



# A Quick Lesson in African American Catholic History



**D**id you know that the first black people in what is now the United States were Catholics? In the first European-style city established here, St. Augustine, Florida, a large percentage of Spanish-speaking black Catholic families lived. Some of these were free blacks, and some were slaves. In 1781, El Pueblo de La Reina de los Angeles (today just “Los Angeles”) was founded with only 11 families. All were Catholic, over half were black, and there were only 2 whites in the entire group! In 1789, the famous Catholic bishop John Carroll wrote, “Of 15,000 Catholics in Maryland, 3,000 are black Catholic slaves.” The original founder of the city of Chicago (established in 1837) was a black Catholic French-speaking trader and trapper named John Baptiste duSable.

Three of the Healy brothers, born in Georgia, were the first black Catholic priests in the United States. James Healy, a member of the Society of St. Sulpice, was ordained in 1854—the year Augustus Tolton was born. His brother Alexander also joined the Society and was ordained in 1858. Their brother Patrick entered the Jesuits and was ordained in France in 1862. James became the second bishop of Portland, Maine, in 1875—the first black bishop in the United States. Patrick was the first black university president when he became the head of Georgetown College in 1874. Sadly, he always felt unable to talk about his African ancestry in his community. After the Civil War, Patrick Healy was instrumental in developing the college into Georgetown University.

Henriette DeLille (died 1862), a descendant of slaves, is the first native-born African American whose cause for canonization has been opened by the Roman Catholic church. In 1836, she and another woman tried to form an integrated congregation of vowed women religious, but the segregation laws of the state of Louisiana made it nearly impossible. In 1842, they began by forming a pious union. They took vows in 1852 and were recognized as a religious congregation by Rome in 1870. It was not until 1872 that they were allowed to wear a religious habit, however, due to racist attitudes toward the Sisters of the Holy Family. Today 250 Sisters of the Holy Family minister in four states as well as in Belize, Central America. We pray that the pope will soon name Mother Henriette DeLille as venerable, the first step toward being recognized as a saint:

O good and gracious God,  
you called Henriette DeLille to give herself  
in service and in love to the slaves  
and to the sick,  
to the orphaned and the aged,  
to the forgotten and to the despised.  
Grant that inspired by her life  
we might be renewed in heart and mind.  
If it be your will, may she one day  
be raised to the honor of sainthood.  
By her prayers, may we live in harmony  
and in peace.  
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

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