

Stations of the Cross Black Catholic Women Give Witness



Art: The Stations of the Cross

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On this journey, we will hear and reflect on the stories of courageous Black Catholic women who relied on their faith and dedicated themselves to living and sharing it despite bearing the unjust crosses of racism, slavery, poverty, segregation, sexism, and exclusion.

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.

We also will hear and reflect on excerpts from Catholic social teaching on the issues of race and racism. By doing so, we acknowledge--before God and before one another--that we, as individuals and as a community of believers, have failed to live the Gospel values of freedom, equality, solidarity, and inclusion.

Gathering Song

Were You There? (African American Spiritual)

Prayer

Leader:

Nneoma Chukwukelu

Good and merciful God, creator of us all,

You call us to reverence your divine image and likeness in our neighbor.

Yet, the equality of your daughters and sons has not always been fully acknowledged, and Christians have been guilty of the sin of racism.

As we reflect on these Stations of the Cross, may the witness of Black Catholic women touch our hearts, minds, and souls, that through their Christ-like example, you might call us to conversion, reconciliation, and renewed hope for racial harmony, equality, and justice.

We ask this in the name of Jesus, through whose life, ministry, death, and Resurrection we have been set free.

All:

AMEN.

THE FIRST STATION

*Jesus Is
Condemned to
Death*



THE SECOND STATION

*Jesus Is Made
to Carry His Cross*



Reader: Alison Grillo

The First Station: Jesus Is Condemned to Death

**All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you.
For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection
you have set us free.**

Reader: As we reflect on this first station, we call to mind the witness of Martha Jane Chisley Tolton.

Like Jesus, Martha Tolton was unjustly condemned. Born into slavery, she was condemned to a life of forced servitude, indignity, and abuse. But just as Jesus walked a long and grueling road for us, so too did Martha by fleeing slavery on a farm in Missouri to freedom in Quincy, Illinois, with her three children, one of whom, Augustus, would become the first African American priest to publicly identify as Black.

All: God of freedom, we thank you for the witness of Martha Jane Chisley Tolton and the countless other mothers who risked their lives to gain freedom for their children. Give us the hope to envision a world where all your holy children live in true and complete freedom, regardless of how long and grueling the road to reality may be. AMEN.

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

**Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble,
tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?**

Reader: Caryl Bertolino

The Second Station: Jesus Is Made to Carry His Cross

**All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you.
For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection
you have set us free.**

Reader: As we reflect on this second station, we call to mind the witness of Mother Mary Lange.

In 1829, Mother Lange founded the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first community of women religious of African descent. Throughout her tenure as superior general, Mother Lange, carried many crosses, not the least of which was guiding this historic and prophetic sisterhood in its early days despite poverty, racism, and other untold hardships.

All: God of justice, we thank you for the witness of Mother Mary Lange. Give us the strength and perseverance to work for justice despite the insults, difficulties, and burdens that will surely come our way. AMEN.

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

THE THIRD STATION

*Jesus Falls
the First Time*



Reader: Mary Hurson

The Third Station: Jesus Falls the First Time

**All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you.
For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection
you have set us free.**

Reader: A reading from *The National Race Crisis*, a statement made by the U.S. Catholic Bishops in 1968.

In 1958, the Catholic bishops of the United States issued a statement on Discrimination and the Christian Conscience. In it they condemned racism in all its forms... now--ten years later--it is evident that we did not do enough; we have much more to do... (1, 4). There is no place for complacency and inertia. The hour is late and the need is critical. Let us act while there is still time for collaborative peaceful solutions. We must show concern, we must give ground for hope. In the name of God, our [Creator]--and we do not invoke [God's] name lightly--let us prove to all that we are truly aware that we are a single human family on the unity of which depends our best hope for our progress and our peace.

All: God of the past, for over five hundred years we have witnessed the degradation of people of color for the purposes of social and economic gain. With contrite hearts, we acknowledge that we as a people, we as a church, have been guilty of the sin of racism. We did not and have not done enough. Forgive us and guide us toward reconciliation and restoration of the one human family. We ask this relying on your unfailing mercy. AMEN.

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when they pierced him in the side?

THE FOURTH STATION

*Jesus Meets
His Mother*



Reader: Catherine O'Hagan Wolfe

The Fourth Station: Jesus Meets His Mother

**All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you.
For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection
you have set us free.**

Reader: As we reflect on this fourth station, we call to mind the witness of Mother Theodore.

In 1916, Elizabeth Williams founded the Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary when the Georgia State Legislature proposed a bill that would outlaw the instruction of Black children by white teachers.

Taking the name Mother Theodore, she became the congregation's first superior general. The congregation's name was chosen to inspire members of the congregation to care for and love their neighbors with the same zeal that Mary had for her son, Jesus.

The bill never passed, and the congregation moved to New York, where the sisters founded St. Benedict's Day Nursery School, early childhood education programs, Catholic elementary schools, an after school program, food pantries, a senior citizen center, and summer camps.

All: Mother of us all, we thank you for the witness of Mother Theodore. May we always see others--first and foremost--as your children, worthy of our love and zealous care. AMEN.

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when the sun refused to shine?

THE FIFTH STATION

*Simon of Cyrene
Carries the Cross*



Reader: Danila Mendoza

The Fifth Station: Simon of Cyrene Carries the Cross

**All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you.
For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection
you have set us free.**

Reader: As we reflect on this fifth station, we call to mind the witness of Sister Cora Billings. She recently wrote, “I have freely given my life to service through the Sisters of Mercy. My great-grandfather, on the other hand, had no choice regarding his service. He worked as a slave, owned by the Society of Jesus.” Despite her family’s history with the church and her own experiences of racism, Sister Cora has willingly served the people of God, often breaking racial and religious barriers along the way. When asked how she can serve the very church that enslaved her great-grandfather, Sister Cora says, “Although this part of our Catholic history might make some people turn away from the church, this knowledge makes me more determined to stay and to work for greater equality for people in the church and the world today.” In 1965 she became Philadelphia’s first Black religious Sister of Mercy. In 1990, she became the first Black nun to be installed as a pastoral coordinator at St. Elizabeth’s Catholic Church in North Richmond, Virginia. Today, Sister Cora continues to serve as a member of the Anti-racism Transformation Team for the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

All: God of equality, we thank you for the witness of Sister Cora Billings. Give us determination to serve the cause of equality for people in the church and the world today. AMEN.

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

THE SIXTH STATION

*Veronica Wipes
the Face of Jesus*



Reader: Eileen Curran

The Sixth Station: Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus

**All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you.
For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection
you have set us free.**

Reader: As we reflect on this sixth station, we call to mind the witness of Sister Antona Ebo. Upon hearing the reports of civil rights protesters being beaten on Bloody Sunday, Sister Antona remembers thinking, “If I didn’t have this habit on, I would be down there with those people.” Later she would remark, “It turned out that the habit was what got everyone’s attention very quickly, because nuns had not been seen doing anything like that before.” When she arrived in Selma, Alabama, Sister Antona was the first African American nun to march in the struggle for civil rights. The Reverend L.L. Anderson, pastor of Selma’s Tabernacle Baptist Church, remarked, “For the first time in my life, I am seeing a Negro nun.” For him, Sister Antona was living proof to the officials in Alabama and those who had beaten the protesters that, in his words, “you don’t have to be white to be holy.” The next day, Sister Antona’s face appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*, sending shockwaves through the nation that a nun--of all people--would join the protests in Selma.

All: God, in whose image we are all wonderfully made, we thank you for the witness of Sister Antona Ebo. May those among us in positions of power, privilege, honor, or reverence use their positions to advance the cause of justice. And may we always see the face of Jesus in the faces of all, especially those who suffer. AMEN.

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

THE SEVENTH STATION

*Jesus Falls
the Second Time*



Reader: Nneoma Chukwukelu
The Seventh Station: Jesus Falls the Second Time

**All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you.
For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection
you have set us free.**

Reader: A reading from "Brothers and Sisters to Us,"
the 1979 U.S. Catholic Bishops pastoral letter on
racism.

Racism is an evil which endures in our society and in
our church. Despite apparent advances and even
significant changes in the last two decades, the reality
of racism remains. In large part it is only external
appearances which have changed. Each of us as
Catholics must acknowledge a share in the mistakes
and sins of the past. We have preached the Gospel
while closing our eyes to the racism it condemns.

**All: God of the present, we decry our nation's history
of slavery, lynching, and segregation. Yet, today
we still struggle under the burden of racism. Often
we close our eyes to it around us. Forgive us our
ignorance, fear, and prejudice. Transform us and
open our eyes, we pray, to see and name the ugly face
of racism today: economic disparity, apathy at the
loss of so many young lives of people of color, lack
of educational and job opportunities, unjust and
racially biased justice systems, the disproportionate
effects of global climate change upon people of color
in our own country and around the world. We ask
this relying on your unfailing mercy. AMEN.**

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

THE EIGHTH STATION

*Jesus Meets the
Women of Jerusalem*



Reader: Marybeth Zeman
The Eighth Station: Jesus Meets the Women of
Jerusalem

**All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you.
For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection
you have set us free.**

Reader: As we reflect on this eighth station, we call to
mind the witness of Sister Martin de Porres Grey, now
Patricia Grey.

Sister Martin was the only woman present when more
than sixty Black Catholic clergy members gathered to
discuss the racial crisis in the country fourteen days
after the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King
Jr. Encouraged by their vision and action, she called
together over 150 Black Catholic women religious to
acknowledge and confront the racism they had
experienced in both church and society. Through the
course of the weeklong gathering, the sisters became
convinced that--in the words of Sister Martin--"since
white racism is behind the race problem, then we, as
Black religious women, have to help white clergy and
our white sisters understand white racism so they, in
turn, can teach their people the truth." Sister Martin
would serve as the first president of the National Black
Sisters' Conference, the result of the gathering.

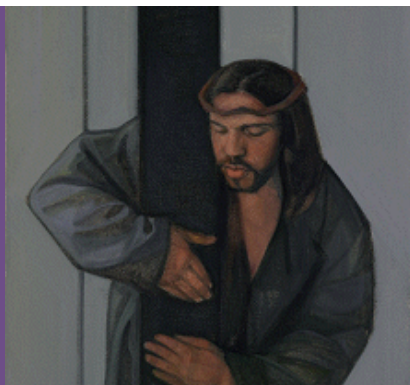
**All: God of community, we thank you for the witness
of Sister Martin de Porres Grey. Give us the courage
to confront those in our communities--even our
families, friends, colleagues, and peers--when they
perpetuate systems of injustice and oppression by
their attitudes, thoughts, words or actions. AMEN.**

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when they pierced him in the side?

THE NINTH STATION

*Jesus Falls
the Third Time*



Reader: Gloria Peropat

The Ninth Station: Jesus Falls the Third Time

**All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you.
For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection
you have set us free.**

Reader: A reading from "What We Have Seen," the 1984 pastoral letter from the Black Catholic Bishops of the United States.

True reconciliation only arises where there is mutually perceived equality. This is what is meant by justice. Without justice, any meaningful reconciliation is impossible. Racism, at once subtle and masked, still festers within our church as within our society. This stain of racism on the American church continues to be a source of pain and disappointment to all, both Black and white, who love [the church and desire it to be "without stain or wrinkle."] This stain of racism, which is so alien to the Spirit of Christ, is a scandal to many, but for us it must be the opportunity to work for the church's renewal as a part of our task of evangelization. Our demand for recognition, our demand for leadership roles in the task of evangelization, is not a call for separatism but a pledge of our commitment to the church and to share in [its] witnessing to the love of Christ.

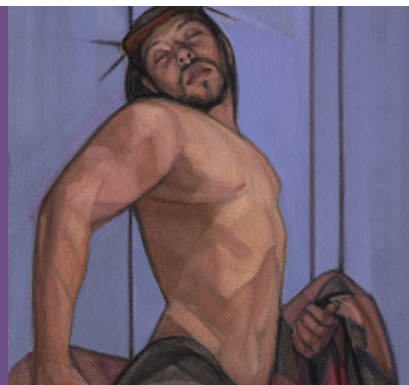
All: God of hope, cleanse us of the stain of racism that we may journey together toward true reconciliation, justice, and equality. Help us to place our hope in you and in each other. Truly diverse yet united in you, may we stand forth as a credible witness to the love of Christ. We ask this relying on your unfailing mercy. AMEN.

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when the sun refused to shine?

THE TENTH STATION

*Jesus Is Stripped
of His Garments*



Reader: McKenna Coyle

The Tenth Station: Jesus Is Stripped of His Garments

**All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you.
For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection
you have set us free.**

Reader: As we reflect on this tenth station, we call to mind the witness of Mother Henriette DeLille.

In the mid-1830s, despite laws forbidding interracial associations, Mother Henriette quietly organized a small interracial community--the Sisters of the Presentation--to care for the sick, help the poor, and educate free and enslaved children and adults in New Orleans. In 1842, with official recognition as "religious association," the community changed its name to the Sisters of the Holy Family. The second order of Black women religious, the sisters would establish the first and oldest Catholic nursing home in the United States, nurse the poor through the yellow fever epidemic, and care for the wounded during and after the Civil War. Because of racist opinions about the social status of Black women, the sisters were forbidden to wear a habit by the Archbishop of New Orleans until 1872. And so the women wore a simple blue dress as their religious garb. Mother Henriette, who died in 1862, would never wear that habit.

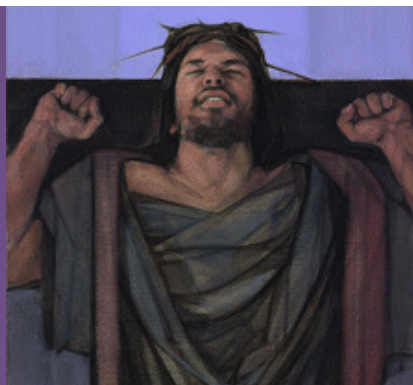
All: God of all people, we thank you for the witness of Mother Henriette DeLille and the Sisters of the Holy Family. Restore in us a desire for community, that we may embrace our diversity, stand in solidarity with one another, and see all of humanity as one holy human family. AMEN.

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

THE ELEVENTH STATION

Jesus Is Nailed to the Cross



Reader: Ellie Crum

The Eleventh Station: Jesus Is Nailed to the Cross

**All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you.
For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection you
have set us free.**

Reader: As we reflect on this eleventh station, we call to mind the witness of all women of color who have suffered cruelty and injustice in their pursuit of making the church truly “catholic”--truly universal. “Long before there were Black priests in the United States, there were Black Catholic sisters. Black sisters renounced an outside world that deemed all Black people immoral and provided a powerful refutation to the insidious racial and sexual stereotypes used by white supremacists to justify African American exclusion from U.S. citizenship rights and the ranks of religious life in the church. Though practically invisible in the annals of American and Catholic history, Black sisters also played critical, and oftentimes, leading roles in the fight to dismantle racial barriers in the U.S. church. As the earliest champions of Black Catholic education and priests, Black sisters forced an often ambivalent white hierarchy to acknowledge their African American constituency and adhere to canon law and the church’s creed of universal Christian brotherhood. In doing so, Black sisters challenged the nation and the church to live up to the full promises of democracy, Catholicism, and justice for us.” (Shannen Dee Williams)

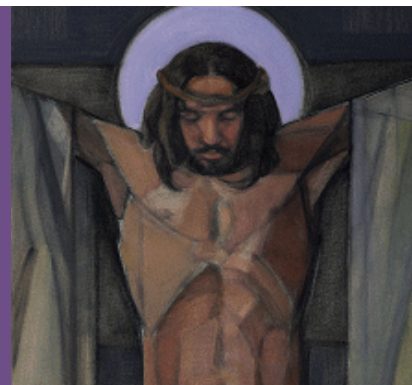
All: God of the past, present, and future, we thank you for the witness of these women. May we find in them the inspiration and strength to continue the unfinished work of eradicating from our church and society the racism, sexism, and every form of prejudice and discrimination that continue the economic, social, physical, and spiritual crucifixion of our siblings. AMEN.

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

THE TWELFTH STATION

Jesus Dies on the Cross



Reader: N/A

The Twelfth Station: Jesus Dies on the Cross

**All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you.
For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection
you have set us free.**

Allow one minute for silent reflection:

*What racist attitudes, beliefs, and practices am I
being called to die to?*

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

THE THIRTEENTH STATION

*Jesus's Body Is
Removed from
the Cross*



Reader: Ethelyn Labissierre Smyley

The Thirteenth Station: Jesus's Body Is Removed from the Cross

All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you. For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection you have set us free.

Reader: As we reflect on this thirteenth station, we call to mind the witness of Sister Thea Bowman.

In one of her last interviews, having lived with cancer for nearly six years, Sister Thea said, "I don't try to make sense of [suffering] I try to make sense of life." Drawing inspiration and insight from African American spirituals, which were so much a part of her life and ministry, Sister Thea lived life fully and purposefully. A champion of incorporating African American spirituality and Black sacred songs into the life of the Catholic church, she challenged Catholics of all backgrounds to see their unique cultures, histories, and heritages as reason for celebration not cause for discrimination. During her 1989 address to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Sister Thea began her remarks by singing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." She went on to say, "What does it mean to be Black and Catholic? It means that I come to my church fully functioning. That doesn't frighten you, does it? I come to my church fully functioning. I bring myself, my Black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become. I bring my whole history, my tradition, my experience, my culture, my African American song and dance and gesture and movement and teaching and preaching and healing and responsibility as gift to the church."

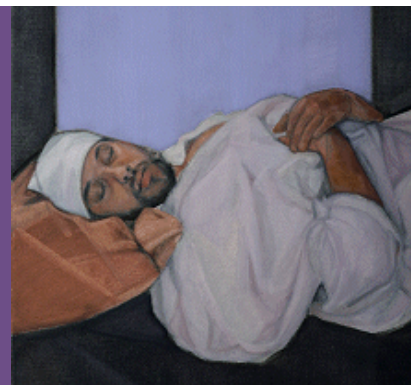
All: God of welcome and inclusion, we thank you for the witness of Sister Thea Bowman. Help us to embrace each other's giftedness. We ask this relying on your unfailing mercy. AMEN.

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when they pierced him in the side?

THE FOURTEENTH STATION

*Jesus's Body Is
Laid in the Tomb*



Reader: Teresa Thompson

The Fourteenth Station: Jesus's Body Is Laid in the Tomb

All: We honor you, Jesus, and we thank you. For by your life, ministry, death, and Resurrection you have set us free.

Reader: As we reflect on this fourteenth station, we call to mind the witness of Dr. Shannen Dee Williams.

As a doctoral student, Williams stumbled on the subject of Black nuns when researching the history of her own mother, who in 1972 became the first African American woman accepted into Notre Dame University. In the midst of her research, Williams came across the 1968 creation of the National Black Sisters Conference. She reached out to some of the early members and the letters started pouring in:

"We've been waiting on you.

"We're so glad someone's trying to tell our story," they said. The topic became the basis of her doctoral research. When her book *Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle* was released in 2022, it was the first to examine the lives and struggles of Black Catholic sisters in the 20th-century United States.

Without Williams's hours of research and interviews, this important part of Catholic history and the incredible witness of so many women could have been completely forgotten with the passage of time.

All: God of memories, we thank you for the witness of Dr. Shannen Dee Williams. May we always remember and learn from our church's history of racism and discrimination and so that, together, we may journey from death to new life. We ask this relying on your unfailing mercy. AMEN.

Spiritual: *Were You There?*

Were you there when the sun refused to shine?

Closing Prayer

Leader: Teresa Thompson Recognizing that we are all one human family,
let us pray together the words that Jesus taught us...

All: **Creator God,
Mother and Father to the one human family, hallowed be your name!
May your reign come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead
us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
AMEN.**

Closing Spiritual

We Shall Overcome

We shall overcome . . . some day!
We'll walk hand in hand . . . some day!
We shall live in peace . . . some day!
We are not afraid . . . today!
God will see us through . . . today!

Notes

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MUSIC: All of the suggested music is available in the hymnal “Lead Me, Guide Me” (2nd Edition) available through GIA Publications, Inc. With the exceptions of “I Need You to Survive” and “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (which have alternative suggestions) all of the music is also available in Gather Comprehensive Third Edition by GIA Publication, Inc.

ROLES: It is preferred that these Stations of the Cross be led by a diverse group. Consider inviting African American women or other women of color from your community to read the reflections.

UPDATES: For the Church of St. Francis Xavier's Stations of the Cross by The Women Who Stayed, Catholic Lesbians, and Interfaith Committee on Friday, February 16, 2024.