Six Black American Catholics on the Road to Sainthood
Lisa Peacock — 2022-11-03

INTRODUCTION — Lisa generously stepped in as a "pinch hitter" when our originally scheduled speaker was unable to attend. As it turned out, Lisa's talk was very timely, as this month is Black Catholic History Month. Lisa spoke to us about 6 extraordinary African American Catholics, many of whom were born into slavery, all of whom experienced the sin of racism, prejudice and discrimination during their lives, all of whom "survived the time of great distress." [Rev 7:14] All of them are speaking to us across time and space, to "be like Jesus," be virtuous, be courageous. In spite of the discrimination they all experienced, they persevered, and they show us the way forward. Lisa gave us a short summary of each one.

SERVANT OF GOD MOTHER MARY LANGE — She was born in Cuba to refugee parents from Haiti. She immigrated to the US, to Baltimore. She saw a need, and used her gifts to fill it, founding the Oblate Sisters of Providence. She became the mother superior at a time slavery was still legal in Maryland, and Catholics in Maryland thought black women should not were religious habits. The Oblates housed and educated orphans, nursed the terminally ill, and took in the elderly. The Order was the first official Religious Order for Women of Color in the US, and is still active in Baltimore today, having opened a Catholic school in 2021 in her name.

VENERABLE HENRIETTE DELILLE — She was of mixed race, and decided not to follow the fate of mixed race women (where they were paired with some wealthy white men to serve as their mistress or second wife). Instead she had a deep conversion and decided to dedicate her life to God. She was unable to join a religious order in her native New Orleans due to racism, and so she co-founded her own order with a couple of friends - The Sisters of the Holy Family, a religious order for African American women, who served God by educating slaves, orphans and caring for the elderly and tending to the sick. They founded the first Catholic home for the elderly in America. The movie "Courage to Love" tells their story.

VENERABLE FATHER AUGUSTUS TOLTON — He was born into slavery, and escaped at age 8. He settled in Quincy, Illinois, but was unable to attend seminary in the United States due to discrimination. He went to Rome where he was eventually ordained a priest, thinking he would be sent to Africa. Instead, he went back to Quincy, where he faced great prejudice from both laity and clergy. He was sent to Chicago were he tirelessly served out his vocation as this country's first African American Black Catholic Priest. He famously said: "As I look back on my life, I realize that every time I thought I was being rejected from something good, I was actually being redirected to something better."

SERVANT OF GOD JULIA GREELEY — She is one of the lesser known of these six. She was born into slavery in Hannibal, Missouri, and her right eye was damaged at an early age by a slave owner's whip. After being freed, she traveled from state to state looking for work until she found her true calling in Denver. She fell in love with the Catholic Faith, especially the Sacramental Life of the Church, and converted. She experienced much cruelty and discrimination, and yet her deep love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus led her to help others, including fire fighters. She died on June 7, the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and was known as the "Angel of Charity" to the people of Denver.

SERVANT OF GOD SISTER THEA BOWMAN — She was born in Mississippi in the last century, the granddaughter of slaves. She was born a Protestant, went to Catholic schools and converted at age 9. She was witness to the Jim Crow South. She joined the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, received a Masters and PhD from Catholic University of America. She was an outspoken advocate for the integration of non-European traditions within our Catholic Universal Church. She famously gave a speech to the USCCB in 1989 on the subject of Authentic Black Presence in our Catholic Church - she received a standing ovation for her talk and you can find it linked on Lisa's talk web page. She was an amazing force and joyous presence.

VENERABLE PIERRE TOUSSAINT — He was born a slave in Haiti. He was brought to New York by his rich slave owners and eventually granted his freedom. He became a hairdresser, and used the money he made to buy freedom for slaves. He had a devotion to the poor, the orphaned and the sick. He went to daily Mass, loved and lived the Sermon on the Mount, especially the Beatitudes. He was known as the "Father of American Philanthropy" and the "Apostle of old New York." Lisa has a personal compelling story about a miracle related to her son after prayers to Pierre Toussaint.

PRAY FOR THE CANONIZATION — Finally, Lisa asked us all to pray for the canonization of these six, to pray for their intercession. They don't have the benefit of a wealthy religious order or a big organization like Knights of Columbus to spread the word, so it us up to us, the body of Christ to make known their lives. There is a group of African American Catholics in Baltimore who are building awareness of these "super six" on the path to sainthood, and their desire to collect signatures to send off to the Holy Father Pope Francis, encouraging him to expedite their cause for canonization. If you would like to add your own letter to Rome, contact Lisa via email and she can send you a template for the letter. All of these six have begun the four step process to sainthood: Servant of God -> Venerable -> Blessed -> Saint.