



American Catholic History
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Fr. Augustus Tolton

Father Augustus Tolton was the first black priest in America who identified as black. He was born a slave in Missouri in 1854, but his mother escaped with him and his two siblings to freedom in Illinois after the Civil War began.

He endured racism among the children and parents at two schools, but also experienced great acceptance and love from the priests of his parishes and the nuns at the school. One of the priests, the Irishman Father Peter McGirr, took a special interest in “Gus,” as he was known, and made sure he received a good education. Eventually, Father McGirr recognized the possibility that Gus had a vocation to the priesthood.

After a few false starts, Father McGirr and the local Franciscan superior got Gus into the seminary of the Propaganda Fidei in Rome. Gus excelled as a seminarian in the Eternal City, and expected to be sent to Africa as a missionary. But the day before his ordination he found out he’d be returning to the US.

He arrived in 1887 and served as a beloved pastor in his hometown of Quincy, Illinois, until a change in the local Church leadership made life very difficult for him, and he was transferred to the Archdiocese of Chicago. There he was once again a beloved pastor until his untimely death in 1896. In 2019, Father Augustus Tolton was declared Venerable by Pope Francis.

To learn more, listen to American Catholic History, episode #122 at sqpn.com/history

Integration in Catholic North Carolina

More than a decade before the Civil Rights Act became national law in 1964, Bishop Vincent Waters was actively desegregating the parishes, schools, hospitals, and other

institutions of the Diocese of Raleigh in North Carolina. Bishop Waters had studied at the North American College in Rome where his friendship with the black cook — who was American, and who wanted to be a priest but was barred due to the color of his skin — helped him realize the deep injustice of racist policies and segregation.

As bishop he wrote multiple pastoral letters on racism, calling it a “heresy”. Throughout the 1950s, he desegregated the chancery staff, the Knights of Columbus, and other Catholic institutions. In 1958, he ordained the first black priest for the Diocese of Raleigh, Fr. Thomas Hadden. Eventually the fight to formally desegregate Catholic life completed its task, but the battle to root out racism from people’s minds and hearts continued, and Bishop Waters would continue his fight until his death in 1974.

To learn more, listen to American Catholic History, episode #124 at sqpn.com/history

Mary Edmonia Lewis

Mary Edmonia Lewis was a black Catholic woman who became a great sculptor. In order to overcome prejudice against her because of her race and sex, she moved to Rome from the US early on and it wasn’t until quite recently that Lewis received recognition for her great art.

Mary was born in New York in the 1840s to a Haitian-American father and Chippewa mother and was baptized Catholic. She studied art and she moved to Boston and began her career as a sculptor. Her financial success there allowed her to travel abroad at 22 years old, and she eventually settled in Rome where she lived for the next 60 years.

In Rome, she was freed from much of the prejudice she encountered at home because she was black and a woman in a field mostly reserved to white men in the US. She was also surrounded by the splendor of the Catholic faith in the Church's art and architecture, which helped her Catholic faith flourish.

In Italy, Mary honed her craft, and unlike most sculptors of the time, she also did her own chisel work rather than creating scale models for stone workers to render in full-size marble. Over the years, she welcomed into her studio the likes of Ulysses S. Grant, Pope Pius IX, and Frederick Douglass.

Her greatest sculpture was *The Death of Cleopatra*, a large work created for the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. Afterward, because the statue had not sold and she couldn't afford to ship it back to Italy, it lingered in obscurity--in a saloon, as a horse's grave marker, in a construction yard, in a shopping mall--for a century, before being identified in the 1980s. It now sits in the Smithsonian Museum of American Art.

Mary Edmonia Lewis spent her last years in London and died there in 1907. Her place in art history was largely forgotten until the 1970s, cemented by the quality of her work, but one thing remains indisputable about America's first great black female artist: Mary Edmonia Lewis was a devout Catholic.

To learn more, listen to American Catholic History, episode #84 at sqpn.com/history.

Mother Beasley

Not much is known about the life of Mathilda Beasley, but what we do know is remarkable. She was born in New Orleans in 1832 or 1834, to her mother Caroline who was enslaved to a man named John Taylor. Not much is known about her first 20 years, except that she may have been baptized in the city's St. Louis Cathedral.

At some point by 1850, she became a free woman and had learned to read and write, conduct business, and teach others and had moved to Savannah, Georgia, where she worked as a seamstress.

But Mathilda had a second, very dangerous project: She was secretly educating enslaved children, which was against the law. To protect themselves, she would change the location of classes, create hiding places in her home for the students, and have the children conceal their books in baskets as they walked to and from classes.

After the upheaval of the Civil War, Mathilda married a prominent black businessman, Abraham Beasley, who had made his money in an unusual way: through the slave trade. In spite of this, Mathilda and Abraham were married in 1869. They had no children of their own, and when Abraham died in 1877, Mathilda found herself a wealthy woman. So she donated it all to the Catholic Church, perhaps in atonement for her husband's participation in the slave trade. In any case, she designated part of it for an orphanage for black children.

Mathilda returned to being a seamstress for a time, but she eventually felt the call to religious life. There weren't many opportunities for a black woman to be a sister in the US, so she traveled to England in 1885 and entered a Franciscan Poor Clare community in York. After two years, she returned to Savannah to establish a new Franciscan community and open a new orphanage. Despite the difficulties and poverty, Mother Beasley persisted against all odds and became known for her humility and faith. She died in 1903, in the little chapel in her home, in the midst of prayer.

To learn more, listen to American Catholic History, episode #36 at sqpn.com/history

Julia Greeley

The only person to be buried in the cathedral in Denver, Colorado is not a bishop or a priest, or even a religious brother or sister. It is Julia Greeley, a woman born into slavery in Missouri, who dedicated her life to caring for others.

Julia was born in the 1830s or 1840s. After Emancipation, she worked as a live-in servant for a St. Louis doctor and his family, but then moved to Denver to work for the doctor's sister-in-law, Julia Gilpin, the devout Catholic wife of the first governor of the Colorado territory.

From early on in Denver, her heart was with the poor, the children, and all those in need. By day, she would work for the Gilpins, but as she was out and about she would use her meager earnings to help the poor and needy. In 1880, in part due to the influence of Mrs. Gilpin, Julia entered the Catholic Church and became a daily communicant. She was deeply devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and worked to share that devotion, walking all over Denver on first Fridays to deliver Sacred Heart pamphlets and other Catholic material to all the firehouses in the city. She knew that most firemen in Denver were from poor Catholic families and had a dangerous job.

Julia was known all over Denver, by people of all faiths and all walks of life, by two things: a little red wagon which she was always pulling behind her with what she had to deliver — whether it was food, coal, religious pamphlets, toys that she would repair to give to kids, clothes, whatever; and a big floppy black hat that she always wore. Some called her a “One-person St. Vincent DePaul Society.” She served everyone, white and black, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

Julia Greeley died on June 7, 1918, the feast of the Sacred Heart. People from all over Denver came to her funeral, filing past her casket for five hours. Her cause for canonization was opened in 2016.

To learn more, listen to American Catholic History, episode #34 at sqpn.com/history.

Pierre Toussaint

Venerable Pierre Toussaint was born around 1766 in what is now Haiti into slavery on a sugar plantation. He was trained to serve in the owner's house and taught to read and write. He learned French by reading books of homilies, which helped instill in him a deep Catholic faith.

In 1787, they were moved with their masters to New York City, where Pierre was apprenticed to one of the best hairdressers in the city, one of the few trades open to people of color at the time. He became so good, he was in demand among the upper classes of NYC.

When his master Jean Berard died of pneumonia in 1791, leaving his wife Marie a penniless widow, Pierre, who was making enough money to buy his freedom chose to remain a slave to take care of Marie. He knew she wouldn't accept his charity from him as a free Black man and elected to remain enslaved to care for her, seeing it as his Christian duty.

This continued until Pierre was freed by a grateful Marie in 1807. He then married his wife Juliette and they continued to live with Marie, but as live-in servants.

Pierre and Juliette spent much time and money helping others who had fled to New York from Haiti. They helped them find jobs, established a credit agency for immigrants and freed slaves, brought aid to the sick during epidemics, visited the imprisoned to give counsel and aid, helped fund the first Catholic school for black children in the city, co-founded an orphanage with St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, and helped fund the construction of Catholic Churches, including St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Pierre was also a confidant of his wealthy and influential hairdressing clients, telling stories and speaking of his Catholic faith and the goodness and love of God, becoming known to many of them as "Our Saint Pierre." In 1996, Pierre was recognized by Pope St. John Paul II as Venerable.

To learn more about Pierre Toussaint, listen to American Catholic History, episode #35 at sqpn.com/history.

Daniel Rudd

Daniel Rudd was born in 1854, to Catholic parents who were enslaved on a plantation in Kentucky. At the end of the Civil War in 1865 and now free, Daniel went to school, graduating from high school in Springfield, Ohio, a rare thing for any young man in those days, especially a Black man.

Daniel set to work at a local newspaper, dedicating himself to advocating for the rights of people of color, wanting to extend into secular matters the equality and dignity he found in his Catholic faith. He quickly became convinced of the strong role the press could play in furthering the causes of justice, and in 1885, he founded The Ohio Tribune in Springfield, the first newspaper in the United States printed by, and for, black Americans.

The Tribune eventually became the American Catholic Tribune, a national newspaper based in Cincinnati. Rudd wrote of his newspaper's mission: "We will do what no other paper published by colored men has dared to do - give the great Catholic Church a hearing and show that it is worthy of at least a fair consideration at the hands of our race, being as it is the only place on this Continent where rich and poor, white and black, must drop prejudice at the threshold and go hand in hand to the altar."

In 1889, Rudd helped create the Colored Catholic Congress, a national gathering of leaders of the black Catholic community that met in Washington, DC. The meeting discussed topics of evangelization and Catholic life and they were even joined at one point by President Grover Cleveland. The Congresses were held occasionally for some years afterward, and was reborn in 1994 as the National Black Catholic Congress, which meets every five years.

Daniel Rudd died in 1933 at the age of 79, but his legacy lives on in the many Catholics who continued to be part of the struggle for civil rights for African-Americans throughout the 20th century.

To learn more about Daniel Rudd, listen to the American Catholic History podcast, episode #33 at sqpn.com/history.

Henriette Delille

Henriette Delille founded the second oldest religious order for Black women in the US, but she had to reject the well-established norms of her day and overcome the legacy of slavery in her home town of New Orleans to do it. Born a "free woman of color" of mixed ancestry in New Orleans in 1813, she was the great-granddaughter of a woman who had been enslaved and then freed. Henriette was expected to one day become a mistress to a wealthy man as was common for freed women of color in that time, so she was to be schooled in arts and etiquette.

At 11 years old, Henriette was enrolled in a Catholic school run by an order of French religious sisters. There her eyes were opened to the Catholic faith and the sisters encouraged the students to teach the faith to the children of slaves. This changed the course of her life.

In 1835, Henriette founded a religious community of white and black women that would be called The Sisters of the Holy Family, despite both Church and civil prohibitions against such mixing. She was not deterred and eventually she prevailed and received approval. The order worked in New Orleans to educate both free and enslaved children, to care for the elderly and sick, and to assist the poor. They established the first Catholic home for the elderly in the US.

Mother Henriette Delille died in 1862 at just 49 years old of tuberculosis. Her order continues with about 300 sisters today in six US cities and in Belize. She was declared Venerable in 2010.

Mother Delille set down what should be on her tombstone in 1836, when she was 23 and was founding her order. On the inside leaf of a prayer book she wrote, "I believe in God. I hope in God. I love God. I want to live and die for God."

To learn more about Henriette Delille, listen to the American Catholic History podcast, episode #13 at sqpn.com/history.

Mary Lou Williams

Mary Lou Williams was one of the great jazz musicians of the 20th century, performing with the likes of Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Thelonius Monk throughout the 1940s and 50s. As a black woman in a time when both parts of her identity were made obstacles, her accomplishments were impressive.

And yet, as she saw the wreckage of suffering and exploitation in the entertainment industry all around her and as her beloved jazz both began to lose popularity and suffer from commercialization, she had a crisis of identity and purpose. Finally, a chance encounter with an American soldier during a European tour led her to the Psalms, which led her to prayer and for a time to give up music and the life that went with it.

Mary Lou returned to New York, gave away her possessions, and took in friends with serious addictions to nurse them to health and sobriety. But then a chance encounter at a Catholic church in Harlem led to the rosary and then Fr. John Crowley, who was himself a jazz musician and fan.

Fr. Crowley advised Mary Lou to return to her music, saying: "God wants you to return to the piano. You can serve him best there for that is what you know best." Mary Lou would become Catholic in 1957. In the latter years of her life, she dedicated herself to music and prayer. "I am praying through my fingers when I play," she said. "I get that good 'soul sound,' and I try to touch people's spirits."

Mary Lou knew that jazz was born of the suffering of African-Americans, and now that she was Catholic she had a faith that helped suffering make sense, that made suffering redemptive. It was the perfect marriage in her mind. In 1971, Mary Lou was commissioned by the Vatican to compose a Mass for Peace, but today it is called "Mary Lou's Mass". She died in 1981 in Durham, NC, of cancer.

To learn more, listen to American Catholic History, episode #82 at sqpn.com/history.