

# BLACK CATHOLIC HISTORY MONTH NOVEMBER



## RESOURCE PACKAGE

### OFFICE OF BLACK CATHOLICS ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON

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# **BLACK CATHOLIC HISTORY MONTH**

## **November**

On July 24, 1990, the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus of the United States designated November as Black Catholic History Month to celebrate the long history and proud heritage of Black Catholics. Two commemorative dates fall within this month, Saint Augustine's Birthday (November 13) and Saint Martin de Porres' Feast Day (November 3). More importantly, November not only marks a time when we pray for all saints and souls in loving remembrance, but also a time to recall the saints and souls of Africa and the African Diaspora.

Some people forget that Christianity did not originate in Europe and even express surprise when they 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. This text is important for several reasons. First, it chronicles the conversion of the first Black African in recorded Christian history. Second, the text suggests that the man was a wealthy, literate, and powerful emissary of the Nubian Queen and also a faithful, practicing Jew prior to his baptism. Clearly, he was not an ignorant heathen. Third, the Ethiopian Eunuch's conversion predates the conversions of Saints Paul and Cornelius. Most significantly, many cite this conversion as the very moment when the church changed from a Hebrew and Hellenist community to the truly universal and Catholic Church.

Black Catholics trace their faith history back to Christian antiquity long before other nations heard the "Good News." Christian Africa was indeed a "leading light" in early Christendom. Black Catholics point to three popes who were born in Africa: Saints Victor I, Melchiades, and Gelasius I. All three shepherded the early church through tough and tumultuous times in history. Black Catholics claim many Black Saints like Saints Cyprian, Zeno, Anthony of Egypt, Moses the Black, Pachomius, Maurice, Athanasius, Pistentius, Mary of Egypt, Cyril of Alexandria, Monica of Hippo, Augustine of Hippo, Perpetua, Felicitas, and Thecla. Some of these mystics, monastics, and martyrs literally made the church what it is today.

Black Catholic History Month provides opportunities to learn and share the whole history and rich heritage of our Catholicism. Ubi Victoria Veritas! The Victory of Truth!

For more information about Black Catholic History, please read [The History of Black Catholics in the United States by Cyprian Davis, OSB.](#)

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[www.nbccongress.org](http://www.nbccongress.org).

## **WAYS TO CELEBRATE**

- Exhibit symbols that reflect African-American Culture:  
Pictures, religious symbols, kente cloth, Bible enthronements  
Ex: Jesus Mafa (posters of Black Biblical Scenes)
- Highlight Black Catholic Role Models  
Sr. Thea Bowman, Fr. Augustus Tolton, Saints, local people
- Write essays or present plays about Black Catholics
- Create/Develop/Design Liturgy Celebrations/Prayer Services
- Invite Black priests, sisters, deacons, and lay leaders to celebrate prayer services and other activities with the young people of your parish
- Incorporate music from Lead Me, Guide Me, the African-American Catholic Hymnal
- Recite/Create a Prayer for Various Black Saints
- Display the African-American Josephite Calendar
- Sponsor a DVD or video showing and facilitate a discussion on African-American themes

## FACTS AND FIGURES

### **Who was the first African mentioned in the Gospels?**

The first African, in the New Testament, was mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew, Simon of Cyrene (Matthew 27:32). Simon was pressed into service to carry the cross of Jesus. This event is highlighted in the fifth station of the cross.

### **Tell the story of the account of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch.**

In the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 8: 26-40, we read the account of the Ethiopian eunuch. This person was a black person baptized by Philip. The Ethiopian eunuch was the court official in charge of the treasury of the Queen of the Ethiopians. "Ethiopian" refers to a person of color from Africa. The Greeks used this word, which means "burnt", or darker skin.

### **Was one of the "Wise Men" Black at the birth of Jesus?**

In the Infancy Narrative there is a reference to Melchior of Persia, whose likeness remains today in the Christian crib set.

### **Notable African Catholic Saints**

**St. Frumentius** (d.380) was from Syria. He was a slave and held a trusted position in the royal court at Axum. Frumentius was person of great faith. He opened chapels in Ethiopia, and did mission work. Frumentius was very instrumental in the conversion of the Ethiopian king Ezana. After his freedom, he was later ordained Bishop by St. Athanasius, the Patriarch of Alexandria. Frumentius was the first Bishop of Ethiopia.

### **How many Popes were African? Three**

St. Victor I (186 A D - 197 A D) from the Roman province in Africa St. Miltiades (311 A D -314 A D) born in Rome of African descent St. Gelasius (492 A D - 496 A D) born in Rome of African descent

### **Did you know about these African people?**

St. Zeno was bishop of Verona in Italy. He died in 372

**St. Maurice** and a group of Ethiopian Christian soldiers called the "Theban Legion" belong to the Roman army. In the Middle Third Century, this group while serving in Switzerland were told to take part in a heathen service, but refused. The group was later butchered.

**St. Moses the Black** was a convert and leader of a band of monks in the desert who were martyred about 410. He was one of the most influential monks in the world. Because of Moses the Black, many women and men sought a life of prayer in the desert in the cenobitic style of sharing meals and community in Upper Egypt and Ethiopia.

**St. Monica** was the Mother of St. Augustine. Monica was an African woman of great faith who prayed for her son to turn against evil. Before her death, Monica had the great joy of knowing that her son had come back to God and used his talents to build up Christ's Church.

**St. Augustine** was born in Tagaste, Africa, and was the son of Monica. At the age of 33 he turned back to God and was baptized Catholic. Augustine was later ordained a priest and later Co-Bishop of Hippo. He led a holy and simple life, writing over 200 books, letters, and sermons. His writings are still read today. St. Augustine's feast day is August 28.

**St. Martin de Porres** (1579 - 1639) was the first African-American saint. Martin de Porres was of Spanish and African descent. He was the first Dominican professed Black brother in 1603. Martin de Porres is called "Father of the Poor" because of his charitable acts and his dedication to prayer. He was canonized a saint in 1962.

**Bl. Pierre Toussaint** was a slave who after freedom performed extraordinary works.

**St. Esteban** (Stephen)- d. 1536, native of Morocco, was a member of the Spanish exploration party of Panfilo de Narvaez.

### **St. Charles Lwanga and the Ugandan martyrs**

In the resource Black Christian Saints and Other Exemplary Black Men and Women (128-13 1) we read the story of the faith filled witness of the Ugandan Royal Pages. This story highlights how even to the point of death they didn't give up their faith, and celebrated their execution with joy. The Martyrs of Uganda were beatified in 1902 and canonized by Pope Paul VI on October 18, 1964.

### **Who was the founder of the Blessed Sacrament Sisters?**

St. Sister Katherine Drexel was the founder of the Blessed Sacrament sisters and the first and only Black Catholic University in United States: Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana. She was canonized on October 1st, 2000 becoming the second recognized American born Saint.

### **Doctor Lena Edwards** (1901-1986)

Dr. Lena Edwards was born in Washington, D.C. She was a dedicated physician, and a mother of six. Lena was a very sincere Catholic. She was a member of the Third Order of St. Francis, and was also very concerned about the poor. Dr. Edwards was an active member of the Catholic Interracial Council in Washington. In her later years, she taught college at Howard University Medical School, and also began to minister to the Mexican American migrant workers in Texas. Dr. Edwards received the President's Medal of Freedom in 1964 for her work with the poor. Dr. Edwards was a determined woman who addressed the needs of the poor and women. She had a very deep faith and dedicated her life to serving others.

**Jean-Baptiste Pointe du Sable** (d. 1818) was an authentic woodman, and trusted friend of the Native American people. He was one of the first settlers in Chicago.

**Harriet Thompson** (1853) wrote to Pope Pius IX to plead for the Catholic Church to minister to black people in New York and address the concerns of racism. This was the beginning of the Black Catholic Movement. (Davis, 1990, Pg. 94-95)

**Who was the first black bishop in the United States?**

Bishop James Healy, was ordained bishop of Portland, Maine in 1875

**Name the first black president of Georgetown University:**

Fr. Patrick Healy, SJ in 1874

**Who was the first known black priest?**

Fr. Augustus Tolton from Illinois in 1886

A Modern Day Saint

**Sr. Thea Bowman** (1937 - 1990) was a Franciscan sister of Perpetual Adoration, a gifted teacher, preacher, and evangelizer.

Read about others in **Black Christian Saints**, or **African Saints (40 Holy Men and Women)**

African Stories, Dr. Camille Brown; or **African Saints**, Frederick Quinn.

**What is the name of the African-American Catholic Hymnal?**

Lead Me, Guide Me (1987, 2011).

**What year and place did Pope John Paul II meet with African-American Catholic leaders?**

In 1987 during his pastoral visit to the United States in New Orleans

**What is the meaning of the colors of the African-American Flag?**

The Flag is a symbol of liberation as a people created by Marcus Garvey.

RED: symbolizes the blood from our past, present, and future suffering for dignity and freedom

BLACK: symbolizes our people of African descent

GREEN: symbolizes Mother Africa and the future.

**What is the African-American National Anthem?**

*Lift Every Voice and Sing* by James Weldon Johnson

**What are the Seven Principles of Nguzo Saba?**

The Nguzo Saba - Seven Principles or "Seven Values" which originated with the Harvest Festival in Kenya and Tanzania, from the Swahili Tribes. Listed below are the "Value," the translation and meaning, and possible scriptural texts.

**1. Umoja—Unity**

To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race. iCorinthians 1:10; John 17:21

**2. Kujichagulia - Self—determination**

To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves, and speak for ourselves, instead of being defined, named, created for, and spoken for by others

Luke 9: 51-53, Sirach 15:14

### **3. Ujima - Collective Work and Responsibility**

To build and maintain our community together and make our sisters and brothers' problems our problems and to solve them together.

Luke 10: 1-2; Phil. 2: 2-5

### **4. Ujamaa - Cooperative Economics**

To build and maintain our own shops, stores, and other businesses, and to profit from them together. Acts 2: 42-45; 2 Cor. 8: 9-10, 12-13

### **5. Nia - Purpose**

To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness. Roman 14: 7-8; Ephesians 4: 11-13

### **6. Kuumba - Creativity**

To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it. 2 Timothy 1: 6-7; 2 Corinthians 19:15

### **7. Imani - Faith**

To believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and the righteousness and victory of our struggle. 2 Corinthians 5:7; Hebrew 11: 1-2

### **How many Black Catholics are there worldwide?**

At the dawn of the Third Millennium, the year 2000 A.D., there were 200 million Catholics of African descent throughout the world. Africa had 130 million, Latin America - 60 million, in the Caribbean and North America - 20 million. Research done by The Catholic African World Network.

### **National Black Catholic Congress VIII (1997)**

The National Black Catholic Congress VIII was held in August 1997 in Baltimore, MD. The Theme was "What We Have Seen and Heard We Proclaim and Celebrate" based upon the pastoral letter written by the Black Bishops. The Congress was attended by over 3,000 people featuring keynote speakers, spirit-filled Liturgies, Word events, and a Youth Showcase. One of the keynote speakers was Cardinal Francis Arinze, president of the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue who was born and raised in Nigeria. The highlight of the Congress was the Dedication of the Our Mother of Africa Chapel in Washington's Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC.

### **National Black Catholic Congress X (2007)**

The X Congress took place in 2007 in Buffalo, New York and can be experienced on the worldwide web at the National Black Congress Website: [www.nbccongress.org](http://www.nbccongress.org)

## Resources

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