



## ARCHDIOCESE OF INDIANAPOLIS

*The Church in Central and Southern Indiana*

## Leadership Briefing

By Archbishop Charles C. Thompson

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### African American Catholics Have a Rich History in the United States

In 1990, Benedictine Father Cyprian Davis, who until the time of his death in 2015 was a monk of Saint Meinrad Archabbey in southern Indiana and a professor of Church history in the seminary at Saint Meinrad, published *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*. This classic study of African American Catholic history tells a story that is still too often neglected. It details



the rich history and valiant struggles of women and men of African descent whose contributions to the history of our Church and nation are unparalleled. All Catholics in central and southern Indiana—and all across our nation—should take the time to read Father Cyprian’s book and learn how indebted we all are to our African American sisters and brothers.

As Father Cyprian observed, there have been Catholics of African descent in the Americas for as long as there have been Catholics in the Americas. Catholics were among the first enslaved peoples brought to the British colonies, and historians say that it was Catholic slaves who rose up against their masters in the South Carolina colony in 1739, launching what we now know as the Stono Rebellion, the largest slave uprising in the British colonies before the Revolutionary War, on the feast day honoring the nativity of the Virgin Mary.

An accurate reading of the history of the American hemisphere shows that black Christianity has been, and continues to be a Catholic majority, just as Catholicism in the Americas has been and continues to be predominantly non-white. This perspective has been blurred by a

biased reporting of our history, which is one reason why it's so important to tell the stories of Black Catholics in America. It's also why we need to better understand and appreciate the contributions made by the women and men of African descent who are currently "on the road to sainthood" including:

Venerable Pierre Toussaint (1776-1853)  
Servant of God Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange (1784-1882)  
Venerable Sr. Henriette Delille (1813-1862)  
Venerable Fr. Augustus Tolton (1854-1897)  
Servant of God Julia Greeley (1833 and 1848-1918)  
Servant of God Sr. Thea Bowman, FSPA (1937-1990)

For more information about these holy men and women, see the selection from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishop's Committee on African American Affairs (below) with links to various websites.

In addition to these leaders of African descent who are currently on the road to sainthood according to the Church's official processes, there are many others—living and deceased—who would qualify as "next door saints," ordinary women and men whose lives give witness to the Gospel. Here in our own Archdiocese, we can point to many saintly African Americans whose contributions have enriched the lives of thousands of Catholics here in central and southern Indiana and beyond. It's not possible to provide anything like an exhaustive list, of course, but here are the names of a few of the outstanding priests, religious and lay faithful whose lives gave witness to both their heritage both as African Americans and as Catholics:

Fr. Cyprian Davis, OSB  
Fr. Boniface Hardin, OSB  
Shirley and Fred Evans  
Sr. Francesca Thompson, OSF  
Morna Patrick

We thank God for these holy men and women—and so many others—who were leaders in helping to our Church to embrace the culture and experiences of African American Catholics. Their witness as "next door saints" combines with the example of those who are being recognized officially as leaders to provide all of us with models for saintly living, especially during these challenging times.

The history of black Catholics in the Americas invites, and challenges, us to rethink what it means to be both Catholic and American. It's a historical fact that not all Catholics who crossed the Atlantic were white. It's also a fact that the history of Catholicism here in Indiana and throughout the United States owes much more than most people know to the contributions of African American priests, consecrated women and men, and lay faithful.

During this time of increased racial tension and social unrest, we owe it to ourselves, to our nation and to our Church to become better informed about this very significant dimension of our history. The History of Black Catholics in the United States is an excellent place to begin this important aspect of our continuing formation as Catholic adults.

Let's take the time this Lent to learn more about the history of our archdiocese and the Church in the Americas so that we can be voices of understanding and advocates for justice, peace and human dignity in our homes, our communities and our nation.

*+ Charles C. Thompson*

+ Charles C. Thompson | Archbishop of Indianapolis

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## **From the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: On the Road to Sainthood: Leaders of African Descent**

### **Venerable Pierre Toussaint (1776-1853)**

Venerable Pierre Toussaint, a philanthropist and founder of many Catholic charitable works, was born a slave in Haiti and brought from Haiti to New York as an apprentice under a popular hairstylist in the city. He eventually became the most sought-after hairdresser of high society women. Upon the death of his master, he gained his freedom and quickly succeeded as one of the country's first black entrepreneurs. He became quite wealthy, but instead of spending lavishly on himself, he supported the Church and the poor. He and his wife sheltered orphans, refugees, and others out on the streets in their home. He founded one of New York's first orphanages and raised money for the city's first cathedral. During yellow fever epidemics, Toussaint would risk his life to help others by nursing the sick and praying with the dying. "I have never felt I am a slave to any man or woman but I am a servant of Almighty God who made us all. When one of his children is in need, I am glad to be His slave."



### **Servant of God Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange (1784-1882)**

Servant of God Mother Mary Lange was born Elizabeth Lange, a native of the Caribbean, and believed to be Cuban born of Haitian descent. She was the foundress and first Superior General of the Oblate Sisters of Providence (1829-1832), the first religious congregation of African American women in the history of the Catholic Church. On July 2, 1829, Elizabeth and three other women professed their vows and became the Oblate Sisters of Providence with the goal of educating and evangelizing African Americans. They educated youth and provided a home for orphans. Freed slaves were educated and at times admitted into the congregation. They nursed the terminally ill during the cholera epidemic of 1832, sheltered the elderly, and served as domestics at St. Mary's Seminary. Mother Mary Lange practiced faith to an extraordinary degree. It was her deep faith – in close union with Jesus – which enabled her to persevere against all odds. She lived through disappointment and opposition until God called her home in 1882 at the St. Frances Convent in Baltimore, Maryland.



### **Venerable Sr. Henriette Delille (1813-1862)**

Venerable Henriette Delille was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she would live her entire life. For the love of Jesus and responding to the Gospel's mandate, she was determined to help those in need. Henriette was also a person who suffered as she made her way through life, and she bore many crosses. She taught those around her that sanctity can be attained in following the path of Jesus. It was in this manner that she dealt with her troubles and major obstacles to achieve her goals. Some of the troubles Henriette met were the resistance of the ruling population to the idea of a black religious congregation; the lack of finances to do the work; the taunts and disbelief of people in her mission; the lack of support from both the Church and civil authority; and poor health.



However, Henriette practiced heroic virtue. She had faith, lived in hope, and practiced love. She was compassionate, forgiving, and merciful. She believed in justice and was not afraid to do what was right in the eyes of God. God blessed her efforts and, in 1842, she founded the

Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family. Henriette died 20 years later on November 17, 1862. Her funeral was held at St. Augustine Church. Her obituary stated, “. . . Miss Henriette Delille had for long years consecrated herself totally to God without reservation to the instruction of the ignorant and principally to the slave.”

### **Venerable Fr. Augustus Tolton (1854-1897)**

Venerable Augustus Tolton was the first U.S. Roman Catholic priest publicly known to be black when he was ordained in 1886. A former slave who was baptized and reared Catholic, Tolton formally studied in Rome. He was ordained in Rome on Easter Sunday at the Archbasilica of St. John Lateran. Fr. Tolton led the development and construction of St. Monica’s Catholic Church as a black “National Parish Church”, which was completed in 1893. Tolton’s success at ministering to black Catholics quickly earned him national attention within the Catholic hierarchy. “Good Father Gus,” as many called him, was known for his eloquent sermons, his beautiful singing voice, and his talent for playing the accordion. He is the subject of the 1973 biography from *Slave to Priest* by Sister Caroline Hemesath.



For more information on Fr. Tolton's cause, check out this [resource list](#) or the [website for his cause](#).

### **Servant of God Julia Greeley (1833 and 1848-1918)**

Servant of God Julia Greeley was born into slavery in Hannibal, Missouri sometime between 1833 and 1848. Freed by Missouri's Emancipation Act in 1865, Julia subsequently earned her keep by serving white families in Missouri, Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico—though mostly in the Denver area. Julia entered the Catholic Church at Sacred Heart Parish in Denver in 1880 and was an outstanding supporter of all the parish. The Jesuits who ran the parish considered her the most enthusiastic promoter of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus they had ever seen. Every month she visited on foot every fire station in Denver and delivered literature of the Sacred Heart League to the firemen, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. A daily communicant, Julia had a rich devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and the Blessed Virgin and continued her prayers while working. She joined the Secular Franciscan

Order in 1901 and was active in it till her death in 1918. As part of the Cause for Canonization, Julia's mortal remains were transferred to Denver's Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception on June 7, 2017.

### **Servant of God Sr. Thea Bowman, FSPA (1937-1990)**

Sr. Thea Bowman, FSPA was a self-proclaimed, “old folks’ child.” Bowman was the only child born to middle-aged parents, Dr. Theon Bowman, a physician, and Mary Esther Bowman, a teacher. At birth, she was given the name Bertha Elizabeth Bowman. She was born in 1937 and reared in Canton, Mississippi. As a child, she converted to Catholicism through the inspiration of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity who were her teachers and pastors at Holy Child Jesus Church and School in Canton. During her short lifetime, many people considered her a religious sister undeniably close to God and who lovingly invited others to encounter the presence of God in their lives. She is acclaimed as a “holy woman” in the hearts of those who knew and loved her and continue to seek her intercession for guidance and healing.

For more information on Sr. Thea Bowman's cause, check out the [website for her cause](#).

Read more about the [information on the Canonization process](#) and [watch a video](#) of the men and women on the road to sainthood.

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## **A Message from Pope Francis: Words of Challenge and Hope**

To believe in a Father who loves all men and women with an infinite love means realizing that “he thereby confers upon them an infinite dignity”. To believe that the Son of God assumed our human flesh means that each human person has been taken up into the very heart of God. To believe that Jesus shed his blood for us removes any doubt about the boundless love which ennobles each human being. Our redemption has a social dimension because “God, in Christ, redeems not



only the individual person, but also the social relations existing between men”. To believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in everyone means realizing that he seeks to penetrate every human situation and all social bonds: “The Holy Spirit can be said to possess an infinite creativity, proper to the divine mind, which knows how to loosen the knots of human affairs, even the most complex and inscrutable”.

[Evangelii Gaudium \(“The Joy of the Gospel”\)](#), Pope Francis, 2013, #178.

Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning. We are able to take an honest look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom. No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts. I appeal to everyone throughout the world not to forget this dignity which is ours. No one has the right to take it from us.

[Laudato Si’ \(“Praised Be”\)](#), Pope Francis, 2015 #205.

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## **My Prayer for You**

Mary, friend and mother to all, through your Son, God has found a way to unite himself to every human being, called to be one people, sisters and brothers to each other.

We ask for your help in calling on your Son, seeking forgiveness for the times when we have failed to love and respect one another.

We ask for your help in obtaining from your Son the grace we need to overcome the evil of racism and to build a just society.



We ask for your help in following your Son, so that prejudice and animosity will no longer infect our minds or hearts but will be replaced with a love that respects the dignity of each person.

Mother of the Church, the Spirit of your Son Jesus warms our hearts: pray for us. Amen.

+ *Charles C. Thompson*