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News & Features

Bound for sainthood: 3 black women religious

current article
by: [Phil Taylor](#)

Profiles of Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, Mother Henriette Delille and Sister Thea Bowman

Three different women from three distinct backgrounds, all black women religious, were to be honored for their extraordinary service to the church during a Mass Nov. 17 at St. Paul Cathedral in Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood. All three women are being considered for canonization. They are Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, Mother Henriette Delille and Sister Thea Bowman.

Mother Lange is founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, a congregation of African-American religious began in 1829. The congregation is still based in Baltimore, where Mother Lange began a school for girls in her own home. The school is considered one of the first for black children in the United States.

The Mass was part of a project of the Race and Reconciliation Dialogue Group, based at the cathedral parish. In the past, it has worked to create awareness of the wide diversity of the church's nearly 4,500 saints, reflecting the universal nature of the church.

"We are delighted that we can celebrate the lives of these three holy women whose lives are now a source of inspiration to all of us in the church and whose process of canonization can be assisted by our prayers" said Father Kris Stubna, rector and cathedral parish pastor.

The Mass was to be offered by Bishop David Zubik, joined by Fathers Carmen D'Amico, pastor of Miraculous Medal Parish in Meadow Lands; David Taylor, pastor of St. Charles Lwanga in Pittsburgh's East End; and Father Stubna. In addition, student African priests from local parishes were to join in the liturgy.

"Special sense of joy"

"Sister Thea Bowman, who earned a doctorate in literature and linguistics, promoted intercultural understanding through song and dance, and lectured to promote cultural awareness and pride in black culture," said Cecile Springer, one of the event co-chairs. "An amazing woman whose presence and preaching turned people's hearts to God, we pray for her election to sainthood."

Although her cause for canonization has not been officially presented to the church, Sister Thea, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, is in line to become perhaps the first black



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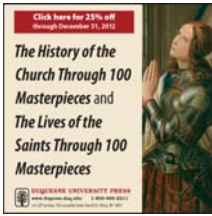
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woman saint from the United States. Mother Lange and Mother Delille could also claim that honor depending on the will of the Vatican.

Sister Thea was born in Yazoo City, Miss., in 1937. She became a vibrant voice for evangelization. She quickly became known to national audiences as a noted African-American teacher, singer, dancer and lecturer. She drew capacity crowds giving lectures and workshops on black Catholic culture, and life and spirituality. She was also a liturgist and artist.



Born Bertha Bowman, she took the name “Thea” upon taking her vows. She entered the order at the age of 15, after converting to Catholicism. She would later earn her doctorate degree from The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Sister Thea was invited to Pittsburgh by what was then known as the Department for Black Catholic Ministries and Laymen’s Council in the mid- to late-1980s as a guest presenter. She gave a rousing presentation at St. Benedict the Moor Church in the city’s Hill District.



TV journalist Mike Wallace interviewed her in 1987 for a segment on “60 Minutes.” He wrote in a forward in the book “Thea Bowman: Shooting Star — Selected Writings and Speeches,” released following her death in 1990:

“I don’t remember when I’ve been more moved, more enchanted by a person whom I’ve profiled, than by Sister Thea. ... You simply couldn’t come away from a session with Sister Thea without sharing that special sense of joy she seemed to bring to everything she turned her hand to.”

Sister Thea died in her home in Canton, Miss., of bone cancer. She reportedly was treated for breast cancer in 1984. Later, the disease would spread throughout her body. For the last two years of her life she was confined to a wheelchair.

Despite battling cancer, she spoke at a meeting of the U.S. bishops in South Orange, N.J., in 1989. She got the bishops to hold hands and sing, “We Shall Overcome.” Some bishops were brought to tears, calling it a moving and emotional experience.

She died March 30, 1990, at the age of 52. More than 1,000 mourners attended her funeral Mass in Jackson, Miss. Newark, N.J., Aux. Bishop Joseph Francis (representing the nation’s then-13 African-American bishops) said at her funeral that the nun “was truly the incarnated wounded healer” who healed many others spiritually and psychologically.

“We (the dialogue group) view her as someone whose faith, extraordinary devotion to the Lord and loving impact makes her worthy of sainthood,” Springer said.

She never lost faith

Mother Lange joins Pierre Toussaint as the first African-American Catholics in the U.S. to be considered by the church for sainthood. Like Sister Thea and Mother Delille, her story can be considered amazing in many ways. The fact that she is the founder of the first religious order of black women in the United States has certainly captured the attention of Rome.

Mother Lange was born about 1784 and is believed to have left Cuba following revolutionary upheaval in what was then her native San Dominique (now Haiti). Cuba was then a haven for refugees from Hispaniola. Hispaniola is the island that makes up the present-day Dominican Republic and Haiti.

Records indicate she arrived in Baltimore in 1812 with her family.

At the time of her arrival, slavery had not been abolished in the United States. Convent archives contain manumission papers freeing slaves that served as “green cards” for the novices who without them could be picked up and resold into slavery. Despite facing

tremendous opposition, she never lost faith in God, and with others was able to establish a congregation of women of color in a slave state long before the Emancipation Proclamation.

For the times, life for the small community of women was not easy and the congregation's growth was slow.

Unfortunately, racial discrimination and poverty were very much a part of the daily trials of the Oblate sisters. Regardless, they persevered in their work of feeding the hungry, nursing the ill and teaching children.

Mother Lange in 1828, along with Sulpician Father James Joubert and two other black women, started St. Frances Academy, which is still open today.

Mother Lange's "servant of God" status is the first stage of canonization.

"Several years ago, our group went to Baltimore to visit Mother Mary Lange's school," said Dorothy Miller, a long-time member of the Race and Reconciliation Dialogue Group.

Mother Lange died in 1882 at the age of 98 on the campus of the academy she and others established.

"For so long, no one ever heard of Mother Lange, but now she is getting her just due. She was someone who saw the need for things before others did and took the risks to make them happen," said Oblate Sister John Francis Schilling in a 2008 interview.

"I wish to live and die for God"

Henriette Delille was born in New Orleans, a free black woman around 1810. She founded the Sisters of the Holy Family, a religious community for black women.

Her canonization cause was accepted by the Vatican Congregation for Saints' Causes in 1988.

Benedictine Father Cyprian Davis, a noted historian, was asked by her congregation to research and write a book on Delille and spent 10 years assembling the various pieces of Mother Henriette's life. The book "Henriette Delille, Servant of Slaves, Witness to the Poor" chronicles her life. Father Cyprian is a professor of church history at St. Meinrad School of Theology in Indiana.

Father Cyprian said he found much of his information in church and financial records, civil records and the archives of the Sisters of the Holy Family.

What the black priest uncovered is a portrait of a free woman of color and some very interesting facts about the Delille family.

The Delilles were free due to the efforts of Henriette's great-great-grandmother, Nanette. Nanette was brought to America from Africa as a slave and was freed after the death of her owner. A shrewd businesswoman, years later she acquired enough wealth to buy her daughter, Cecille, and two grandchildren out of slavery. This was possible because Louisiana was under Spanish rule at the time and had laws on slaves' rights.

Father Cyprian noted that, although Henriette's mother claimed to be illiterate, she was also a businesswoman who bought and sold property and slaves as well.

Henriette was the result of a liaison between a white planter and her mother.

The family believed Henriette would follow suit, wed a wealthy suitor like her sister, and live a comfortable life, even though Father Cyprian noted that for the most part "they had a

second-class citizenship.”

Henriette ultimately would reject that lifestyle. About 1836, she underwent a religious experience and wrote, “I wish to live and die for God.”

It was during the 1840s that she began assembling a group of women who would become the Sisters of the Holy Family. It should be noted that she fought civil laws that forbade people of color from forming such societies, and she was thwarted in an earlier attempt to form a congregation. The congregation was granted full ecclesiastical approval in 1851, according to records found by the Benedictine scholar. Mother Henriette was sick periodically during her life. It is believed she died of tuberculosis in 1862.

The congregation’s earliest works of charity included housing needy elderly women. It continues today as the Lafon Nursing Facility of the Holy Family in New Orleans. A school the congregation founded in 1867 continues to serve students as St. Mary’s Academy, also in the city. The sisters’ ministries have spread to include Texas, California and Belize, as well as Louisiana. Mother Henriette was named “venerable” by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010.

Toward sainthood

Three major steps are involved in the Catholic Church’s process leading to canonization. First is the declaration of a person’s heroic virtues, after which the church gives him or her the title “venerable” or “servant of God.”

Second is beatification, after which she or he is called “blessed.” The final step is the declaration of sainthood or canonization.

While Latin America has several saints of African origin, these women could well be the first African-American saints from the U.S.

To date, the Race and Reconciliation group has sponsored several “black saints celebrations” that have profiled the lives of Benedict the Moor, Martin de Porres, Charles Lwanga and martyrs, Augustine, Maurice and the Theban Legion martyrs, Moses the Black, Josephine Bakhita, (Venerable) Pierre Toussaint and Latin American saints, among others.

Catholic News Service contributed heavily to this report.

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