

BLACKS in CATHOLIC HISTORY “MOMENTS”

Introduction for this series:

Some people have criticized Christianity as a “white man’s religion and put down the Roman Catholic Church as a “white” church. These myths and misconceptions are NOT TRUE. In fact, Blacks in Catholic Christianity have a long and vibrant history that we’ll be exploring this month (November) with a daily “*Blacks-in-Catholic-History Moment*” You may use this in your bulletin, or as a study guide for your Black Catholic History month activities. (All information was compiled from websites of the Archdioceses of Washington, Baltimore, Chicago & Newark, the Diocese of Raleigh, the Newsletter of NBCC and the books: *African Saints* by Frederick Quinn, *The Saints Go Marching In* by Robert Fulton Holtzclaw, and *Blacks Who Died for Jesus* by Mark Hyman; *The Anacostia Story: 1608-1930* by Louise Daniel Hutchinson)

11/1/10

Did you know...?

...that married lay people can become saints? Saints Julian and Basilissa, through married, lived in chastity by mutual consent about 304. They used all their money in relieving the sick and converted their home into a hospital which sometimes housed thousands. St. Basilissa tended the sick women in one part of the house while St. Julian ministered to the men in another part. St. Julian came to be known as the hospitalarian. St. Basilissa died before St. Julian after several persecutions; St. Julian lived many years longer. Although they both died in peace, the Church calls them martyrs.

11/2/10

Did you know...?

...that among the 265 popes of the Catholic Church, between St. Peter and the current pope Benedict the 16th, are three popes known to be of African descent? St. Victor the First was a deacon when he became the first black and the 14th pope in 189 A.D. He established a set date for the yearly celebration of Easter. St. Victor died a martyr for the faith in 199. St. Melchiades (mel-KY-uh-des) reigned as the Church’s second black and 32nd pope, from 311 to 314. He signed the Emperor Constantine’s laws that ended persecutions and made Christianity the established religion of the Roman Empire. St. Gelasius the First, was the Church’s third black and 49th pope from 492 to 496. He was known then for saving Rome from famine, composing a book of hymns, and clarifying Church teaching on the Eucharist.

11/3/10

Did you know...?

...that the only saint, of African origin, in the Western Hemisphere to date, is St. Martin de Porres of Lima, Peru? Born in 1579, as the unwanted son of a Spanish knight and a freed African slave woman. St. Martin showed signs of the virtues of modesty, humility and charity for the poor, early in his life. As a Dominican Brother, St. Martin founded an orphanage and a hospital. He also ministered to hundreds of unhappy people from Africa, who were forced into slavery in the new western world. St. Martin is recognized in the Church as both the Patron saint of Peru and of the poor. His feast day is celebrated today.

11/4/10

Did you know...?

...that perhaps no mother, other than the Virgin Mary herself, is considered to have had as much influence on the early Catholic Christian Church, as St. Monica of Tagaste, Africa? Why so? Because St. Monica spent most of her lifetime praying for the Christian conversion of a wayward and worldly son, who eventually became one of the Church's greatest theologians, St. Augustine. Some observers considered her an interfering, in-your-face kind of mom. Others saw her as a shrewd woman of faith and spiritual anchor for a son whose talents she felt belonged to the Church. A crowning moment for St. Monica was when she saw Augustine finally baptized in the Church. She died in the year 387.

11/5/10

Did you know...?

...that the founder of the Sisters of the Holy Family, based in New Orleans, Louisiana, is among three African American candidates for sainthood in the Catholic Church? Mother Henriette Delille (duh-LEEL) was born in 1812 as a "free person of color". At the tender age of 17, she and two companions began to evangelize the large slave and free-people-of-color populations in New Orleans. Their efforts led to the formation of the nation's second religious order for women of color in 1842. Its mission: to care for the aged; to instruct the unlearned; and to care for the poor.

11/6/10

Did you know.....?

....that the New Testament of the Bible speaks of "Simon from Cyrene", which is located in Africa, carrying the cross of Jesus, in the Gospel according to Luke? And did you know that in the Book of Acts, Apostle and Deacon, Phillip, helped convert an official from the African kingdom of Ethiopia to follow Jesus, even before the conversion of St. Paul? Some scholars say this event marked the very moment when the Church changed from a primarily Hebrew and Greek community to the truly universal and catholic Church.

11/7/10

Did you know...?

...that the patron saint of southern Germany and parts of France, Spain, Italy and Switzerland, is a man of African origin? He is Saint Maurice of Aganaum, born less than 250 years after Jesus Christ. He became a general in the Roman army, stationed in what is now France. St. Maurice and his six thousand African soldiers were ordered to put down a rebellion against the empire. When St. Maurice discovered they all were Christians, he and his men refused to fight their fellow Christians. They also refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods. For this, the emperor had St. Maurice and nearly all of his Theban Legion executed. A basilica in Aganaum, Switzerland enshrines their relic remains today.

11/8/10

Did you know...?

...that two young African Christian women and three companions were thrown to wild animals and killed for their faith, at Carthage in the year 203? St. Perpetua, a new mother, and her pregnant maid-servant, St. Felicity, were first arrested during the Roman persecution of Christians. Both women had to leave their families because they refused to worship Roman gods. St. Perpetua's account of their harsh treatment in prison is considered one of the earliest and most dramatic documents of Christian martyrdom. St. Felicity gave birth to a daughter just three days before she and St. Perpetua were ultimately beheaded for their faith.

11/9/10

Did you know...?

...that the first African woman to be canonized as a saint by the Church in this 21st century, lived her entire childhood as a slave? When just a little girl, St. Josephine Bakhita (Bah-KEE-tah), was kidnapped from her loving family in the Sudan, and sold into brutal slavery. Her different "owners" frequently beat and tortured her. Finally, when she was sold to an Italian diplomat, at age 14, St. Josephine Bakhita received Christian instruction for the first time from the Sisters of Charity in Venice, Italy. Later, when the diplomat's family returned to Africa, St. Josephine Bakhita refused to go with them. She remained within the protection of the Sisters' convent in Italy, where slavery was illegal. St. Josephine Bakhita eventually joined this religious order. For the next 50 years, she joyfully and faithfully served as the convent's cook, seamstress, sacristan, and doorkeeper until her death in 1947.

11/10/10

Did you know...?

...that a former slave who worked as a hairdresser in New York more than two centuries ago, is on track to become the first African American man, canonized as a saint from the United States? Pierre (pee-YAIR) Toussaint (too-SAHNT) was born and raised as a Catholic slave in Haiti when it was still a French colony. To escape the slave rebellions that eventually drove out the French government, Toussaint's owners fled, with him, to New York. He was assigned as an apprentice to one of the city's leading hairdressers, and became quite successful. When his slave-owner died, Toussaint quietly supported his owner's widow. She, in gratitude, freed Toussaint from his slave status. Toussaint later married and used his considerable wealth to support charitable causes, including work against religious and racial prejudice. Toussaint's death in 1853, at age 87, sparked widespread mourning. Just 13 years ago, Pope John Paul the Second declared Pierre Toussaint, *Venerable* – the first step to becoming a saint.

11/11/10

Did you know...?

...that the first African-American priest ever ordained in the United States, was born and raised in nearby Baltimore, MD, 150 years ago?

Charles Randolph Uncles was the son of a B & O Railroad worker and a dressmaker mother. Father Uncles was an extremely bright student in high school and college. He broke the color barrier in Baltimore's St. Mary's Seminary, at a time when segregation within and outside the Catholic Church was the norm. Father Uncles' ultimate achievement in 1891 made headlines around the country, including those of the New York Times newspaper. Two years after his famous ordination, Father Uncles became one of the founders of the St. Joseph Society of the Sacred Heart. More commonly known as the Josephites, this order's mission is to evangelize African Americans, mostly in the United States.

11/12/10

Did you know...?

...that the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, is the first and oldest religious congregation for women of color in the United States?

Haitian immigrant & educator, Mother Mary Lange, and three companions founded this order in 1829, when Maryland was still a slave state. Under great risk, these sisters dedicated themselves to serving orphans and educating black children. Also around that time, Mother Lange founded Baltimore's historic St. Frances Academy. It continues to thrive today as a co-ed high school that educates mainly inner city African American and Hispanic youth. Mother Lange's candidacy for sainthood began in 1990.

11/13/10

Did you know...?

.....that one of the pillars of the Catholic Church, St. Augustine, wrote 96 books during his lifetime? The two most famous are his autobiography, *Confessions*, and *City of God*. St. Augustine's writings covered a huge range of subjects such as morals, history, philosophy and heresy. Christian churches throughout the world have used Augustine's works as major references. Pope Leo the Tenth admired St. Augustine so much, that he allowed this bishop's feast to be honored the same as those of Christ's Apostles. His feast day is today.

11/14/10

Did you know...?

...that even though he was born into a rich, noble family of African descent in Spain, St. Peter Claver chose to spend his life serving the sick and downtrodden in South America? He treated people with the dreaded disease leprosy. St. Peter Claver met all of the slave ships from Africa right on the docks in Colombia. He ministered to their diseases, comforted and baptized them. St. Peter Claver also served the neglected and abused Native Indian people in Colombia. Overall, St. Peter Claver touched some 50 thousand African slaves. One hundred years ago, the Catholic organization, called the Knights of St. Peter Claver was founded in his memory.

11/15/10

Did you know...?

...that a canonized saint who described herself as “the mother and servant of the Indian and Negro races”, helped found Holy Redeemer Parish and School in DC? In 1858, St. Katherine Drexel was born into great wealth in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As she grew up, St. Katherine’s parents taught her that their money was meant to be shared with others. St. Katherine took this to heart throughout her long life, especially in service to suffering Native and African Americans. She gave more than 21 million dollars of her own money to help found dozens of churches, schools and hospitals across the United States. Besides founding her own religious congregation of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, St Katherine also established Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana. It’s the only Catholic African American College in the country. St. Katherine Drexel died in 1955 and became saint in the year 2000.

11/16/10

Did you know...

...that the very first African American priests in the United States were three brothers born of a slave mother and fathered by a Georgia plantation owner? The Healy brothers: James, Alexander, and Patrick were sent north for their education and freedom. Because of the adverse racial climate in 19th century America, the Healy brothers had to be ordained in Europe, beginning with James in 1854; Alexander, in 1858; and Patrick, in 1864. James Augustine Healy later became our nation’s first African American bishop in Portland, Maine, in 1875. A year earlier, his brother, Patrick Francis Healy, became the highly regarded president of the Catholic institution, Georgetown University, here in Washington, DC. Ironically, Georgetown did not admit students of color, until the mid-1900’s.

11/17/10

Did you know...

...that Black Catholics are remembered with honor and reverence by believers in Europe. Ss. Ursus and Victor were soldiers in the Theban Legion? They were captured at Solothurn in Switzerland and executed for their faith under Maximian in 300 AD. They were buried by Christians outside the city walls. Theodolinde, Queen of Burgundy, in 480, had the body of St. Victor brought to Geneva where she built a basilica in his honor. At the same time she built a church over the tomb of St. Ursus of Solothrun.

11/18/10

Did you know...?

... A slave born of Christian parents at Philadelpho in Sicily in 1522 became a Franciscan monk and saint? St. Benedict the Moor was known for his mild demeanor and his humble spirit. He became the superior of the community of hermits at Montepelligrino, near Palermo even though as the cook for the community, he claimed to be unworthy. That congregation was ordered to disband by Pope Pius IV in 1553 and St. Benedict joined the Franciscan Friars Minor of the Observance. The convent was poor and depended on charity, but there was never a shortage of food. St. Benedict seemed to miraculously

multiply their food supply. His reputation for sanctity and miracles soon spread throughout Sicily. He was a very humble man who would sometimes travel at night to avoid being recognized. Throughout his life he endured most of the austerities of his hermit years, always keeping seven Lents per year. Dying at the age of sixty-three, he was cheered on his deathbed by a vision of St. Ursula. He was canonized in 1589, and chosen patron saint of Palermo.

11/19/10

Did you know...

...that a little Methodist girl born, Bertha Bowman, in Yazoo City, Mississippi, grew up to be a renowned Roman Catholic nun, teacher and scholar? Sister Thea Bowman became Catholic when she was nine years old. She later went to college and then became the first African American to join the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Wisconsin. After 16 years of teaching at the elementary, secondary and college levels, Sr. Thea Bowman was invited to be a special consultant for the Catholic Church. She gave presentations around the country aimed at bridging racial and cultural divisions. She combined her gifts of singing and gospel preaching, with prayers and storytelling. Sr. Thea Bowman was diagnosed with bone cancer in 1984. Yet, she continued her fight against the evils that drive people apart, from her wheel chair, until her death at age 53 in 1990. Sr. Thea Bowman said she prayed "to live until I die – to live fully." And that she did.

11/20/10

Did you know...

...that a Roman legion was virtually wiped out because of their Christian faith? The Theban Legion consisted of Christian soldiers recruited in Upper Egypt. While in service in Gaul (present day France) about 300 AD, they refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods. They also refused to kill innocent Christians in the line of duty. After being twice decimated (every tenth man killed), nearly all of them were massacred. A few escaped. Some of their names were Ss. Maurice, Victor, Exuperius, Candidus, Vitalis, Ursus, Alexander and Gereon.

11/21/10

Did you know...?

... Catholics from Africa led the way in being witnesses for Christ in the face of grave persecutions? St. Charles Lawanga was one of 22 Ugandan martyrs who converted from paganism. He was the chief of the royal pages and was considered the strongest athlete of the court. He was also known as "the most handsome man of the Kingdom of the Uganda." He instructed his friends in the Catholic Faith and he personally baptized boy pages. He inspired and encouraged his companions to remain chaste and faithful. He protected his companions, ages 13-30, from the immoral acts and homosexual demands of the Babandan ruler, Mwanga. He and his companions were burned to death by Mwanga's order on June 3, 1886. Pope Paul VI canonized Charles Lwanga and his companions on June 22, 1964. We celebrate his memorial on June 3rd of the Roman calendar. Charles is the Patron of the African Youth of Catholic Action.

11/22/10

Did you know...

... that a black African Catholic, St. Anthony of Alexandria, is known as the patriarch of Monks? He was born at Aama, a village south of Memphis, near Thebes. His parents were rich Christians. Shortly after inheriting his parents' fortune, he sold all his vast fortune and gave the proceeds to the poor, sent his sister to a nunnery and retired to an old ruin of a tomb. He ate only every three or four days and spent his time at manual labor and prayer.

11/23/10

Did you know...?

... black Haitian Catholic, Toussaint L'Ouverture played a key role in the first successful attempt by a slave population in the Americas and the world win independence from European colonialism. He defeated armies of three imperial powers: Spain, France, and Great Britain. The success of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) had enduring effects on shaking the institution of slavery throughout the New World. Haiti became the second independent republic in the Americas. After being captured by the French general Leclerc, on the ship to France, Toussaint L'Ouverture warned his captors that the rebels would not make his mistake in the following words: "In overthrowing me you have cut down in Saint Domingue only the trunk of the tree of liberty; it will spring up again from the roots, for they are many and they are deep. Haiti became an independent state on January 1, 1804.

11/24/10

Did you know...

...that one of the greatest Bible scholars, Origen, was from ancient Egypt? He was born in 185 AD. Early in his career, Origen became head of the church's training school in Alexandria, Egypt. Some of his most impressive concepts on religion had been taught to him by another African teacher named Clement. Origen won wide acclaim for his lectures at Rome, Caesarea and Jerusalem. Origen's life-style was said to have been one of self-denial; yet nothing hampered the excellence of his letters. Critical studies of biblical texts and his vivid explanations of the Scriptures had a strong spiritual quality. They carried great moral influence. Even though he was never in complete harmony with his Bishop and he had some differences with Rome, his strength and influence were in constant demand to fight heretics and the thinking of non-believers. Without question, Origen was a vital part of the foundation and the fabric of what the great Christian Church was to become.

11/25/10

Did you know...

...Our Lady of Perpetual Help Roman Catholic Church was formed because black Catholics were denied full participation in the parish life at St. Teresa's Catholic Church. The members of the "Mission of St. Teresa's" began the construction of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. The parishioners used their own sweat and equity to get it done. In August 1920 they began digging the foundation and mixing and pouring cement; work was performed in the evening after the day's labor. The land at Fort Stanton was purchased from Dr. J.C. Norwood, a black physician. Following a procession that began at Douglass Hall up the steep incline of Morris Road, chanting the litany of the Blessed Virgin, 525 church members watched as a twenty-five foot cross was placed atop their hill, and a new (but segregated) parish was begun for the black Catholics of Anacostia.

11/26/10

Did you know...

...that of the one billion Roman Catholics in the world today, at least 20% (200 Million) are Black. Africa alone has 130 Million Black Catholics. In fact, the largest Catholic Church building in the world is found in Africa, the cathedral in Yamassouka, the capital city of the West African country known as Cote d'Ivoire. During the selection of the latest pope, many scoffed at the idea that one of the 12 Black cardinals would be picked. However, it would not have been the first. There have been three, all of them have been declared saints, that is, and the Catholic Church feels certain that all three went to heaven. It's interesting to note there are hundreds of revered icons that is statues, of Christ and his mother throughout Europe which picture them as Black figures. The last pope, John Paul II, had a Black icon in his personal chapel that he prayed before every day. Black people have been and are a very vibrant part of the church.

11/26/10

Did you know...

...a native Washingtonian received the President's Medal of Freedom? Dr. Lena Edwards (1901-1986) was born in Washington, DC. She was a dedicated physician, and a mother of six. Lena was a very sincere Catholic. She was a member of the Third Order of St. Francis, and was also very concerned about the poor. Dr. Edwards was an active member of the Catholic Interracial Council in Washington. In her later years, she taught collage at Howard University Medical School, and also began to minister to the Mexican American migrant workers in Texas; Dr. Edwards received the President's Medal of Freedom in 1964 for her work with the poor. Dr. Edwards was a determined woman who addressed the needs of the poor and women. She had a very deep faith and dedicated her life to serving others.

11/27/10

Did you know...

...one of the first foreigners mentioned in the Bible to be baptized was an African? In the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 8: 26-40, we read the account of the Ethiopian eunuch. This person was a black person baptized by Philip. The Ethiopian eunuch was a court official in charge of the treasury of the Queen of the Ethiopians. "Ethiopian" refers to a person of color from Africa. The Greeks used this word, which means "burnt", or darker skin.

11/28/10

Did you know...

...every Catholic and many a non-Catholic recognizes the name of the largest Catholic lay organization in the world, the Knights of Columbus. The Knights of Columbus were chartered as a fraternal organization in Connecticut in 1882.

Far fewer Catholics and others have heard of the Knights of Peter Claver. This organization was founded in 1909 at Most Pure Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Mobile, Alabama. The organization was founded to give "colored men" a Catholic fraternal organization. (Yes, sadly, there was a time that those other Knights allowed no "colored men" among them. Fortunately those days are gone.) Like the Knights of Columbus, the Knights of Peter Claver are engaged in charitable works. From their start in Alabama a century ago, they now have over 1000 subordinate units around the country.

11/29/10

Did you know...

...that a black priest has written what many believe is the definitive history of black Catholics in the United States?

Father Cyprian Davis, a Benedictine priest and professor has been the single most important leader in historical studies of the African-American Catholic Church in the United States. Father Davis has recovered a story that was largely hidden from public view. His lifelong commitment to recording the African American riches that have been lost to us not only has told us about the diversity of Catholic life in this country, but has restored their potential for our future as a Church. His work has been sheer grace for our Catholic community.

Davis has written numerous books and articles in the area of monastic history and the history and spirituality of African American Catholics in the United States. In 1990 he published "The History of Black Catholics in the United States." (New York: Crossroad), which received the John Gilmary Shea Award in 1991.

In 1994-1995, he served as a visiting professor of Church history at the Monastic Studium established in West Africa at the Abbey of Dzogbégan in Togo and the Abbey of Koubri in Burkina Faso. He was as visiting professor at the Abbey of Keur Moussa in Senegal in 1995-1996, and at the Benedictine and Trappist monasteries in Nigeria in 1997-1998. He also has lectured on the development of monastic archives in monasteries of men and women in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Togo in West Africa.

Davis is a longtime scholar and monk of St. Meinrad Archabbey. He was professed in 1951 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1956. He received a licentiate of sacred theology degree from The Catholic University of America in 1957, and a doctorate in history at the University of Louvain in Belgium in 1977.

A native of Washington, D.C., Davis attended the public schools of the District of Columbia, graduating from Dunbar High School in 1948.

11/30/10

Did you know...

... The National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus (NBCCC) of the United States voted on Tuesday, July 24, 1990 while meeting in convention at Fordham University in New York, to establish November as ***BLACK CATHOLIC HISTORY MONTH***. The reason behind the selection of the month of November was the number of important dates to Catholics of African descent that fell within this month.

- Nov. 1 All Saints Day = an opportunity to review the lives of the hundreds of Saints of African descent in the first 300 years of the Church.
- Nov. 2 All Souls Day = a time to remember all those African lost to cruel treatment in the Middle Passage crossing of the Atlantic Ocean.
- Nov. 3 Feast of St. Martin de Porres, the only saint of African descent in this Hemisphere.
- Nov. 13 The birth of St. Augustine in 354 A.D., the first Doctor of the Church from North Africa.
- Nov. 20 The death of Zumbi of Palmares in Brazil, South American founder of a free state for Blacks.

The first celebration of ***Black Catholic History Month*** began in November of 1990 in various cities in the United States with the celebration of St. Martin de Porres Feast day. The liturgy celebrated the 350th anniversary of St. Martin's transition from this life to eternal life.