

# Celebrating Women Witnesses

## A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

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Though slaves were not normally educated, the French Church insisted that they be taught the rudiments of the faith and baptized. While Nanette and other first generation African women probably converted under duress, their West African culture was also highly receptive to catechesis by women. In West

African society, women were sacred practitioners and mothers were responsible for initiating their daughters into religious cults. Therefore, these first-generation African women could have viewed daily female catechism gatherings preparing them for the ritual of Catholic Baptism as a way of continuing their accustomed religious roles.<sup>1</sup>

In an extensively researched paper, Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould found that captive female slaves constituted nearly half the baptisms of adult African slaves in New Orleans between 1731 and 1733, though they constituted only 40% of the population of adult enslaved Africans at the time. Clark and Gould conclude:

*The intergenerational transmission of Roman Catholicism to the people of African descent in New Orleans was a matrilineal process...Increasingly, African American women undertook primary responsibility for the transmittal of their adopted faith, not only to their daughters, but also to all those of African descent in their city. And finally, they expressed their leadership through their own religious order. This evolution was probably nothing the first generation of European evangelizers ever imagined...<sup>2</sup>*

### Quadroon Society

Female to female catechesis is not the only significant chapter in this remarkable and still-unfolding story. Another foundational element is the unique social

## HENRIETTE DELILLE

Early Womanist  
Servant of Slaves



### Background

In the spring of 1838, in a small chapel on St. Claude Street in New Orleans, Henriette Delille, a free creole woman of African descent, and Fr. Etienne Rousellon, a white priest, served as godparents to fourteen-year-old Marie Therese Dagon, a free black catechumen. This simple tableaux had been repeated many times, through many generations, by other creole women of color and other white priests who also performed the baptisms. It is perhaps the best explanation for why, against nearly insurmountable odds, Henriette Delille was ultimately successful in founding the U.S. Church's second black order of nuns, the Sisters of the Holy Family.

The early nineteenth century New Orleans milieu in which Henriette lived and died was a complex melting pot of French, African, German, Spanish, and (after the Civil War) American cultures, all heavily impacted by the overarching reality of slavery. French Catholicism grew rapidly among the New Orleans African population primarily because of the evangelization efforts of black women. French slavers brought the first shipment of Africans to Louisiana in 1719. Delille's great-great-grandmother, Nanette arrived in 1920. New Orleans was unique in that its primary missionaries at the time were Ursuline nuns who focused on catechizing women. They organized a women's confraternity called the Children of Mary and it is likely that Nanette was catechized by them while serving as a domestic in the household of Claude Joseph Dubreuil, a wealthy planter. She also bore Dubreuil five children, four of whom were girls.

conventions of colonial Louisiana. White women were scarce, and even though the law forbade biracial marriages, interracial relationships were quite common and sanctioned by society. ‘Quadroon balls,’ presented beautiful mixed women to white men among the New Orleans gentry who were in search of life partners or mistresses. Technically you were considered a quadroon if one of your grandparents was African, though the term was also used to describe anyone whose African heritage was even more dilute.

Such arrangements are not to be equated with casual extramarital affairs. The offspring of these liaisons were not considered bastards, but the “natural” children of the male head of the family. They freely used the father’s name, were given an education and some rights of inheritance. Whether a person of color was free or not, depended upon the status of the mother. The quadroon and her children were often granted their freedom upon the death of the patriarch.

In Louisiana and in New Orleans in particular, a highly cultured society developed among “free people of color,” whose freedom was nevertheless fettered by the ever present Jim Crow laws. This being said, in the New Orleans of Henriette Delille’s time, “free people of color” had some limited economic and social power, particularly, as we shall see, in the Catholic Church.

### Early Years

Henriette Delille was born in 1813, the youngest child of a French father, Jean Baptiste Delille, and a free woman of color, Josephine Diaz. Her sister Cecilia was six years older, and her brother Jean, three years older. Their mother, grandmother and great-grandmothers were all landowners, and Henriette’s eventual inheritance of family property was to prove crucial to her mission. Her maternal forebears left another, even more valuable legacy. Their names are listed repeatedly in New Orleans baptismal registries as godmothers to many generations of black women (and some men), continuing the tradition of female religious instruction begun by their African foremothers.

Being a beautiful light-skinned woman of color in quadroon society meant Henriette had other kinds of obligations as well. She was expected to better her family’s social standing by matching up with a wealthy white man either as a mistress or a life partner. Like most young quadroons of her generation, she learned to discuss French literature, how to dance gracefully and developed a refined taste in music. Quadroon women also learned the “womanly arts” of make-up, jewelry ornamentation and the selection and care of elaborate wardrobes. Henriette’s mother had other more practical gifts to share. She was a skilled herbalist and nurse, training possibly linked to Vodou healing arts learned from her own mother and grandmother. Josephine found in her daughter an apt pupil. These skills would be invaluable to Henriette’s future work among the sick and poor of New Orleans.

### Countering Family Expectations

While her older sister Cecilia was engaged in fulfilling the social expectations of quadroon society, Henriette pursued a different path. When, at age 16, Cecilia met her life partner Samuel at the quadroon ball, Henriette, age 11, came under the tutelage of a French nun, Sr. St. Marthe Fontier. New Orleans’ free people of color had given Fontier money to open a school for their daughters. During the day, the energetic nun taught young women of color while at night she gave instructions in the faith to black adults, both slave and free. According to an early biographer : “The little school was the nucleus for missionary activities among Negroes, bond and free. It was the work of this little school which laid a firm foundation in Catholicism among the black population in New Orleans.”<sup>3</sup>

Henriette again proved to be an avid learner. With several friends she began to help Sr. St. Marthe in her work. By age sixteen Henriette and her friends were deeply absorbed in “visiting the sick and aged, feeding the indigent, teaching religion to the poor and the slave, and praying in church.”<sup>4</sup> The young women encountered the stark realities of working with slaves completely under the control of a master whose permission must be granted before any teaching could begin. Since there were laws regulating the extent to which bond and free could intermingle, Henriette learned very early how to walk the delicate political tightrope which continually plagued her and her sisters as they tried to serve people in bondage. For slave girls life was harsh:

*Many times, as soon as a female slave reached puberty, she was introduced to the reality of sex and expected to produce, like stock, as many little bondsmen for the slave market as possible. Therefore, working among the slaves which was dangerous and very frustrating, required dedication and a deep spirit of prayer.*<sup>5</sup>

More and more, Henriette was drawn to her compassionate work among slaves and away from quadroon society. A defining moment came when her family registered as white in the 1830 census. Creoles of color, whose white complexion made their African heritage imperceptible, often crossed the color line to gain freedom from restrictive laws and to advance themselves. Henriette refused to follow them, choosing instead to continue her work at the school and her public association with slaves. She found a new “family” in lifelong friends and co-workers, Juliette Gaudin and Josephine Charles, who also resisted quadroon social expectations. Juliette and Josephine would eventually become co-founders of the Sisters of the Holy Family.

### The Sisters of the Holy Family

When Henriette came of age in 1835 she gained access to her inheritance, which she used to continue her work among the poor. She sold her property and, together with a zealous French woman, Marie-Jean Aliquot, as well as Juliette, Josephine and several other free women of color attempted to found a religious community of nuns called the Sisters of the Presentation. This community was to be short-lived however, because Aliquot was white and an 1830 law forbade interracial associations. The little group

was forced to disband reinforcing the doubt that a female religious community of color would ever succeed in New Orleans.

But Henriette was determined to find a way to fulfill her heart's desire. A prayer she wrote on the flyleaf of a devotional book anchored her life: "I believe in God. I hope in God. I love [God]. I want to live and die in God." 6

In 1837 Henriette met Fr. Etienne Jean Francois Rousellon, a missionary from Lyons, France. He became deeply interested in the ministry of this small struggling community and worked to have them recognized. Rousellon skirted interracial association laws by tactfully

**"Henriette made a bold frontal attack on the sexual prerogatives and privileges of white male society, trans-forming their sassy sirens into sacred sisters."**

Onita Estes-Hickes

suggesting that Jean Aliquot begin her work with slaves on a plantation in the country. However, when in town, Aliquot lived with the sisters and, after a long and edifying life, eventually died with them.

In 1841, Rousellon managed to obtain ecclesiastical permission to attach the fledgling community to St. Augustine's Church. They were accepted because of their mission of healing and teaching among the poor, slave and free. In 1842 they formally became a "religious association" and began to wear a plain blue dress as their religious garb. It would take ten years before Henriette and Juliette were able to make a formal novitiate with the Religious of the Sacred Heart and finally profess vows in their own community. Racist opinions about the social status of black women were such that they would wait thirty more years, until after the Civil War, before being allowed to wear a religious habit.

The new community was desperately poor and would not have survived were it not for the 1847 foundation of the Association of the Holy Family, a group of free people of color who committed themselves to supporting their mission. In 1853, after courageously nursing New Orleans' poor through the yellow fever epidemic, the sisters finally gained the public affirmation that had so long eluded them. In gratitude for their unstinting care, the city finally accepted the Sisters of the Holy Family as a black Catholic sisterhood. 7

Henriette and her sisters also bravely cared for the poor and wounded during and immediately after the Civil War. Worn out by work, Henriette died suddenly in 1862. Her funeral was marked by the love of diversity and of the poor that so characterized her life:

*The people who gathered at her funeral, free people of color, aristocratic white ladies, the poor, the aged, the orphans, and most of all her friends, the slaves, all testified 'by their sorrow how keenly felt was the loss of her who for the love of Jesus Christ made herself the humble and devoted "servant to the slaves." 8*

After Henriette's death, the Sisters of the Holy Family faced many challenges, both within and without, as they tried to survive in a racially divided Church. They were well led by Henriette's dear friends, Mother Juliette and Mother Josephine, who despite some significant differences, guided the orphaned community through many a rocky shoal.

Despite long and distinguished service, the sisters were at first refused the habit by the archbishop of New Orleans who, in 1872 drove a young novice from his door with the words: "Go take that off! Who do you think you are? You are too proud, too proud! That dress is not for you. Go take it off at once!" 9 Thankfully his surprised and racist outburst was not the last word. By year's end the sisters were given the habit, which they continue to wear to this day believing they had "fought and suffered long enough to wear the veil and are not about to part with it." 10

### Full Circle

In 1881, the Sisters of the Holy Family bought the Orleans Theatre, former site of the quadroon balls against which Henriette, Juliette and Josephine had so vigorously rebelled. The theatre was remodelled into a school and convent, and the ballroom transformed into the sisters' chapel. Onita Estes Hicks sees this remarkable turnaround as symbolic of the three friends' radical resistance to the sexual exploitation of black women:

*Recruiting her early followers from among the quadroons slated for concubinage, Henriette made a bold frontal attack on the sexual prerogatives and privileges of white male society, transforming their sassy sirens into sacred sisters. Against palpable historical odds, Henriette founded and nurtured her religious foundation. 11*

Today, the work of Henriette Delille's descendents has spread to other parts of the United States as well as to Nigeria and Belize. In 1988 the Vatican found no obstacle to advancing her candidacy for sainthood, a cause now being pursued by her sisters and the Catholics of New Orleans. While the Catholic community awaits new miracles to secure Henriette's saintly status, perhaps the most important one has already been given.

## End Notes:

1. Clark, Emily and Meacham Gould, Virginia. "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852." *The William and Mary Quarterly* vol. 59, Issue 2. p.(available at [www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/59.2/clark.html](http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/59.2/clark.html))
2. Ibid.
3. Detiege, Sr. Audrey Marie. *Henriette Delille, Free Woman of Color*, New Orleans, LA: Sisters of the Holy Family 1976. p.18.
4. Ibid. p. 19.
5. Ibid. p. 20
6. Fessenden, Tracy. "The Sisters of the Holy Family and the Veil of Race." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Volume 10, No.2 The Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, 2000 p. 194.
7. Estes-Hicks, Onita. "Henriette Delille: Free Woman of Color, Candidate for Roman Catholic Sainthood, Early Womanist." *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* Spring 1995 p. 52.
8. Detiege, p.48.
9. Fessenden, p. 187.
10. Ibid. p 188.
11. Onita Estes-Hickes p. 53.

## Other References:

Davis, Cyprian. *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*. New York:Crossroad,1996.

Deggs, Sr. Mary Bernard. *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth Century New Orleans*. ed by Virginia Meacham Gould and Charles E. Nolan. C by the Sisters of the Holy Family. Indiana University Press. 2001

Fichter, Joseph H. S.J. "A Sainly Person of Color," *America* February 29, 1992 pp 156-157

## Novels and Pamphlets

Collins, David R. *Servant to the Slaves: The Story of Henriette Delille*.c 2000 Daughters of St. Paul.pp 68 (Suitable for children)

Kelley William: *A Servant of Slaves: the Life of Henritte Delille* (a historical novel) New York: Crossroad 2003.

\* **Definition of Womanist:** (From *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* by Alice Walker )

1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who... appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter) and women's strength. ... Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folkLoves herself. Regardless.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

The feast day for Henriette Delille is celebrated on November 17. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.

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## Prayer Service Honoring Henriette Delille

*Celebrate on November 17 or any other time*

**Welcome:** The presider makes sure people meet each other and gives appropriate words of welcome.

**Opening Song:** *Lead Me Guide Me* (Afro-American Spiritual #220 in *Lead Me Guide Me G.I.A.* 1987)

**Reading I:** Philippians 2:1-2, 5-11

**Sung Refrain:** *We hold a treasure, not made of gold, in earthen vessels wealth untold, one treasure only, the Lord the Christ in earthen vessels* (*Earthen Vessels*, John Foley, S.J. #428 *Today's Missal Music* 2002).

**Reading II:** *Readings from No Cross, No Crown* by Sr. Mary Bernard Deggs (Indiana University Press, 2001) *describing the early history of the Sisters of the Holy Family, founded by Henriette Delille.*

**Reader 1:** "When our dear community commenced, it was very poor, but was blessed with many graces and also many crosses which are said to be the best of all other graces, as no cross, no crown... Many were the times that the foundress had nothing to eat but cold hominy that had been left from some rich family's table. It is not necessary to say a word about their clothing for it was more like Joseph's coat that was of many pieces and colors darned until darn was no the word (*No Cross, No Crown*, pp 8,9).

**Response:** *"I believe in God. I hope in God. I love. I want to live and die in God."*  
(prayer of Henriette Delille)

**Reader 2:** "Many times our dear sister Jeanne Marie Aliquot left her own dinner to give it some old black man whom she had paid to come and learn his prayers. Many times she took off her own clothing to give it to some old colored woman whom she saw in the streets... Once when the soldiers were posted in the city, on them forced a young girl of only twelve years old to come back to camp. Jeanne Marie went and demanded that she be released and brought out. That was her act of charity. She told cold and was brought to our convent where she fainted and died a very short time after that. We regretted her death very much for we have not found a friend as dear as she was nor as holy a religious"  
(*No Cross, No Crown*, p. 11).

**Response:** *"I believe in God. I hope in God. I love. I want to live and die in God."*

**Reader 3:** "One of the greatest pains after emancipation was that those owners who had previously sent their slaves to us to be instructed wished us to refuse to give them any more lessons. But that was asking too much of our sisters, for our dear Lord said, "Go and teach all nations." We, as sisters, are more obliged than others to teach all to know their God. And the day that we would refuse would be the day of sin for us, for our dear Lord said in another place that He had not come for the just, but to save sinners. This would have been preaching one thing and practicing another, for the rich have many friends when they have money. We would work in vain if we were to seek to please them and to neglect the poor..."  
(*No Cross, No Crown*, p.12)

**Response:** *"I believe in God. I hope in God. I love. I want to live and die in God."*

**Reading III:** Romans 12:9-21

**Response:** We hold a treasure, not made of gold, in earthen vessels wealth untold, one treasure only, the Lord the Christ in earthen vessels" (*Earthen Vessels*, John Foley, S.J. #428 *Today's Missal Music* 2002).

**Reflection** (*May be given by one person or shared, depending on the number of people present.*)

### Prayers of the Faithful

*Racism, poverty and the exploitation of women still afflict our world. Participants are asked to name one such reality from their own experience that they wish to bring to God. Give people a chance to reflect first and then allow each person to name their experience without comment or response from the rest of the group. Once all of the experiences are names, move to the antiphonal response below:*

**Antiphonal Response** (Psalm 37, as adapted)

Side 1

Fret not because of the wicked  
be not envious of wrongdoers!  
For they will soon fade like the grass  
And wither like the green herb.

Side 1

Commit your way to Yahweh  
trust in God who will act,  
bringing forth your vindication as the light,  
and your right as the noonday sun

Side 1

Yet a little while and the wicked will be  
No more though you look well at their place,  
they will not be there. Yahweh knows the days of  
the blameless and their heritage will abide forever

Side 1

Though falling they shall not be cast headlong  
For the hand of Yahweh supports them.  
They are ever giving liberally and lending  
and their children become a blessing

Side 1

The mouths of the just utter wisdom, and their  
tongues speak justice. The law of God is in their  
hearts' their steps do not slip

Side 1

Mark the blameless and behold the upright, for there  
is a future for those of peace. But sin shall  
be destroyed; The future of sin shall be cut off.

Side 2

Trust in Yahweh and do good  
so you will dwell in the land and enjoy  
security. Take delight in Yahweh,  
who will give you the desires of your heart.

Side 2

Be still before Yahweh, and wait patiently  
fret not over those who prosper,  
Those who wait for Yahweh shall  
possess the land.

Side 2

They are not put to shame in evil times  
in the days of famine they have abundance  
A person's steps are confirmed by Yahweh;  
God delights in the way of the virtuous.

Side 2

Depart from evil and do good; so you shall  
abide forever. For Yahweh loves justice  
and will not forsake the saints.

Side 2

The wicked will watch the just and seek to slay  
them. Yahweh will not abandon them to their  
power or let them be condemned when brought to trial.

Side 2

The salvation of the just is from Yahweh, their  
refuge in time of trouble. Yahweh helps them  
and delivers them and saves them.

**Ritual of Commitment:** At the end of the Antiphon, ask participants to reflect quietly on one positive response they could make to the racism, sexism, evil or injustice they have named. Allow time for people to think about. Response could include reaching out to a racist family member, volunteering at a local hunger center, women's shelter or rape crisis center, visiting women and men in prison, reading about racism and sexism in U.S. Society, or praying regularly for healing of these ills. As each person voices his or her response, group members respond by raising their right hand in blessing with the words of Isaiah 43: **"Behold, I make all things new."**

**Closing Prayer:** O God of justice and love. We thank you for the life of Blessed Henriette Delille and the witness of her sisters and friends both black and white, male and female who worked in spite of suffering and opposition to bring your love to a racist and sexist society. We give thanks for Jesus' Spirit who enables us now to pour out our lives in behalf of your new creation, making all things new. We go forth confident that your grace, love and peace go with us as we pray with Blessed Henriette Delille:

**(All) "We believe in God. We hope in God. We love. We want to live and die in God."**

**Closing Song:** *Your Song of Love* (Bob Fabing S.J. c 1984 NALR #418 in *Today's Missal Music Issue*, 2002) or *Just a Closer Walk with Thee* (Afor-American Spiritual #156 in *Lead Me Guide Me G.I.A.* 1987)

*Prayer service was prepared by Christine Schenk csj a certified pastoral minister and director of FutureChurch.*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

*Henriette Delille: Early Womanist, Servant of Slaves*

**1. Give the following biographical information about Henriette Delille:**

**a. What year was she born?**

**b. Who were her parents? Father:**

**Mother:**

**c. Names of her siblings:**

**d. How old was she when she died?**

**2. What is a “quadroon?”**

**Did Henriette qualify as a quadroon? Explain.**

**3. Why didn’t Henriette ever marry?**

**4. What did Henriette do with her inheritance?**

**5. Name three obstacles that the Sisters of the Holy Family faced as they tried to get established in New Orleans.**

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**6. How did the two people below help Henriette Delille?**

**a. Jean-Marie Aliquot:**

**b. Fr. Etienne Jean Francois Rousellon:**

**7. Name two historical events in the period between 1853 and 1865 that affected the work and ministry of Henriette Delille and her religious sisters.**

**a.**

**b.**

**8. What was expected of young female slaves prior to the civil war?**

**9. What was ironic about the purchase of the Orleans Theater by the Sisters of the Holy Family in 1881?**

**10. How did women slaves in America continue the sacred responsibilities of their West African ancestors?**

**11. Use the article and the footnotes (at the end of the article) to explain the following analogy, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."**

**Who coined the term, "womanist"?**

**12. Write a brief draft of a letter to the Vatican telling the Pope why Henriette Delille should be canonized. In your letter, explain why the life and work of this woman has something important to say to Catholics today.**