

Editorial: Getting to know Black Catholics on the road to sainthood

In a recent piece for Our Sunday Visitor, [Sister Josephine Garrett](#), a sister of the Holy Family of Nazareth, shared her story of being a Black Catholic in the United States and argued that similar sharing of stories is one of the most important things Black Catholics can do to help overcome racial prejudice and the resulting division in this country. In sharing and listening to one another's experiences, we can better understand and appreciate the other as a child of God, with equal dignity.

"Being a Black Catholic isn't a special class or something that should have precedence over Catholics of other racial and ethnic descents," she wrote. "But, because of our history as Blacks, we need to tell these stories so that the whole story is complete and has a voice in the places where there was not previously a voice. It is a part of participating in the hope of Jesus that we may be one."

As we celebrate Black History Month as a nation this February, there is one group of individuals whose stories we as a Church can and should commit to knowing better: American Black Catholics who are on the road to sainthood. These six individuals not only faced great challenges placed before them because of their race, they did so, many believe – and for three, the Church officially has agreed – with heroic virtue. For them, living as people of faith – all while persevering through the many grievous and shameful hardships they faced – was a priority. They loved Jesus, and they loved their neighbors, and they sought to do God's will in their lives, even and especially when it wasn't easy.

There is Venerable Father Augustus Tolton, born the son of slaves, who fled for freedom with his mother and siblings at a young age. As he sought to respond to a calling to the priesthood, Tolton faced rejection after rejection before he finally was ordained the first African American priest from the United States. At a parish in his hometown of Quincy, Illinois, Tolton faced racial prejudice from clergy and laity. Eventually he was transitioned into ministry to the Black Catholic community in the Archdiocese of Chicago, where he served faithfully until his premature death at age 43.

There is Venerable Henriette Delille, who was called to religious life but was denied entrance because of the color of her skin. Instead of giving up, she established her own religious congregation – which became known as the Sisters of the Holy Family – and served the sick and poor. The sisters also provided both slaves and free persons with religious education.

There is Venerable Pierre Toussaint, who was born into slavery but, after receiving his freedom, prospered in New York City as a hairdresser. Devoted to care of the poor and needy, Toussaint and his wife, Juliette, accomplished works of charity throughout the city. Toussaint is now buried in St. Patrick's Cathedral – no small achievement, as he was prohibited from even entering the previous cathedral because of his race.

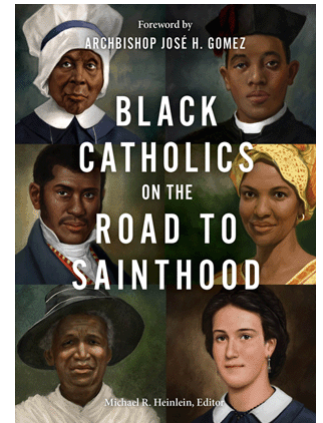
There is Servant of God Mary Lange, who persevered through racial prejudice and hatred to establish the Oblate Sisters of Providence – the first successful establishment of Black sisters in the United States.

There is Denver's "Angel of Mercy," Servant of God Julia Greeley, a former slave and convert who dedicated her life to caring for the poor of the city. She took on a life of poverty, giving away whatever little she earned. Deeply devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Greeley spread the

devotion to all she encountered.

And there is Servant of God Thea Bowman, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration who came of age in the 1960s amid America's struggle for civil rights. With a big heart filled with love of the Lord, Sister Thea sought to promote greater harmony and mutual respect among people who looked different from one another.

These are but snapshots of these great men and women, each of whom deserves greater study. A new book from OSV, "[Black Catholics on the Road to Sainthood](#)" (\$9.95) offers more information, analysis and context.



As we seek to learn more about these brave men and women, let us remember, too, to seek their intercession for both an end to racism and for our own perseverance as we attempt to follow them in the way of holiness.

Our Sunday Visitor Editorial Board: Gretchen R. Crowe, Scott P. Richert, Scott Warden, York Young