

EMBRACING A SHARED LEGACY

Recognizing Over 400 Years of Black Catholic History in the United States

by The Tablet Staff and Catholic University of America



In July 1990, at a meeting at Fordham University in the Bronx, the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus designated November as Black Catholic History Month.

The month serves as an opportunity to reflect on the challenges and triumphs black Catholics faced throughout history and celebrate their ongoing contributions to the Church.

According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, there are over three million black American Catholics in the U.S., 250 priests, 437 deacons, and 50 men of African descent in seminary formation for the priesthood in the United States.

In addition, there are 12 living black American bishops — four of whom head a diocese — including one cardinal (Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory, Archbishop of Washington) and one archbishop (Bishop Shelton J. Fabre, Archbishop of Louisville). There are also 400 black American religious sisters and 50 religious brothers in the United States.

In the Diocese of Brooklyn, many efforts have been made to help ensure that black Catholics are treated as full and equal members of the Catholic Church.

In the late 1970s, the diocese formed the Council for Black Catholics at the behest of parishioners who wanted to ensure their identity was honored and respected. A decade later, the diocese established the Office of Black Ministry to continue that work, and in 2016, the Vicariate of Black Catholic Concerns was formed.

CALENDAR DATES

Black Catholic History Month, a time of remembrance and prayer, coincides with several significant dates for black Catholics in the United States, including these three to kick off the month.

Nov. 1 | ALL SAINTS DAY

An opportunity to review the lives of the hundreds of saints of African descent in the first 300 years of the Church.

Nov. 2 | ALL SOULS DAY

A time to remember all those Africans lost to cruel treatment in the Middle Passage crossing of the Atlantic Ocean.

Nov. 3 | FEAST DAY OF ST. MARTIN DE PORRES

St. Martin de Porres, the first black saint from the Americas, was canonized on May 16, 1962, by Pope John XXIII. Throughout his life, St. Martin de Porres exemplified God's love for all people, regardless of their social status.

HISTORY OF BLACK CATHOLICS IN THE U.S.

1500s

1565 St. Augustine, Florida

Blacks, both slave and free, help found the oldest town in the United States — St. Augustine, Florida. In the early 1690s, Spain offers asylum in a community northeast of St. Augustine to slaves fleeing from the north if they convert to Catholicism.

They lived there until 1738, when Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, or Fort Mose, was established by the governor of Spanish Florida as a free black settlement, the first to be legally sanctioned in what would later become a territory of the United States.



Old slave market, St. Augustine, Fla.

1700s

1781 Los Angeles

Governor Don Felipe de Neve recruits 11 families — a mix of Catholic Africans, Spanish, and American Indians — to settle on the Porciuncula River in what is now known as Los Angeles. Meanwhile, in Maryland, the black Catholic population grows to 3,000 due to Jesuit evangelization in the region.

1800s



1829 Oblate Sisters of Providence

A handful of women from Baltimore's Haitian refugee colony begin to educate local children in their homes. With the archbishop's support, in 1829, they found the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first permanent community of black Catholic sisters in the U.S. The first superior is Elizabeth Lange, who was born in Cuba to Haitian parents. A later archbishop dismisses the need for an order of black religious, but the sisters find new advocates among the Redemptorists and in St. John Neumann, the archbishop of Philadelphia. Their ministry spreads to Philadelphia and New Orleans.

1968 First Black Clergy Caucus

Before the meeting of the Catholic Clergy Conference on the Interracial Apostolate in 1968, Father Herman Porter of the Rockford, Illinois diocese invites all U.S. black Catholic clergy to a special caucus. More than 60 clergy gather to discuss the racial crisis and decide to form a permanent organization: The National Black Clergy Caucus. They send a statement to the bishops that strongly criticizes the Church but are clear in declaring their devotion and hope. It lists nine demands for the Church to be faithful in its mission to blacks and to restore the church within the black community. The caucus remains active today.



1985 Black Catholic Congresses

The National Black Catholic Congress is re-established in 1985 as a coalition of black Catholic organizations. In 1987, NBCC renews the tradition of gathering black Catholics from across the country. The first renewed congress, Congress VI (the first five took place in the 1800s), takes place in May of 1987 in Washington, D.C. NBCC holds a national congress every five years — Congress XIV is scheduled for 2028 — with each year attracting a growing number of attendees.



2000s

2006 Vicariate of Black Catholic Concerns

The Vicariate of Black Catholic Concerns is established in the Diocese of Brooklyn. It is the only canonically designated office in the Diocese of Brooklyn to act as an administrative, advocative, and representative body for all those in Brooklyn and Queens who identify as black Catholics.



2018

Denunciation of Racism | Open Wide Our Hearts

American bishops once again issue a Pastoral Letter on Racism: "Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love" to address systemic racism and the responsibility of Catholics to call it out and advocate for change. In the letter, the bishops state: "This evil causes great harm to its victims, and it corrupts the souls of those who harbor racist or prejudicial thoughts. The persistence of the evil of racism is why we are writing this letter now. People are still being harmed, so action is still needed."

1965 March in Selma

Many Catholic clergy and women religious join the Selma to Montgomery marches in Alabama, marking the Catholic church's foray into the civil rights struggle for racial equality.

1920 First Seminary for Blacks

The Society of the Divine Word in Greenville, Mississippi, with the blessing of Pope Benedict XV, opens St. Augustine's, the first seminary for blacks.



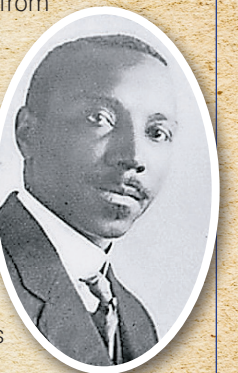
1916 Handmaids of Mary

The Georgia state legislature introduces a bill prohibiting whites from teaching black students. Although the law eventually fails, a community of black sisters is formed to teach. In 1924, the group relocates to Harlem (where it remains today), starts a soup kitchen, and begins educating local children. In 1929, they affiliate with the Franciscan Third Order, becoming the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary. Still active in Harlem, their ministries have spread elsewhere in the United States.

1916 Committee for the Advancement of Colored Catholics

Led by Thomas Wyatt Turner, the Committee for the Advancement of Colored Catholics forms during World War I to care for neglected black Catholic servicemen.

The U.S. bishops, despite requests from Rome to act on behalf of blacks during the race riots and lynchings of 1919, avoid the topic at their first annual meeting. In response, the committee publicly urges the bishops to denounce discrimination and consult with black Catholics, saying, "At present, we are neither a part of the colored world (Protestant), nor are we generally treated as full-fledged Catholics."



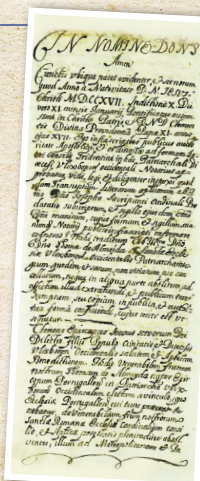
1900s

1909 Knights of Peter Claver

The fraternity of the Knights of Peter Claver is established by the work of Josephite priests as a parallel to the Knights of Columbus. It soon develops chapters for women and young people and is now the largest and oldest black Catholic lay-led organization still in existence.

1839 'In Supremo Apostolatus'

In this 1839 apostolic letter, Pope Gregory XVI condemns the slave trade as the "inhuman traffic in Negroes." Many U.S. bishops, as well as men's and women's religious orders in this period, own slaves while sometimes advocating for their proper treatment. Bishop John England of Charleston, South Carolina, defends the domestic slave trade, arguing Pope Gregory's apostolic letter refers only to slaves imported by the Spanish and Portuguese. While claiming he is not personally in favor of slavery, he says it is a "question for the legislature and not for me."



1842 Sisters of the Holy Family

Henriette Delille and Juliette Gaudin found the second religious order for black women in New Orleans. Both are biracial and of African descent, free people of color, and a class above slaves at that time. The order provides assistance to poor black individuals, education, and caring for the sick. However, they were not permitted to wear their habit in public until 1872.



1889 Catholic Congress

In January 1889, almost 200 black Catholic men meet with President Grover Cleveland on the last day of the Colored Catholic Congress, founded by Daniel Rudd, a journalist from Ohio and founder of the American Catholic Tribune. The group would meet for five more years before disbanding.