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## Racism and resilience: An overview of Catholic African American history

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A Dominican sister teaches students at Immaculate Heart School in North Portland in the late 1950s. The school was one of five inner-city Portland schools to close in the late 1980s. Archdiocesan officials said the closures put the school system on better financial footing. Immaculate Heart parishioner Teletha Benjamin 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. (Archdiocese of Portland archives)



Katie Scott  
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*This is the first of a two-part series looking at 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.*

In the mid-1970s, Mary Elizabeth Harper was eager to join the cheerleading squad at her all-girls Catholic academy in an Illinois

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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 clergymen — a Catholic prelate, Bishop Joseph Aloysius 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 nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist."

Its contents, exhibiting King's righteous fury and brilliant intellect, in fact helped transform Bishop Durick's views. He 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, Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Sister Thea Bowman, an African American, repeated some of the conclusions of the pastoral letter, offering a rousing, incisive address on the state of Blacks.

"Surviving our history physically, mentally, emotionally, morally, spiritually, 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 not an 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.

Among the most devastating anti-Black laws passed in the 19th century was the federal Oregon Donation Land Law, which said white male citizens were entitled to 320 acres of land but explicitly excluded African Americans.

These legacies of Oregon's past meant for decades the power and political influence flowed nearly exclusively from whites and preserved the marginalization of Blacks.

In the 1920s, the presence of a large Ku Klux Klan chapter made the state more dangerous for African Americans —



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)



### Slave-turned-priest on path toward sainthood

Father Augustus Tolton was born in 1854 into a slave-owning Catholic family in Missouri. He escaped slavery with his own family during the Civil War by crossing the Mississippi River into Illinois.

When Tolton attempted to enter local schools, he faced harassment and discrimination. A pastor recognized the ex-slave had a vocation to the priesthood, but no American seminary would admit a Black student. Tolton therefore underwent formation privately with local priests and eventually was able to study in Rome.

Ordained in 1886, he is regarded as the first African American Catholic priest.

When Father Tolton returned to the United States following ordination, thousands of people lined the streets to greet him. A band played hymns and African American spirituals.

Father Tolton began ministering to Black Catholics in Chicago and became a popular preacher. He soon gained a national reputation as both a pastor and public speaker, but he devoted most of his life to his parishioners, most of whom lived in poverty.

The priest died at age 43 after collapsing during a heat wave.

Last year Pope Francis declared Father Tolton "venerable." To become a saint, he needs to have to have two miracles attributed to him and approved by the Vatican.

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 multicentury 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 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 American converts," Cressler said.

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although since Oregon's exclusionary practices had so effectively kept the Black population small, Catholics and Jews were often its primary targets.

At least one Black child was enrolled in Cathedral School in Northwest Portland during this time. Most U.S. bishops supported desegregation long before the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, which said state-sanctioned segregation of public schools was unconstitutional.

But a 1926 editorial in the *Advocate*, a Portland Black newspaper, criticized the parochial schools, charging that two attempts to enroll Black children in Catholic schools had failed due to discrimination. Answering this challenge and admitting Black students by the 1930s were Portland's St. Mary's Academy, staffed by Holy Names Sisters, and St. Andrew School, run by the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon.

Amid World War II, Portland became a center of the wartime shipbuilding industry, and African Americans moved to the city as shipyard workers. Between 1940 and 1950, the African American community exploded by 400%, reaching more than 9,500 Blacks.

It was in 1950 that the first Black Catholic priest, Father James Mosely, was ordained for the Portland Archdiocese. Some were uncomfortable with his presence, and three years after his ordination, a local newspaper columnist wrote that a group of parishioners were distressed to have the only Black priest in the archdiocese assigned to their parish.

Following the war, most Blacks in the Portland region lived in a new city called Vanport. A 1948 flooding of the Columbia River, however, displaced more than 6,000 of them.

The church promptly stepped in to help. St. Vincent de Paul provided food and clothing, and Archbishop Edward Howard let the Red Cross use all archdiocesan buildings to assist the residents whose homes were destroyed.

For Blacks who remained after the flood, the small Albina District in Northeast Portland was the only place in the city they were allowed to purchase homes.

Starting in 1919, the city's realty board banned members from selling to African Americans, believing that a Black presence within four blocks of a neighborhood would lower property values. For the following three decades, red lines on a city map dictated where people of color could live, buy property or secure a bank loan.

Known as "redlining," this practice meant the majority of Catholic African Americans attended parishes in North and Northeast Portland. Immaculate Heart, St. Andrew and Holy Redeemer at one point had relatively high numbers of Blacks in the congregation.

Even when the redlining policy was removed from the real estate code, it persisted unofficially.

In 1958, Teletha Benjamin, then a newlywed, moved from Louisiana to Oregon hoping for a culture of greater equality. She eventually found a welcome spiritual home at Immaculate Heart but encountered obstacles both in the city and faith community. "I quickly realized I'd moved into what I'd left," said the 83-year-old Benjamin, a former social worker and longtime advocate for the poor and disenfranchised.

Benjamin recalled how unofficial redlining initially thwarted her efforts to find a place to live. She'd call about an ad for an apartment, only to be told the unit had been rented. "But then that same ad would appear the next week," she said.

In the late 1950s and early '60s, the construction of Memorial Coliseum and Interstate 5, along with the expansion of Emanuel Hospital in the 1970s, again uprooted Black residents, including Catholics. According to Benjamin, local church leaders didn't speak out against these changes.

To give a stronger voice to their needs, African American Catholics in 1976 created the Portland Black Catholic Lay Caucus, part of the National Black Catholic Congress.

"We were all feeling that Black Catholics were almost considered to be invisible in the Catholic Church," caucus co-founder Sam Jackson told the *Sentinel* in 2010. "We didn't feel included in the conversation with respect to Catholic activities in a lot of the parishes, locally and throughout the state."

Later named the African American Catholic Community of Oregon, the organization has members who have coordinated revivals, vacation Bible camps and the annual Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. memorial Mass.

Benjamin, a longtime member of the group, views a cluster of school closures in the late 1980s as an especially bleak moment in the history of Oregon's African American Catholic community.

In the late 1980s, the archdiocese closed five inner-city Portland schools and merged two. St. Francis in Southeast Portland, Assumption, Pope John XXIII and Immaculate Heart in North Portland, and St. Andrew in Northeast Portland were closed. Northeast Portland's St. Charles and St. Rose merged.

Citing escalating operational costs, limited resources, fewer teaching religious sisters and declining enrollments, the archdiocese argued the decision to close the schools, though difficult, would put the school system on sound financial footing.

Benjamin served on the committee that discussed the closures, which affected primarily Blacks and poor white children. For the struggling schools to survive, they needed to be subsidized by the archdiocese. But Benjamin saw that as an opportunity to fulfill an essential task of the church.

"We do missionary work all over the world, including in Africa; why are we not willing to do it in our own cities?" said Benjamin.

An added rationale for the closures was that the populations served included many non-Catholics. "But you educate because there's a need, not because they are Catholic," Benjamin said, adding that the schools served as an

evangelizing tool, drawing Black families to the faith.

Benjamin points out that in recent decades, gentrification has transformed traditionally black neighborhoods in North and Northeast Portland and pushed many lower-income Black families into the suburbs. It's just the most recent way the community has been displaced.

"But I still have hope and belief and faith that things can change and improve," said Benjamin, who spends two hours reading the Bible and meditating each morning.

Purvis, the radio host, believes Catholics are well suited to address the range of racial injustices inside and outside the church.

"It will be uncomfortable, but carrying the cross is uncomfortable, the Christian faith is uncomfortable," said Purvis. "We are blessed as Catholics that we have the grace of the sacraments to fix our brokenness."

Catholics need not despair, she added. "The Lord wants us to grow in holiness; the Lord is with us."

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**Watch the video**

[View Sr. Thea Bowman's passionate 1989 address to U.S. bishops on the state of Black Catholics.](#)

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