

CELEBRATING BLACK CATHOLIC HISTORY MONTH

November marks a time of remembrance and celebration in the Black Catholic Community. All Saints Day (November 1) recognizes the hundreds of saints of African descent throughout the Church's history, and All Souls Day (November 2) calls to mind the Africans lost in the Middle Passage.

The feast day of St. Martin de Porres (November 3) honors a holy man who loved God's people despite their race or class. Then, we celebrate the birthday of St. Augustine of Hippo (November 13), theologian, author, preacher and Doctor of the Church. Another American Black Catholic to remember is Zumbi of Palmares, a native Brazilian who founded a free state for Blacks. He died on November 20.

With the number of significant dates in Church history during this month, the National Black Clergy Caucus (priests, men religious, deacons and seminarians) voted in 1990 to designate November as Black Catholic History Month.

The history of Black Catholics in America can be traced to the 1560s when both freed and enslaved Blacks helped to found the city of St. Augustine, Florida. In 1693, Spain offered freedom to the enslaved who converted to Catholicism; these freed men and women established the local community of Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, the first free Black town in the US.

In 1787, 17-year-old Haitian-born Pierre Toussaint arrived in New York with his owner and became a well-known hairdresser. After his owner's death, Toussaint supported the owner's widow and used his income to buy freedom for his wife and sister and to support various charities. He started each day by attending 6 a.m. mass at St. Peter Parish in lower Manhattan and considered it an honor and duty to serve his clients — the sick, poor and orphaned. He died in 1853 and is the only lay person buried at St. Patrick's Cathedral in midtown Manhattan, alongside former Cardinal-Archbishops of New York City.

In the early 1800s, a young woman named Elizabeth Clarisse Lange arrived in the US as a refugee from her birthland Cuba and eventually settled in Baltimore. She quickly recognized that Black children, freed and enslaved, needed education. However, prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, there were no public schools that admitted Blacks in Baltimore since Maryland was a slave state and the education of the enslaved was outlawed. Elizabeth kept prayer and took charge of educating Black children and "loving them like Christ." She did this in her own home with her own money and the help of a fellow female refugee.

Archbishop James Whitfield urged Elizabeth C. Lange to establish a religious order for the education of Black children. In 1828, with the help of Sulpician Father James Joubert, S.S., Elizabeth C. Lange, and two other Black women started the first Black Catholic school in America. A year later, she and three fellow Black women pronounced vows to become the first religious order of women of African descent. She took the name Mary at her profession of vows. Mother Mary Lange served as the first mother superior and despite challenges, racism and a lack of funds, Mother Lange continued to educate children and meet the needs of Baltimore's Black Catholic community until her death in 1882.

Born in 1854 to enslaved parents, Augustus Tolton was baptized as an infant at St. Peter's Catholic Church in Bush Creek, Missouri, 170 miles south of St. Louis. To gain their freedom, Tolton's father, Peter, allegedly joined the Union army, and his mother Martha, he, and siblings, with aid of Union

soldiers, escaped to the free state of Illinois. Martha insisted on a good education for her son Augustus, and with the help of Fr. Peter McGirr was able to attend St. Lawrence parish school during winter months (young Augustus worked at a cigar factory in the summer to help support the family). Augustus was studious and pious; his educators saw in him a vocation. The Franciscans welcomed him into St. Francis College (now Quincy University), which allowed him to begin his higher education, as no seminary in the US would accept him as a student because of his race. Eventually, he persevered earning a spot in Rome to complete his studies and was ordained in 1886.

The newly ordained Fr. Augustus Tolton, the first openly African American priest in the U.S., returned home to Quincy, Illinois, and was asked to serve the growing Black Catholic community in Chicago. He was known for his holiness, evangelism, gentleness, leadership and gift of preaching. It was common for Whites to be among his parish congregation at Mass. He made it his mission to preach the word of God to everyone and to love everyone, regardless of skin color or station in life. Fr. Tolton died at the age of 43. due to the effects suffered from a heatwave. In 2010, Cardinal Francis George began an investigation into Fr. Tolton's life to determine the possibility of a cause for canonization; in 2011, Fr. Tolton received the title of Servant of God; and in 2019, Pope Francis advanced Tolton's cause with the promulgation of the Decree of Heroic Virtue and gave him the title Venerable Augustus Tolton. The next stage in Tolton's cause is beatification, which includes being bestowed the title of Blessed followed by, if requirements are present, canonization.

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Beginning in the late 1800s, chapels and missions were set up to accommodate the area's growing Black populations. In 1911, the first Catholic Mission for African Americans was established in St. Mary's Parish in Greektown. A year later it baptized its first child, Grayton Barksdale. In 1914, the mission was named for St. Peter Claver and moved into a new church home. The mission parish was both Black and culturally diverse with parishioners from Jamaica, Trinidad, Windsor, Ontario, Chile, Granada, Louisiana, Maryland, Kentucky, and Michigan. Staffed by Felician Sisters and Congregation of the Holy Ghost Fathers, an order dedicated to serving Black Catholics, these missions were established to give African American Catholics a place of respite from the racial harshness of the day, a place of belonging, prayer, religious education and hospitality. St. Peter Claver opened a school in 1936 and then moved into the previous German parish, Sacred Heart Church, in 1938 located in Eastern Market which remains today a personal African American parish for the Archdiocese of Detroit.

A second Black Parish was established on Detroit's westside in 1927 – St. Benedict the Moor. A young man, Norman DuKette, who helped with St. Mary's mission, was named its first priest. Fr. Norman DuKette was the first Black priest ordained for Detroit, incardinated in 1926 by Bishop Michael James Gallagher. A third Black mission, Holy Ghost, was opened in 1939 in northeast Detroit and given parish status in 1946; in 1943, a Black mission in the Detroit-Ferndale area, Our Lady of Victory, was established since Blacks were not permitted to attend nearby parishes, including Presentation Parish. A fifth and very successful Black mission, St. George Parish, was started in north-central Detroit. Nearly 1,000 African American Catholics were baptized there from 1949-1965. Sadly, St. George Church closed in 1965 to make way for freeway construction.

The Detroit Rebellion occurred in the summer of 1967 and was considered one of the most violent demonstrations in the U.S. of the 20th century. The Rebellion was due to tensions caused by a lack of educational opportunities, inadequate and segregated housing and unemployment. The Rebellion started

at 12th street and made its way to the Boston-Edison neighborhood, adjacent to Sacred Heart Major Seminary (SHMS) in Detroit. An African American artist painted the face, hands and feet of the Sacred Heart of Jesus image that is in front of the seminary. A topic of controversy for many years, the Black painted Jesus has become a landmark and symbol of Jesus' love for all races of people. Mary Massingale, a researcher for SHMS wrote for *Detroit Catholic*, "Bishop Boyea called the painting a 'great blessing' for the seminary: 'It was a sign that we are not somehow immune to what takes place all around us, and it is a call to be engaged.'"

In 1970, the Archdiocese of Detroit established an Office of the Black Secretariat, one of the first offices in the nation to monitor relations between Blacks and Whites. In 1981, the Secretariat Office was closed and the Office of Black Catholic Affairs was established to address the spiritual, familial and social needs of the area's Black Catholics. Today, there are 15-18 local Catholic parishes with a strong Black presence. The Affairs office is now the Office of Black Catholic Ministry which is in the Cultural Ministries Office within the Department of Evangelization and Missionary Discipleship in the Archdiocese of Detroit.

To celebrate Black Catholic History Month, or learn more about Detroit's special place in Black Catholic History, more resources can be found by copying and pasting the below:

<https://www.micatholic.org/advocacy/focus/2021/with-gratitude-for-african-american-catholics.pdf>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkMUqdS5aKI>

https://www.detroitcatholic.com/news/as-racial-tensions-ratcheted-in-1943-1967-sacred-heart-played-key-role-for-peace?_hstc=196444275.ecd699deff911d4753c5d1a827ef9500.1667325353370.1667325353370.1667406301828.2&_hssc=196444275.2.1667406301828&_hsfp=1651619998