian work" and, for the slaves, their reward would be in heaven.

The American southern church's Christian work was ambiguous when it came to slaves. Catholic slaveholders had six months to baptize their slaves or risk excommunication. And although thousands were baptized, fewer were granted access to the sacraments, particularly marriage and last rites. Baptized slaves even had to have written permission from their owner to receive communion. And civil law prohibited slaves from marrying without prior consent of their owners.

Most Southern religious were slaveholders, the most well-known being the Jesuits in Maryland, who in 1636, received some 12,000 acres of land. The Jesuits first employed indentured servants, men and women mainly from England and Ireland. By the end of the 17th century, the Jesuits used African slaves to work their land. In 1819, the Jesuits were in financial trouble and a feud developed between the older Jesuits, who argued the salvation of the slaves was their responsibility, and younger Jesuits, who argued that the order needed to get out of agriculture, sell the slaves and devote itself to education.

In 1835 the sale of the slaves began. In total, 272 men, women and children, all Catholics, were sold to buyers in Louisiana. They were not necessarily sold to Catholic slave owners and, in the end, families were separated. Those sold to non-Catholic slave owners never practiced their faith again. Only about a dozen slaves escaped with the help of a handful of Jesuits.

The transaction is commonly known as the sale that saved Georgetown. The sale totaled \$115,000, roughly \$423 per soul.

The Jesuits were not the only slave-owning Catholic order. The Vincentians in Missouri were major slaveholders in Perry County, south of St. Louis. It was a New Orleans bishop who supplied the Vincentians with their first slaves.

Women religious also had slaves. The Ursuline nuns, who first came to New Orleans in 1727, owned slaves from the very beginning. Other slave-owning communities were the Carmelites, Daughters of the Cross, the Visitation nuns, the Dominicans, the Sisters of Loretto and the Sisters of Charity. The Sisters of Loretto were able to purchase land to build their first convent when their Mother Superior Ann Rhodes sold her personal slave to a Catholic priest.

In 1839, Pope Gregory XVI condemned the practice of slavery in his apostolic letter, *In Supremo Apostolatus*, where he called slavery “the inhuman traffic in Negroes.” He also forbade any ecclesiastical or layperson to defend or teach anything that supported the slave trade. But Pope Gregory’s anti-slavery stance was interpreted by American southern bishops as a condemnation of the slave trade, not U.S. slavery.

The vicar apostolic of Florida, Augustine Verdot, said in an 1861 sermon that slavery “received the sanction of God, the church, and of Society at all times, and in all governments.”

Black women religious

Despite an American Catholic hierarchy that, for the most part, was pro-slavery and racist, black Catholics came forward to participate in the religion they loved. The very first were black women.

Black women could not join established white orders so they formed their own. The first attempt to found a community of black women religious failed in Kentucky in 1824. Five years later, four Haitian women, with the help of Father Jacques Joubert, a Sulpician priest, founded the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore. On their first anniversary, the Sulpician superior enrolled the sisters in the association of the Holy Slavery of the Mother of God. The sisters received a small link of chain with their habit to mark their Holy Slavery. The order was approved by Pope Gregory Xavier in 1831. The sisters worked tirelessly in the black community. In 1832, during the grip of cholera in Baltimore, the city asked for eight volunteers to work with the sick, a very dangerous undertaking. The Sisters of Charity, a white order, was approached first. It volunteered four sisters. When Father Joubert asked the Oblate Sisters for volunteers, every woman in the room stood up. He chose four. Another sister was tasked with nursing the archbishop’s housekeeper, who had contracted the disease. That sister was dead in 24 hours.

Despite their displays of charity, good works and selfishness, the sisters were assigned in 1855 to take over the housekeeping duties at the seminary.

African-American sisters ministered mostly to their neglected community in the form of education and health. They did good work with little or no recognition. Pioneers — Elizabeth Lange, Henrietta Delille and Mathilda Beasley — worked without encouragement or support and too often in the face of indifference or apathy. They established the Sisters of the Holy Family in 1842 in New Orleans.

When they excitedly sent one of their novices to the archbishop to model their habit, she was greeted with distaste. The archbishop asked her, “Who do you think you are? You are proud, too proud.” It took 30 years for the Sisters of the Holy Family to be allowed to wear their habit in public. The order did not receive official recognition until 1949.

The first black priests

Michael Morris Healy, an Irishman, came to Georgia about 1816. He purchased 400 acres of land. By 1831, he owned 1,600 acres of land and numerous slaves. The slaves made him a very rich man.

Healy chose a light-skinned slave named Mary Eliza as a mistress. But by several accounts, Healy and Mary Eliza were monogamous. They could not be married because of civil and religious law. They had 10 children,

all of whom were slaves. (The law of the land was that children born in such a circumstance took on the status of the mother.)

Healy could not free his children so he sent them, one by one, to the North to be educated. He sent his first four sons: James Augustine Healy, Hugh Healy (who died tragically in his 20s of typhoid fever), Patrick Francis Healy and Alexander Sherwood Healy. All were sent before they were 10 years old. The family was not a religious one. None of the children had been baptized. Everything changed when Michael Healy met and formed a friendship with Coadjutor Bishop of Boston John Fitzpatrick in 1844. Fitzpatrick urged Michael Healy to send his sons to Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass. That year, all four Healy boys were baptized into the Catholic faith.

A daughter, Martha Ann, later arrived and lived in Boston with one of the bishop's relatives. The girls in the family were educated in Catholic convent schools in Montreal. Eventually, three of the Healy daughters became nuns.

When Healy and Mary Eliza died in 1855, the Healy estate and its 57 slaves were sold with the proceeds to go to educating all the Healy children. Ironically, it was slave labor and slaves that would finance America's first priests of African descent.

James Augustine Healy was ordained a priest in Paris in 1854. He was consecrated Bishop of Portland on June 2, 1875. He is the first American with African ancestry to serve as a Catholic bishop in the United States. Patrick Francis Healy became a Jesuit and is the first American with African ancestry to earn a Ph.D. In 1874, he was named president of Georgetown University. It was Healy who would spearhead big changes at the university, adding dormitories, classrooms, science labs and meeting rooms. He also upgraded the medical and law schools. The university's flagship building still bears his name.

Alexander Sherwood Healy was ordained in Rome in 1858 and received his doctorate in Paris. He became an expert in Gregorian Chant and Cannon Law.

Michael Augustine Healy entered the seminary at age 15 but the priesthood was not his calling. He signed onto a clipper ship as a cabin boy and became an expert seaman. He joined the Revenue Cutter Service in 1864, which eventually became the U.S. Coast Guard. A Coast Guard ice-breaker is named in his honor.

All the Healy children were very light skinned and most passed for white. Patrick never spoke of his African heritage, only James and Sherwood did.

The “most conspicuous man” in America

The first black American priest publicly known to be black was Augustus Tolton, born a slave in Missouri to a white Catholic family. His friends called him Gus.

In 1862, Tolton, his mother and two siblings escaped slavery by crossing the Mississippi River by rowboat while being shot at by slave hunters. When the family reached the northern shore, they went down on their knees to thank God. Tolton's mother, a devout Catholic, turned to him and said “You're free. Never forget the goodness of the Lord.”

Amid horrific poverty and racism, Tolton, at the age of 9, along with his siblings, were forced to work in a tobacco factory to help their mother put food on the table and roof over their heads. With the help of two priests, who saw potential in the pious young man, Tolton went on to graduate high school and Quincy College. In 1880, he began his studies for the priesthood in Rome because no U.S. Catholic seminary would admit him. Upon his ordination on Holy Saturday in 1886, it was planned that Tolton would minister in Africa. That changed, however, when a cardinal decided it was time for America to have its first black priest.

Father Tolton worked tirelessly in Quincy, Ill., where he was assigned a black parish with very few parishioners — 31 and mostly women. Soon several hundred white Catholics, German and Irish immigrants, came to

Tolton's church for Mass and the sacraments. This caused some problems with other parishes in the area and with a particular German priest. Father Tolton appeared, through his letters to Rome, to be physically afraid of this priest. It was then he asked to be moved to another parish. After two and a half years in Quincy, Tolton was reassigned to minister to black Catholics who were meeting in the basement of St. Mary parish in Chicago. Nineteen men and women converts from Quincy followed him there.

Father Tolton struggled in Chicago, too. He had little financial support and he felt lonely. He spoke of having no other black priest to talk with. He wished he could be part of the Mill Hill Fathers, later called the Josephites, which had organized in 1871. The sporadic financial support he received came from St. Katherine Drexel. Father Tolton spent seven years in Chicago, plagued with ill health and the constant need to find funding for his church. He died on July 9, 1897. He was 43.

The Civil War and the end of slavery

The Civil War settled the issue of slavery for the Catholic Church. During the hundreds of years of the enslavement of black people, American bishops had made bad choices. In 1866, during the second plenary council of Baltimore, they were given a chance to rectify them. They did not.

The bishops bemoaned the "immense slave population" and evils resulting from "the sudden emancipation" of blacks. Their references to a preferred "graduated system of emancipation" and the "fact" that blacks possessed "peculiar dispositions and habits" displayed their racial bias. Several bishops stepped forward to defend the rights of black Catholics, several of whom had previously been staunch advocates of slavery. But, in the end, how to deal with the infusion of freed blacks was left up to each diocese.

During this time, many blacks turned to Protestant churches, which reached out to black communities. It is not known how many black Catholics left the faith because of the Catholic Church's apathy toward them. Clergy and black Catholics at that time referred to the enormous effort Protestants had made for the education of American blacks in contrast to the "light efforts of American Catholics."

Perseverance by the black laity

Black Catholics took matters into their own hands — a number of Black Catholic newspapers appeared, beginning with Daniel Rudd's Ohio Tribune, later expanded into the American Catholic Tribune in 1885. It was the first black paper printed by and for blacks. In 1890, black Catholics organized a Black Catholic Congress to address the church's role in evangelizing, educating and advocating for black people. They demonstrated, beyond a doubt, not only that a black Catholic community existed, but that it was active, devoted, articulate and proud.

While prior congresses urged the church to open schools for black youths and parishes for black Catholics, Frederick McGee, a prominent black Minnesota attorney, spoke to the members during the third congress about rethinking their approach. He argued that Catholic schools and public schools admit black children, not house them in separate schools. He spoke of starting a Catholic Building and Loan Association for Colored People. He took a broader approach to integrating black people in society at large, even urging unions to admit blacks.

The congresses were intellectual as well as social in their approach. And in the fifth congress, black Catholic laity — using the plight of fellow African Americans — began shaping the future of Catholic social teaching and human rights. While their white counterparts met twice during the 19th century, black Catholics convened five times. They were dedicated and driven.

Is Catholic history repeating itself?

By the early 20th century, the American Catholic Church had only four black priests. It was converting about 1,000 blacks per year, but was hemorrhaging an untold number of baptized Catholics. The gain of Catholics occurred in parishes that ministered exclusively to African Americans. The loss of Catholics came from mixed parishes, where black parishioners were — depending on their numbers — relegated to side aisles, the gallery

or the back of the church. The younger generation of African Americans would not accept the humiliation and left the faith. Again, Protestant churches were there to absorb the souls of those thirsting for a welcoming community.

There were a few success stories.

In 1909, parishioners and Josephites at the Most Pure Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Mobile, Alabama, founded the Knights of Peter Claver, an organization named for the patron saint of missionary work among black slaves. Peter Claver would enter the infested hold of slaves ships to minister to the Africans who had survived the horrific journey. For four decades, he came armed with medicine and food and, by 1651, had baptized 300,000 souls. He died in 1654 after being sickened by the plague.

Today, the Knights of Peter Claver is the largest and oldest black Catholic laity-led organization still in existence. The knights promote civic and social justice, contribute to charities, award scholarships and nurture relationships with the community, youth and family. It stepped forward in 1939 to oppose segregation. It also created a committee to support American black priests who, after their ordinations, were being sent to Africa. The knights worked to keep priests of color in the United States.

Other milestones included the opening of the first seminary for black candidates for the priesthood in Mississippi in 1920. The first Catholic Interracial Council convened in New York City in 1934 and the formation of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus opened in 1968. Before Ruby Bridges walked into a all-white public school in 1960, Catholic schools had begun desegregating in the diocese of St. Louis (1947), Washington, DC (1948) and in Tennessee (1954).

The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s can be attributed with putting the social and spiritual rights of the black population into the public eye. It was then that white priests and nuns joined their black sisters and brothers in marches and demonstrations, publicly showing that the Catholic Church, finally, was walking with them.

Today, the fastest growing population of Catholics is on the continent of Africa. According to the Vatican, the number of Catholics in the world in 2020 increased by 16 million to 1.36 billion. Of this total, 48% are in the Americas, with 28% living in South America. Following recent trends, the Catholic Church grew most rapidly in Africa (+2.1%) and Asia (+1.8%).

The figures show many things — including a serious mismatch in how Catholic priests are allocated around the world. More than 50 percent of priests live and minister in the global North — while more than two-thirds of Catholics live someplace else. About 236 million Africans are Catholics while the U.S. and Canada are home to 84 million Catholic. Yet the U.S. and Canada have almost the same number of priests as the entire continent of Africa. Ironically, the Catholic Church in the global North is significantly supported by priests and religious who come from countries in the global South.

In Europe, on average, there is one priest for 1,746 Catholics and church attendance is low. In Africa, far more Catholics attend church regularly but there is one priest for every 5,089 Catholics. At the end of 2020, there were a total of 410,219 Catholic priests, a decrease of 4,117 since 2019. The number of priests in North America and Europe continued to decline, but Africa and Asia saw a significant increase.

The story of African American Catholicism is a story of a people who obstinately clung to a faith that gave them sustenance, even when it did not always make them feel welcome. Black people come with energy and gifts that the church needs. And if the Catholic Church is to grow, it will do it with that African and African American energy, an energy it has sorely underestimated for hundreds of years.

Sources:

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Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California

