

November 28, 2021

This week we present the 4th biography of a notable Black Catholic as we observe Black Catholic History Month.

Henriette Delille (1812-1862)

A descendent of slaves, Henriette Delille was born a free woman of color in New Orleans in 1812. She was able to be educated and led a life of privilege because of her father's wealth. She was raised as a Catholic and as a young woman, she sought to enter religious life. Sadly, she was turned away by two communities because of her race. In 1835, Delille sold all of her property hoping to start a community of Black nuns to teach in a school for free girls of color. After a few failed attempts, she and two other women founded the Sisters of the Holy Family religious order at St. Augustine's Church in New Orleans in 1842.

Although their primary work was in the area of education, Delille made it possible for the order to build a home for the sick, aged, and poor Black residents of the city. They took into their home elderly women, many of whom were freed slaves who needed care. The home became America's first Catholic home for the elderly of its kind and this is recorded in the National Register. The Sisters heroically cared for the sick and the dying during the yellow fever epidemics that struck New Orleans in 1853 and 1897.

During her life, Henriette wrote, "I believe in God. I hope in God. I love. I want to live and die for God." She died at the age of 50. In the eyes of the world Henriette may not have accomplished much, but her obituary and the Catholic Church tell us otherwise. "(Henriette) devoted herself untiringly for many years, without reserve, to the religious instruction of the people of New Orleans, principally of slaves. . . ." The last line of her obituary reads, ". . . for the love of Jesus Christ she had become the humble and devout servant of the slaves."

Over 170 years later, the Sisters of the Holy Family which Henriette helped to found continue to minister to the poor, sick and elderly.

In 1988, the canonization process for sainthood began when Pope John Paul II declared Sister Henriette Delille a Servant of God, the first step in the canonization process. She was declared Venerable by Pope Benedict XVI on March 27, 2010.

Venerable Henriette Delille is the first United States native-born African American whose cause for canonization has been officially opened by the Catholic Church.