

Celebrating the Fullness of the Black Catholic Experience

**An Editorial by Fr. Peter Damian Harris, OP
Chaplain, Office of Campus Ministry
Xavier University of Louisiana**

The Black Catholic experience is not only a story of suffering or resistance. It is also a story of faithfulness, holiness, creativity, evangelization, family, intellectual achievement, sacramental life, and hope. Black History Month offers the Church an opportunity to tell this fuller story—to remember past wounds while celebrating the grace, wisdom, courage, and joy through which Black Catholics have enriched the Body of Christ.

Black Catholic history includes the painful realities of slavery, racism, exclusion, and discrimination. These realities must neither be forgotten nor minimized. Yet suffering does not tell the whole story. Across generations, Black Catholics have preserved the faith, built communities and institutions, nurtured families, and carried hope from one generation to the next.

At the heart of this history is faithfulness. Black Catholic parents, grandparents, godparents, catechists, religious women and men, priests, and lay leaders have passed on the faith through prayer, Catholic education, participation in the sacraments, and devotion to the Eucharist, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the saints. St. Paul's words to Timothy speak powerfully of this intergenerational witness: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice" (2 Timothy 1:5).

Black Catholic history is also a history of holiness. It includes saints such as St. Martin de Porres, St. Josephine Bakhita, and St. Benedict the Moor, as well as the witnesses of Venerable Augustus Tolton, Venerable Henriette DeLille, Venerable Pierre Toussaint, Mother Mary Lange, and Sister Thea Bowman. Their lives reveal holiness expressed through prayer, service, education, perseverance, religious vocation, and joyful witness to the Gospel. They stand alongside countless Black Catholic families, elders, educators, parishioners, and community leaders whose quiet faithfulness continues to strengthen the Church.

Black Catholics have also enriched the Church through music, preaching, storytelling, art, prayer, and communal celebration. Gospel music and spirituals give voice to sorrow and joy, lament and praise, struggle and hope. These expressions are not merely cultural additions; they can also be forms of theological reflection. Through song and testimony, Black Catholics have proclaimed God's presence in the midst of human experience.

Their evangelization has taken place not only from pulpits but also through family life, Catholic schools, youth ministry, religious vocations, social outreach, and hospitality. In many communities, the parish has served as a spiritual home, a school of faith, a center of support, and a place where people encounter the mercy of God. Black Catholic communities have been a light to the wider Church through their resilience, generosity, spiritual depth, and commitment to human dignity.

The Black Catholic experience is also a story of intellectual achievement and theological wisdom. Black Catholics have served as teachers, scholars, theologians, administrators, artists, scientists, lawyers, educators, and leaders. Their wisdom is found not only in academic institutions but also in the preaching of elders, the prayers of mothers and grandmothers, the testimony of parishioners, and the communal memory of those who have carried the faith through adversity.

For this reason, Black Catholics must not be viewed merely as recipients of pastoral care. They are active participants in the Church's life and mission. As the Second Vatican Council teaches, the laity share in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission. Black Catholics are co-responsible members of the Church, bearers of theological wisdom, witnesses to the Gospel, and agents of evangelization.

Co-responsibility means that Black Catholics should help shape the Church's worship, education, social ministry, leadership, and public witness. It requires the Church to listen to their experiences, recognize their gifts, and provide meaningful opportunities for leadership and participation. The Church is diminished whenever any community is treated as peripheral or merely as an audience for ministry.

At the center of Black Catholic life is the sacramental encounter with Christ. Through Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Reconciliation, Marriage, Anointing of the Sick, and the funeral rites, the Church accompanies families through every stage of life. At the Eucharist, Black Catholic communities bring their joys and sorrows, hopes and wounds. Christ gathers them into one body, for "because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

As we look to the future, there is reason for hope. Young Black Catholics are bringing new energy through ministry, scholarship, music, service, advocacy, and missionary discipleship. There is also growing interest in Black Catholic history, spirituality, vocations, Catholic education, and collaboration among African American, African, Caribbean, Afro-Latin, and other Catholic communities of the African diaspora.

This hope must be nurtured through intentional formation, genuine listening, and shared leadership. Black History Month should be more than a time of remembrance. It should be

a moment of renewal and commitment—a time to recognize the continuing gifts and missionary vocation of Black Catholics.

The history of Black Catholics is not a marginal chapter in the history of the Church. It is part of the Church's living memory and ongoing mission. As we celebrate, may we move beyond honoring Black Catholics for only one month and work toward deeper listening, greater inclusion, and genuine co-responsibility throughout the life of the Church. May we recognize not only what Black Catholics have endured, but also the wisdom, holiness, creativity, and missionary energy they continue to offer.

May this celebration deepen our gratitude, strengthen our communion, and renew our commitment to building together a more faithful and inclusive future in Christ.