

▲ From left, Ange Pierre of the Haitian Catholic community, Father Calonge Lemaine, a Haitian priest and parochial vicar at Prince of Peace Parish and Lawsikia Hodges, new vice chair of the Black Catholic Commission.



▲ *Estebana* is a quarterly publication focusing on Florida's Black arts, culture and heritage. The inaugural issue, printed in September, includes the story of *Estebana*, baptized in St. Augustine in 1595, daughter of Gratia, an enslaved African-descended woman, and the magazine's namesake.

Black Catholic Commission expands mission, membership and outreach

BY LILLA ROSS

The diocesan Black Catholic Commission, established in 1987 by Bishop John J. Snyder, has undergone a renewal aimed at broadening its reach and strengthening its role across the Diocese of St. Augustine.

Vice Chair Lawsikia Hodges said commission members worked closely with Bishop Erik Pohlmeier to revise the ministry's charter, expanding the advisory board to 11 members and creating a membership tier open to any Catholic in the diocese.

"Bishop Pohlmeier has been the strongest champion of this ministry," Hodges said.

"He has encouraged priests to recommend individuals to help fill our four vacancies. Monsignor James Boddie, our co-chair and moderator, makes the appointments."

Several parishes in the diocese serve large Black Catholic communities, including St. Pius V, Crucifixion and Holy Rosary, while Prince of Peace is home to Haitian and

Nigerian Catholic communities.

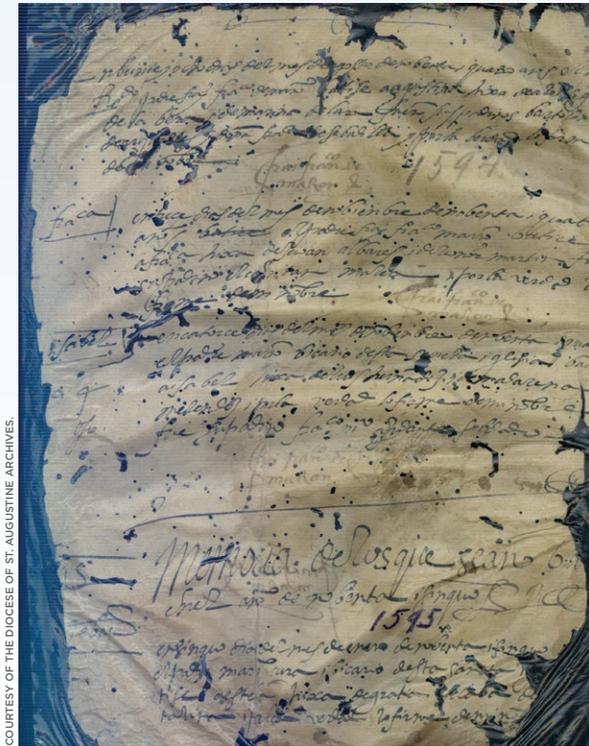
"We want to include the entire diocese," Hodges said. "This is a working ministry that is expected to be present in the community and represent the diocese. How do we welcome and retain Black Catholics and evangelize more Black Americans to the Catholic faith?"

Hodges noted that Black Catholics in the diocese reflect a wide range of backgrounds, including African American, Nigerian, Tanzanian, Ghanaian, Rwandan, Haitian and Caribbean communities.

"The Church welcomes diversity," she said. "Parts of the Mass are immutable and divinely instituted, but the cultures of the people of God can be incorporated into the liturgy."

The commission also hopes to highlight the diocese's deep Black Catholic roots, which date to the 16th century.

"Black Catholic history in America begins in



COURTESY OF THE DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE ARCHIVES.

▲ A baptismal entry from a 1595 St. Augustine parish register records the baptism of Estebana, daughter of Gratia, an enslaved African woman. It is the earliest known Catholic baptismal record of an African-descended child in what later became the United States.

Florida,” Hodges said.

In 1738, Fort Mose became the first free Black settlement in what is now the United States, helping to defend St. Augustine. In exchange for freedom, residents pledged allegiance to the Spanish crown and converted to Catholicism. Today, the site is a National Historic Landmark with a museum and reconstructed fort.

In 1866, Bishop Augustin Verot invited the Sisters of St. Joseph from Le Puy, France, to educate children of freed slaves and later the freed slaves themselves.

“Eight tiny but mighty women, many in their early 20s, came from France during one of the most controversial periods in American history,” Hodges said. “That courage during Reconstruction is a story that deserves to be told.”

Hodges said the commission is encouraged by plans for a Florida Black History Museum in St. Augustine on the former Florida Memorial University campus. The state has allocated \$1 million for the project, and a foundation led by Executive Director Alesia Wilbekin has been formed.

The project remains in its early stages, Wilbekin said. A board appointed by the governor and Legislature will oversee the effort. While construction costs are still unknown, comparable museums have ranged from \$100 million to \$150 million.

“This is an exciting time for St. Johns County and St. Augustine,” Wilbekin said. “The museum will tell the story of Black history and culture across Florida.”

Hodges said the commission hopes to work closely with the foundation to ensure Black Catholic history is included.

“We need to build bridges and communicate,” she said. “The diocese should be prepared to support this effort so that the story of Black Catholics is part of the larger Black experience in Florida.”

Wilbekin is also involved with a new magazine, *Estebana*,

named for the first Black Catholic child whose baptism was recorded in 1595.

“The name just fit,” Wilbekin said. “We want to share stories of Black history and cultural arts that have never been told before.”

The Black Catholic Commission is also planning events for Black Catholic History

Month in November. Bishop Pohlmeier and multicultural priests from across the diocese will celebrate Mass at 2 p.m. on Nov. 1, All Saints Day, at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine.

The celebration will honor six Black Catholics who are currently on the path to sainthood. Venerable Pierre Toussant, Venerable Henriette DeLille, Venerable Augustus Tolton and Servants of God Mother Mary Lange, Julia Greeley and Sister Thea Bowman.

“Many Catholics may not know about them,” Hodges said. “They should be praying for them.”

The Mass will reflect the diverse cultures of Black Catholics through language and music, followed by a reception featuring Nigerian, Haitian and African American cuisine. The celebration is open to the entire diocese and the St. Augustine community.

Additional events are being planned by parishes throughout the diocese, including educational workshops, prayer services and tours of historic sites such as Mission Nombre de Dios, Fort Mose and the Sisters of St. Joseph Miguel O’Reilly House Museum.

Anyone interested in volunteering may contact Norma Garcia in the diocesan Multicultural Office at ngarcia@dosafl.com.

“This is an opportunity to evangelize across all communities,” Hodges said. “The Church welcomes diversity, and that message should touch every heart, not just those who look like me.” 🙏❤️



▲ Msgr. James Boddie Jr., center, co-chair and moderator of the diocesan Black Catholic Commission, stands with commission members and parishioners from Crucifixion, Holy Rosary and St. Pius V parishes

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