



WOMEN WITNESSES OF MERCY

CELEBRATING THE EXTRAORDINARY WITNESS
OF WOMEN DURING THE YEAR OF MERCY

Black Catholic Sisters in the United States

A Historical Reflection by Shannen Dee Williams, Ph.D.



Dr. Shannen Dee Williams

is an award-winning historian of the black Catholic diaspora. She is currently writing a book entitled, "Subversive Habits: Black Nuns and the Struggle to Desegregate Catholic America after World I," which examines the hidden history of black nuns in the fight to dismantle racial and gender barriers in the U.S. Church. When completed, it will be the first historical monograph on black Catholic sisters in twentieth-century America.

Dr. Williams frequently lectures on the history of black Catholic nuns in the Atlantic world and publicly advocates for the revitalization of black female religious life in the United States. Her writings have appeared in Religion Dispatches, The Feminist Wire, the U.S. Catholic Blog, and Patheos.

Introduction

Long before there were black priests in the United States, there were black Catholic sisters. Since 1824, hundreds of black women and girls have professed the religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in the U.S. Catholic Church. By consecrating themselves to God and dedicating their lives to educational and social uplift, 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 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 all.

Black Sisters in the 19th Century

In 1824, black women became the first representatives of the African-American community to embrace the religious state in the U.S. Catholic Church. Barred from joining most white sisterhoods due to anti-black racism and racial exclusionary admissions policies, black women first entered religious life through the establishment of all-black congregations. Between 1824 and 1889, at least six all black sisterhoods were organized in the United States. They were the all-black Sisters of Loretto in Kentucky (1824-1824); the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, Maryland (1829-present); the



Mother Mary Lange
Founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence.



Mother Henriette DeLille
Founder of the Sisters of the Holy Family.



Mother Theodore Williams
Founder of the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most pure Heart of Mary.

Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans, Louisiana (1842-present); the Sisters of Our Lady of Lourdes in New Orleans, Louisiana (1883-l.1920s/e.1930s); the Sisters of the Third Order of Saint Francis in Convent, Louisiana (1888-1913); and the Sisters of the Third Order of Saint Francis in Savannah, Georgia (1889-1910). Of these six communities, all were founded in the South, where the vast majority of the nation's black Catholics lived and labored, and all were (or slated to be) teaching communities.

Though African-American entry into historically white Catholic sisterhoods was overwhelmingly restricted to the post-World War II era, there were some notable exceptions in the nineteenth century. Between 1824 and 1885, at least eighteen U.S.-born black women entered white congregations in and outside of the United States. The majority of these women were light-skinned and deliberately sought to pass for white. In three known nineteenth-century cases in which white orders admitted or assisted in the novitiate training of black women, who could not pass for white, those pioneering sisters, like the nation's first black priests, did not receive their spiritual training on American soil. Instead, Frederica Law of Savannah, Georgia, Frances Johnson of Baltimore, Maryland, and Mathilda Beasley of Savannah, Georgia (by way of New Orleans, Louisiana) all traveled to Europe to undergo their respective novitiate training in the early to mid-1880s.

Though black sisterhoods were among the earliest Catholic congregations founded in the United States, they were severely marginalized in the white-dominated, male-hierarchical Church. White religious authorities frequently referred to the existence of black sisters as a "profanation

of the habit." Religious authorities in New Orleans went so far as to prohibit the Holy Family Sisters from wearing a habit in public until 1872. Black sisters were also subjected to white supremacist terror and violence and as a rule ostracized by their white counterparts in religious life well into the twentieth century. Moreover, their numbers remained small for much of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, by founding Catholic schools, orphanages, and nursing homes for African Americans and mentoring a significant portion of the nation's earliest generations of black priests, black sisters forced the U.S. hierarchy to acknowledge (if only nominally) the existence of its largely neglected African-American constituency and laid the critical groundwork for the creation and expansion of the African-American apostolate in the twentieth century.

Black Sisters in the 20th Century

By the turn of the twentieth century, the national population of black sisters began to increase substantially. During the first two decades, two additional black congregations were also established. They were the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Heart of Mary of Savannah, Georgia and later Harlem, New York (1916- Present) and the all-black Good Shepherd Sisters (or Magdalens) of Baltimore, Maryland (1922 to 1960s). It would also be during the twentieth century that black sisters arguably made their most significant and enduring contributions to the fight for racial and educational justice.

After World War I, state legislatures began requiring the higher education and accreditation of private school teachers, placing the nation's black teaching sisterhoods in a precarious position.

Though canon law and church mandates dictated that all Catholics be educated in Catholic schools, the vast majority of the nation's Catholic colleges, universities, and normal institutes systematically excluded African Americans, including Catholic religious, from admission solely on the basis of race. Working secretly with a small cadre of prelates and white religious orders, black sisters, anchored by the African-American lay community, quietly began desegregating Catholic colleges and universities in order to secure accreditation and transform their schools into educational sanctuaries for African-American parents and children searching for alternatives to grossly under-funded or nonexistent public schools. Some notable Catholic institutions that black sisters desegregated during the Jim Crow era include: Saint Louis University, Villanova College (later University), the Catholic University of America, Loyola University of the South (later Loyola-New Orleans), Seton Hill College for Women (later University), and Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama.

After World War II, scores of young black Catholic women and girls began desegregating the nation's historically white sisterhoods. Prior to World War II, African-American challenges to these communities' whites-only admissions policies were routinely ignored. As a result, black women and girls seeking admission into white orders were often, though not always, tracked into the nation's black orders. An undetermined number of black female vocations were lost to the Church as a result of these discriminatory (and un-Catholic) policies. However, expanding calls for racial justice and increased Vatican pressure finally forced the leadership of the nation's all-white sisterhoods to reconsider their stance after World War II. As a result, a small number of white orders began to admit African-American candidates. However, obstacles remained for black sisters in white congregations. In fact, many later testified to enduring years of bullying, neglect, and other forms of racist abuse in their convents.

After Vatican II, black sisters entered the public fight for racial justice. In mid-August of 1968, 155 of the nation's ~1,000 black sisters, reeling from the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., gathered at Mount Mercy College (now Carlow University) for a weeklong

meeting to discuss for themselves their ongoing role in the changing black revolution. Organized by 25-year old Sister M. Martin de Porres (Patricia Muriel) Grey, Pittsburgh's first black Religious Sister of Mercy, the meeting marked the first time that black sisters had gathered on a national stage to protest racism in the Church. It culminated in the formation of the National Black Sisters' Conference (NBSC). In the coming years, the NBSC embarked on an ambitious campaign to rid the Church of racism and sexism, taking their fight all the way to the Holy See in 1971. They also launched a national campaign to stop the mass closings of Catholic schools in urban and predominantly black communities.

However, when most U.S. congregations proved unable or unwilling to make the changes needed to insure the retention and growth of all of their members, black sisters, like their white and male counterparts, began departing religious life at an alarming rate. From 1965 to 1975 alone, more than 200 black sisters defected from their communities. Many did so in willful and righteous protest against ongoing racial and gender discrimination and rising political conservatism in the Church. As the NBSC executive director ominously put it in 1975, "the future of the black Catholic nun is dubious."

Conclusion

By the turn of the twentieth first century, there were only about 300 African-American sisters left in the United States. Nonetheless, the contributions of black sisters in the fight for racial and educational justice in the nation and Church have endured. As for those black women and girls who departed religious life in the post-civil rights era, the vast majority chose to remain in the Catholic Church. Today, as laywomen, community workers, and theologians and university professors in the academy, they continue the fight for justice and equity in American society and the Church, reminding us all of how far we have come and how far we still have to go.

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