

MEET THE SAINTLY SIX

There are no Black saints among the 11 saints associated with the United States. This Juneteenth we therefore take the time to remember, celebrate and reflect on the Saintly Six, the six Black Catholics whose lives of faith in the pursuit of justice and freedom have placed them on the road to sainthood. Last week's bulletin insert introduced us to Sister Thea Bowman, Pierre Toussaint and Julia Greeley. This week we meet Mother Mary Lange, Augustus John Tolton and Henriette Delille. May these holy women and men inspire us to promote the racial justice needed in our church, our nation and our world.

SERVANT OF GOD, MOTHER MARY ELIZABETH LANGE, OSP

Elizabeth Clarisse Lange was born in Haiti in 1789. It is believed that her mother was the daughter of a Jewish plantation owner, and her father a mulatto slave on the same plantation. When she was a child, the family fled to Cuba due to a revolution in Haiti. There, because of her family's wealth, she received an excellent education. As an adult she sought refuge in the United States, eventually arriving in Baltimore where many French speaking Haitian refugees were settling. At that time Maryland was a slave state and educating slaves was outlawed. There was no free education available to people of color. Elizabeth, who was a courageous and deeply spiritual woman, took charge of educating Black children in her home, at her own expense, with her friend Marie Balas.

In Baltimore, she met a Sulpician priest, James Joubert, who had also fled the revolution in Haiti. He was attempting to teach catechism to Black children and realized they had difficulty learning about their faith as they were unable to read. He began looking for women of color who could serve as teachers. He learned about the school Elizabeth and Marie Balas were operating in their home and after meeting with them introduced the idea of joining a religious community. They shared with him that they had felt called to consecrate their lives to God for more than ten years and asked for his support. They indicated that they had approached white led sisterhoods in Baltimore only to experience rejection. He then proposed that they start a new religious community. He persuaded Archbishop James Whitfield to approve the community. Thus, the Oblate Sisters of Providence were established. On July 2, 1829, Elizabeth and three women, including Marie Balas, took their vows. Elizabeth, the founder and first superior of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, took the name Mary.



The founding four OSP members met vigorous opposition from Baltimore's wider Catholic clerical and slaveholding community. They faced physical and verbal threats and derision from clergy and white Catholics. This resulted in limited financial support and an attempt to destroy their second school and convent in Baltimore. Nevertheless, Mother Lange and her sisters were role models who provided an atmosphere of faith and hope to parents and children degraded by slavery. They educated the young, provided a home for orphans and nursed the terminally ill during the cholera epidemic of 1832. Their faith and perseverance resulted in the growth of their community and by the 20th century Oblate schools were founded in 15 States. They continue to provide service in day care centers, social and pastoral services to all ethnic groups.

AUGUSTUS JOHN TOLTON



Augustus John Tolton, known as Gus, was born into slavery on a Missouri plantation. Like many enslaved by Catholic masters, he was baptized and given instruction. When he was nine, his father joined the Union Army. His mother, fearful that her children might be taken from her, fled with her children to Illinois.

The family settled in Quincy, Illinois where Gus and his mother worked in a tobacco factory. Her attempts to provide her son with an education proved challenging. Parents at an all-white Catholic school protested. At the public school for non-white students, Gus, now 14, was taunted for being illiterate, dark-skinned, and fatherless. Impressed with Gus's religious fervor, the local parish priest found a primary and then high school to accept him. After his graduation no seminary in the U.S. would admit a man of color. In 1880, at 26, he was accepted at Rome's Urban College and was ordained six years later.

Unexpectedly, after ordination, Fr. Gus was installed as pastor at Quincy's Negro Church of St. Joseph and received support from the local white pastor who had founded the Black parish. He was such an effective pastor that many white Catholics attended services and participated in the choir and other activities. Despite widespread poverty in the Black community, he was able to assist many.

Sadly, after the supportive white pastor was re-assigned, his successor had no time for a separate Black parish. He also resented the donations for its support from the white community. Fr. Gus found himself struggling to respond to the needs of his community and was encouraged to leave Quincy by the white pastor and local bishop.

In 1889 he was assigned to a Black parish in Chicago that was housed in the basement of a white parish. For eight years, until his death in 1896 at 42, he toiled mightily to raise funds to build a parish church and to assist his impoverished parishioners. In addition to conducting Church services, he tirelessly organized religious education for adults as well as children. In 2019 Pope Francis confirmed Fr. Gus's life of "heroic virtue" and declared him "Venerable."



HENRIETTE DELILLE

Henriette Delille was born in New Orleans in 1813, the daughter of a "free woman of color" and a French father. She resisted the life of comfort her mother had planned for her. Instead, she attended a Catholic school for girls of color. At age 14, she began teaching at the local Catholic school. Over time her desire to care for and educate the poor only deepened.

Henriette's efforts to join an existing religious order met universal rejection because of her color. In 1836 she and eight other Black women attempted to found a new order, the Sisters of the Presentation, to care for the sick and the elderly, to assist the poor, and to teach free and enslaved Black children and adults. The local bishop barred them from taking public vows and wearing a habit. Black women were considered unworthy of religious life.

Fortunately, in 1837 the Vatican granted formal recognition to the order. Henriette took the name Sister Mary Theresa; however, everyone called her Mother Henriette. In 1842, the order changed its name to Sisters of the Holy Family. They welcomed older women into their home, caring for them through serious illness and death, especially during the yellow fever epidemic of 1853.

Mother Henriette died in 1862, at age 49, after a short intense life of service, poverty and hard work. In 2010 Pope Benedict XVI recognized her "heroic virtues" and proclaimed her "Venerable."

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SISTER THEA BOWMAN



A trailblazing Black nun, Sister Thea (‘of God”) was born Bertha Bowman in 1937 in Mississippi, the daughter of a physician and a school teacher. She attended a Catholic school run by the Order of Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, was baptized Catholic at age ten, and entered the Order at 15 as its only Black member. She received her Ph.D. in English from Catholic University and was a founding member of the Institute for Black Catholic Sisters at Xavier University in New Orleans.

Committed to asserting a Black way of being Catholic, Sr. Thea consistently advocated for inclusion within liturgies of Black spiritual traditions, emphasizing family, community, celebration and remembrance, and encouraging all to “Call One Another!, Testify!, Teach!, Act on the Word!, Witness!” She also deftly navigated the blatant racism, segregation, inequality and fierce civil right struggles that were ubiquitous for a daughter of the Deep South without compromising her identity as a Black Catholic woman religious.

When giving mission presentations in all-Black parishes, Sr. Thea would enter, singing with gusto, full of the spirit of love and grace, and integrating vibrant songs of praise and thanksgiving into her preaching. She was always about being proud to be Black and about having the courage to recognize our unity as Catholic Christians regardless of any cultural differences.

In 1989, wheelchair-bound because of her advanced cancer, Sr. Thea addressed the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. She spoke as a “sister” having a “heart-to-heart” conversation with her “brothers”, urging them to promote inclusivity and full participation of Blacks within church leadership. At the end she invited the bishops to move together, cross arms and join her

in “We Shall Overcome.” Their hearts evidently touched, the bishops responded with thunderous applause, many tearfully.

At her passing in 1990 Sr. Thea was regarded as one of the great treasures of the American Catholic Church. A woman of grace and fidelity, she managed in her manifold witness to the gospel to beautifully integrate the traditions of her Catholic faith with her cherished identity as a proud Black woman. In her own words to which she remained true: “We unite ourselves with Christ’s redemptive work when we reconcile, when we make peace, when we share the good news that God is in our lives, when we reflect to our brothers and sisters God’s healing, God’s forgiveness, God’s unconditional love.”

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Venerable Pierre Toussaint

June 27, 1766-June 20, 1853

A very wise person once said that it did not matter where you started from in life what mattered in life is where you end up. This can truly be said of Pierre Toussaint.

Pierre Toussaint was born into slavery in Haiti. He was then brought to New York City by his enslavers. They had fled Haiti during the beginning of the Haitian Revolution. With the death of his slave master Pierre was free. Because he was a man with integrity, he continued to care for the wife of his slave master until her death.

He married Juliette Noel, and quickly became a successful businessman, and ultimately was a major philanthropist in the city. He was a major fundraiser for the construction of old St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan. He was the de facto founder of Catholic Charities of New York.

He was a very successful hairdresser/barber and used his wealth for various philanthropic causes. He had to face the ugly stigma of racism. He had single-handedly raised the money to build the Cathedral, but as a black man he could not attend the opening ceremony.

But God smiled upon him because Pierre Toussaint, is the only layperson honored with burial in its crypt. Every day Pierre prayed the rosary and kept a missal in his pocket. He always carried the tools of his trade in his upper left shirt pocket, a comb, and scissors. As a candidate for sainthood, Pierre Toussaint was declared Venerable by Pope John Paul in 1996. May God Bless him and may we one day be able to pray to St. Pierre Toussaint.



Julia Greeley

Julia Greeley, Servant of God, was born into slavery in Missouri. She knew neither the date of her birth nor the full names of her parents. Standing by her mother as she was being whipped, the child Julia became half-blind when the slave master's whip struck her in the right eye. In 1865 Missouri, which was not part of the Confederacy, legally freed her and all of its other enslaved people.

After her emancipation Julia Greeley worked as a cook, housekeeper and nanny for a wealthy St. Louis family for most of the 1870's. In 1879 she took a domestic position with another family that was relocating to Denver. There her new employer introduced her to Catholicism. In 1880 she converted and was baptized in the Jesuit parish of the Sacred Heart. She then developed a deep lifelong devotion to the Sacred Heart and became a daily communicant. Fasting frequently, she would say, "My Communion is my breakfast."

Julia Greeley never married and lived frugally in a boarding house. After meeting her simple needs, she spent the rest of her meager earnings assisting the poor. When her own resources were insufficient, she never hesitated to beg for funds or other material donations on behalf of the disenfranchised. Wearing her wide-brimmed floppy hat, oversized shoes, and tattered dress, she would deliver food, fuel, clothing and other necessities by night in a little red wagon. With the Klan and other racists having a menacing presence in the Denver of that era, she was at risk as a small Black woman walking alone at night. Yet, she assumed the risk to spare needy white families the embarrassment of accepting charity from a Black woman. Her charity knew no bounds; she gave her burial plot for a Black man so he could avoid being laid to rest in a potter's field. With a great love for children, she would persuade children from better off families to part with clothing before it was worn so needier children could benefit.

In 1901 Julia Greeley joined the Third Order of St. Francis and remained faithful to its way of life until her death in 1918, sometime in her 80's. Her sanctity and acts of loving service enabled her to bridge the gap between Denver's separate communities of rich and poor and Black and White. Not surprisingly, hundreds from all corners of the City mourned Denver's "Angel of Charity," as she had become known. After her canonization process was opened in 2017, her remains were exhumed and interred in Denver's Cathedral, the first person to be buried there.