



WOMENWITNESSESFORRACIALJUSTICE

Venerable Henriette DeLille



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WOMEN WITNESSES FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

Venerable Henriette Delille (1812–1862)

I believe in God.

I hope in God.

I love.

I want to live and die for
God.

Venerable Henriette Delille

A Saint for Our Times

Henriette Delille (1812–1862) emerged as a remarkable figure in New Orleans breaking free from societal constraints as an Afro-Creole woman. In 1842, she founded the second Black order of nuns, the Sisters of the Holy Family. Her congregation of African descended religious sisters committed their lives to serving the enslaved, free people of color, and those living in poverty. Mother Henriette died Nov. 16, 1862, six months after Union troops occupied New Orleans and two months before President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves. She is believed to have been 50 when she died, leaving behind a community of a dozen sisters. Her obituary on the front page of *Propagateur Catholique*, the archdiocesan newspaper, read: “The crowd gathered for her funeral testified by its sorrow how keenly felt was the loss of her who for the love of Christ had made herself the humble servant of slaves. (Finney)”

In 1988, the Sisters of the Holy Family initiated the cause for Henriette Delille’s canonization with the Holy See.

1851: The Desegregation Walk

On October 15, 1851, Henriette Delille, a free woman of color in New Orleans, embarked on a remarkable journey. Leaving her residence on Bayou Road, just beyond the French Quarter where she co-founded the Sisters of the Presentation in 1842, she made her way to the Chapel at Ste. Marie de l'Archeveche on Chartres Street to profess religious vows. The archbishop, Antoine Blanc, and her steadfast supporter, Fr. Etienne Rousselon, were present to receive her profession. Henriette, draped in her percale blue dress with a rosary around her neck, walked alone to the communion rail, and declared vows of poverty, charity, and obedience. This marked the culmination of a journey she had initiated in 1836 when she dedicated her life to serving the enslaved and free people of color in New Orleans.

Henriette's entry into religious life was a formidable feat in a society where such a path had been reserved for young, white women from affluent Catholic families. White women's religious communities denied entry to women of color, reinforcing derogatory stereotypes of black women as promiscuous and unfit. Undeterred by these norms, Henriette's entrance became a bold and courageous act of resistance, challenging the prevailing slave mentality and racist ideologies of her time. In essence, she proved herself to be another freedom fighter desegregating white women's religious communities in New Orleans. In the toxic slave environment of the day, this was a remarkable feat.

Traditionally, when white women professed vows they transitioned from street clothing to the habit of the congregation. However, this was not an option for Henriette. Instead, she adorned a simple black woolen dress resembling that of widows. To signify her religious status, she wore a rosary around her neck—an ancient tradition and a powerful symbol of her commitment. It would take another thirty years before they were granted the right to wear a habit.

Henriette Delille's groundbreaking entry into religious life challenged entrenched racial and societal norms leaving an enduring legacy that transcends time. Her story reflects not only personal courage but also a transformative force that defied the limitations imposed by a society steeped in racial prejudices. (Gould, 6,7).



Henriette's house with St. Augustines in background
Photo: Virginia Meacham Gould



Ste. Marie de l'Archeveche



Henriette Delille after vows

Pope John Paul II granted the request, *marking her as the first native-born African American with a canonization cause.* Bestowed with the title “Servant of God,” her cause received unanimous endorsement from the United States Catholic bishops in 1997. The process advanced when on March 27, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI declared her Venerable, formally recognizing her profound impact and virtuous life.

Henriette Delille’s Matrilineal Ancestry

Henriette Delille was born on March 11, 1812 to Marie Josephe Diaz, a free Creole of color of French, Spanish and African ancestry. Her parents were Catholic, as were most Creoles and free people of color in New Orleans.

Henriette was the youngest of Marie’s four children which included Jean Delille, Cecile Bonile, an unnamed son (Bonile), and Henriette Delille. Henriette’s father was Frenchman Jean Baptiste Delille Sharpy. Although Delille was the father to Jean and Henriette, Henriette never acknowledged him as her father and did not have contact with him.

According to Dr. Virginia Gould who helped Cyprian Davis research Delille’s life, “Whoever her father was, he didn’t do anything for Henriette. Several generations of women in that family survived in a very harsh world and became independent. That is one of the great gifts they passed down to Henriette. But she took that [independence] in a whole different direction.”

Delille’s great-great-grandmother, Nanette, among the first groups of Africans who were forcibly transported from Africa and enslaved. French slavers brought the first shipment of Africans to Louisiana in 1719 and Nanette was transported in the early 1720s. When she arrived in New Orleans, she was purchased by the wealthy planter Claude Josephe Dubreuil and bore five children. And when he died in 1757, she obtained her freedom. Under Spanish law, which ruled in Louisiana at that time, enslaved people could purchase their freedom and some years later, Nanette amassed enough money to purchase her daughter, Cecile, and two of her grandchildren out of slavery.

The Role of Women in Spreading the Faith

New Orleans was unique in that its primary missionaries at the time were Ursuline nuns who focused on catechizing women. The nuns organized a women’s confraternity called the

Claude-Joseph Villars Dubreuil, great great grandfather of Henriette Delille

Nanette Dubreuil, a woman enslaved by Claude-Joseph Villars Dubreuil, bore five of his children. Claude was one of Louisiana’s largest enslavers. He was also the first French royal engineer whose free and enslaved Black crews cleared much of the land. They built the city’s first canals and levees and erected its earliest structures including the Old Ursuline Convent (pictured) where paradoxically, Henriette Delille could not enter as a candidate for religious life (Williams, 35).



Terminology

Creole - a person of mixed European and Black descent, especially in the Caribbean.

Quadroon - Popularized by Thomas Jefferson who illustrated the term using formulas, this term was used to designate a person with one quarter African/Aboriginal and three quarters European ancestry.

Plaçage - a recognized extralegal system in French & Spanish slave colonies in the Caribbean and North America by which ethnic European men entered into civil unions with non-Europeans of African, Native American and mixed-race descent. The term comes from the French *placer* meaning “to place with”. were known as *placées*; their relationships were recognized among the free people of color as “left-handed marriages.” They became institutionalized with contracts or negotiations that settled property on the woman and her children and, in some cases, gave them freedom if they were enslaved. Of note, Emily Clark has challenged the popular notion of *plaçage*, proposing that the practice largely consisted of a broad range of relationships between free women of color and white men that originated in various ways, which often lasted for a lifetime.

Henriette Delillie Matrilineal Family Genealogy



Children of Mary and it is likely that Nanette was catechized by them while serving as an enslaved domestic and child bearer to the wealthy planter Claude Joseph Dubreuil.

Though slaves were not normally educated (it was against the law), the French Church insisted that they be taught the rudiments of the faith and baptized. While Nanette and other first generation African women were likely forcibly converted, 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 may have viewed daily female catechism gatherings preparing them for the ritual of Catholic Baptism as a way of continuing their accustomed religious roles. Thus French Catholicism grew rapidly among the New Orleans African population primarily because of the evangelization efforts of black women.

In an extensively researched paper, Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould found that captive female slaves

The Complex Cultural Norms of New Orleans and the Effect on Women of Color

Chattel slavery in the United States shaped the environment where black bodies were objectified, used, abused, and desecrated. Slavery trafficked not only in “human property” but also in the fantasy that enslaved and free black women existed for white male use. It also spawned a laissez faire morality and casual religiosity in the murky social milieu of antebellum New Orleans that conspired, in particularly depraved ways, to debase the bodies of black women (Detige, 4).

Under French and Spanish rule, free women of color living in the Louisiana territory had limited legal rights and limited options. The pervasive system of concubinage was often the only option available to them. Under that system, white European or Creole men entered into formal long-term relationships with free and enslaved Indigenous, African, and mixed - race women and girls. Although segments of society, including the Church, publicly condemned these civil unions, they were commonplace in New Orleans and elsewhere by the late eighteenth century (Williams, 34).

Plaçage was a recognized extralegal system in which white French and Spanish and later Creole men entered into the equivalent of common-law marriages with women of African, Indian and white (European) Creole descent. The term comes from the French placer meaning “to place with”. The women were not legally recognized as wives, but were known as placées; their relationships were recognized among the free people of color as mariages de la main gauche or left-handed marriages.

Many were often the offspring of a European and a mulatto, but plaçage did occur between whites and mulattoes and blacks. The system flourished throughout the French and Spanish colonial periods, and reached its zenith during the latter, between 1769 and 1803.

Plaçage was not limited to Louisiana, but also flourished in the cities of Natchez and Biloxi, Mississippi; Mobile, Alabama; St. Augustine and Pensacola, Florida; as well as Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti). Plaçage, however, drew most of its fame—and notoriety—from its open application in New Orleans. Despite the prevalence of interracial encounters in the colony, not all Creole women of color were or became placées.

Many slaveholders and other white men claimed the right to take sexual pleasure where and with whom they could. These more or less permanent sexual relationships between a white man of financial substance, often a planter, and a free woman of color; considered to be beautiful, poised, and refined was a well known system of civil unions in New Orleans.

Up and against this system of exploitation, free women of color were well educated, astute in business and resourceful. And they worked strategically through concubinage alliances to obtain a path of freedom for their children.

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.

Henriette's maternal forebearers served as godmothers to many generations of black girls (and some boys). Their names are listed repeatedly in New Orleans baptismal registries as godmothers. In this way they continuing the tradition of female religious instruction and initiation begun by their African foremothers.

Henriette, like her foremothers, took up this tradition. One documented incident took place in the spring of 1838 in a small chapel on St. Claude Street in New Orleans, Henriette Delille and Fr. Etienne Rousellon, a French priest, served as godparents to fourteen-year-old Marie Therese Dagon, a free black catechumen. This simple tableaux was repeated many times through many generations, by other Creole women of color and other white priests who also performed the baptisms.



Henriette Delille Rejects the Placage System, Forges a New Path

To understand Henriette's life and the many obstacles she overcame in founding her ministry and the Sisters of the Holy Family, one has to understand the system on concubinage called "plaçage" that was commonplace in New Orleans and other places in the South.

Being a beautiful light-skinned woman of color in New Orleans's society meant Henriette had obligations. She was expected to better her family's social standing by matching up with a wealthy white man.

Like most young women of her generation, she learned to discuss French literature, how to dance gracefully and developed a refined taste in music. She also learned the "womanly arts" of make-up, jewelry ornamentation and the selection and care of elaborate wardrobes. Henriette's mother shared practical gifts teaching Henriette the art of herbal healing, nursing, and training linked to ancient healing arts learned from her own mother and grandmother -- skills that would be invaluable to Henriette's future work among the sick and poor of New Orleans.

Henriette's older sister Cecilia engaged in fulfilling the social expectations of quadroon society. From early on though, it Henriette was attracted to another kind of life. Already, at the age of eleven, Henriette 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."³

Henriette proved to be an avid student. With several friends she began to help Sr. St. Marthe in her work. In 1827, at the age of 14, the well-educated Henriette began teaching at the St. Claude School, an establishment founded for the education of young girls of color. 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.”⁴ The young women encountered the stark realities of working with slaves completely under the control of a master whose permission had to be obtained 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.*⁵

Did Henriette formally enter into the placage system? Evidence shows that she likely entered into a placage arrangement in her early teens. Church records show that Henriette bore two sons who died before the age. This may well have been the experience that forever changed her path. More and more, Henriette was drawn to work among slaves and away from the narrow life of a woman caught in the placage system.

Henriette and her family were light skinned enough to pass for white. 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. Her parents and siblings listed themselves as white in the census, Henriette refused. Instead, she listed herself as a free person of color. Her brother Jean Delille was strongly opposed to her decision and activities because within the Creole community Henriette’s work at the school and with slaves had the effect of exposing Jean’s heritage. Estranged from Henriette, Jean moved from New Orleans to a small Creole community in Iberia Parish, Louisiana.

As a result of declaring herself nonwhite, Henriette was refused as a postulant by the Ursuline and Carmelite nuns, which were open only to white women.

Henriette’s desire to move away from the placage system that would claim her future also put her in conflict with her mother’s expectations. As a devout Catholic, Henriette devoted herself to God and became an outspoken opponent of the placage system on the grounds that it represented a violation of the Catholic sacrament of marriage.

According to Professor Shannen Dee Williams, “Extant Church and community records make clear that the SSF foundresses understood placage to be sexual slavery, restricting free women and girls of color - already limited or barred from entering marriage or religious life - from living lives of virtue and contributing to attacks on the moral character of Black women and girls. Most, if not all of the women who entered the order before 1865 were products of placage and thus had first hand knowledge of its exploitative nature” (Williams, 35).

The Sisters of the Holy Family (SSF)

In 1835, Henriette’s mother suffered a mental health crisis. Later that year, the court declared her incompetent, and granted Henriette control of her assets. After providing for her mother’s care, Henriette sold her remaining property which she used to fund her ministries.

In 1836, a zealous French woman named Marie-Jean Aliquot who had been running the St. Claude School educating African American girls, joined together with Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin, Josephine Charles and several other free women of color to organize what was to be an interracial congregation, the Sisters of Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The congregation was to serve and educate the city’s free and enslaved Black population (Williams, 37).

At a time when teaching enslaved children was punishable under the law, the women taught religion to them and other free children of color encouraged free quadroon women to select men of their own class and encouraged enslaved couples to have their unions

blessed by the church.

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.

I believe in God. I hope in God. I love God. I want to live and die in God.

But Henriette was determined. 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.”

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 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.

By 1840, Delille, Gaudin, Charles and a few other women lived together as a dedicated community under the directorship of Father Etienne Rousellon. Rousellon, the founding pastor of St. Augustine, a parish created for the city’s Black population, wanted to nurture this groups of dedicated women.

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, the enslaved and the free.

In 1842, the official year of their founding, they formally became a “religious association” and began to wear a plain blue dress as their religious garb.

In 1850, Henriette Delille and Juliette Gaudin began their noviate with the community of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and in October of 1851, they professed full vows. It would be another 35 years until they could actually wear a habit. Ecclesiastical authorities in New Orleans forbade these members from wearing habits or clothing to signify their consecrated status during the early decades of their existence. According to one SSF source, Antoine Blanc, the first archbishop of New Orleans when it was elevated to an archdiocese in 1850, prevented the sisters from wearing habits and making public vows to illustrate the Church’s opposition to abolitionism, since some anti-Catholic nativists and proslavery ideologues promoted the myth that Catholic enslavers readily freed women who expressed a desire to enter religious life. According to another SSF community source, the order’s first spiritual director advised he sisters to avoid wearing a traditional habit so as to appear without pretension and avoid threatening the status of white nuns, and other white women (Williams, 35).

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 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

In 1862, as Henriette and her sisters cared for the poor and wounded during and immediately after the Civil War, worn out by work, Henriette died suddenly. 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."

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, sustained the community.

In 1872, despite long and distinguished service, the sisters were at first refused the habit by the archbishop of New Orleans. At one point he 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! (Williams, 47). 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."

Slaveholding Members of the Community and Practices of Segregation

At the time of Henriette's birth there were 17,000 free persons of color living in New Orleans. These were racially mixed descendants of early French, Spanish, and African residents of colonial Louisiana who, despite severe legal restrictions, could hold entrepreneurial jobs and own property. Many even held slaves. In fact, for a brief time in 1834, Henriette owned a slave. Benedictine Father Cyprian Davis, who is writing the comprehensive scholarly biography of Henriette required for the sainthood cause, discovered the documentation in family financial records.

"One of the possibilities is that she bought the slave to protect her from being sent out of New Orleans, which was the law at the time," said Dr. Charles Nolan, the nationally recognized archivist of the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

That's really one of the puzzles that we have not fully explored. During those times, many religious and priests owned slaves. The whole theology of the times was that you could not challenge the existing order. Our notion of civil disobedience was not current. The whole thing is so complex. We don't want to explain it away. We want to try to understand it.

Shannen Dee Williams also writes:

Like most of their European and white American male and female counterparts and many Afro-Creole elites, at least two of the early Sisters of the Holy Family also owned enslaved people. Because many of the earliest SSF members (whose names are lost to the historical record) left the order after Delille's death in 1862, the extent and nature of the order's slaveholding may be irrecoverable.

However, it seems clear that the Afro-Creole sisters did not themselves traffic in human flesh or use physical violence to control their enslaved property as most of their white male and female counterparts routinely did. Nor did the SSF order support the Confederacy during the Civil War as white slaveholding Catholics did. Records reveal only that Delille owned at least one human being while in religious life, and Gaudin owned at least two people during her lifetime. The two best friends seemingly inherited their enslaved human property from their families. While Delille made clear provisions in her last wills and testaments for the protection and eman-

ipation of Betsy, the enslaved woman in her “possession,” it is unclear whether Gaudin still owned the woman named Melania and Melania’s son when she entered religious life.

In the SSF’s first written history, it is also noted that French-born Aliquot, who remained with the community throughout the years, also bought two or three slaves when she first joined the community (Williams, 39).

When it came to education, during their formative years, the SSFs taught enslaved children and free children together. But after the Civil War when segregation and racial hatred hardened even more, according to their first historian, Sr. Mary Deggs, they educated the enslaved children and the free children separately because of complaints they received from the parents of free children (Davis, 24).

It is also true that the SSFs excluded some women from entrance for a time.

Like their European and white American counterparts, the SSF also initially employed a restrictive admissions policy based on color, class, and previous condition, accepting “only those of free and well-known families” and, according to Deggs, refusing “an Indian, red skinned.” The order ended its exclusionary policy in 1869 by admitting a formerly enslaved woman, Cloe Preval (later Sister Mary Joachim), which required the intervention of the order’s second spiritual director, a new archbishop, for whom Preval worked as a cook, and the moral leadership of three members, including Sister Elizabeth Wallace, a Mississippi native who later departed the SSF for the OSP, and the nonslaveholding SSF cofounder Josephine Charles, who according to Deggs rejected social distinctions and “above all things ... loved justice.” Preval’s admission engendered a bitter fourteen-year split in the congregation, underscoring the elitism and colorism of many of the order’s early Afro-Creole members despite their unwavering commitments to evangelizing and educating the enslaved and formerly enslaved. (Williams, 40).

Transforming a Symbol of Exploitation

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 turn-around 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. Against the odds, Henriette founded and nurtured her religious foundation.

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.

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What about Henriette Delille's life made an impression on you? What surprised you? What challenged you?
2. Henriette Delille turned away from her family's expectations for her. She turned away from the comfortable lifestyle she could have enjoyed and placage. Instead, she forges a new path for women of color in New Orleans. Have you also turned away from a system that was exploitative and moved toward greater freedom and autonomy? Or do you know someone who has made this journey? What memories and feelings does this bring up for you? In which ways do you feel a connection to Henriette's journey?
3. When you read Henriette's story, how do you relate it to today's world where racism and white supremacy still have a major hold on our institutions and even our church? What do you think you could do to bring more racial and reparative justice to the world?

Take Action!

Ralph E. Moore Jr., a lifelong Black Catholic and a member the Social Justice Committee of St. Ann's Catholic Church in Baltimore, has taken a lead role in expediting the canonization of Venerable Henriette Delille and five other Black Catholics. Below is an article he wrote for *The Black Catholic Messenger* with actions we can take to help.

The Social Justice Committee of St. Ann Catholic Church in Baltimore has created an initiative to speed up the canonizations of six Black Catholics.

On December 14, 2021, the committee sent 1,500 letters to Pope Francis at his home address. On June 17, 2022, another 1,500 letters were sent. Copies were sent to now-cardinal Christophe Pierre, the pope's ambassador to the United States.

They have spoken to many prelates about the initiative: Cardinal Wilton Gregory of Washington; Auxiliary Bishop Bruce Lewandowski, urban vicar for the Archdiocese of Baltimore; Bishop Emeritus John Ricard of Pensacola-Tallahassee, superior general of the Josephites; Auxiliary Bishop Roy Campbell Jr. of Washington; and Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus Joseph Perry of Chicago, postulator of Fr Tolton's canonization cause. As laypersons, we needed some help from bishops to get the attention of the Vatican. Bishop Lewandowski's successful assistance is evidence of it.

Another strategy toward achieving expedited canonizations of our six is to educate the public about their lives. We have deliberately raised the profiles of the six African-American candidates because the more people know of and talk of and pray to them, the more the atmosphere can be created for their canonizations.

All are called to advocate for the expedited canonizations of the first six African-American candidates for sainthood from the United States. It is clearly a racial justice issue. Here are some actions that you can take.

- 1. All are urged to contact the bishops of your diocese (by letter, phone, or in conversation in person) and urge them to contact the Vatican to end the absence of Black American saints.**
- 2. During Mass in the Prayers of the Faithful, urge the inclusion of petitions for the expedited canonizations of the African-American candidates for sainthood.** Before or after Mass, prayers for their beatification can be said with those present in the pews participating.
- 3. Letters to Pope Francis calling for the expedited canonizations can be circulated, collected, and sent to the pope in Rome.**
- 4. Contact the pope's ambassador, and advocate for the expedited canonizations and organize others in churches to do so also.**

It is time for a "yes" from the Catholic Church to African-American Catholics.

If you wish to help by writing letters, here are the addresses:

His Holiness, Pope Francis PP.
00120 Via del Pellegrino
Citta del Vaticano
phone: +390669881022
fax: +390669885373

Cardinal Christophe Pierre (Pope's Ambassador)
Apostolic Nuncio
3339 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20008
phone: +1 (202) 333-7121

U.S. bishops' addresses can be found here: <https://www.usccb.org/about/bishops-and-dioceses/all-dioceses>

Prayer Service

Women Witnesses for Racial Justice Prayer Service Honoring Venerable Henriette Delille

Welcome and brief introductions:

Opening Song: A Place at the Table

Sign of Cross & Greeting:

Leader: We gather in the name of (making the sign of the cross)
God, our loving Mother, in whose divine image we are all made;
of our Christ our Liberator, who leads us to fullness of life;
And of the Holy Spirit of courage and boldness,
All: Amen.

Leader: The unshakable peace of Jesus, the boundless love of God,
and the power of the Holy Spirit is with you,
All: And also with you.

Introductory Remarks:

Leader: Church, we gather tonight to give thanks for the witness of our Black Catholic Foremothers in faith and particularly the life, witness, and legacy of Venerable Henriette Delille. And in so doing, we give thanks to God for the gift of religious women who have been pioneers and prophets for the Gospel in the United States and elsewhere.

But we also gather to seek God's mercy, compassion, and forgiveness - aware of the fact that our Church, called to be "home" - called to be "mother" - has failed Black Catholics.

And we mourn with black mothers who have had their beloved children taken from them: taken and sold into slavery; taken and executed in our criminal justice system...never to return home,

And so, let us pray: (allow for a brief moment of silent centering)

Opening Prayer:

Leader: God, our loving parent,

You placed in us a desire for connection, for welcome, for inclusion.
You gave us a longing for home, a true home, a true family.
Yet there is within us a capacity to exclude, to push away.

You have made us a tapestry, weaving together, enhancing the whole.
Yet, we create division, sameness, drawing lines.
We find some strange security by seeing others as less than, worse than.

Help us, Mothering God, guide us.
We feel a long way from home.
Help us find our way home.
Home to you. Home to each other.
Home in the kin-dom you desire for all your children.

We make this prayer in the name of Christ Jesus,
ALL: AMEN.

Liturgy of the Word

1st Reading:

Reader: A Reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

Shout for joy, you heavens! Exalt, you earth!
You mountains, break into song!
For God consoles the people and takes pity on those who are afflicted,

But Zion said, ‘The Holy One has abandoned me,
Adonai has forgotten me.’

Does a woman forget her baby at the breast, Or fail to cherish the child of her womb?
Yet, even if these forget, I will never forget you.

The Word of God,
ALL: Thanks be to God

2nd Reading:

Reader: A Reading from the words of Ralph Moore, Jr., advocate for the canonization of Venerable Henriette Delille and five other Black Catholic women and men

The “saintly six” Black Catholics officially on the road to canonization led saintly lives years ago. Their inspiration should call us to action.

Black Catholics have always had to fight for first-class membership in the U.S. Catholic Church, especially during the hundreds of years of enslavement and 75 years of legalized racial segregation. We advocated to be baptized while living and laboring on the plantation and we fought to be admitted to Catholic churches, some of which we built.

Once allowed inside, African Americans were forced to sit in the back or off to side pews away from Whites. Black Catholics were required, in most churches, to wait until all the Whites at Mass had received Holy Communion before they could receive. All the while, African-American Catholics put their envelopes in the collection baskets like everyone else. It was the only time ushers connected with them. They were not handed the paper bulletins, while White congregants got them freely. Some ushers blocked Blacks from dipping their hands in the holy water font as they entered or left the church, so as not to “pollute the water.”

The indignities dealt out at the local level were extended to the institutional level as well. At one time, Blacks and

Brown persons needed not bother to apply to seminaries or convents, nor seek admission to Catholic schools, housing, or hospitals. They would not be admitted. To this day, there are few to no images (statues, portraits, or missal book covers) of any persons of color in Catholic churches in these lands.

Most disconcerting is that in 2023, there are no African-American saints recognized by the Catholic Church in its 247 years of U.S. history, while there are 11 White American saints. It is shameful, embarrassing, and just plain wrong. We, the founders of the Initiative for the expedited canonizations of the “saintly six,” say, “If it is wrong now—and it is—fix it now.”

We strongly feel the Catholic Church owes Black Catholics. So give us our saints now. Despite the gross, racist mistreatment by the White Catholic Church in this nation, Black Catholics have remained faithful to God and remained as members of the Catholic Church.

The six African-American candidates for sainthood: Mother Mary Lange, Fr Augustus Tolton, Venerable Henriette DeLille, Mr. Pierre Toussaint, Ms. Julia Greeley, and Sr Thea Bowman lived through the omnipresent hurt and pain of racial prejudice and discrimination and they did great things with their lives despite it.

ALL: Thanks be to God

Introducing the Witnesses

Leader: Let us listen now with open and willing minds, hearts, and bodies as we hear from our Black Catholic sisters.

May their witness open our minds, touch our hearts, inspire our words and actions and awaken us to the pursuit of racial justice and harmony.

Sung Response: Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child

First Witness from Olga Marina Segura

(From <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/church-must-make-amends-black-people-reparations>)

Black Catholics want to feel heard; they want a church that reflects and uplifts them toward liberation; a church that cares about their spiritual and physical lives — a church that atones.

Throughout the American church’s history and well into the twentieth century, religious orders were also actively working to keep Black women and men out. Universities run by religious orders, like Georgetown University, were also complicit in racial capitalism. The Jesuits who ran Georgetown University in 1838, just forty-nine years after the first Catholic bishop in America founded it, sold 272 enslaved persons to avoid bankruptcy.

Onita Estes-Hicks understands this history well. A cradle Catholic, born in New Orleans in 1936, Onita has loved the church her whole life. In 2004, her family learned that her paternal great-great-grandparents, Nace and Biby Butler, and their children, were part of the 272 enslaved persons sold by Georgetown’s Jesuits in 1838.

“This breached our awareness of ourselves, who we were as Catholics,” Onita told me. For years, her faith struggled to reconcile their faith within a church that sold their ancestors. It took fourteen years before her faith felt whole again; and this was thanks to Georgetown’s efforts to reckon with its slaveholding past. “I came out with a deeper sense of what it meant to be a Catholic and also with a deeper sense of how Catholicism had failed us.” Georgetown is the first American Catholic institution to grapple with its slaveholding past and offer financial

resources as part of that atonement. By repairing their racist past, Georgetown is actively working to align the Catholic tradition with the struggle for liberation. In order to make amends, our church must do the same.

This can begin by publicly embracing Black Lives Matter. The American church has so fully internalized these white supremacist ideals, rationalizing a spiritual racism of its own, that it is unable to imagine our church as one centered in the struggle for liberation under the leadership of Black women. The inability to acknowledge this work also continues to perpetuate systemic oppression and accentuates the hypocrisy of the church on the issue of racism.

Church reparation must also be financial. If the church is to work toward a truly liberating Catholicism, then our bishops could begin by allocating a fund from their various collections toward a reparations fund for some of the most impoverished Black communities across the country.

The current racial crisis in America, one that creates ripple effects in marginalized communities around the world, is a moral crisis that demands radical, transformative reparations.

Sung Response

Second Witness by Dr. Shannen Dee Williams

(Excerpt from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/02/10/black-catholic-women-are-forgotten-prophets-american-democracy/>)

On Jan. 6, a mostly White mob attacked the nation's Capitol in a violent attempt to overturn the election of the nation's second Catholic president and first female, Black and Asian American vice president.

Two weeks later, 22-year-old Amanda Gorman took the stage at the Biden-Harris inauguration in front of the same Capitol, and delivered a sermon on equality and hope in the face of lethal resistance with her poem, "The Hill We Climb."

As Gorman reflected on the need for the nation to repair its brutal past, to confront the unyielding threat of white supremacy and fully embrace the promises of a truly equal and inclusive democracy, she quite literally stood at the intersection of the Catholic Church — the first global institution to declare that Black lives did not matter — and Black women's long fight for equal rights and unwavering declarations that the lives of Black people fundamentally do matter.

From the beginning, Africans and African-descended people fought the trade and enslavement in the Americas. And many did so as members of the Catholic Church.

Black Catholics, especially women and girls, also fought to forge a tradition of Catholicism free from slavery, segregation and white supremacy within the U.S. Church. Baptismal, marriage and confraternity records from the cradles of U.S. Catholicism, especially Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri, are inundated with the names of free and enslaved Black women and girls, whose labor, sales and faithfulness not only fueled the early church's development, but also seeded antislavery and anti-racist sentiments in the faith.

Many of these devout Black women and girls established some of the nation's earliest Catholic schools, orphanages, parishes and nursing homes freely open to Black people. Several of these women and their descendants also became members of the modern world's first Roman Catholic sisterhoods freely open to African-descended women and girls.

Indeed, the photograph of Gorman, positioned between Biden and Harris and calling for justice and national unity, may very well go down as one of history's most important images. In daring to imagine herself a future president of America's "unfinished" project, Gorman brought forward a revolutionary and womanist tradition of Black Catholicism that far too many people deny exists. She also powerfully reminded her nation and church that Black women and girls are some of its most formidable prophets of democracy and Catholicism — if only they dare to listen.

Sung Response

Moment of Quiet Reflection (3 minutes)

Leader: As we take a moment to reflect silently, I ask you to consider:

- What did you learn? - About Venerable Henriette Delille? About the Black Catholic experience in New Orleans? About racial justice and reparations?
- What touched or moved you as these witnesses shared their stories?
- How will you change? – In your personal life? In your engagement with institutions or communities you are a part of? In your understanding of what it means to be Catholic?

Sung Response

Prayers of the Faithful

Leader: We lift up our prayers in confidence, assured of God's motherly love for us and knowing that we stand united with that great cloud of witnesses – all holy women and men and particularly our Black Catholic Foremothers – who intercede for us.

Our response is: "Mothering God, hear our prayer."

For the Church, that we may truly live as One Family – united in Christ – and work together to rid ourselves of racism and white supremacy, and all forms of exclusion and discrimination, we pray:

For the citizens and leaders of the global community: that we may enact policies that uphold the dignity and equality of all people, that ensure a sustainable and equitable distribution of our resources, and advance the common good we pray:

For an end to systemic racism: that we may reform and rebuild all of our institutions – policing, education, healthcare, housing, politics, and economics - with justice and love as our guide. And for reconciliation and reparation for centuries of violence and oppression against People of Color, we pray.

For us gathered here: that we may honestly seek to understand ourselves and others as well as the ways we benefit from privilege and power, that we may be allies who confront bias and prejudice in ourselves and one other, we pray:

For marginalized Catholics – and particularly Catholic women of color; that they may be stirred by the witness of Venerable Henriette Delille to embrace their wholeness, to lift up their voices, and to claim their rightful place in our midst as they seek to respond faithfully to God's call in their lives, we pray:

For the canonization of Venerable Henriette Delille so that her life may shine brightly for all Catholics as one who faced slavery and segregation with courage and strength and changed the course of history for all those she touched, for the church, and for the country.

Loving God of all, your family stands before you in need of your mercy and compassion. Come to our aid. Make haste to help us. We pray in the name of Christ Jesus, our Liberator, AMEN.

Closing Prayer

Leader: Let us pray:

Loving God,

In the effort to dismantle racism, help us to understand
that we struggle not merely against flesh and blood
but against powers and principalities –
those institutions and systems that keep racism alive
by perpetuating the lie
that some members of our family are inferior
and others superior.

Create in us new minds and hearts
that will enable us to see siblings
in the faces of those divided by racial categories.

Give us the grace and strength
to rid ourselves of racial stereotypes
that oppress some in our family
while providing entitlements to others.

Help us to create a nation
that embraces the hopes and fears
of oppressed people of color where we live,
as well as those around the world.

Help us to heal your family
making us one with you
and empowered by your Holy Spirit.

AMEN.

Adapted from Pax Christi

Closing Song Magnificat/Mary's Song

New Britain

In honor of Venerable Henriette Delille who founded the second religious community of Black Catholic sisters, we will sing the words of Mary's Magnificat hymn to the tune most commonly associated with "Amazing Grace"

My soul proclaims the Holy One.
My spirit sings God's praise,
Who looks on me, and lifts me up,
That gladness fills my days.

All nations now will share my joy;
For gifts God has outpoured.

This lowly one has been made great.
I magnify my God.

For those who fear the Holy One,
God's mercy will not die.
Whose strong right arm puts down the proud,
and lifts the lowly up.

God fills the starving with good things,
and sends the rich away;
the promise made to our ancestors
is filled to endless day.

Text: Based on Luke 1:46-55; Anne Cater, Copyright 1988, Society of the Sacred Heart. All Rights Reserved. Music: NEW BRITAIN Reprinted and streamed under ONELICENSE.NET #A-737115



This Artwork of Henriette Delille was commissioned
by FutureChurch
Artist: Chloe Becker
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Artist's Statement

Henriette DeLille's portrait is centered on her biracial identity. Although she could've passed as white, she chose to claim her Black identity by working at a Black school and refusing to register as white with her family; the contrasting white and Black hands in the portrait illustrate this duality. DeLille's biracial identity allowed her to seek connections within the Black and white communities in New Orleans (where the painting's background is set).

The white hand and Black hand reaching for each other represent her efforts for multiracial community through her attempt at an interracial sisterhood (that was ended by an 1830 law that defined interracial groups as illegal) and in her work with all those in poverty, the elderly, the orphaned, and people who were enslaved.

True interracial community requires more than just shared spaces though, but solidarity. The hands in the "hands up, don't shoot" positioning (widely known after the shooting of Michael Brown, and used as a chant in Black Lives Matter protests) shows this; It emphasizes that solidarity requires white people to stand with the Black community not only when it is comfortable or popular, but especially when it is challenging. Using this modern phrase in DeLille's context reinforces that white people today are called to the same solidarity that her white colleagues practiced when joining their Black sisters in an illegal interracial sisterhood.

Finally, the hands from the sky, opened towards the sacred heart, portray the Holy Family. This is in reference to the Sisters of the Holy Family (the Black Catholic sisterhood that she eventually formed), while also uplifts Blackness as divine something Black sisterhoods proclaimed with their existence and vibrant spirituality.

Extra: Stoking White Fears in the Americas: Saint Domingue to New Orleans

Between 1791 and 1804, the Saint-Domingue revolution in the West Indies marked a transformative period that resulted in the abolition of slavery in the former French colony and the establishment of Haiti. This achievement marked Haiti as the second independent republic in the Western Hemisphere and the first Western nation governed by individuals of African descent. At the forefront of these victories were three pivotal figures: Toussaint l'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henri Christophe. Their leadership played a crucial role in shaping the destiny of the Haitian people and influencing historical events beyond the confines of their island.

The impact of the Haitian revolutionary triumphs reverberated far beyond its borders, reaching the shores of Louisiana and leaving an indelible mark on the region from the 1790s through the 1810s. The French, under Napoleon, experienced a setback in their attempt to re-conquer the island for commercial purposes. Seeking an alternative, Napoleon negotiated with Spain in 1800 for the possession of Louisiana, envisioning it as a vital resource to support Saint-Domingue. However, the defeat of French forces by Haitian rebels altered Napoleon's priorities, leading to the decision to sell the entire Louisiana territory to the United States. On December 20, 1803, this transfer of ownership from French to U.S. control officially marked a turning point in the geopolitical landscape.

The repercussions of the Haitian Revolution were not confined to political boundaries but had a profound impact on Louisiana's slave and immigration policies. In the 1790s, the Spanish colonial Governor Francisco Luis Hector de Carondelet, presiding over Louisiana, harbored fears that immigrants from Saint-Domingue might introduce dangerous revolutionary ideas. Consequently, he implemented measures to restrict the entry of both slaves and free people of color into the territory.

Similarly, Louisiana Territorial Governor William C. Claiborne, in 1809 and 1810, displayed reluctance towards admitting Saint-Domingue refugees. He perceived their presence as a potential impediment to the growth of American democratic principles. Complicating matters, U.S. slave laws enacted in 1807 prohibited the importation of slaves from outside the nation. In response, Claiborne permitted the entry of enslaved persons—referred to as “servants” on ship manifests—into the Louisiana Territory. Striking a delicate balance, he prohibited the immigration of free men of color while allowing free women of color passage.

The years between 1809 and 1810 witnessed a significant influx of Saint-Domingue émigrés to Louisiana. Thirty-four vessels transported nearly 5,800 refugees from Cuba and by 1810, approximately ten thousand Saint-Domingue refugees arrived in Louisiana during this period. Approximately one-third white elite, one-third free people of color, and one-third enslaved people, the latter belonging to either whites or free blacks.

In 1811, the Deslondes Revolt, recognized as the largest slave revolt in U.S. history, unfolded upriver from New Orleans. Authorities and planters attributed the rebellion to the political aftermath of the Haitian Revolution, solidifying the connection between events in the Caribbean and those on American soil. Though the revolt was ultimately suppressed, its reverberations underscored the enduring political legacy of Haiti's successful struggle for independence.

The demographic shifts resulting from the influx of Saint-Domingue refugees left an undeniable imprint on Louisiana's culture, particularly in New Orleans. The city saw a doubling of its free people of color and French speakers, reshaping the social fabric. Louisiana Creoles, recognizing the potential cultural allies in the arriving refugees, generally welcomed this immigration as a counterforce against the encroachment of Americanization. Notably, some immigrants attained positions of great standing within the community.

In conclusion, the Haitian Revolution between 1791 and 1804 not only shaped the destiny of Haiti but also reverberated across the waters, profoundly influencing Louisiana. From geopolitical shifts to alterations in slave and immigration policies, the impact was multifaceted. The Deslondes Revolt in 1811 further highlighted the enduring political legacy of Haiti on U.S. soil. The cultural transformation, particularly in New Orleans, demonstrated the resilience and adaptability of communities in the face of historical upheavals. The intertwined narratives of Haiti and Louisiana during this period underscore the interconnectedness of global historical events and their far-reaching consequences.