

EVERYTHING HAS A
History

Taking Down their Harps

The history of "Hidden Saints:" Black Catholic Voices That Changed America, A History of Faith and Freedom

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Hi, I'm Richard

As a Cultural and Philosophical Historian, I focus on the Anthropology of Technology...Connecting history, philosophy, and culture to today's Technology challenges

My career has been as an Emerging Technology Strategist and former executive (*Oracle, PwC, C-Bridge, American National Insurance*), guiding organizations worldwide through 500+ keynote addresses and workshops. I focus on those *moments, patterns, and events* that changed how civilization evolved; I focus on *hermeneutics, phenomenology, deconstruction, and reconstruction*.

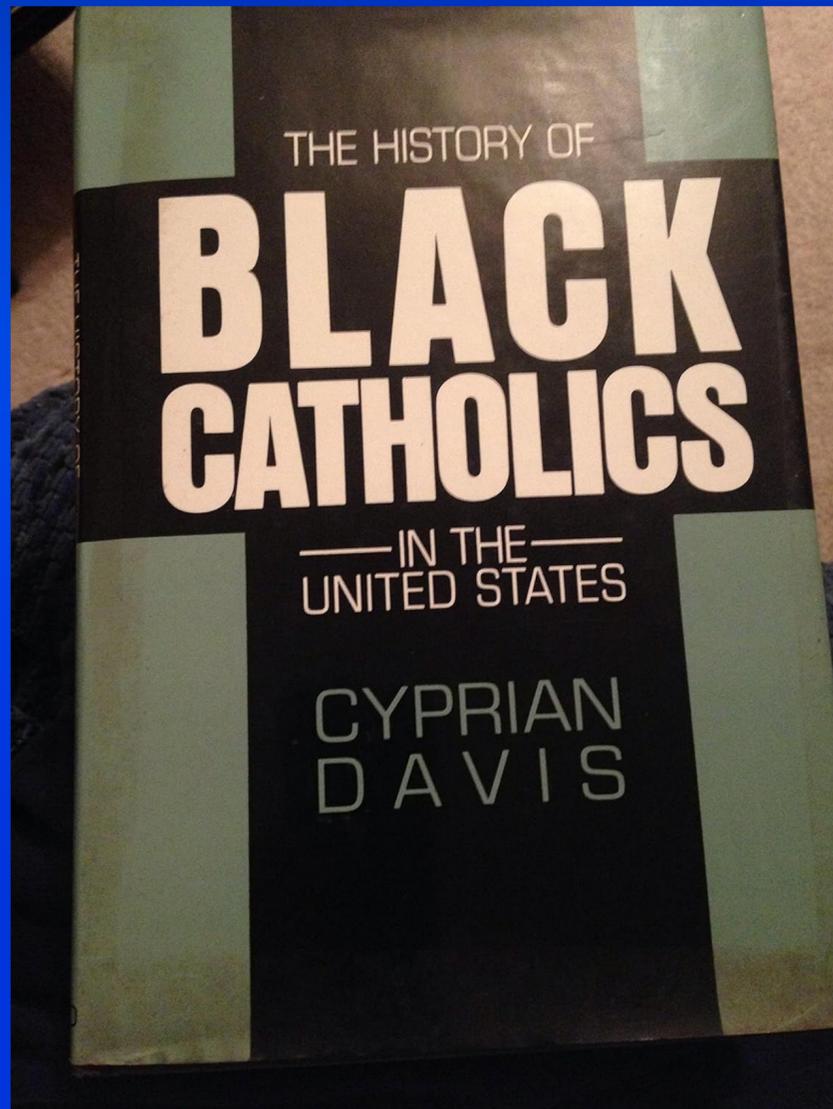
As a **Communications Theorist and Educator**, I focus on events that touch our lives and, hopefully, present “AHA” moments in *Understanding Society, Culture, Religion, Theology, Philosophy, Policy/Government, People, Planet, Purpose, Prosperity, and Emerging Technology*, which have altered how we live and, most importantly... how we **behave** as human beings.

Today, I teach, write, blog, and speak at the *Forever Learning Institute, the Cardijn Institute, the International Thomas Merton Society, the American Historical Association, and the Westar Institute, all as a labor of love.*

We have experienced two cultural revolutions: the **agricultural** and **industrial revolutions**.

**We are entering the third:
The Autonomous Revolution. Buckle Up!**





Cyprian Davis was a professor of church history at St. Meinrad College and the Graduate School of Theology. He was my thesis director and spiritual director for years in both the college and the graduate school. He is the author of *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (Crossroad, 1992), reminding us that the Catholic Church was not European originally, but Mediterranean. He adds, “Remember, Ethiopia was a Christian nation earlier than many nations in Europe. It was a Christian kingdom before Ireland was evangelized, before more of North Germany was evangelized, and before Poland was a Catholic country.”



Why is it so important for Black & White Catholics to examine their religious history?

Black Catholics want a sense of being Catholic, especially if they are converts, but they don't want to be cut off from their roots.

As human beings, we desperately need and want a sense of identity. So many were not able to tell their children about what it means to be Black Catholics or about Black saints or Black priests, nuns, and sisters and brothers. But now they have that background information, and they can use it. They have a good reason to be Catholic and to be proud of it and not feel they have given up being Black.

Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s Perspective on Teaching Black History

Gates has rejected the idea that only African Americans can authentically teach or interpret Black history. He has argued for an approach that invites interested scholars and students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, reinforcing the idea that Black studies are not solely about building the self-esteem of African Americans but *exploring a shared American history with critical thinking and debate.*

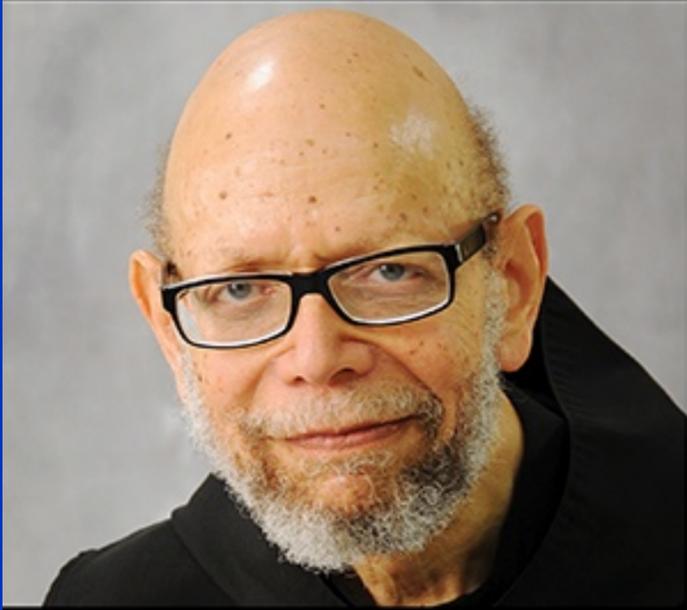


Photo courtesy of Saint Meinrad Archabbey

FATHER CYPRIAN DAVIS

“There is more to being Black and Catholic than the fact that we’ve got nice music. ... We’re an integral part of the church, and we’re not negligible.”

- Father Cyprian Davis, OSB

"Sitz im Leben"

"Sitz im Leben" is a German term meaning "setting in life," primarily used in biblical criticism to refer to the **social and cultural context** in which a text was created or transmitted.

Why History Matters

"I still find history full of wonders; I still find in the differences in past societies a way to take stock of the present—a source of sober realism, but also a source of hope."

~Natalie Zemon Davis



The **one-drop rule** is a historical principle in the United States that classified any person with even a single ancestor of Black African ancestry as Black, regardless of their appearance or the proportion of their ancestry.

The one-drop rule emerged as a *cultural construct throughout European history*; it asserted that any individual with "one drop" of Black blood was to be considered Black. This principle was rooted in the desire to maintain racial purity and uphold white supremacy, particularly during the Jim Crow era when racial segregation laws were prevalent. The rule was a form of hypodescent, which automatically assigned individuals of mixed ancestry to the racial group with the lower social status.

The one-drop rule was *codified into law in southern states*, but practiced socially in northern states, particularly through racial integrity laws that defined racial categories. For example, Virginia's Racial Integrity Act of 1924 legally enforced the one-drop rule, preventing interracial marriages and reinforcing segregation. Although the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967 invalidated laws prohibiting interracial marriage, the social implications of the one-drop rule persisted long after its legal enforcement ended.

Origins: Africa, Faith, and the Early Church in the Americas

Throughout the church's history, many of our most important theologians defended slavery, including Augustine, Aquinas, and a variety of popes. Augustine, for instance, believed slavery to be God's punishment for a person's sin.

*A number of popes, including Gregory the Great, were slaveholders. But one cannot excuse the support of slavery as simply the predominant views of bygone eras, for there were also many throughout history who **argued against the practice.***

These included the Essenes who lived at the time of Christ, Gregory of Nyssa (4th century), the Abbot Smaragdus (8th century), and Duns Scotus (13th century).

“Would it surprise you to learn that some people believe St. Augustine, St. Monica, St. Cyril of Alexandria, and others were Black of African origins?

*I'm convinced they weren't blond. You could say they were **culturally African.**” ~ Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.,*

Framing the Discussion

Reset your thinking: *“In the Beginning: Africa, Faith, and the Early Church in the Americas.”*

“All Black Catholic history begins in Africa...All Catholic history begins in Asia.”

Echoing Davis: the Church has never been only European; African Christians helped shape Christianity from its earliest centuries, and Africans were present in the Americas from the beginning of colonial Catholicism.

Thomas Merton:

The "White Problem"

Writing primarily in the 1960s, Merton's most piercing work on race is found in his book **Seeds of Destruction** and his essay **"Letters to a White Liberal."** He famously argued that racism was not a "Black problem" to be solved by charity, but a "white problem" rooted in spiritual blindness.

The Monastic Movement: Origins & Purposes

In 313 CE, Constantine the Great (272–337 CE) ended the harsh Christian persecutions in the Roman Empire with the "*Edict of Milan*" and placed the Christian movement, including the [Christ Associates and Jesus schools](#), under imperial authority protection.

Unsurprisingly, public activities and culture changed significantly, benefiting early Christians. After Constantine supported Christian leaders and followers, they gave him a "Creed," in return, and new cultural freedoms and secular trends emerged within the faith.

More of the original believers then shifted their concerns to problems inside the church, such as immorality, abuse, and vice.

Early Monastic Leaders

This Christian monastic lifestyle began simply. As in all societies, its routines became more complex and diverse over the centuries.

Monks and nuns lived in caves, swamps, cemeteries, and even atop stylites 12 metres (40 feet) high.

Each proclaimed God's call and affirmed this way of life. Over time, the church developed rules and regulations to unify the groups into consistent expressions of Christianity within the monastic movement.

Early church fathers and mothers discussed several monastic models. Saint Anthony of the Desert (c. 251–356 CE), an Egyptian holy man, first lived as a hermit along the Nile. He later left solitude to organize his disciples into a community of hermits under a rule. This group shared less community life than later religious orders.



Chariton the Confessor (Greek: Χαρίτων; mid-3rd century, Iconium, Asia Minor – c.350, Judaeen desert) was an early Christian monk. He is venerated as a saint by both the Western and Eastern Churches. His remembrance day is September 28

Saint Benedict of Nursia

In the 4th century CE, the monastic movement spread to Europe. John Cassian (c. 360–430 CE), a "Desert Father" and friend of Saint John Chrysostom the "*Golden-Mouthed*" (c. 347–407 CE), founded an Egyptian-style monastery in Gaul (modern France). Cassian remains controversial for his association with his teachers, his symbolic interpretation of Christian scriptures, and his spiritual focus on the three stages of spiritual development: Purgatio (purification),

One of the most famous monastics was Saint Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–c. 543 CE). *"Benedict is a shadowy figure who quickly attracted legend, lovingly collected into a life by Pope Gregory I [c. 540–604 CE] at the end of the sixth century.*

He is credited with creating a monastic rule. Most scholars believe Benedict borrowed much of it from "*The Rule of the Master*" or "*Regula Magistri.*" This rule became the standard for monasticism as lived in Europe.

NB: The monastic movement in West Africa was a response to the need for a purer and more focused environment for spiritual growth, away from the complexities of the outside world.

The early monastic life of **Black Catholics** focused on community and spirituality, earning respect and admiration for their devotion.

Figures like **St. Fulgentius**, Bishop of Ruspe, demonstrated this through living in unity with the clergy and founding monasteries in Africa. His commitment to the **Augustinian ideal of communal life** and his knowledge of Augustine's writings made him a key figure in the early *Black Catholic tradition*.

Black Catholics have consistently been part of the Catholic faith, expressing an understanding of blackness and a sense of identity within a tradition that predates Protestantism.

The **Black Catholic** intellectual tradition is essential to the Church, reflecting the rich cultural heritage of activism, spirituality, and scholarship that **Black Catholics** bring to the faith.



“The black church does a poor job of showing how ancient and black Christianity is. It is a strange thing to say, “Everything I need to know about God is in the Bible,” when you don’t know where the Bible came from and some of the people who came from there looked just like you....In my years as a Baptist pastor, there was discussion of the latest books and sermons from the latest Christian ministers. Yet, I can’t say that I have ever heard my former colleagues discuss lessons from the Life of St. Anthony or the Homilies of St. Macarius. I think this lack of knowledge of the Desert Fathers is detrimental to modern black Protestantism in a couple of ways.”



John R. Gresham, Jr. is the son and grandson of Baptist deacons and deaconesses. He is a graduate of Virginia State University and received a Certificate in Church Ministry through the Evan-Smith Institute of the Baptist General Convention and the Virginia Union University School of Theology. He served as the Pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in West Point, VA, and the Moderator of the Pamunkey Baptist Association. John began studying the Orthodox Church in June 2012 and joined the St. Philip’s Prayer Discipline. After over a year of learning and practicing the ancient faith as much as possible as a Protestant minister, he left his church of 16 years and the denomination of his childhood to become fully Orthodox. John serves as a chanter/reader at St. Basil the Great Antiochian Orthodox Church in Hampton, VA.

Enslaved Africans and early Catholic presence

Connect the African Church to the Atlantic world:

From the 15th century (1400) onward, Portuguese and Spanish traders and missionaries discovered that Catholicism existed in West and Central Africa; they found that Africans were baptized and catechized before ever crossing the Atlantic.

Enslaved Africans taken to the Americas arrived already baptized and confirmed, and they brought with them Christian symbols, sacraments, and prayers, especially in regions where Portuguese and Kongolesse Catholic networks existed and marketed their products.



In the years 1452 and 1455, respectively, Pope Nicholas V issued the papal bulls “*Dum Diversas*” and “*Romanus Pontifex*,” which legitimized the Portuguese slave trade and gave its kingdom the right to *enslave Africans south of Cape Bojador and hold them in perpetuity.*

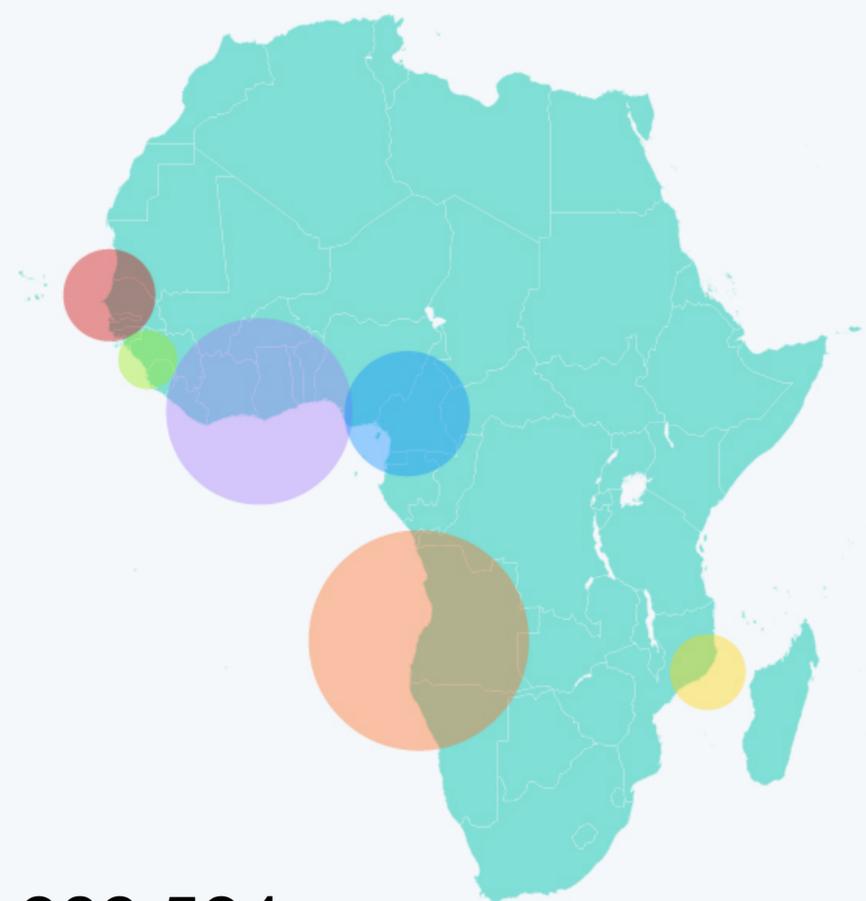
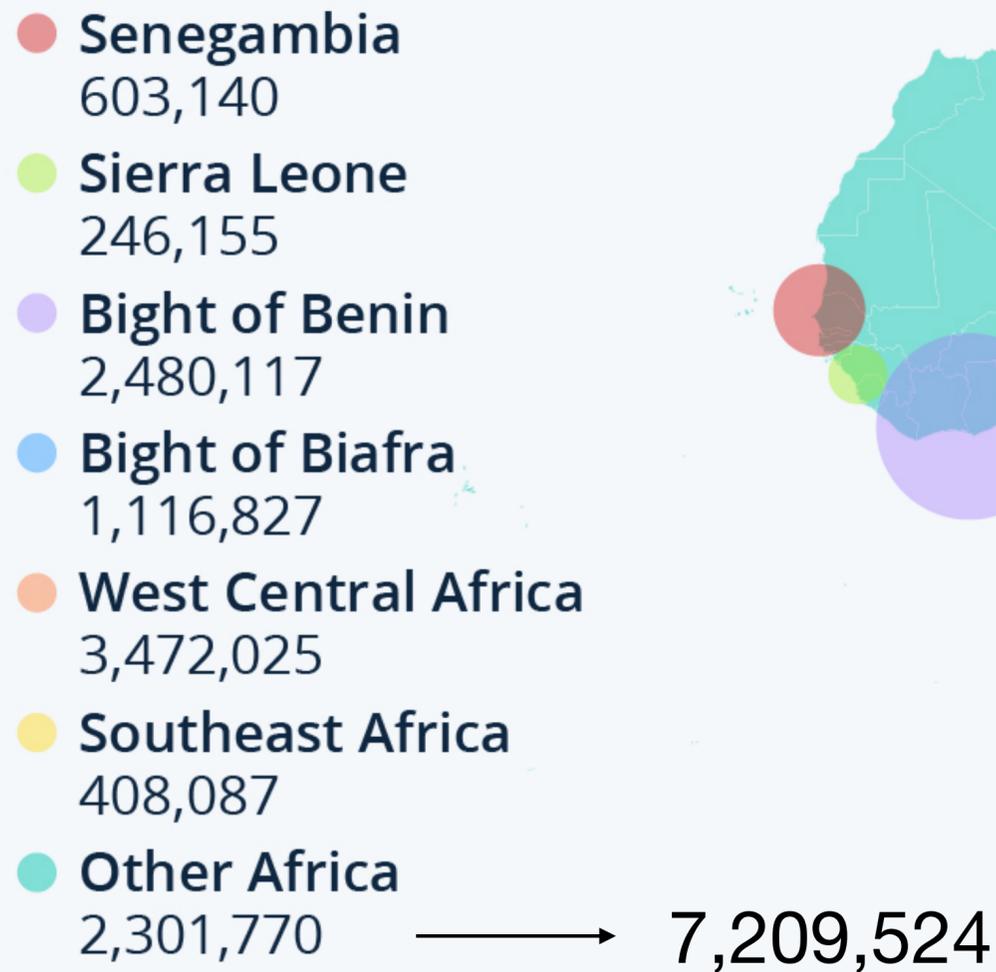
A year after Christopher Columbus’s first expedition, commissioned by the king and queen of Spain, Pope Alexander VI issued papal bulls on May 3 and 4, 1493, which have come to constitute the (now disavowed) “Doctrine of Discovery” and played a central role in the Spanish colonization of the Americas.



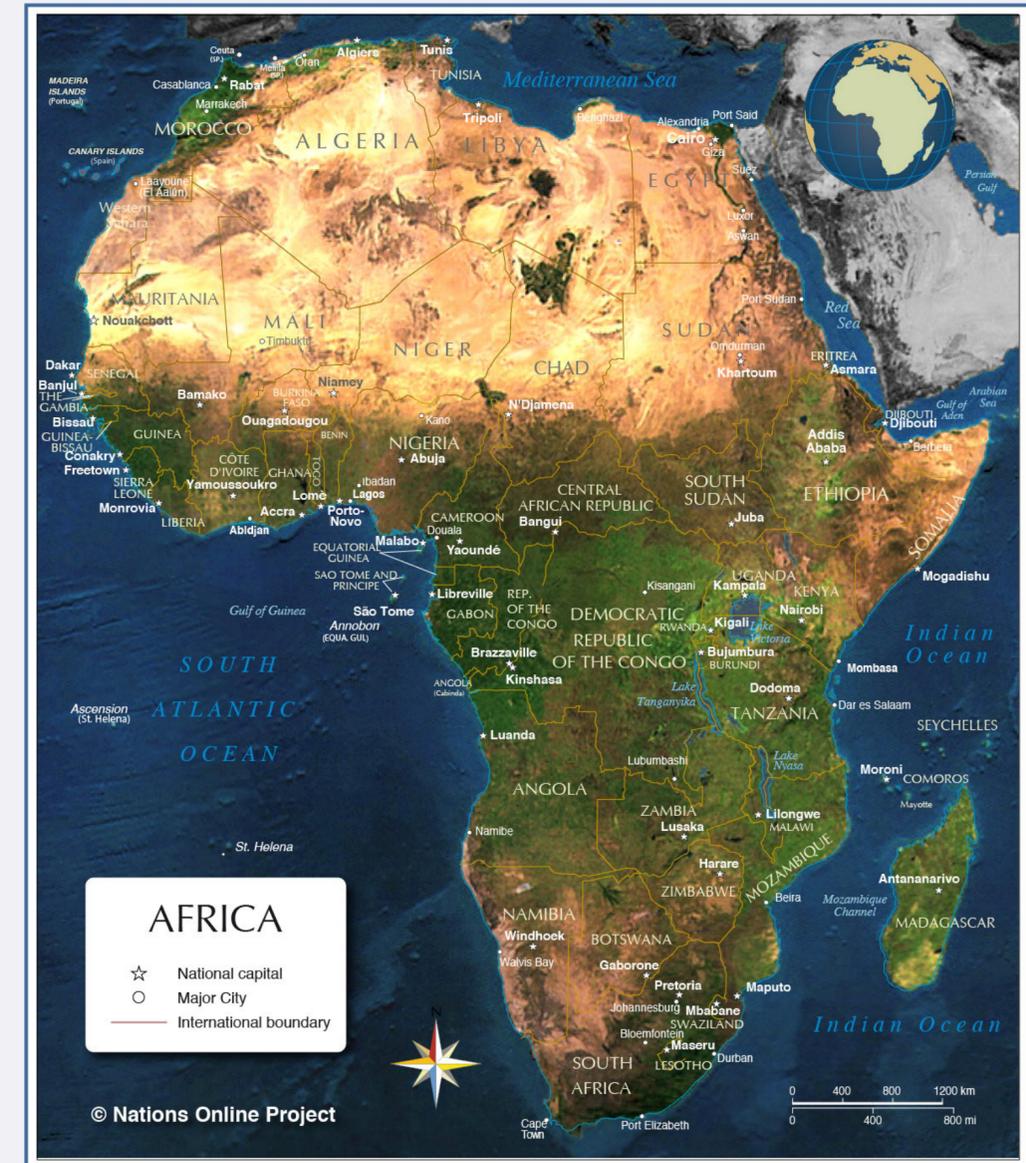
1517 Halloween

Where African Enslaved People Came From

Number of enslaved Africans forced to embark to Europe or the Americas, by region (1514 - 1866)



Includes outlying islands
Source: Slavevoyages.com



Cyprian Davis argues that Black Catholic history does not begin at the slave ship or with the United States, but with Africa's central role in early Christianity and with the presence of Africans — free and enslaved—within Catholicism from the very beginnings of European colonization in the Americas. He insists that Black Catholics are not a late “add-on” to an otherwise white Church, but a people with a continuous, though often hidden and oppressed, history within Catholic life.

I would suggest: In our minds, we need to relocate the origins of Black Catholic history to Christian antiquity in Africa, to the followers of Jesus at the time of the first 250 years, stressing that *African lands and peoples were “leading” centers of Christian life long before many European regions were evangelized.*

The early spread of Christianity in North Africa and the Nile valley, and the decisive contributions of African theologians and bishops such as Augustine, are presented as part of the ancestral story of Black Catholics who find their way to North America via a slave boat.



In the beginning, there were Black Catholics

Estevanico was the first Black Roman Catholic of record to arrive on Texas soil in **1528**. A native of Azamor on the northwest coast of Morocco, Estevanico was a Christian slave owned by Andrés Dorantes—a member of the ill-fated Pánfilo de Narváez expedition.

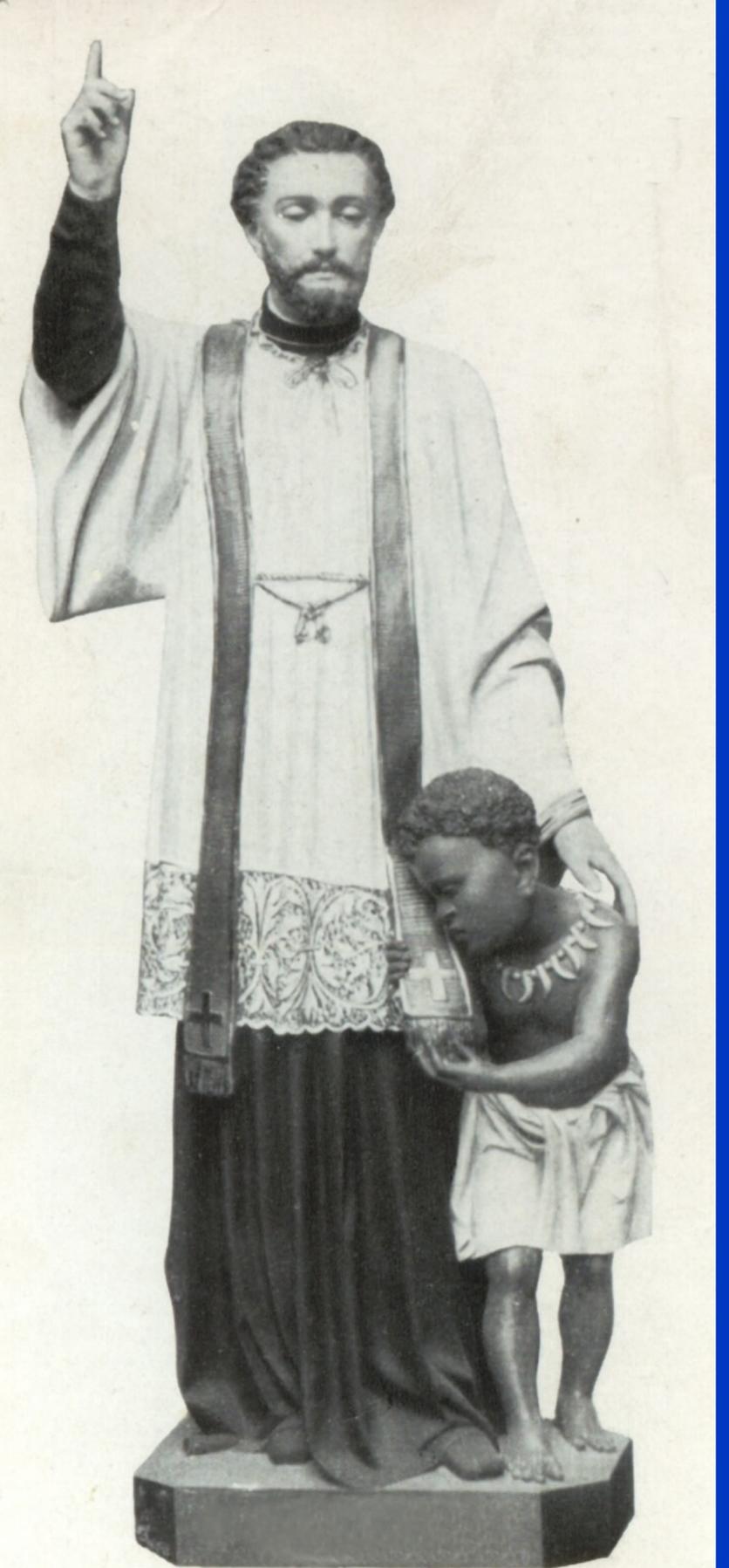
Black Catholics arrived with the Spaniards in Florida in the 16th century. There is an article in the *American Historical Review* that examines the [Stono Rebellion in Georgia](#) during the 1700s. Some of the slaves who rebelled in that incident had come from the Congo region, part of what is now Angola. Historians found that these slaves considered themselves Catholic for centuries, called themselves Catholic, and wanted to practice their religion even as slaves.

Peter Claver SJ (26 June 1580 – 8 September 1654) was a Spanish Jesuit priest and missionary born in Verdú, Spain, who, due to his life and work, became the patron saint of slaves, Colombia, and ministry to African Americans.

During the 40 years of his ministry in the New *Kingdom of Granada*, it is estimated that he personally baptized around 300,000 people and heard the confessions of over 5,000 people per year. He is also a patron.

A saint for seafarers. *He is considered a heroic example of what should be the Christian praxis of love and of the exercise of human rights.* St. Peter Claver became the paradigmatic Catholic minister to enslaved Africans and is now patron of slaves and ministry to African Americans, shaping later Black Catholic self-understanding.

(A ship would hold between 200 and 600 slaves. Between 1526 and 1867, captured men, women, and children were put on ships in Africa, with an estimated 10.7 million arriving in the Americas. enslaved Africans were often held in coastal forts or compounds, known as barracoons, before being shipped to North America.)



St. Peter Claver

The Catholic presence in colonial America

Spanish Florida and the Southeast: Africans (free and enslaved) accompany Spanish explorers and settlers, and Black Catholics are present in 16th-century St. Augustine and other outposts of Florida.

Maryland: Jesuit missionaries minister to Catholics, both enslaved and free people of African descent, on plantations from the 17th century, baptizing, catechizing, and forming Black Catholic communities even as the Church participates in slaveholding.

Louisiana and the Gulf Coast: under French and Spanish rule, Catholicism is the dominant Christian presence, and people of African descent—enslaved, free, and mixed-race—form part of parish life, confraternities, and devotional cultures.

Kongolese Catholics and the [Stono Rebellion](#) (1739): historians note that the record shows the leaders of the rebellion in South Carolina were *Kongolese Catholics* seeking to escape Protestant territory for Catholic Spanish Florida, illustrating how African Catholic identities shaped both resistance and piety.

Is this a “Double Truth?”

The Church as complicity (*owning slaves, benefiting from the system*) and the Church as community, where enslaved people claimed dignity through sacraments, devotions, and a language of freedom.

Anonymous enslaved converts in colonial America

Enslaved Africans in Maryland and Louisiana who were baptized and practicing Catholics before becoming slaves, attended Mass when allowed, joined sodalities, and used prayer ropes, artifacts, and feast days to affirm their dignity and negotiate the brutality of slavery.

I want to note that these early Black Catholics left few written records themselves. That we know of, but are still discovering through the network of the Underground Railroad: the items they carried, the stories they told. Still, their presence is visible in sacramental registers, plantation archives, and enduring Black Catholic communities that trace roots to colonial parishes.

Cyprian would say: *“The history of Black Catholics is not an ‘add-on’ but part of the Church’s story from the beginning, in Africa and in every period of American Catholic life.”*

What happened to Estevanico?

Estevanico, also known as **Mustafa Zemmouri** or **Esteban the Moor**, was the **first Black Roman Catholic** of record to arrive in Texas in **1528**. He was a Christianized slave from Azamor, Morocco, and was part of the Narváez expedition that explored parts of what is now the continental United States. Estevanico was a black Catholic African slave- *Arabic-speaking*—who helped Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and two other Castilians of the ill-fated 1527 Pánfilo de Narváez expedition to La Florida survive nearly eight years of hardship in the Texas wilderness. After surviving numerous challenges, including shipwrecks and conflicts with Native Americans, Estevanico and his companions traveled west, becoming the first Europeans and Africans to enter the American West.

They eventually traveled west and reached **Mexico** in **1536**, where they were sold and sent on expeditions, including one led by **Fray Marcos de Niza** in **1539**. Tragically, Estevanico was killed by Zuni Indians near the **Zuni pueblo of Hawikuh** in present-day New Mexico.



Painting, Estavanico by Granger. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

Deep sorrow and loss

The phrase “**taking down our harps**” from **Psalm 137:2** signifies the **deep sorrow and loss** experienced by the Israelites during their Babylonian exile. The **harps**, which were once used in worship, were now hung on willows, **symbolizing** their **disconnection from joy and music**.

This act reflects their **grief and longing for their homeland**, as they could not sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land. The willows, often associated with mourning, further emphasize the **sorrowful nature of their captivity**.

Ultimately, this verse serves as a poignant reminder of the **disruption of identity and worship** during times of exile, while also pointing to the hope of **future restoration** through God's faithfulness.

Venerable Pierre Toussaint (1766–1853)

Background and Impact: Born enslaved in Haiti, he was brought to New York City. He was freed and became a highly successful hairdresser. A renowned philanthropist, Toussaint donated generously to various charities, helping to fund the first Catholic orphanage in New York and starting the city's first school for Black children. He was an influential figure in the Catholic community and is recognized as a pioneer of Catholic Charities in New York.



Pierre originally was buried outside St. Patrick's Old Cathedral, where he was once refused entrance because of his race. His sanctity and the popular devotion to him caused his body to be moved to the present location of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue.

Pierre Toussaint was declared Venerable in 1996.

A. Historical Context

Catholicism in colonial America: Maryland and Louisiana as Catholic strongholds in a Protestant-dominated landscape.

Slavery was introduced early into both colonies and woven into their economic and social systems.

B. The Paradox of Faith and Ownership

Davis notes that Catholic plantation owners—Jesuits among them—owned enslaved Africans and used the profits to sustain missions and education (notably the Maryland Jesuit plantations).

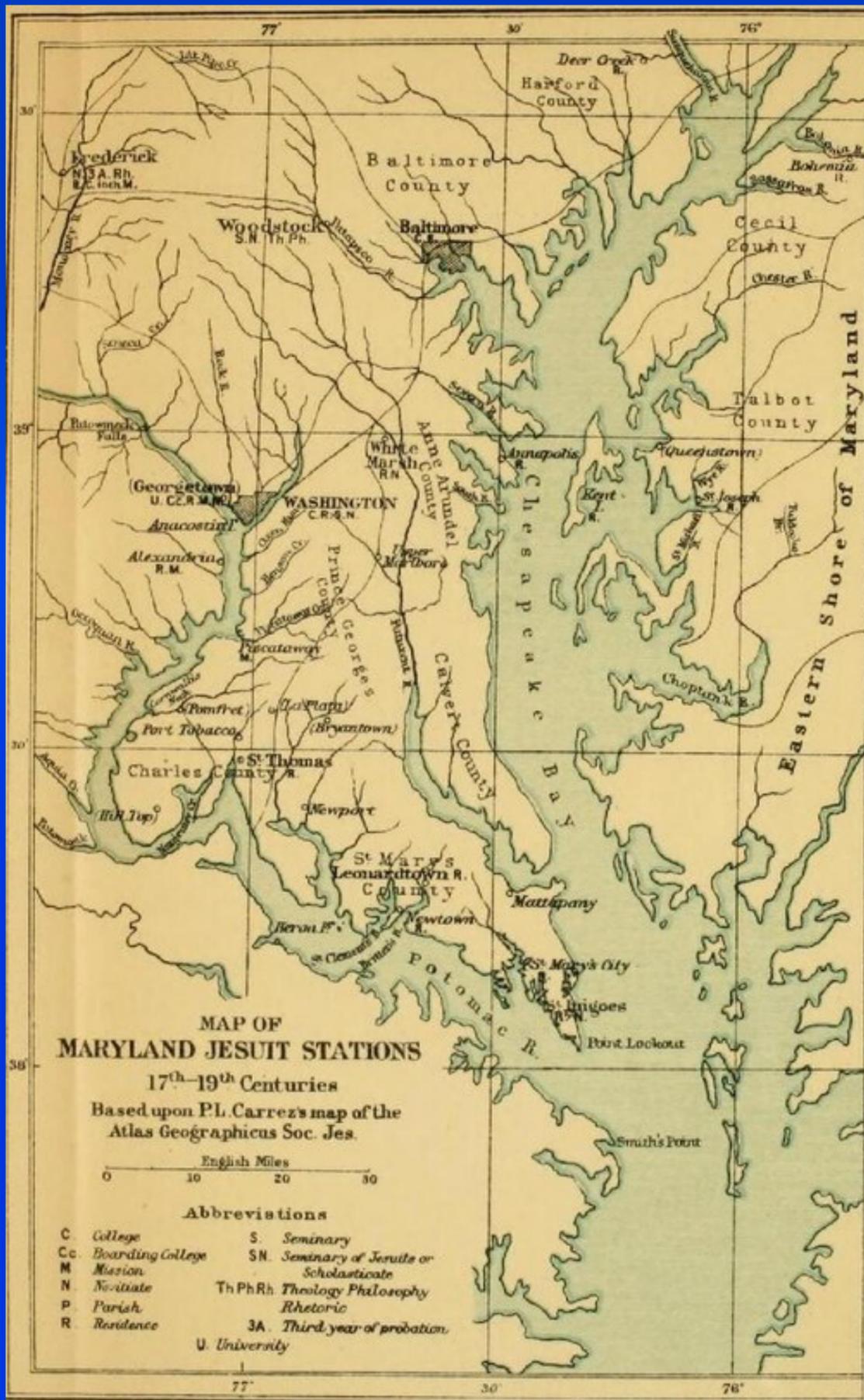
Theological rationalizations: seeing slavery as a “natural” social order or a *paternalistic* mission field rather than an **intrinsic sin**.

Priests often baptized and catechized enslaved persons but rarely challenged the system itself.

"A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann," from Merton's 1966 essay collection Raids on the Unspeakable.



ONE of the most disturbing facts that came out in the Eichmann trial was that a psychiatrist examined him and pronounced him perfectly sane. I do not doubt it at all, and that is precisely why I find it disturbing. If all the Nazis had been psychotics, as some of their leaders probably were, their appalling cruelty would have been in some sense easier to understand. It is much worse to consider this calm, "well-balanced," unperturbed official conscientiously going about his desk work, his administrative job which happened to be the supervision of mass murder.



On 19 June 1838, the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus agreed to sell 272 slaves to two Louisiana planters, Henry Johnson and Jesse Batey, for \$115,000 (equivalent to approximately \$3.34 million in 2025). This sale was the culmination of a contentious and long-running debate among the Maryland Jesuits over whether to keep, sell, or free their slaves, and whether to focus on their rural estates or on their growing urban missions, including their schools.

Sometimes, this is hard to hear for people. The Jesuits—the same order that founded Georgetown, that educated many of our Church leaders—enslaved 272 people and sold them in 1838 to keep the university afloat. These weren't faceless institutions. These were priests who said Mass, heard confessions of slaves and slave owners, and then sold their slaves to plantation owners who were catholic in Louisiana.

Map of Jesuit sites in Maryland from the 17th to 19th centuries

Think about the **moral blindness** of religious institutions when culture and profit override Gospel conviction.

What do we see as the connections to modern institutional complicity in injustice, e.g., racial inequity, economic exploitation?

When have we seen good people—or good institutions—fail to see their own complicity in harm? What made it hard for them to see?"

"What does it mean that the same sacraments that enslaved people clung to for hope were administered by people who saw them as property?"

Thomas Merton's reflections on the **moral blindness of religious institutions** when culture and profit override Gospel conviction highlight the tension between **religious principles and societal values**. He critiques how the pursuit of profit and cultural norms can lead to a neglect of moral integrity within religious institutions. Merton's writings often address the **banality of evil**, suggesting that ordinary people can commit moral failures despite their awareness of their actions. He emphasizes the importance of **moral autonomy** and the need for individuals to question conventional morality when it conflicts with their faith and the Gospel conviction



Venerable Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, OSP (1789–1882)

Background and Impact:

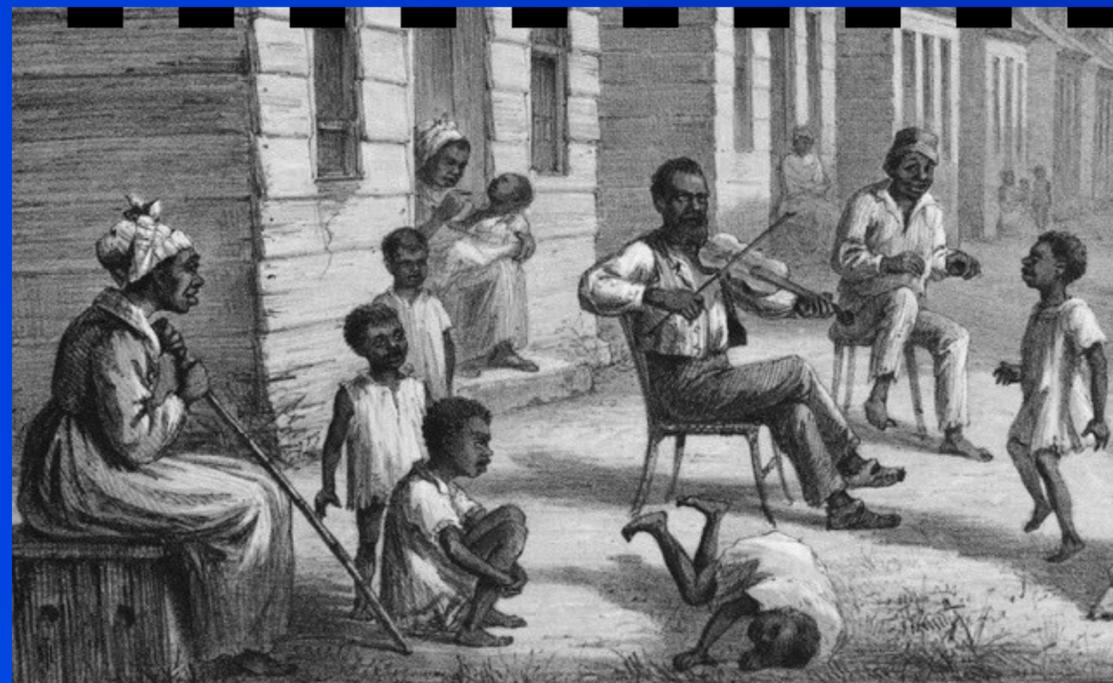
Born in Cuba, she emigrated to Baltimore, Maryland, where she began educating children of color. In 1829, she founded the **Oblate Sisters of Providence**, the **first successful religious congregation for women of African descent** in the United States. The Oblate Sisters educated African American children, cared for the sick and elderly, and provided a home for orphans, even nursing the terminally ill during the 1832 cholera epidemic, often in defiance of racial prejudice.

. Pope Francis named her as venerable on June 22, 2023.

*"Here's what's extraordinary: enslaved Black Catholics didn't wait for white priests to give them permission to be fully human before God. They **claimed** it. They took the Gospel their masters preached and turned it into a weapon of **spiritual resistance**. They baptized their children and taught them that they belonged to God, not to any plantation owner. They sang songs that sounded like hymns but carried coded messages of freedom."*

Catholicism interacted with **African spiritual** traditions, creating a **lived** spirituality marked by song, ritual, and memory.

Enslaved catechumens often drew hope from the stories of Exodus, the Cross, and the saints.



Humanizing "Building Faith under Bondage: Slavery and the Church"

"In 1812, a young woman named Henriette Delille was born free in New Orleans, into a world where being Catholic and being enslaved often existed in the same household, sometimes in the same family. She would go on to found a religious order— Sisters of the Holy Family - but first, she had to reckon with a Church that blessed her soul while turning away from the bodies of her enslaved brothers and sisters." She was born into the plaçage system (where free women of color were kept as concubines by white men)

- She rejected that path and chose religious life—but no existing order would accept Black women.
- So she founded one, serving the poorest of the poor: enslaved, sick, and dying Black people in New Orleans
- Her cause for canonization is open today



“Faith, Freedom, and Formation: Black Catholic Life after Emancipation”

When the Civil War ended in 1865, emancipation signaled more than a political victory—it marked a spiritual and communal rebirth for millions of formerly enslaved people. Yet freedom raised profound questions: *How would Black Catholics claim space in the Church that had long struggled to see them as equals in Christ? What new forms of leadership, devotion, and community would emerge when faith met freedom?*

Let’s explore three movements in this crucial period:

- The transformation of Catholic parishes in the era of Emancipation and Reconstruction.
- The rise of Black Catholic lay leadership and religious vocations.
- The birth of institutional advocacy through the Josephites and the Black Catholic Congress Movement (1889–1894).

The Exodus

The departure of Black Catholics from the Roman Catholic Church occurred in two major historical waves, driven primarily by the search for racial autonomy, the rejection of "Jim Crow" segregation within the Church, and the desire for more culturally expressive worship.

While many Black Americans were Catholic from the colonial era (particularly in Maryland and Louisiana), the institutional "exodus" followed **distinct timelines**:

The Post-Civil War "Religious Reconstruction" (1865–1890s)

The first large-scale movement away from Catholicism began immediately after the Civil War. During the era known as Religious Reconstruction, newly emancipated Black Americans sought to exercise their independence by forming their own institutions.

Emancipation and the Reconstruction-era Catholic Parishes

Following emancipation, the Catholic Church—especially in the South—faced a new pastoral and moral challenge. As Cyprian Davis recounts, many newly freed Black Catholics sought both continuity and autonomy. They desired *sacraments, catechesis, and spiritual life*—but also dignity within their own communities.

Transformation of Parish Life:

In dioceses like New Orleans, Baltimore, Savannah, and Mobile, Black Catholics began to organize independent spaces of worship—sometimes within existing parishes under segregation, sometimes as fully separate churches. These parishes often sprang from a yearning for ownership over liturgical music, devotions, and leadership.

Black protestant churches are those that minister to predominantly African American congregations in the United States. **Early black churches were founded by free blacks in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.** Historically black churches have long been the centers of African American communities, serving numerous important social functions.

The seven largest Black Protestant denominations are (as listed by the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA)):

- African Methodist Episcopal Church
- African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
- Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
- Church of God in Christ
- National Baptist Convention of America
- National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.
- Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.

The Catholic Church affirms papal authority and apostolic succession, while the Methodist Church emphasizes historic continuity without papal jurisdiction. The Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments, including the Eucharist, whereas the Methodist Church recognizes: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The slaves as Catholics placed a strong emphasis on the Eucharist as the "source and summit" of Christian life, and with the Methodist Church, they saw value in heartfelt preaching and congregational singing. These differences shape the public understanding of both faith traditions today.

The Rejection of Hierarchy: The Catholic Church's rigid, top-down structure did not allow for local Black leadership. In contrast, Black Protestant denominations like the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and Baptist churches offered immediate opportunities for Black men to be ordained and for congregations to own their own property.

The Mission to the South: Northern Black Protestant missionaries followed the Union Army South, actively recruiting among former slaves. The AME Church, for instance, grew from 20,000 members in 1860 to over 400,000 by 1884.

Segregation in the Pews: Even in the North, Black Catholics often faced "Jim Crow" practices, such as being forced to receive Communion last or being barred from parish social groups. This led many to find a more welcoming home in the burgeoning Black Church.

"What does it mean that enslaved people saw liberation in a faith preached by their oppressors?"

"Where do you see this kind of '*faith from below*' today—people claiming the Gospel in ways that challenge the Church's own complicity?"

Enslaved people evangelized one another, forming catechetical circles and family shrines. The Church's sacraments became both spiritual lifelines and expressions of defiance—proof that they belonged to the Body of Christ.

- What does it tell us that Black Catholics had to create their own religious orders because white orders wouldn't accept them?"
- How do these early communities shape what it means to be Black and Catholic today?
- These communities exemplify the Church from below: Was it a faith lived in bondage that turned toward freedom?
- What signs of resistance and grace can be seen in the faith of the enslaved?
- What parallels exist between past rationalizations of injustice and those seen in our own time?
- How did claiming their baptism become an act of resistance?

"We can't undo this history. But we can refuse to forget it. We can listen to Black Catholics today when they tell us where the Church still fails. We can support Black-led ministries and parishes. We can learn the names: Henriette Delille, Pierre Toussaint, Augustus Tolton, the Oblate Sisters of Providence. We can ask ourselves: What does it mean to be part of a Church that is still becoming what it claims to be?" ~ Cyprian Davis

This history can be painful, but it's also sacred. The faith of Black Catholics under slavery is a teaching lesson to the whole Church—a reminder that the **Gospel belongs to the oppressed**, and that God's grace breaks through even the worst human sin.

Think about what it says that blacks have to create their own religious communities because what communities rejected them.

On Merton's vow of poverty and its connection to justice: "*To have a vow of poverty seems to me illusory if I do not in some way **identify myself with the cause of people who are denied their rights** and forced, for the most part, to live in abject misery.*" ~ Thomas Merton's Letters to a White Liberal.'



Healy Brothers (James Augustine, Patrick Francis, Alexander Sherwood)

The Healy Brothers—James Augustine Healy, Patrick Francis Healy, and Alexander Sherwood Healy—are a profoundly significant family in the history of the **Catholic Church** in the United States, particularly due to their mixed-race heritage and their groundbreaking professional achievements.

They were three of the ten children born to Michael Morris Healy, a wealthy Irish immigrant plantation owner, and Mary Eliza, a mixed-race enslaved woman, in Georgia in the 19th century. Due to the laws of the time, all the children were legally born into slavery. Their father sent them North for their education and freedom.



The Healy family included three sisters who entered religious life in the Catholic Church: **Eliza Healy, Martha Ann Healy, and Amanda Josephine Healy.**

Eliza Healy (Sister Saint Mary Magdalen)

- **Religious Community:** Congregation of Notre Dame of Montreal (CND).
- **Career:** She entered the novitiate in Montreal in 1874 and took the name **Sister Saint Mary Magdalen**. She pursued a career as a religious nun and teacher.
- **Leadership Role:** She became a **Mother Superior** within her community, specifically leading convents and schools in both Canada and the United States.
- **Key Achievement:** From 1903 to 1918, she served as the superior of the **Villa Barlow** convent and headmistress of St. Mary's School in St. Albans, Vermont. She used strong administrative skills to successfully manage the school and convent, which was struggling with debt and financial instability, and restored its reputation for academic and administrative excellence.
- **Later Life:** In 1918, she was transferred to be the superior of Notre Dame Academy on Staten Island, New York. She died in 1919

The Rise of Black Catholic Lay Leadership and Religious Vocations

The late 19th century brought a remarkable rise in lay involvement and religious calling among Black Catholics.

Lay Leadership in a Segregated Church:

Despite exclusion from many white Catholic institutions, Black Catholics formed societies of charity, mutual aid organizations, and sodalities. These lay associations—such as the Knights and Ladies of St. Peter Claver in the South—emerged as spaces for education, advocacy, and racial pride anchored in Catholic faith.

Venerable Father Augustus Tolton (1854–1897)

Background and Impact: Born into slavery in Missouri, he and his family escaped to Illinois via the Underground Railroad. Denied entry to American seminaries because of his race, he was accepted in Rome and ordained in 1886, becoming the **first recognized African American priest** to serve openly in the United States. He ministered tirelessly to Black Catholics in Quincy and later in Chicago, where he established **St. Monica's Catholic Church** as a Black "National Parish Church," serving all Catholics who faced prejudice.



Declared Venerable in 2019.



Servant of God Julia Greeley (1833/1848–1918)

Background and Impact:

Born enslaved in Missouri, she was freed by the Emancipation Proclamation and eventually settled in Denver, Colorado. Known as "**Denver's Angel of Charity,**" she was a zealous convert who devoted her life to serving the poor, often working under the cover of darkness with her little red wagon to protect the dignity of the recipients and her own anonymity. She was a tireless promoter of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Pioneers of Religious Vocation:

Davis and the contributors to the history of black catholics describe faith-filled struggles for acceptance in religious life. Figures like Father Augustus Tolton—ordained in 1886 as the first publicly recognized Black diocesan priest in the U.S.—became symbols of perseverance and grace. Black women, too, pressed forward in consecrated life: the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans, the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, and others blended deep spirituality with courageous ministry in a Church slow to welcome them fully.

Catholic Education as Formation for Liberation:

Schools, catechetical programs, and small parishes became places of cultural as well as spiritual emancipation. Black lay leaders often taught and catechized their own communities when no white priests would serve them. Education became a tool for internal resilience and external advocacy.

The Josephites and the Black Catholic Congress Movement (1889–1894)

Out of this ferment came institutional organization—the Josephites and the Black Catholic Congress Movement.

The Josephite Mission:

Evolving from the Mill Hill Fathers in England, the Society of St. Joseph for the Sacred Heart—the Josephites—was founded specifically to serve African Americans in the U.S. Their mission combined evangelization and education, aiming to prepare Black Catholics for leadership while fostering vocations among them.

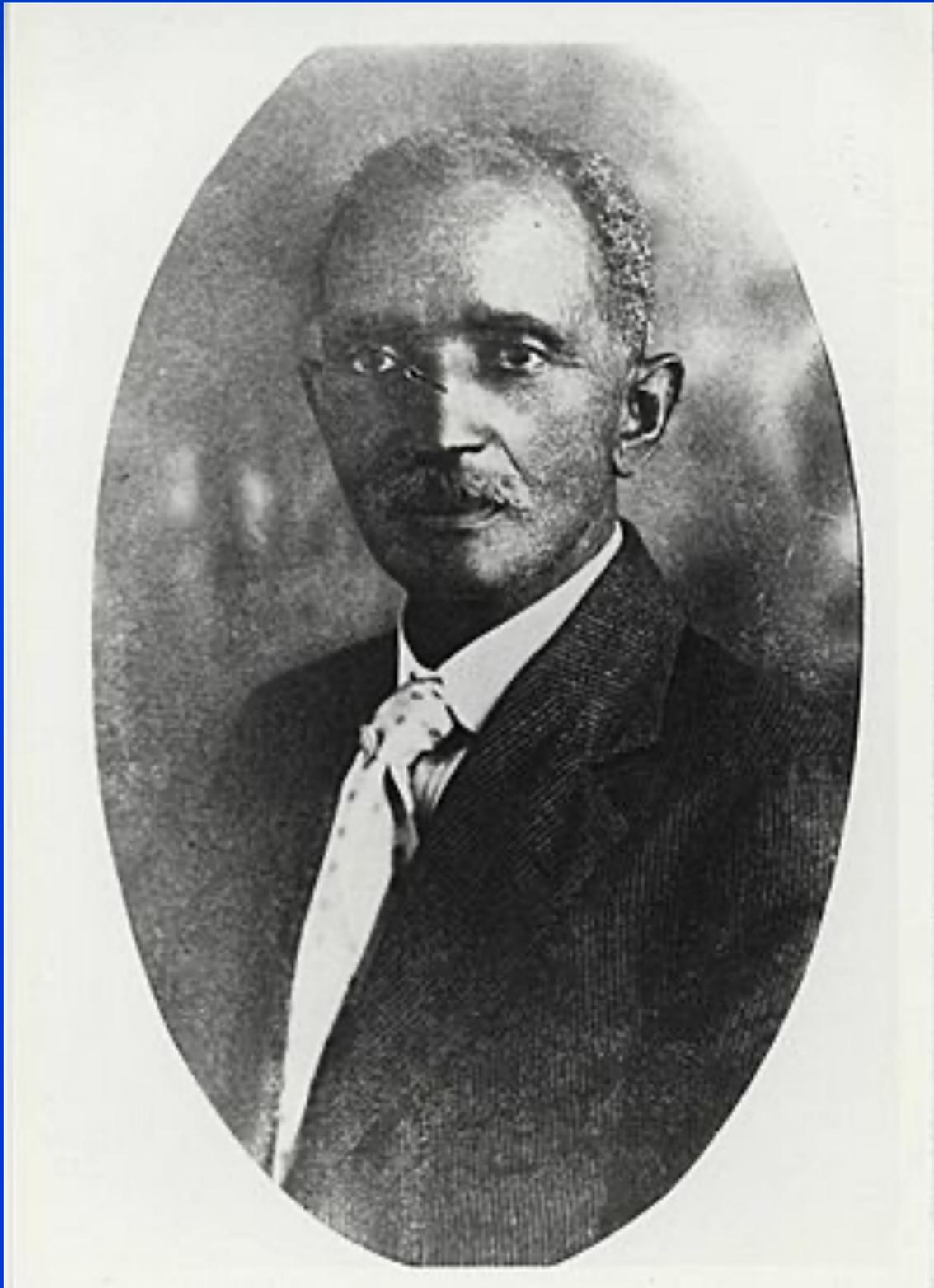
Tensions and Limitations:

The Josephites, though dedicated, often mirrored paternalistic assumptions of the wider Church. They struggled to move beyond a “mission to” model toward a genuine “Church of.” Still, they provided essential pastoral support, founded schools, and partnered with local leaders to sustain fledgling parishes.

The Black Catholic Congress Movement (1889–1894):

Lay leader **Daniel Rudd**, a journalist and civil rights advocate, convened the First Black Catholic Congress in 1889 in Washington, D.C. Delegates from across the nation—priests, educators, and laypeople—gathered to articulate a vision for racial justice, education, and full Catholic participation. These congresses were intellectual and spiritual milestones, blending the rhetoric of Catholic social thought with the realities of racial struggle.

The Congresses declared, in effect: We are fully Catholic and fully Black—an inseparable identity in the Body of Christ.



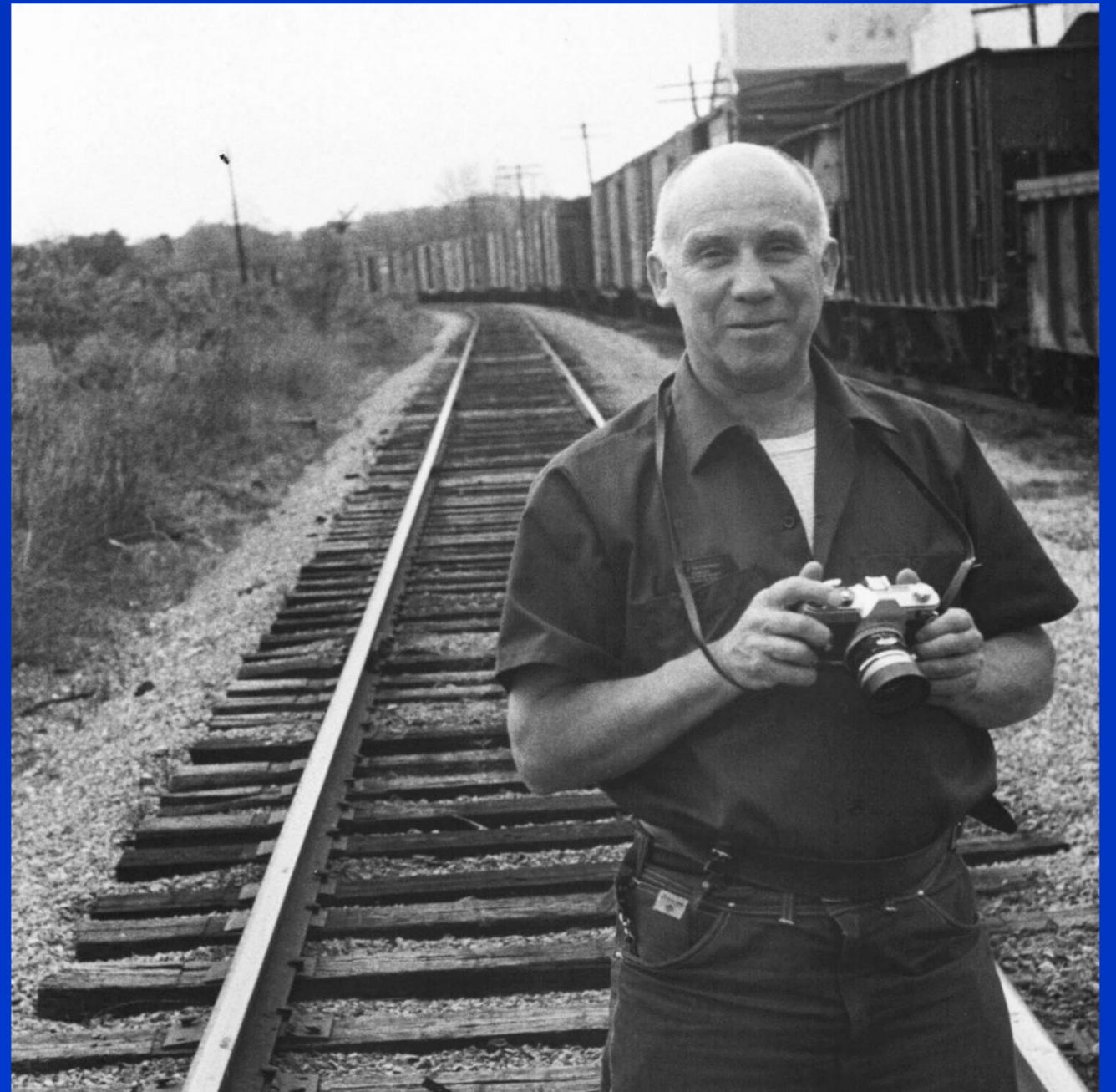
Black Catholic journalist Daniel Rudd was born a slave. He left a legacy.

In the wake of the American Civil War, the former slave Daniel Rudd launched a newspaper that sought to inform his readers, advance racial equality, and convert the world to his Catholic faith.

“Daniel Rudd believed that the Catholic Church was the path to equality for Black people, and he published editorials in his newspaper, ‘The American Catholic Tribune,’ to that effect,” Valerie Washington, executive director of the National Black Catholic Congress, told CNA Feb. 23. “His beliefs, as published, reached not just Black Catholics at the time, but a large readership of White Catholics as well.”

Merton argued that integration required the complete **revolutionizing of white society**: "*The Negro cannot be integrated into white society without revolutionising that society. But that society is not willing to be revolutionized. There is the crux of the problem.*"

He criticized the **hypocrisy of white liberals**, suggesting their participation in the Civil Rights movement was often motivated by their own needs, and they were often unwilling to accept real change in their own communities: "*North or South, integration is always going to be **not on our street but 'somewhere else.'***"



Faith and the Color Line: 1900–1950

The Jim Crow Period and Black Catholics

The Jim Crow system, after slavery's abolition, involved more than just separating Black and white people; it also **institutionalized** white supremacy, white privilege, and discrimination. Segregated churches were common throughout the twentieth century, and African-Americans were largely barred from most Catholic universities and colleges during the first half of that century. The concept of **eugenics emerged**. (think today)

Catholic Church Complicity

History demonstrates how the Catholic Church in America largely enforced racial segregation: Black Catholics could not access all-white convents, seminaries, schools, hospitals, cemeteries, and churches—even ones they helped build. The situation became especially ingrained after Homer Plessy, a Catholic of color from New Orleans, lost his Supreme Court case in 1896, turning the *Catholic Church in Louisiana* into a *Jim Crow institution* with "separate but equal" as both the law of the land and the church's practice.



Cyprian Davis points out that in these decades, Black Catholics faced both white Catholic racism and Protestant hostility, yet they created schools, parishes, and organizations that kept the faith alive and prepared the ground for later movements. “The Progressive Era” and “Between the Wars” to name the paradox: a Church that taught human dignity but tolerated segregated worship and used “prudence” as a reason to avoid confronting white Catholics’ racism.



Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA (1937–1990)

Background and Impact: A highly influential Franciscan Sister, teacher, and evangelist in the late 20th century. Sister Thea was a powerful voice for the Black Catholic experience, blending her African American cultural heritage with her Catholic faith. She was known for her compelling sermons, her beautiful singing, and her tireless work to promote **racial justice and cultural diversity** within the Church, founding the **National Black Sisters' Conference**



Black Catholics in the North were forced to sit in galleries or in the back of the church during Mass. Diocesan policies or informal practices that kept Black students out of seminaries, leading to a scarcity of Black priests

Davis highlights the emergence of Black Catholic lay organizations and leaders in this period— including groups like the Federated Colored Catholics (founded 1925), which pressed the Church on issues like discrimination in religious orders, schools, and seminaries.

Katharine Drexel and the founding of Xavier

Drexel's call and the Jim Crow context

Mother Katharine Drexel as a wealthy white heiress who became a religious sister, dedicating her inheritance to "*Indians and colored people,*" building schools and missions in the South and West. She recognized the severe lack of Catholic educational opportunities for Black children and young adults during Jim Crow, especially in the South, and saw education as essential for both spiritual and social advancement



In letters to her Sisters, she described quietly evaluating property in New Orleans and relying on white intermediaries to buy land for a Black school, knowing that open association with a “colored” institution could kill the sale due to racism.

This was **Courage under threat**: Historical accounts report that when she purchased a former university building for Xavier Preparatory School, locals smashed the windows; her letters interpret such events in light of the cross and perseverance. **She sought permission for coeducation at Xavier University—men and women studying together—despite a recent Vatican document criticizing co-ed education, and she quietly sent some white Sisters to study alongside Black students, despite state segregation laws.**

Drexel’s correspondence shows a spirituality of “holy cunning”—using legal and financial structures of Jim Crow society against themselves in order to secure a Catholic higher education for Black students.

It is one thing to be persecuted by those outside the Church...it's quite another for people within the Church...to persecute you and tell you that you are not wanted there.

Jim Crow extended into all aspects of Catholic practice. The hierarchy often tolerated or cooperated with segregation to avoid alienating white parishioners or provoking anti-Catholic sentiment.

Black Catholics were often restricted to the back pews or upper galleries, forced to come to Mass late and leave early, and sometimes received the Eucharist *after* white parishioners, using *separate vessels*.

Segregation extended to burial grounds and pious associations (sodalities).

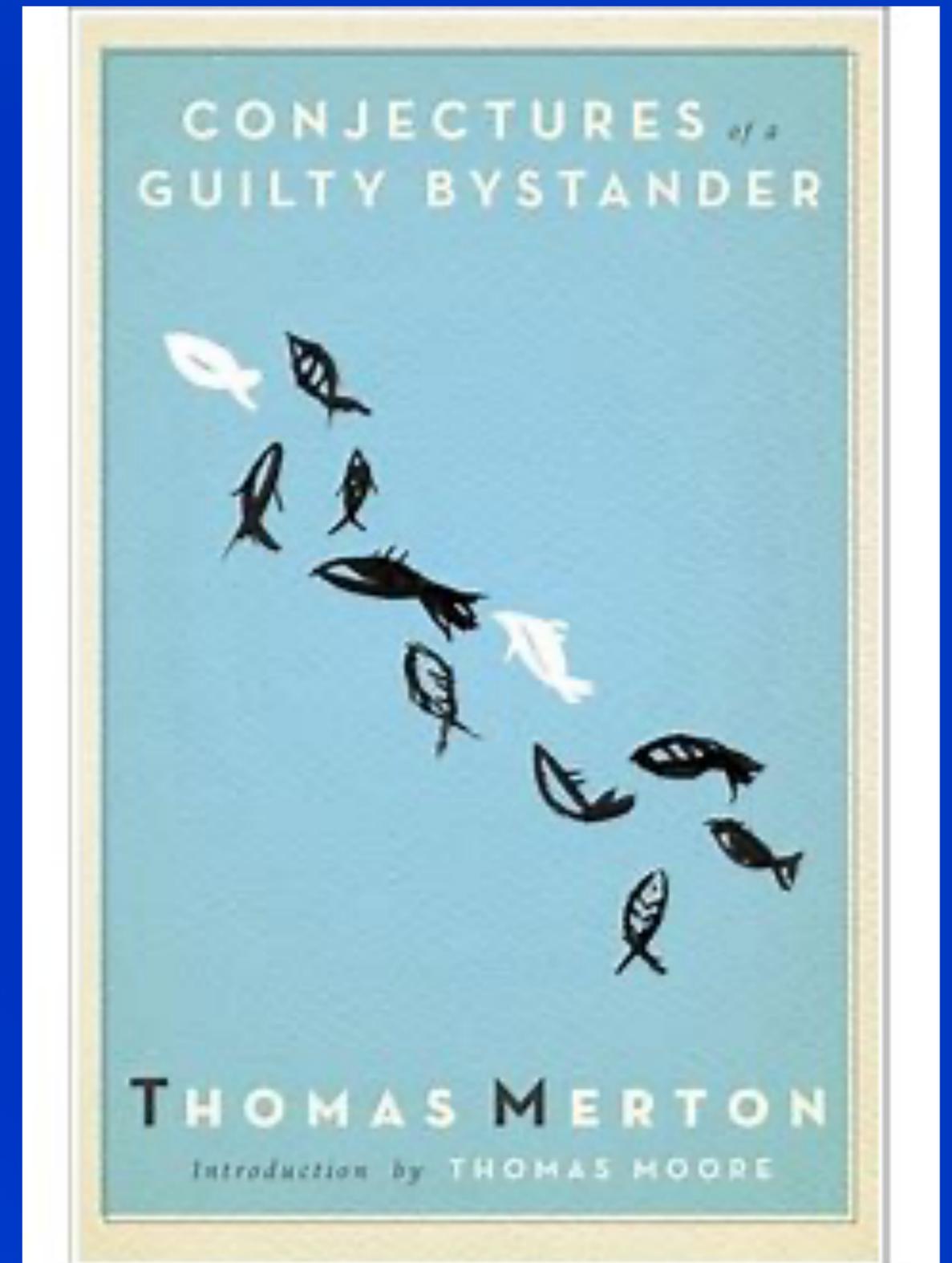
The Rise of "Historically Black Parishes: Explain how many Black parishes and institutions were established not purely by choice, but as a result of segregation or as a response to the need for ministry when white parishes excluded Black parishioners.

Purpose: They were often created as "**missions**" — often staffed by missionary orders like the Josephites, who focused specifically on African American evangelization.

The Silver Lining: While a product of segregation, these separate institutions became vital centers of community, self-determination, and cultural expression for Black Catholics, nurturing leadership and vocations that were often excluded elsewhere.

The burden of change fell on the perpetrators, not victims: Merton rejected the idea that Black people needed to "*prove themselves*" worthy of equality or wait patiently for white acceptance. He argued that expecting Black people to solve racism was both unjust and absurd—like asking the victim of a crime to rehabilitate the criminal.

White complicity and illusion: He believed most white people, even those who considered themselves "*good*" or "*non-racist*," were complicit in racist structures through their silence, comfort with the status quo, and failure to act. Merton was particularly critical of white moderates and liberals who claimed to support equality but did nothing substantive to challenge racist systems.



The Civil Rights Era: Prophets and Freedom Fighters

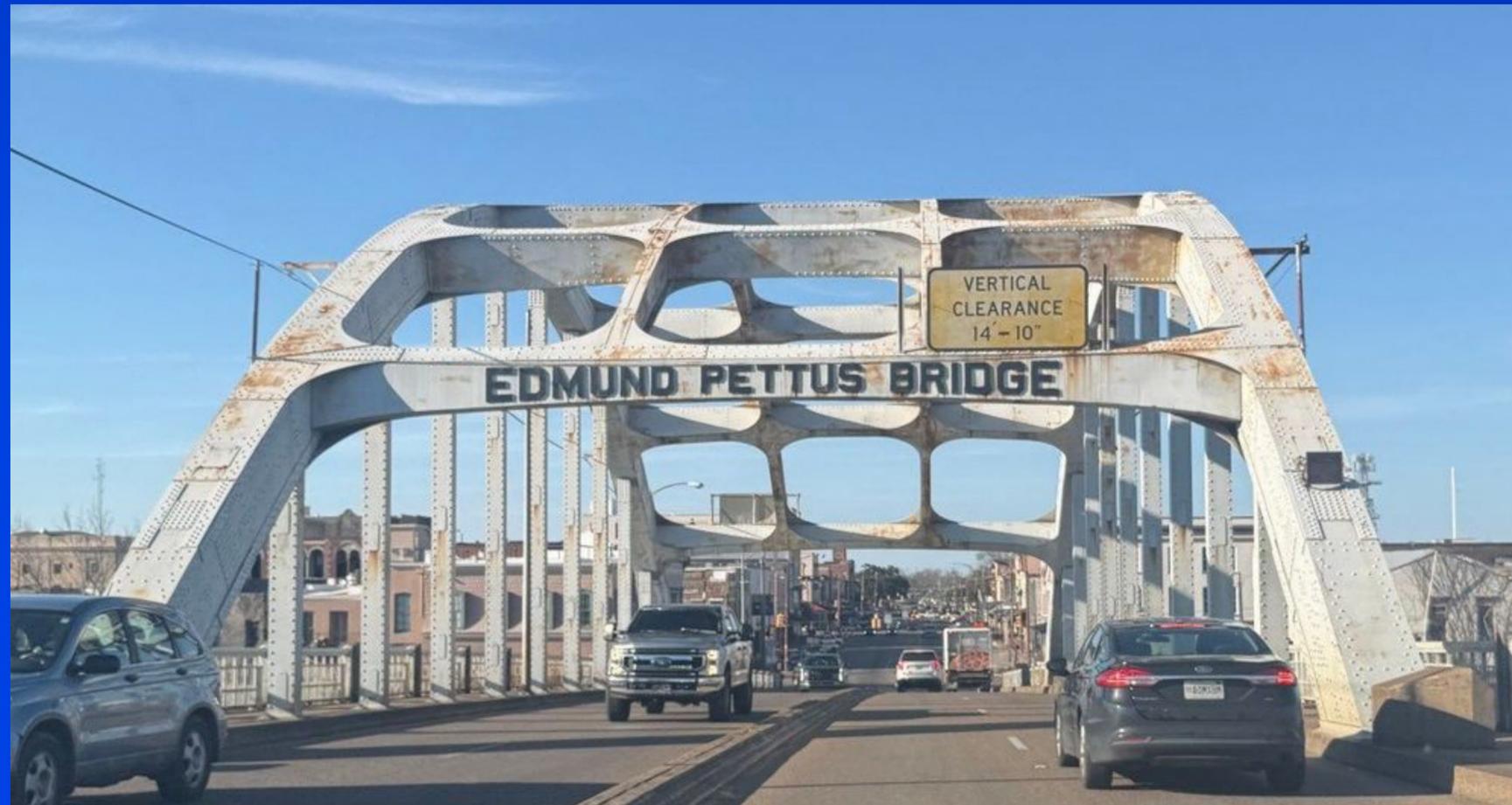
The "Black Catholic Movement" (1960s–1970s)

A second, more political wave of departures occurred during the *Black Power Movement*. This era is often called the "Black Catholic Revolution" or the "Black Catholic Revolt."

1968 Pivot Point: Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Black Catholic clergy and laypeople began to organize against what they called the "white racist institution" of the Church. *The Black Catholic Clergy Caucus (formed in 1968) issued a stinging statement declaring the Church to be "a white racist institution" in its treatment of Black people.*

The 1970s Exodus: Frustrated by a slow pace of change despite the reforms of Vatican II, many Black Catholics left the Church during this decade. While some joined traditional Black Protestant churches, others stayed to "Protestantize" their Catholic worship by introducing Gospel music, Negro spirituals, and African-inspired vestments.

"Those who marched, organized, prayed, and endured brutality during the Civil Rights Movement chose this way not because it was safe, but because it was faithful." ~ Meagan Kim



Because it is impossible to narrate Black sisters' journey in the United States—accurately and honestly—without confronting the Church's largely unacknowledged and unreconciled histories of colonialism, slavery, and segregation, I address these violent systems of power and their perpetrators—male and female—directly. In so doing, this book also recovers an overlooked chapter in the history of the long African American freedom struggle—a tradition of sustained Black Catholic resistance to white supremacy and exclusion that most scholars argue does not exist. ~ Shannen Dee Williams, Ph.D.



The Roots — White Supremacy Was Never Outside the Church

To understand what happened to Black sisters, we have to be honest about something uncomfortable. The Catholic Church did not stand apart from white supremacy in America. It did not watch from a distance and occasionally stumbled into racism. It helped build it.

The Catholic Church introduced African slavery into the Americas. It practiced segregation — in parishes, in schools, and yes, in convents. Williams is blunt about this: "*Segregation and exclusion were also Catholic traditions.*"

She goes further. The Church was not a reluctant follower of racism. It was, in her words, a "*spiritual propagator of white supremacy,*" practicing it "*generally without apology.*"

In some orders, Black sisters could not eat in the same room as their white counterparts. They could not set foot in the motherhouse. Some were required to take their vows in separate ceremonies — alone or nearly alone — while white sisters professed together in community.

Think about what that means for a moment.

You are a woman who has heard God's call. You have said yes. You are professing vows of communion, of poverty, of obedience — and you are being told you cannot sit at the same table. You cannot pray in the same chapel. You cannot even make your promises in the same room.

That is not a minor slight. That is a message. And the message is: You are less.

The Habit as a Battleground

Here's something that might surprise you. One of the most visible signs of a sister/nun's commitment to God — the veil, the habit — became one of the most contested battlegrounds in the fight over race inside the Church.

Some *Black congregations were actually forbidden by white church authorities from wearing the veil in public*. Why? Because the sight of a Black woman in a habit was experienced as threatening. It disrupted the racial order. It said something white supremacy did not want said.

Even in the twentieth century, some white-led congregations tried to prevent Black sisters from wearing a veil that resembled their own. They turned a sacred garment into a racial badge.

White-led congregations attempted to **prevent Black sisters from wearing veils** that resembled their own due to historical discriminatory practices. For instance, the **Sisters of Loretto** allowed Black women to become oblates in the 1820s but never granted them full membership, leading to distinct practices and clothing. Additionally, many religious orders explicitly prohibited Black women from wearing veils, as seen in the **Sisters of the Holy Family**, which was founded in 1842 and was not allowed to wear veils in public.



Pope Francis revealed a bombshell about the Catholic Church, with sickening stories of sisters/nuns especially black sisters in “sexual slavery”.

White priests and bishops sometimes described the very existence of Black sisterhoods as a "*profanation of the habit.*" The idea that a Black woman could wear the habit — could dedicate her life to God in that way — was, to them, an offense.

Williams quotes the experience directly: white-led orders "*tried to prohibit Black nuns...from wearing a veil that resembled the habit of their own vowed members...Thus, wearing a veil — a marker of a commitment to holiness — was, and still is, a subversive act.*"



The dual identity of being both Black and Catholic is complex and often marginalized. Black Catholics encounter systemic racism and marginalization within both the Black Church and the Catholic Church. This identity is influenced by systemic racism, cultural expression through liturgy, and the need for Black Catholics to incorporate cultural elements into liturgy to define and express their localized church identity. The Traditionalist Liturgy Style, the most common liturgical form in the U.S., is associated with Catholics of European heritage and is also present in parishes with African descent members. This style generally appeals to Catholics with conservative liturgical tastes.

Emergence of Black Catholic Theology

Black thinkers like Fr. Joseph Nearon, Sr. Thea Bowman, and Fr. Bryan Massingale (later but well known today) built upon this moment—integrating liberation theology and the Black religious experience.

Black Catholic theology insists that liberation is not secondary but central to holiness and to Catholic universality.

How does God's call to liberation challenge our Church's structures, assumptions, and comfort?

Joyce Ruth Williams converted to Catholicism in 1944, just two years after migrating to Chicago from Summit, Mississippi. A regular volunteer at the city's Friendship House, she became inspired by the Catholic witness of founder Catherine de Hueck Doherty and the writings of Trappist monk Thomas Merton, shortly before feeling the call to religious life.



Courtesy of the Order of St. Benedict at St. Joseph, Minnesota.

The assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. profoundly affected her, changing her forever. The next day, she shared the news with her all-white *Religion in the Modern World* class at Cathedral High School in St. Cloud, Minnesota, aiming to encourage a meaningful discussion. However, her students responded with silence and indifference. After a tense pause, a male student finally spoke, saying, “Well, that’s one down, how many more to go?!”

The nuns who witnessed the life and death of Martin Luther King Jr

Sister Mary Antona Ebo was the only black Catholic nun who marched with civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama, in 1965.

“I’m here because I’m a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness,” Sister Mary Antona Ebo said to fellow demonstrators at a March 10, 1965 protest attended by King.

The protest took place three days after the “Bloody Sunday” clash, where police attacked several hundred voting rights demonstrators with clubs and tear gas, causing some severe injuries among the non-violent marchers.

She died Nov. 11, 2017 in Bridgeton, Missouri at the age of 93.





Carrying Forward the Black Catholic Witness: A Call to See, Judge, and Act

Let me share something with you today that the Holy Spirit is calling us to hear and respond to.

SEE: *Recognizing the Reality Before Us*

Look around our Church. Black Catholics have always been here —praying, serving, building up the Body of Christ—even when they were treated as invisible, even when they were pushed to the margins.

But here's the honest truth we need to face: *that marginalization hasn't ended.*

JUDGE: *What Does Faith Tell Us About This Reality?*

Now, let's bring our faith to bear on what we're seeing. Cyprian Davis gave us a powerful document with a simple but revolutionary title: "*Stamped with the Image of God.*" Think about those words. **Stamped.** Not lightly sketched, not tentatively suggested—**stamped with the image of God.**

This isn't abstract theology, friends. This is a concrete claim about every Black Catholic/Christian you see. Every face, every voice, every vocation is a sacramental sign of God's presence. When we look at our Black brothers and sisters, we're looking at icons of God among us—not guests in someone else's Church, but essential witnesses to who God is.

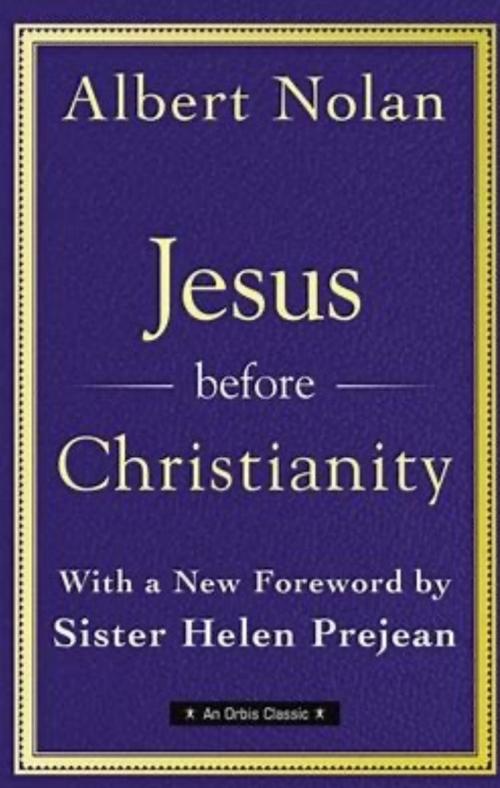
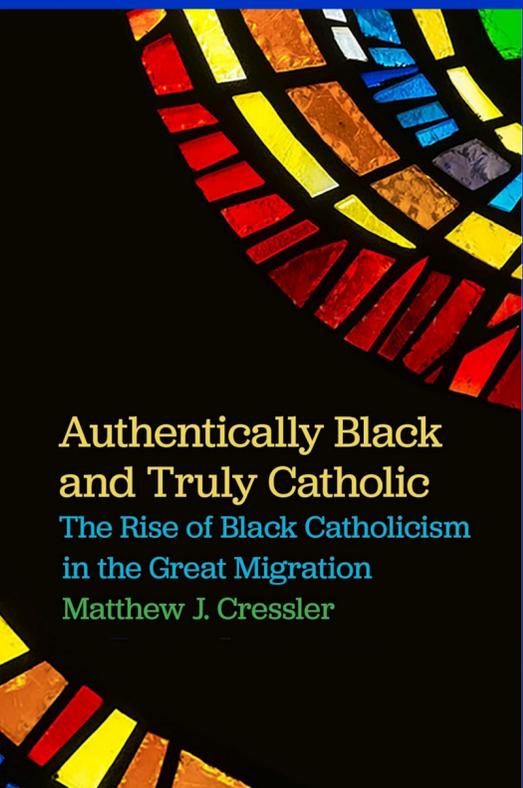
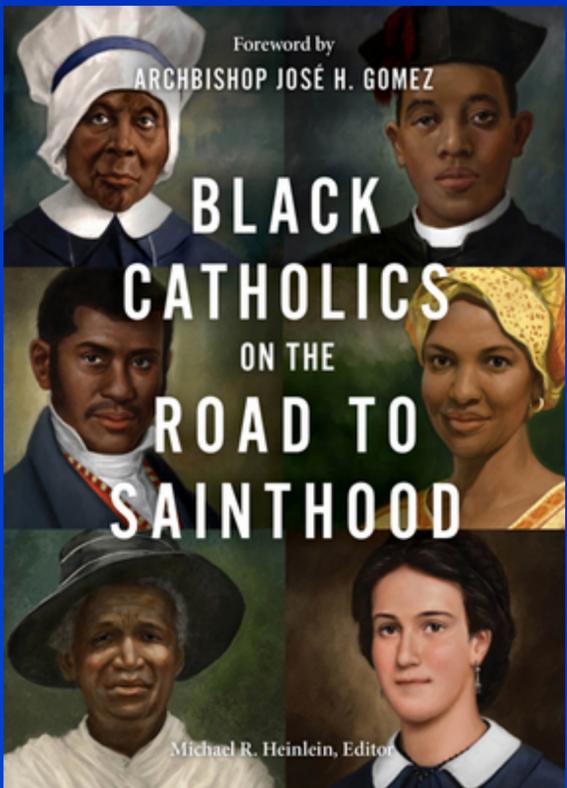
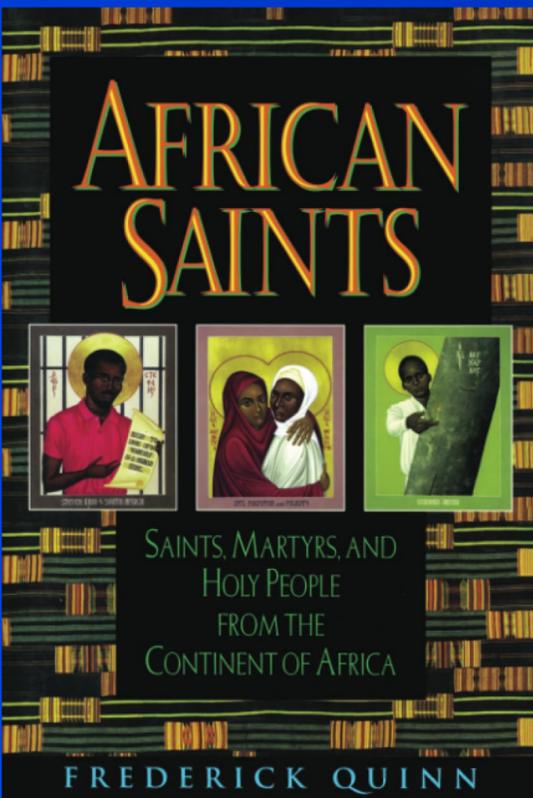
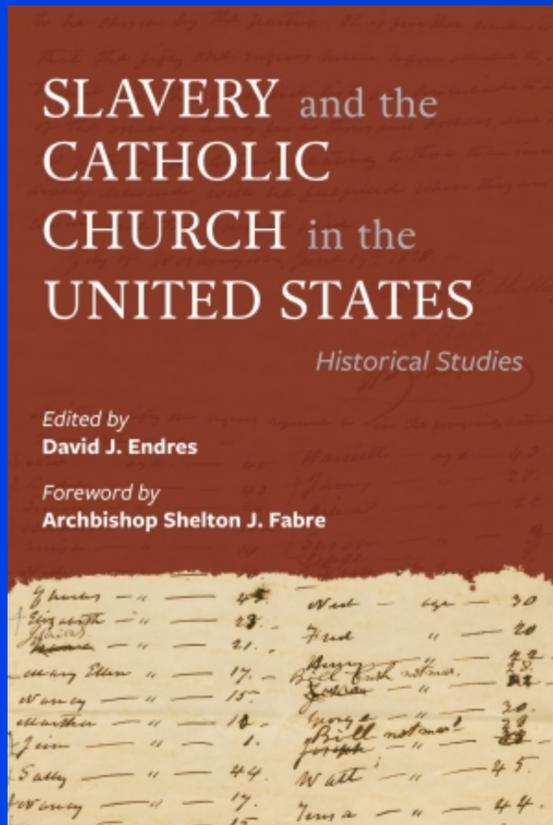
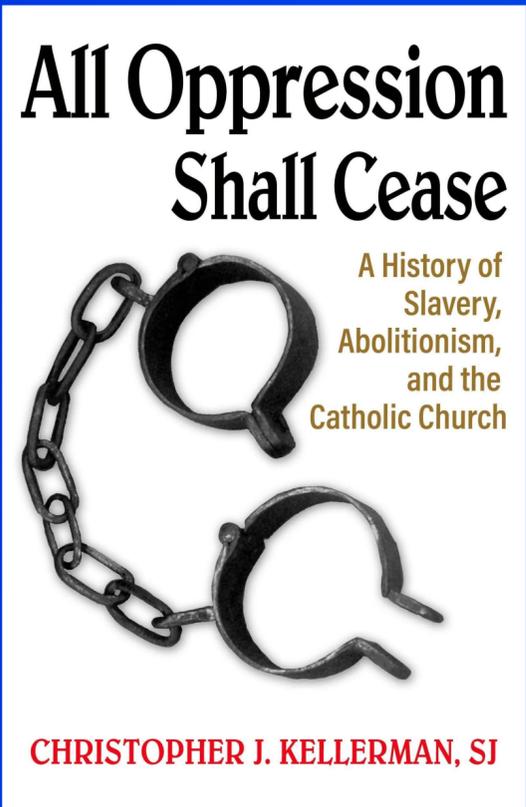
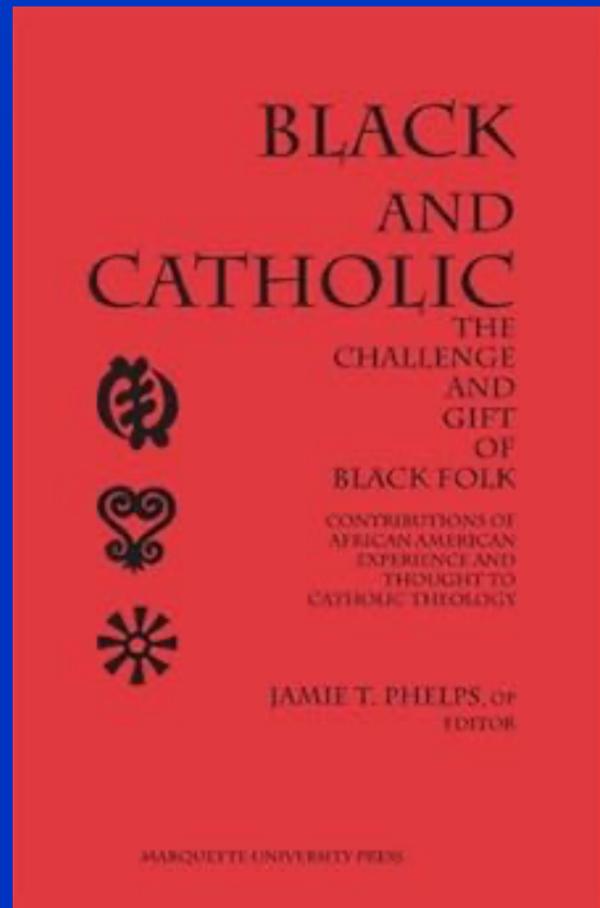
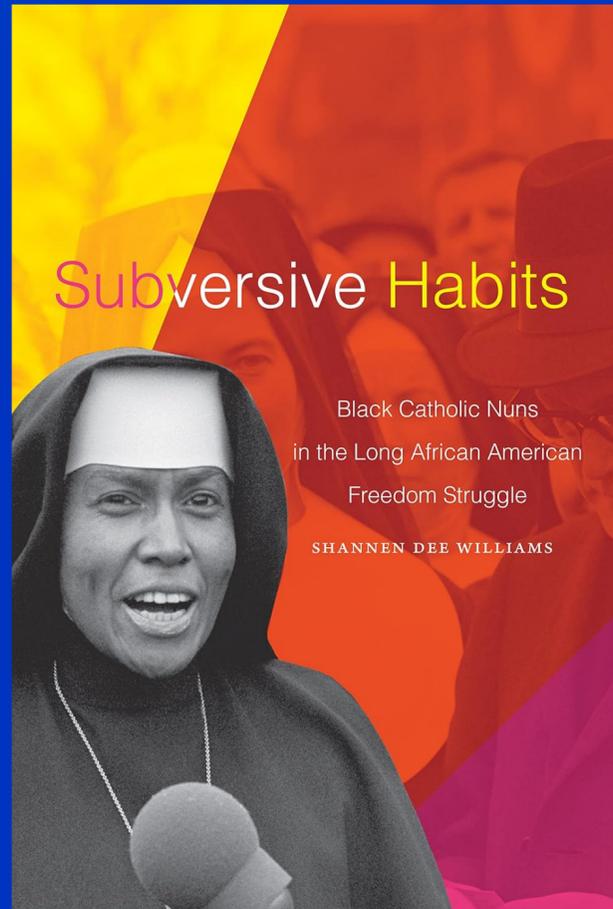
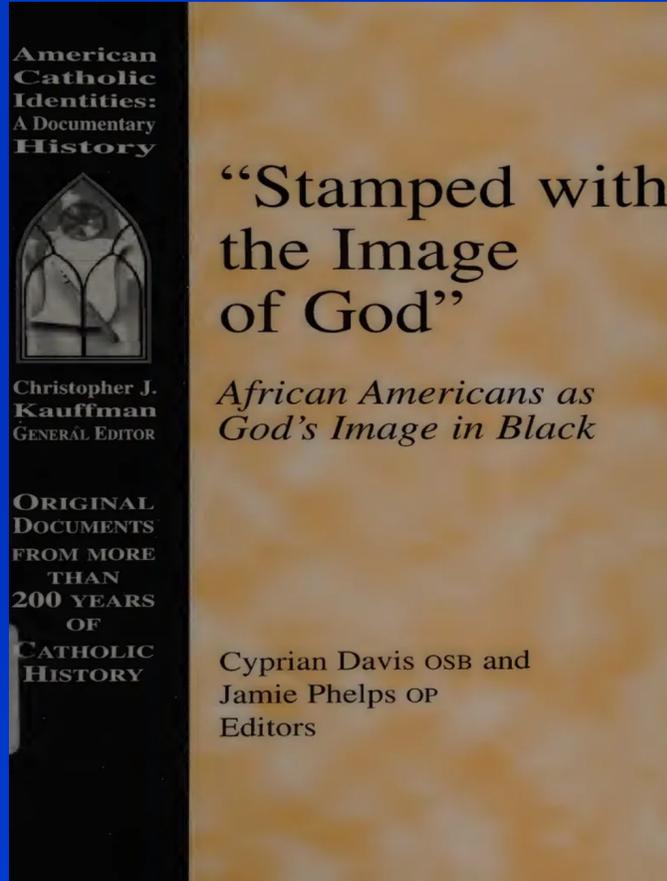
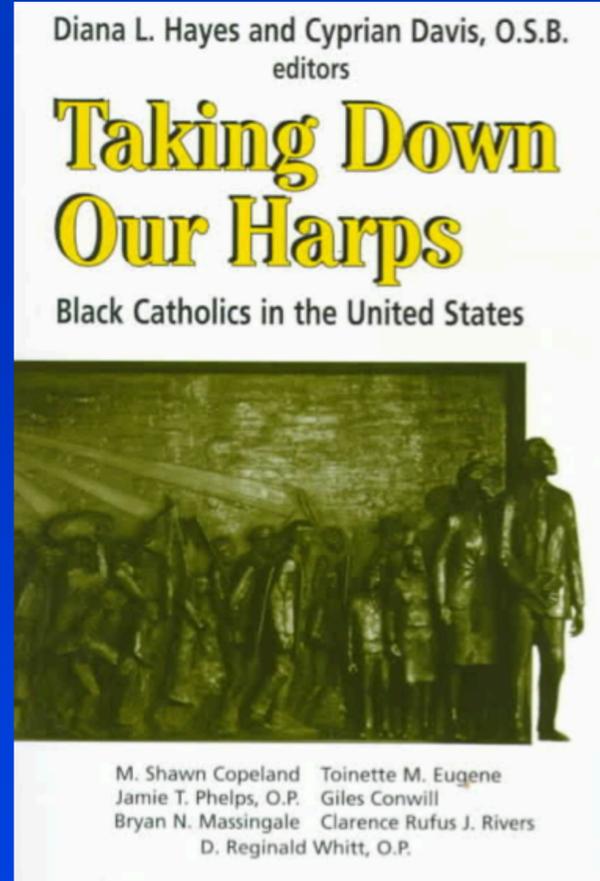
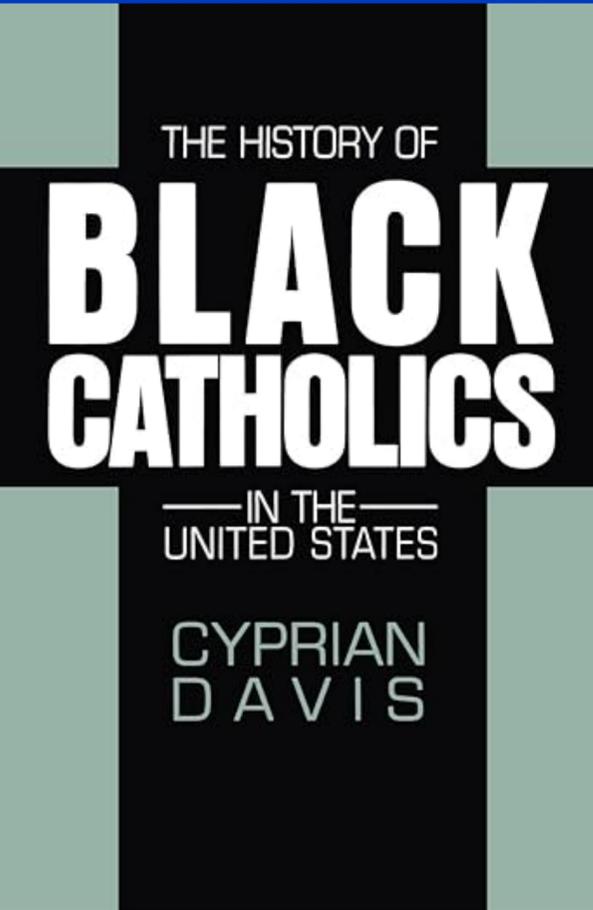
ACT: What Must We Do Now?

So where does this leave us? What is the Holy Spirit asking of us?

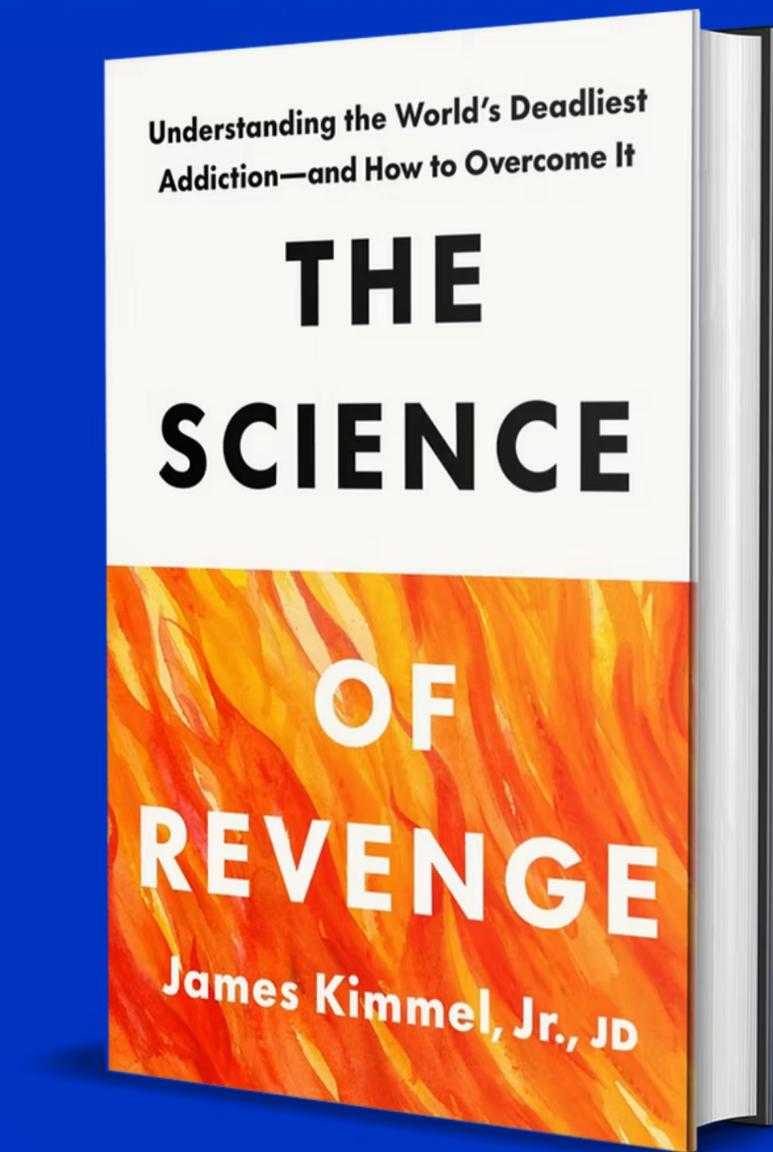
First, we must name the truth. Cyprian Davis insisted that the "anonymous" status of Black Catholics has to end. No more invisibility. No more footnotes. The whole Church needs to remember, to honor, and to be transformed by Black Catholic history and presence.



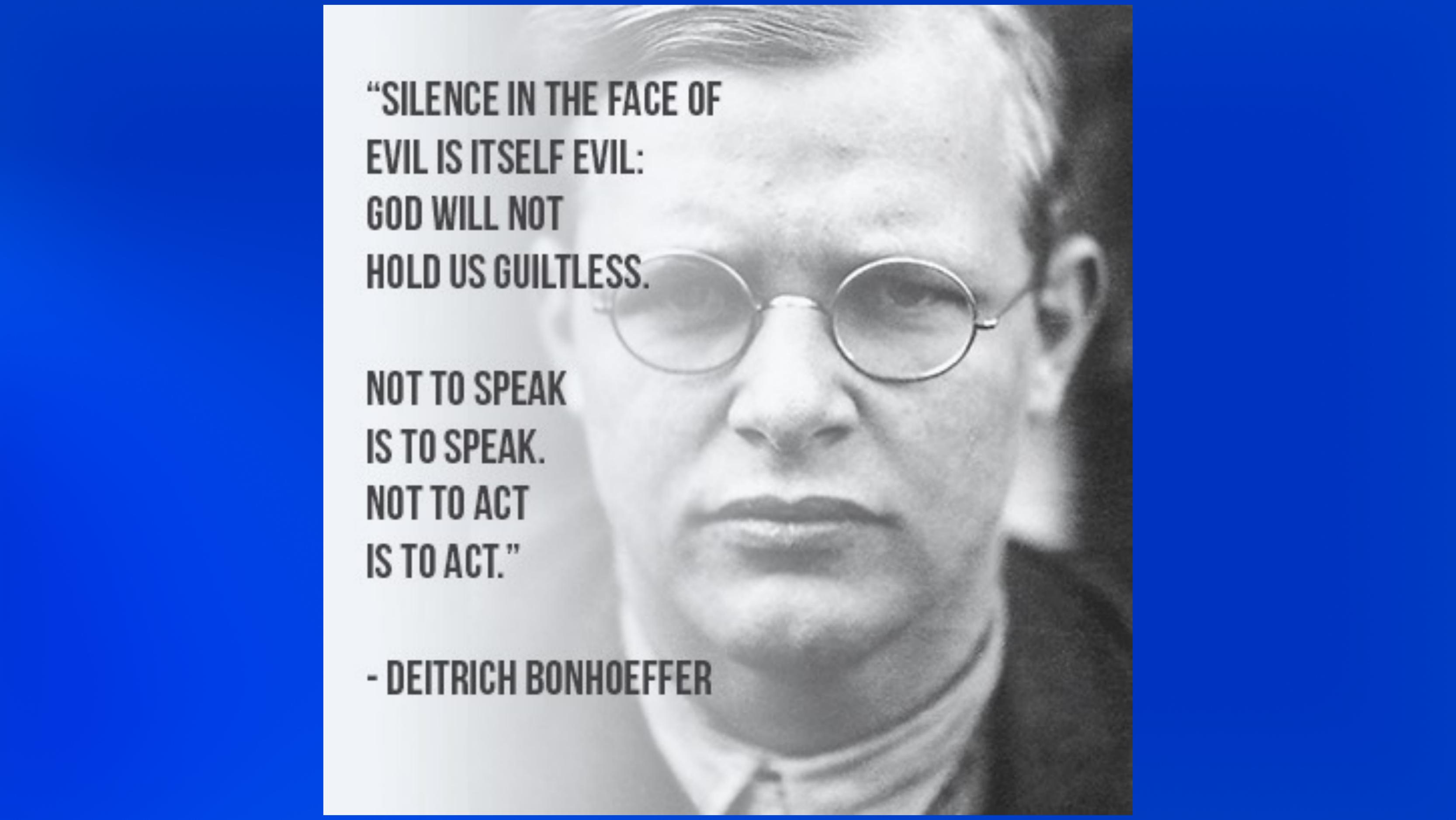
Holy Bible
GRANT PRINT



James Kimmel, Jr., JD, is a **violence researcher, psychiatry professor, and author who explores the science of revenge, addiction, forgiveness, and violence**. James Kimmel, Jr., J.D., is a lawyer, author, Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine, and the founder and co-director of the Yale Collaborative for Motive Control Studies. A breakthrough scholar and expert on revenge and forgiveness, James first identified compulsive revenge seeking as an addiction. He developed the behavioral addiction model of revenge and the brain disease model of revenge addiction as public health approaches for preventing and treating violence and founded Revenge Anonymous (RA), a worldwide self-help 12-step program like AA/NA for recovering from revenge addiction. He made the study of revenge and forgiveness his life's work after nearly committing a mass shooting as a teenager. He also developed the School Nonjustice System bullying prevention and victim support program for use with schools and youth. Prior to his work at Yale, he co-founded the largest peer support mental health agency in Pennsylvania.



James is the author of three books on revenge: *The Science of Revenge: Understanding the World's Deadliest Addiction--and How to Overcome It*; *The Trial of Fallen Angels*, a novel; and *Suing for Peace: A Guide for Resolving Life's Conflicts*.



**“SILENCE IN THE FACE OF
EVIL IS ITSELF EVIL:
GOD WILL NOT
HOLD US GUILTLSS.**

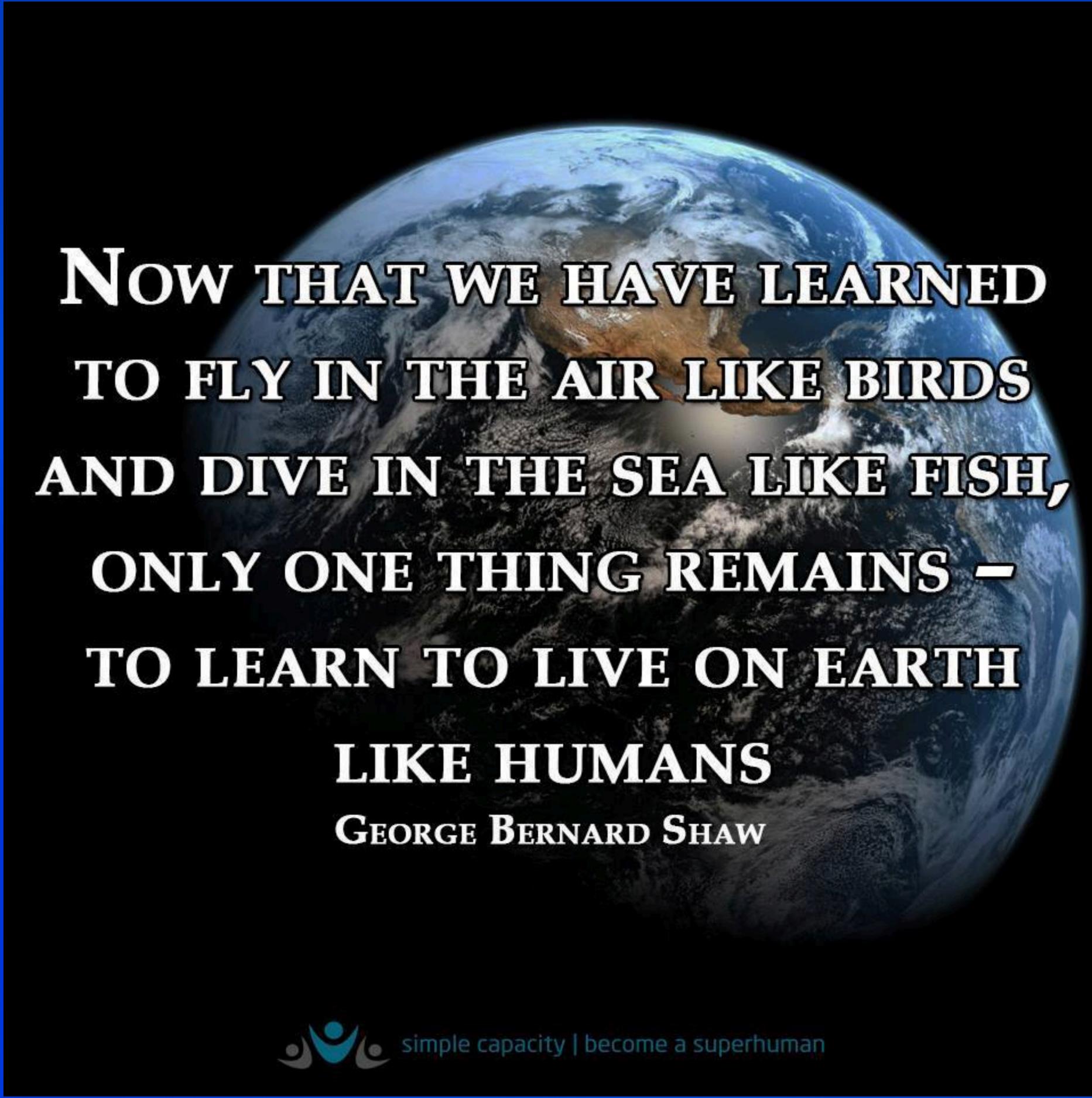
**NOT TO SPEAK
IS TO SPEAK.
NOT TO ACT
IS TO ACT.”**

- DEITRICH BONHOEFFER

Be A Mensch!

Practice Eudaimonia

Be a Historian and Share the History



**NOW THAT WE HAVE LEARNED
TO FLY IN THE AIR LIKE BIRDS
AND DIVE IN THE SEA LIKE FISH,
ONLY ONE THING REMAINS –
TO LEARN TO LIVE ON EARTH
LIKE HUMANS
GEORGE BERNARD SHAW**

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