

RACISM AND RESILIENCE: AN OVERVIEW OF CATHOLIC AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

This is the first of a two-part series examining racism toward Black Catholics. The first piece examines U.S. and Oregon church history. The second story will explore recent experiences of African American Catholics in Oregon and Blacks' views on the ongoing protests and the Black Lives Matter movement. It also will highlight ways Catholics can work for racial justice.

By Katie Scott
OF THE CATHOLIC SENTINEL

In the mid-1970s, Mary Elizabeth Harper was eager to join the cheerleading squad at her all-girls Catholic academy in an Illinois town. When the team captain excluded her from tryouts with no clear explanation, the young Mary Elizabeth went to the principal.

"Your being on the team won't look right," Harper recalled the nun telling her. "After I pushed her for what that meant, it became clear the issue was my race." The athletes and cheer teams were all white.

"It stabbed me in the heart," said Harper, now in her 60s and a member of Resurrection Parish in Tualatin.

Alaina Hardy, 20, grew up attending Immaculate Heart Parish in North Portland and Catholic schools in the Portland area. In 2016, when she was in high school, classmates compared her to a monkey.

"They thought it was OK because it was disguised as a joke," said Hardy.

Two years ago, Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers was a speaker at a Catholic youth conference in Chicago. The 54-year-old African American is co-host of a national EWTN radio program and a permanent deacon at Immaculate Heart. Wearing a suit and tie, Deacon Burke-Sivers stepped onto the elevator at the conference site and smiled at a woman who was a fellow rider. She backed into the corner and clutched her purse.

"I turned around and got off," said the deacon.

Such painful experiences are echoed by generations of Black Catholics in Oregon and across the country. Some individuals have a handful of stories, others an extensive list. Each story is part of a long history of racism in the wider culture and the church.

As demonstrations and conversations remain impassioned in the wake of George Floyd's death in May, it's all the more urgent "to have an honest look at history and the Catholic Church's past," said Gloria Purvis, a Washington, D.C.-based pro-life advocate, vocal proponent of the Black

Lives Matter movement and fellow radio show host with Deacon Burke-Sivers. "In many ways," Purvis said, it's a miracle that there are Black Catholics."

Enslavement, enduring hope in the U.S.

Black Catholics have been in the Americas for as long as Catholics have been in the Americas, said Matthew Cressler, professor of religious studies at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. Arriving in the 15th and 16th centuries, some were free but many were enslaved.

"There's a multcentury history of Catholics engaged in enslavement converting and baptizing Blacks," Cressler said.

Among the Black Catholics who practiced their faith prior to enslavement were those from present-day Democratic Republic of Congo.

In 1441, an African king was baptized Catholic and converted the inhabitants of his kingdom.

The largest slave uprising in the Colonies prior to the American Revolution was led by a group of Congolese Catholics, who in 1739 timed their attempt for freedom with the feast of the Nativity of Mary. Most were killed.

Not only Catholic families but also religious orders and priests owned slaves.

Shannen Dee Williams, a history professor at Villanova University in Pennsylvania, writes in a 2019 America magazine article that the Oblate Sisters of Providence — the United States' first successful order of Black nuns — was the only non-slaveholding U.S. order of sisters known to have educated enslaved people.

"If the U.S. church seeks to remedy the ills of its own participation in over 400 years of chattel slavery and segregation, it must start by always telling an honest history of American Catholicism — one that includes rampant racism and exclusion, but also the insurmountable faith, hope, love and charity of people who fought (and continue to fight) to make the church truly Catholic," Williams said in an essay published on the U.S. bishops' website.

Until the 20th century, the majority of African Americans were living in the South as slave laborers and then as indebted farmers. Between 1915 and 1970, however, came the Great Migration, a period when African Americans fled the South's Jim Crow laws and lynchings and moved into cities in the North, Midwest and West. "They were refugees in a sense," said Cressler. Some were Catholic but most



A Dominican sister teaches students at Immaculate Heart School in North Portland in the late 1950s. The decade brought the construction of Interstate 5, splintering the African American neighborhood. (Archdiocese of Portland archives)

of the migrants were evangelicals.

Predominately white Catholic neighborhoods in large cities, including Chicago and Detroit, thus saw an influx of Black, mostly non-Catholic families.

The relocated African Americans faced fierce resistance from Catholics who didn't want them as neighbors.

"But an exceptional few sisters and priests who served as missionaries to the Black migrants hoped to repopulate churches and schools with African Ameri-

can converts," Cressler said.

The result was a period of unparalleled growth, with a 200% increase in the number of Black Catholics between 1940 and 1975.

In the years after the Great Migration ended, the number of Black Catholics leveled off. According to statistics compiled by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, there currently are about 3 million African American Catholics, roughly 4% of the country's 72 million Catholics.

Cressler said that in the late 1950s and '60s, white Catholics across the country were on the frontlines of resistance to the civil rights movement and the desegregation of institutions.

"For obvious reasons those who write the history of the Catholic Church include exceptions to the rule, but Catholics engaged in civil rights activism were really the minority," he said.

When individual archbishops endorsed efforts by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., many white Catholics wrote angry letters saying how disgusted they were. There were Catholics who grabbed Confederate flags as they shouted down and at times assaulted civil rights marchers — some of them priests and nuns.

Other Catholics viewed such overt racism as uncouth, "but nevertheless invested in lily-white suburbs while divesting from black and brown communities," Cressler said.

When in 1963 King scribbled a letter on newspaper margins in a cell in Birmingham, Alabama, he was responding to a letter from eight white clergyman — a Catholic prelate, Bishop Joseph Aloisius Durick, among them — who wanted the civil rights movement to abandon demonstrations and urged caution and negotiations.

King wrote that he was disappointed with white moderates who "see my non-

violent efforts as those of an extremist." Its contents, exhibiting King's righteous fury and brilliant intellect, in fact helped transform Bishop Durick's views. The bishop became a civil rights crusader who gave a eulogy during a memorial service for King at Memphis City Hall.

In the aftermath of King's assassination were uprisings in more than 100 cities. Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, a white Catholic, authorized the police to "shoot to kill" arsonists and "shoot to maim" looters.

The Black Power movement of the 1960s and '70s inspired Black Catholics to confront racism within the church, and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) fueled unprecedented liturgical innovations that integrated African religious practices with Catholic worship. Gospel music began to flourish for the first time in some Catholic churches.

A generation of Black activist-scholars questioned assumptions that white ways of being Catholic were the proper ways.

In 1979 the U.S. Catholic bishops issued their first pastoral letter on racism, entitled "Brothers and Sisters to Us." They noted the progress made in the culture and the church, much of it due to Black activism, but said it was insufficient.

"We do not deny that the ugly external features of racism which marred our society have in part been eliminated. But neither can it be denied that too often what has happened has only been a covering over, not a fundamental change."

Ten years later, at the U.S. bishops' annual meeting, Sister Thea Bowman, the only African American member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, repeated some of the conclusions in the pastoral letter, offering a rousing, incisive address on the state of Blacks.

"Surviving our history physically, mentally, emotionally, morally, spiritu-

ally, faithfully and joyfully, our people developed a culture that was African and American, that was formed and enriched by all that we experienced," said Sister Thea, who is being investigated for sainthood. "And despite all of this, despite the civil rights movement of the '60s and the socio-educational gains of the '70s, Blacks ... are still trying to find home in the homeland and home in the church."

Black Catholics in Oregon despite the odds

There are many examples of Oregon priests and religious who focused attention on injustice, collaborated with community members to fight for civil rights and helped educate generations of Blacks. But looking back on the state's past, African American Catholics say there are areas where the church mirrored social inequities and racism.

Oregon's longtime homogeneity — the state currently is three-quarters white — coupled with the fact that only a small percentage of Catholics are Black, makes the region's early African American Catholic history difficult to trace. There's no official record of a Black Catholic presence in Oregon until 1924.

The scarcity of African Americans is not accidental. The state's history is awash in principles of white supremacy.

In 1844, the first of Oregon's three Black exclusion laws was adopted. It said that Blacks who tried to settle in the territory would be whipped 39 times every six months until they left. There's no record of whippings occurring, but the law sent an unambiguous message.

Oregon's constitution, adopted in 1857, banned slavery but excluded Blacks from legal residence. Blacks could not own real estate, make contracts, vote or use the legal system.



Immaculate Heart third grader Ronald Perry and fourth grader Kandy Raiford leave the school for the last time in 1986. Immaculate Heart was one of five inner-city Portland schools to close in the 1980s. Archdiocesan officials said the closures put the school system on better financial footing. Immaculate Heart parishioner Teletha Benjamin and a number of other local Catholics felt the archdiocese should have continued to subsidize the schools. "We do missionary work all over the world, including in Africa; why are we not willing to do it in our own cities?" she said. (Sentinel archives)

Watch the video

To view Sr. Thea Bowman's passionate 1989 address to U.S. bishops on the state of Black Catholics, go to go.sentinel.org/2ErM27T.



The Ku Klux Klan marches down a street in Ashland in the 1920s. Decades of exclusionary practices in Oregon were so successful at keeping the Black population small and isolated that African Americans were a secondary target; the Klan's primary focus was Catholics and Jews. Still, the KKK was an intimidating force for Blacks and made the state more dangerous for them. (Sentinel archives)



Gloria Purvis, who said she considers racism as much a sin as abortion, and Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers of Portland co-host a 2019 episode of "Morning Glory," a nationally broadcast show on EWTN radio. Purvis and the deacon have some different perspectives on racism in the church and wider culture, but they agree it persists. "When you see how people are portrayed on television, when you see Blacks as pimps and hoers over and over and over, when you hear these jokes, that does something to you," said Deacon Burke-Sivers. (Courtesy EWTN)

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