

BLACK CATHOLIC HISTORY 2018

AN UPDATED EXCERPT FROM JANUARY 31, 2012 *TIMELY TOPICS*

Each year in February we are reminded of the history and contributions of Black Americans. For us, it also is a time to be aware of the history and gifts of our black brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church in America. Black Catholics are not newcomers to the Church.

We often forget that Christianity did not originate in Europe. You may be surprised to learn that Black Catholic History began in the Acts of the Apostles (8:26-40) with the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch by Philip the Deacon. Three Popes have been born in Africa: Saints Victor I, Melchiades, and Gelasius I.

Many saints were black: Saints [Cyprian](#), [Zeno](#), [Anthony of Egypt](#), [Moses the Black](#), [Pachomius](#), [Maurice](#), [Athanasius](#), [Pisentius](#), [Mary of Egypt](#), [Cyril of Alexandria](#), [Monica of Hippo](#), [Augustine of Hippo](#), [Perpetua](#), [Felicitas](#), and [St. Martin DePorres](#). Black Catholics have played a major part in the history and development of our Church, e.g., St. Augustine's *Summa Theologica* (St. Augustine is considered the first black doctor of the Church).

Many Black Catholics have devoted their lives to their Catholic faith – indeed, many have given their lives for their faith. Below are links to some notable Black Catholics.

- [Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable](#)
- [Daniel A. Rudd](#)
- [Pierre Toussaint](#)
- [Mother Henriette Delille](#)
- [Mother Mary Lange](#)
- [Father Cyprian Davis](#)
- [Fr. Augustine Tolton](#)
- [Pope St. Victor 189-198 AD](#)
- [Pope St. Miltiades 310-314 AD](#)
- [Pope St. Gelasius I 492-496 AD](#)
- [St. Josephine Bakhita](#)

Black Catholics have been a part of American history since at least 1565. For a brief history of Black Catholics in America see the following, which is adapted from [A Brief History of African American Catholics](#) by Fr. Cyprian Davis, OSB.

Sr. Jaime Phelps OP, director of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies, Xavier University, New Orleans, reflects on Black Catholics in the US in her October 26, 2011 article [African-American Catholics: Story of an uncommon fidelity](#).

Black people share a kind of “sacred culture.” Spirituals and Gospel Music permeate Black culture. Black Catholics more commonly feel free to express and inquire about religious matters – whether in church or in a secular setting. This shared “sacred culture” finds a vibrant expression in the Mass in the form of Gospel music, joyful exuberance, “call and response”, lively interaction with the preaching though verbal affirmations, applause and raised hands. The revisions in the Mass after Vatican II opened the door for many cultures to be more integrated into the Eucharistic celebration.

On September 9, 1984 the 10 Black Bishops of the United States published a Pastoral Letter on Evangelization, [What We Have Seen and Heard](#), as a witness to the Black community. The Bishops sought to explain that evangelization is both a call and a response. This means not only preaching but also witnessing. The first part of the document is about the shared gifts rooted in the African heritage. Part two highlights some obstacles to evangelization.