

CATHOLICS AND RACE

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POPES & SAINTS

When Pope John Paul II died in April 2005, there was some speculation that the successor to the first Polish pope might be an African cardinal. Many, if not most, Catholics thought that would be a first as well. The record shows, however, that there were three of North African origin who became the Bishop of Rome and thus pope: Pope St. Victor of the latter 100s, Pope St. Miltiades (also known as Melchiades) of the early 300s, and Pope St. Gelasius of the late 400s.

The Acts of the Apostles records Philip's encounter with an Ethiopian whom he baptizes, and it is known that from that time on Christianity spread in Ethiopia, Egypt, and Carthage. Saints Perpetua and Felicity, whose names as cited in the Roman canon of the Mass, were African Christian martyrs, a prosperous woman and a slave who were imprisoned together in Carthage before their execution in the early 3rd century A.D. (C.E.). St. Augustine, the famous convert who authored *The Confessions* (often hailed in Western literature as the first autobiography), was also a Carthaginian.

Until quite recently, none of these popes or saints were pictured in religious art as people of color. The saints more likely to be depicted as persons of color were the 4th century convert known as Moses the Black, the 16th century Franciscan Benedict the Moor and the 16th century Peruvian Martin de Porres, who was a Dominican brother. In more recent times, Joseph Mkasa and Charles Lwanga, two among the Ugandan martyrs of the 19th century, and Josephine Bakhita, a former Sudanese slave who became a nun in Italy (d. 1947), have been numbered among African saints.

The fact that these African personages and notable African American Catholics who are now candidates for canonization does not imply that the Church has a stellar history on matters of race. It was as recent as 1979 that the Catholic bishops of the United States collectively pronounced racism a sin, and anyone who looks into the history of the Diocese of Charleston as it celebrates its bicentennial will see that slavery and segregation were accepted as facts of life by Catholics and many of their bishops. And that is true despite the fact that Pope Eugenius IV in

1435 and Paul III in 1537 had condemned the slave trade and, in the case of the latter, the maltreatment of native peoples of the Americas and Africa. Pope Gregory XVI in 1839 reiterated the condemnation of the slave trade and slave holding.

How, then, did it happen that Catholics were not abolitionists and that domestic slavery continued among them until the end of the Civil War?

CATHOLICS, SLAVERY & SEGREGATION

When Bishop John England arrived in late 1820 to oversee the new Diocese of Charleston, he quite promptly showed active concern for the well-being of those he called Africans. He established a school for free African boys and celebrated Sunday vespers for the Black community. The religious community he founded in 1829, the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy (known as the OLM's locally), provided catechetical education for enslaved and free persons. The OLM's have a long history, one that continues to this day, of serving minority communities — notably at Neighborhood House in Charleston and Our Lady of Mercy Outreach on Johns Island.

Bishop England temporarily oversaw Haiti, along with his tri-state diocese (both Carolinas and Georgia) and is thought to have ordained a biracial man, George Paddington, to the priesthood after having had his temporary auxiliary, Bishop William Clancy, install Paddington in minor orders in Haiti. When Pope Gregory's statement became known, however, John England interpreted the pope's intent as condemning the seizure of people from their native lands and selling them into slavery but not demanding the dismantling of already existing domestic slavery.

Historian David Heisser has said this of the way in which Bishop England interpreted, and locally applied, Pope Gregory's condemnation:

“England abhorred slavery but stated that his church permitted retention in servitude of descendants of those originally enslaved. He hoped that American slavery would not continue, but he saw no quick end to it. He worked [instead] to improve the condition of Blacks.”

The position of Bishop Patrick Lynch, the third bishop of Charleston, proves harder to finesse. Lynch's family came to South Carolina from Ireland when Lynch was an infant. He grew up in a culture which assumed that slavery was the order of the day and an economic necessity. Lynch himself had slaves, including scores left to him in a Charlestonian's will. Some have noted that his brother, who was a physician in Columbia, was known as the doctor who would treat ill and injured slaves compassionately.

Bishop Lynch himself was said to have purposely taken on the care of slaves who were considered unwell and no longer fit for service. So there is some speculation that he was working within the system to humanize it. Yet he did agree to go as an envoy to the Vatican to seek recognition of the Confederate States of America. It required a pardon from President Andrew Johnson for him to return to the nation once the Civil War had ended.

During Reconstruction he raised money to rebuild his diocese and erected a number of parishes and schools serving the African American community. He was undeniably supportive of segregation. The bishop who had ordained Lynch, Francis Patrick Kenrick of Philadelphia and then archbishop of Baltimore, had argued as a moral theologian that it was permissible to cooperate with a received social system as long as one maintained humane provisions. Lynch obviously subscribed to this understanding.

It was not until the arrival of Bishop Ernest L. Unterkoefler in 1964 that the Diocese of Charleston saw an ardent ecumenist who went about vigorously integrating Catholic schools and organizations. Before him, the heroes of integration were the Oratorian fathers of Rock Hill, who were the first to integrate St. Anne's school there in 1954. The pastor of St. Mary's, Rock Hill, Father Henry Tevlin, drove the van — at some peril — which transported Black children from his parish to St. Anne's.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

The situation in the diocese today has changed significantly. South Carolinians considered heroes of the faith — Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, long-time Mayor Joe Riley, retired State Supreme Court Justice Jean Toal — have all made their mark in supporting Civil Rights.

The number of African American Catholics in the diocese remains relatively low, but there are historic places where African Americans have championed the faith. They include Catholic Hill

outside Walterboro, St. Gerard in Aiken, St. Martin de Porres in Columbia, and St. Anthony in Greenville. Quite a number of active Catholic parishes and missions, like St. Patrick's in Charleston, have African priests as their pastors or administrators, and these have achieved noteworthy integration of Anglo, Hispanic, and African American parishioners. St. Martin's periodically offers Masses celebrated in Igbo, one of the languages of Nigeria. That having been said, it seems that Catholics, like many of our fellow citizens, have a long way to go in awareness of injustice and active response to what seems a ceaseless round of violence and abuses in our nation.

Perhaps the insights of two Protestant theologians of the last century will help us to understand how it is that people who profess the universal love of Christ and the imperative to see to the well-being of the most disadvantaged have in the past been and still seem to be blind to injustice and systemic racism.

Reinhold Niebuhr gained fame for his book "Moral Man in Immoral Society." His contention was that social systems never are able to rise to the level that individuals might achieve in the moral realm. Original sin means that prejudices and corruption are inevitable in the civic realm. One is not to succumb to hopelessness, but one may need to recognize that compromise is the only way to make some improvement.

H. Richard Niebuhr, his younger brother, posited five approaches to societal life in his book "Christ and Culture." He noted that some Christians set themselves against the status quo, as the early Christians and the desert monastics did. Others attempt an integration of Christ and culture, a Holy Roman Empire or a Puritan New England. Some believe that Christ will transform culture and take a prophetic stance, opposing and confronting things as they are. Catholic pacifists and activists for pro-life (anti-abortion) legislation would seem to be among this number. Others perceive Christ and culture intrinsically locked in paradox, living in a tension between things as they are and things as they should be, while others see Christ above culture, calling us to take the high road and to be exemplars and witnesses to the better, regardless of success.

I leave it to readers to decide which of these positions the early bishops and some of the Catholics of Charleston have taken. As we face our current crises, it seems incumbent on all people of faith and all people of good will to repent of the compromises and blindness of the past and to work intently to realize a civilization of love and justice.