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Keynote Address: Why Black Catholic History Matters

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Keynote Address:

Why Black Catholic History Matters

Shannen Dee Williams¹

Last summer’s global protests against police violence and systemic anti-Black racism following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd prompted numerous calls for the Catholic Church to acknowledge its long-standing complicity and agency in America’s racial crisis. In addition to seeking formal apologies and atonement for the church’s foundational and leading participation in the violent regimes of colonialism, slavery, and segregation, Black Catholic protesters drew specific attention to how the whitewashing of church history has aided in the erasure of those who suffered under these institutions and the dismissal of their and their descendants’ demands for justice. As a result, the recent Black Catholic calls for racial



Shannen Dee Williams

¹ This essay is a revised version of the keynote address delivered by Shannen Dee Williams for the University of Dayton Global Voices Symposium held on March 3, 2021. In fall 2021, Williams joined the UD faculty as an associate professor of history. Her first book, *Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle*, will be published by Duke University Press in April 2022. Williams is also the author of the award-winning column “The Griot’s Cross” for the Catholic News Service.

reparation in the Church also included the mandatory teaching of Black and Brown Catholic history in Catholic schools as well as in the nation's seminaries and women's religious formation programs.

Black intellectuals have always understood that the most dangerous weapon of white supremacy has never been violence, but rather the ability to erase the history of white supremacist violence and the victims of said violence. Take me for example. Although I am a lifelong Catholic, I only began studying Black Catholic history by chance. While searching for a paper topic in graduate school, I came across a newspaper article and feature photograph announcing the 1968 formation of a Black power federation of Black Catholic nuns called the National Black Sisters' Conference. Until then, I had never seen a Black nun. In fact, I had never been taught that Black nuns existed in the Catholic Church. Neither had my mother, who was educated in Catholic schools for the entirety of her formal education and who in 1974 became one of the first three Black women to graduate from the University of Notre Dame. Determined to understand why Black sisters had been invisible in our lives, I set out learn as much as I could about the National Black Sisters' Conference and soon encountered an unfamiliar history of the U.S. Catholic Church. I also confronted a history of willful erasure about the Black Catholic experience that had to be directly addressed.

Specifically, to tell the stories of the nation's Black Catholic sisters—accurately and honestly—I had to tackle four core myths about the U.S. Catholic experience that have been popularized and wielded to obscure the leading roles that European and white American Catholics played in the social, political, and cultural propagation of white supremacy in the church and wider society. This keynote identifies these four myths and counters them with the facts of Black Catholic history. My address builds on the intellectual and educational traditions of the nation's Black Catholic sisterhoods, which were the first Catholic congregations to teach and institutionalize Black and Black Catholic history within church boundaries. Because many members of the Black sisterhoods during the Jim Crow era were the descendants of the free and enslaved Black people whose labor and faithfulness built the early American church, they recognized that teaching Black Catholic history was essential in the fight against racism in their church. Black sisters also

fundamentally understood that Black history is, and always has been, Catholic history.

A truthful accounting of the American Catholic past reveals that the Church was never an innocent bystander in the history of white supremacy and the brutal systems of colonialism, slavery, and segregation. Black Catholic history also teaches us that there have always been two transatlantic stories of American Catholicism—one that begins in Europe and another that begins with free and enslaved Africans living in Europe and Africa in the sixteenth century. For too long, most scholars of the U.S. Catholic past, by virtue of misrepresentation, marginalization, and outright erasure, have declared that the history of Black Catholics does not matter. Tonight's presentation demonstrates that Black Catholic history unequivocally matters—and has always mattered.

Myth 1: The history of Black Catholics in the United States is inconsequential and primarily a 20th-century story of the conversion of African American Southern migrants in the urban North, Midwest, and West.

Facts: The history of African and African-descended Catholics in what became the United States is as old as the history of European Catholics in the area. In fact, the roots of many Black Catholics predate those of most of their European counterparts by over three centuries.

Like in Latin America and the Caribbean, Catholicism was the first Black articulation of Christianity in the land area that became the United States. Despite popular contention, slavery did not begin in the future nation with the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in Virginia in 1619. Instead, Spanish Catholics inaugurated slavery nearly a century earlier, first in the Carolinas and later with the successful establishment of St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565. That year, Luisa de Abrego, a free woman of African descent and domestic servant from Seville, Spain, and Miguel Rodriguez, a soldier and blacksmith from Spain, married in St. Augustine. Their interracial union inaugurated Christian marriage in the future United States. Their marriage record is preserved in the archives of the Diocese of St. Augustine.

Although records indicate that Black Catholics make up only 5% of the U.S. Catholic Church today, Black Catholics have never been footnotes in church history. In fact, much of early American Catholic history is African American history and vice versa.

During the colonial and early national periods, free and enslaved Black Catholics constituted significant percentages of the church's membership in the cradles of U.S. Catholicism, especially Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri. Baptismal, marriage, and confraternity records in those places and elsewhere are inundated with the names of free and enslaved Black Catholics whose labor and faithfulness not only fueled the early church's development, but also seeded antislavery and anti-racist sentiments in the faith. In many early American churches, which were often slave-built, the names of African-descended people are the first to appear on these records, underscoring the ways in which Black people embraced Catholicism and used it to carve out autonomy and mobility in their lives. Historians Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould have also documented that by the early nineteenth century, the Catholic Church in New Orleans, Louisiana was an Afro-female dominated institution with free and enslaved Black women and girls leading efforts regarding the spiritual welfare of the African American community.

Devout Black Catholic women and girls established some of the nation's earliest Catholic schools, orphanages, parishes, and nursing homes freely open to Black people. Several of these women and their descendants also became members of the modern world's first Roman Catholic sisterhoods freely open to African-descended people. These are the historically Black order Oblate Sisters of Providence, established in Baltimore in 1829, and the historically Afro-Creole and Black order Sisters of the Holy Family, established in New Orleans in 1842.

It must also be noted that many early Black Catholics, including several pioneering Black priests and sisters, had direct and even biological ties to the nation's earliest European Catholic families, including the Carrolls of Maryland, the Spaldings of Kentucky, and the Pintados of Spanish Florida and Louisiana. In the case of early Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Aloysius, born Anne Marie Becraft, surviving records document that her father, William Becraft, was "the natural son of Charles Carroll of Carrollton," the only Catholic signer of the

Declaration of Independence, and a free woman of color who worked in Carroll's household. One of the early nation's largest enslavers, Carroll was a descendant of one of the first European families to settle in Maryland and an early benefactor of the U.S. Church. He was also a cousin of the slaveholding Jesuit priest John Carroll, the nation's first Catholic bishop and Georgetown University's first president—a poignant reminder that White Catholics played leading roles in America's slave society during and even before the founding of the nation, despite the realities of anti-Catholicism.

Before entering the Oblate Sisters of Providence in 1831, Anne Marie Becraft established the nation's first Catholic school for Black girls in her hometown community of Georgetown in Washington, D.C. Described as “the most remarkable colored young woman of her time in the District, and perhaps of any time,” Becraft is the only known Catholic sister to possess a birthright to the early nation and church.

Myth 2: The Catholic Church was a reluctant and benevolent participant in chattel slavery in the modern era.

Fact: The Catholic Church was the first and largest slaveholder in the Americas.

As a frequent lecturer on Black Catholic history, I never cease to be amazed by how often I encounter faithful religious and lay alike who sincerely have no knowledge of the church's expansive slaveholding past or the leading roles that Catholics played in the brutal history of the transatlantic slave trade.

From at least 1502 to 1888, European Christians, who were mostly Catholic, violently transported at least 12.5 million African women, men, and children from the African continent to the Americas, Europe, and other parts of Africa to fuel and sustain four centuries of Atlantic world slavery. This trade constituted the largest forced human migration in modern history and laid the social, political, and economic foundations for much of modern Europe and its “New World” colonies. It also resulted in the deaths of 10 million to 50 million African people, including babies.

Although the church's rampant participation in this barbaric trade is beyond dispute, it is rarely taught in Catholic schools and religious

formation programs. Indeed, many Catholics can point to Pope Gregory XVI's 1839 condemnation of the slave trade and slavery in the bull "In supremo apostolatus." However, few are aware of the 15th-century papal bulls, including Pope Nicholas V's 1452 "Dum diversas" and Pope Alexander VI's 1493 "Inter caetera," where the church first authorized the trade's development and morally sanctioned the perpetual enslavement of Africans and the seizure of "non-Christian" lands. Even fewer realize that Pope Gregory XVI's 1839 condemnation came some 337 years after the trade formally began and 35 years after the success of the Haitian Revolution. Indeed, it was not the papacy but the Haitian Revolution, led by baptized free and enslaved Black Catholics, that cemented the foundation of antislavery throughout Europe's slave societies in the Americas.

Perhaps most indicative of the silencing of the church's slaveholding past and culpability in modern racism, though, is how few Catholics know the story of São Jorge da Mina (St. George of the Mine) Castle in present-day Ghana. Established by the Portuguese in 1482, Elmina Castle, as it is commonly known, was the first of more than 60 permanent European-controlled trading posts and slave depots built in West and Central Africa to facilitate the transatlantic trade. It was also the site of the first Roman Catholic chapel in sub-Saharan Africa.

For more than 300 years, hundreds of thousands of kidnapped and enslaved Africans traveled through Elmina on their way to America's slave societies. At the height of the slave trade, approximately 30,000 enslaved Africans per year passed through Elmina, where they encountered a host of European traders, priests, soldiers, and families who denied their humanity and subjected them to unspeakable acts of trauma and violence.

Elmina stands as yet another powerful reminder that the Catholic Church was never an innocent bystander in the histories of colonialism, African enslavement, and white supremacy. In fact, I argue that the story of Elmina Castle—the many crimes against humanity committed there in the name of God—is as much of the story of the modern Roman Catholic Church as the Vatican is.

Slavery under Catholic auspices was no less brutal or savage than any other form of the institution practiced in Europe's "New World" colonies. Church and secular records document the brutality of Catholic

enslavers, religious and lay, male and female. Black Catholic historical truth telling also reminds us that the roots of the American Church's contemporary sexual abuse crisis began in colonialism and slavery. On August 9, 1659, an enslaved Black woman named Ana María de Velasco filed a complaint in the ecclesiastical court of Lima, Peru, against her priest and owner, Pedro de Velasco. Ana's complaint revealed that her owner had "stalked and beat her and forced her to live in isolation with their two young children to cover up their sinful cohabitation." The story of Ana María de Velasco, brought to light in Michelle A. McKinley's *Fractional Freedoms: Slavery, Intimacy, and Legal Mobilization in Colonial Peru* (2016), demonstrates that enslaved Black Catholic women were among the first to expose and use the law to protest this abuse in the American Church.

Religious orders of men and women were among the largest enslavers throughout the Americas. Most exploited and traded in human flesh without care or concern of the human beings that they "owned." Most European and white American Catholics also bitterly resisted emancipation and practiced slavery until it was abolished in every American colony, with Brazil—which received the largest number of enslaved Africans transported to the Americas—being the last to do so in 1888. In the United States, the church was the largest slaveholder in Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri at various moments in history from the colonial era to the Civil War. The vast majority of U.S. bishops, sisters, and white lay members also supported the Confederacy and upheld white supremacy and segregation in their institutions before and after the Civil War.

Catholics must also never forget that it was Roger B. Taney—the nation's first Catholic justice on the U.S. Supreme Court and a descendant of prominent Catholic slavers from Maryland—who infamously declared that Black people "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect" while denying the freedom petitions of Dred and Harriet Scott and their two daughters in 1857.

While such stories are sobering, it is important to remember that there were always Catholics fighting institutionalized white supremacy.

On the ground, free and enslaved Catholics revolted against slavery and plotted its demise at every turn. In fact, the first Underground Railroad led south to a runaway haven in Spanish Florida built by

formerly enslaved Black people who successfully fled from slavery in English-controlled territories. In exchange for converting to Catholicism and joining the Spanish military during the colonial era, these rebels secure their freedom. In a plethora of legal cases, enslaved Catholic women sought to escape their captivity, and free Black Catholic women like Lydia Hamilton Smith served as conductors on the Underground Railroad and fought for abolition and Black citizenship in the North.

When I teach the *Dred Scott* decision, I make a point to also teach the story of the Venerable Augustus Tolton, the nation's first self-identified Black priest and one of six African American Catholics under consideration for canonization in the church. Just a few years after Taney's decision in the *Scott v. Sandford*, Tolton's devout Catholic mother, Martha Jane Chisley Tolton, courageously fled slavery under Catholic auspices in Missouri with her three young children and settled in Illinois. In the Toltons' freedom march, they rejected not only the authority of a nation that could justify holding a people in slavery, but also the legitimacy of any articulation of Catholicism that denied Black humanity, promoted white supremacy, and upheld slavery.

Black Catholic stories of resistance and resilience serve as important counterpoints to the countless examples of white Catholic racism and violence during slavery. They also underscore the necessity of decentering whiteness in narrations of the U.S. and wider American Catholic experience. Indeed, a 2014 roundtable discussion on Black Catholicism published in the *Journal of Africana Religions* reminded scholars that "most of the people who have lived their lives under the sign of Catholicism [in the Americas including the Caribbean] have been Native American and African descended, not European."

Myth 3: The Catholic Church was in the forefront of desegregation in the United States.

Facts: There are notable instances in which ecclesiastical leaders (e.g., in St. Louis and Washington, D.C.) in response to long-standing African American Catholic protests initiated desegregation in their

archdioceses before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954.² There are also instances when white Catholic leaders forcefully condemned racial segregation and exclusion in the nation and the church. However, these examples and individuals were always the exception and never the rule. Segregation was a Catholic tradition, and the Catholic Church was the largest Christian practitioner of segregation in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century through America's civil rights years. White Catholics—religious and lay, male and female—steadfastly opposed the admission of Black people into religious life through the twentieth century. U.S. Catholic bishops were also the last of the leaders of the nation's twenty-five major religious denominations to endorse the *Brown* decision. Even then, the bishops' embrace of desegregation was timid at best.

Members of the white laity were among the most violent foot soldiers and virulent leaders of the backlash to the desegregation campaigns of the post-World War II era. This was true across the country, but especially in the Midwest, Northeast, and Deep South. In New Orleans, white Catholic women led the movement to thwart the desegregation of the city's public schools in 1960 and the desegregation of the archdiocese's parochial school system two years later. Every day for over a year, the "cheerleaders," as these women were known, hurled grotesque and sexualized slurs, screams, and death threats at six-year-old Ruby Bridges and the four other Black girls tasked with upholding U.S. democracy. In 1965, these same women, only one of whom was excommunicated for her defiance, led the protests in New Orleans at the ordination of the Most. Rev. Harold Perry, S.V.D., the nation's first self-identified African American bishop. One sign read: "GOD DOES NOT RECOGNIZE NEGRO PRIEST, BISHOPS." Another sign read: "JESUS DID NOT CHOOSE NON WHITE APOSTLES." Such stories are rarely incorporated in surveys of the U.S. Catholic experience. Yet, these examples are vital to our understanding of what it has meant to be Catholic in America for a large segment of the church's membership.

² The *Brown* decision overturned the legal foundation for racial segregation in public institutions, which was established in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896. The plaintiff in the *Plessy* case was an Afro-Creole Catholic from New Orleans.

Myth 4: Catholic sisters have been the most progressive church representatives on matters of racial justice.

Editor's note: This reprint of Williams's address does not include her response to the fourth myth. This is the subject of her forthcoming book.

Conclusion

Upending the myths crafted to conceal the church's racist past is essential to any Catholic program of racial reparation and reconciliation. Embracing historical truth telling, or the "true truth," as Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman called it, is the first step that we must all take in the quest for racial justice and peace in our church and society.

In narrating the stories of the Black Catholic past, I take my cue from the determination and courage of the nation's Black Catholic sisters—the first representatives of the African American Catholic community permitted to embrace the religious state in the Church. When asked in 2009 what she believed Black sisters' greatest legacy was, Sister Loretta Theresa Richards, the longtime leader of the Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, did not hesitate to respond: "The Catholic Church wouldn't be Catholic if it wasn't for us." For generations, African American Catholics fought to make their church truly catholic. In the face of the most egregious crimes against humanity and unyielding anti-Black discrimination, Black Catholics, especially women and girls, refused to surrender their church to those within it committed to racism, sexism, and exclusion. Their stories remind us that there has always been an articulation of U.S. Catholicism that understood that the lives and souls of Black people matter. Their journey is also indicative of just how far the church has come—and how far it still has to go.