

in a
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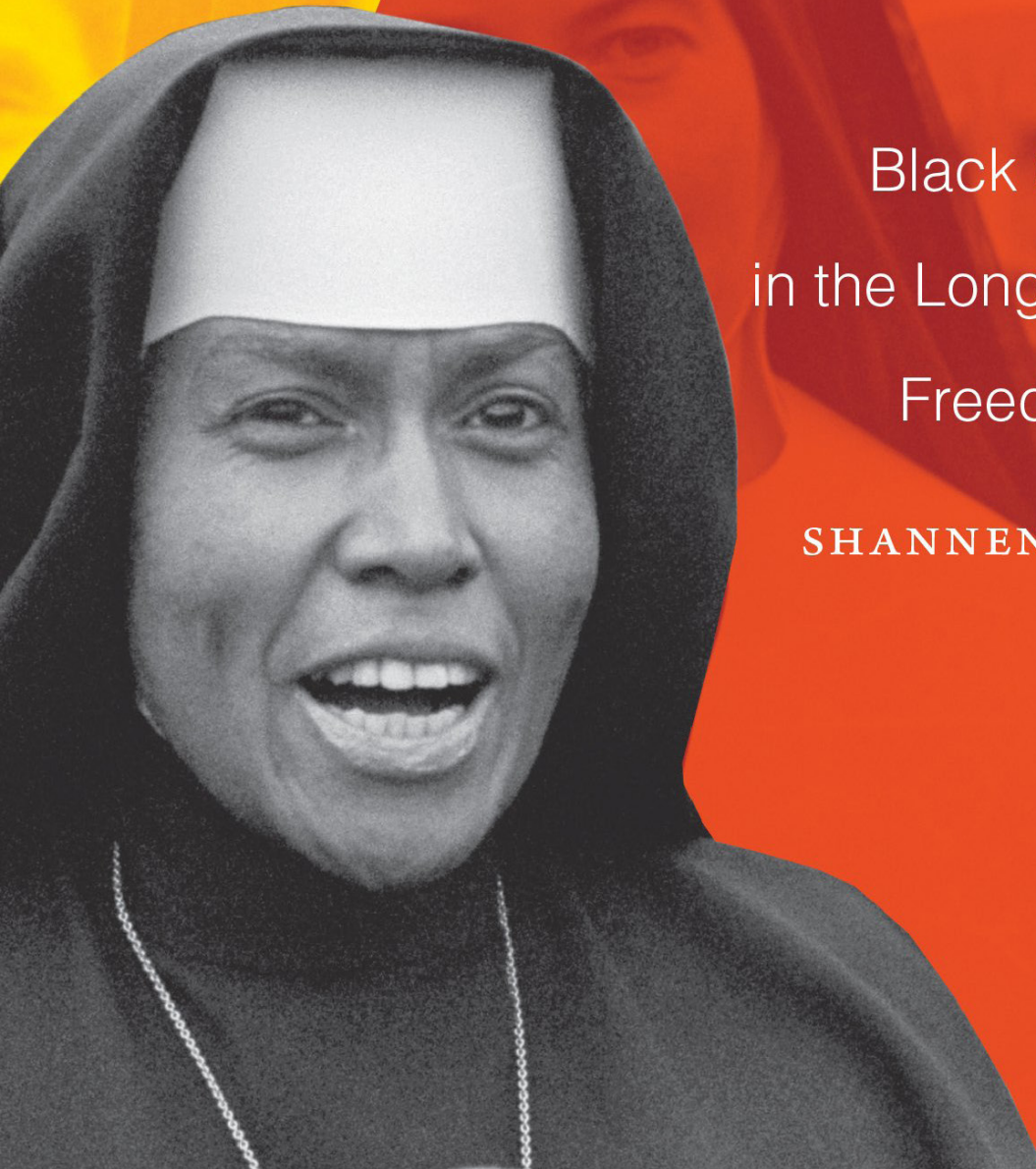
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Subversive Habits

Black Catholic Nuns
in the Long African American
Freedom Struggle

SHANNEN DEE WILLIAMS



Survey on Black Catholics in America



(CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

A survey by The Pew Research Center released on March 15 follows up on the Center's report in February 2021 titled *Faith Among Black Americans*.

In this new survey comparing Black, White and Hispanic Catholics a few items are of interest.

-While relatively few Black Catholics attend predominantly Black parishes, Black Catholics express some distinctive preferences and expectations about their congregations. For example, they are more likely than White or Hispanic Catholics to say they think it is essential that churches offer a sense of racial affirmation, as well as to say it is essential that churches assist people who need help with bills, housing or food. And Black (40%) and Hispanic Catholics (42%) are more likely than White Catholics (18%) to say it is essential that churches teach practical job and life skills, and that they offer sermons that address political topics such as immigration and race relations.



(CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

-In addition, the majority of Black Catholics say that opposing racism is important to how they think about being Christian. About three-quarters of Black Catholics (77%) say opposition to racism is essential to what being Christian means to them. Most Black Catholics also say opposition to sexism (75%) and believing in God (73%) are essential to what being Christian means to them, while much smaller shares say attending religious services regularly (26%), opposing abortion (22%) and avoiding sex before marriage (16%) are essential to their Christian faith.

-The survey finds that 16% of Black Catholics are converts to the faith – people who identify as Catholic now, though they were raised in another religious tradition or as religiously unaffiliated. **The share of Black Catholics who are converts to Catholicism is higher than the share of**

White or Hispanic Catholics who are converts.

That said, the share of Black Americans who were raised as Catholics and *remain* Catholics is lower than the corresponding shares of Hispanic and White Catholics. **Roughly half of Black adults who were raised Catholic still identify as Catholic (54%),** compared with 61% of White adults and 68% of Hispanic adults who were raised as Catholics and still identify with the faith.



(CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

-What Black Catholics report hearing from the pulpit differs in many cases from what other Catholics say they hear in sermons. For example, Black Catholics are **more likely** than White and Hispanic Catholics to say they heard a sermon, lecture or group discussion in the past year about race relations or criminal justice reform. Roughly four-in-ten Black Catholics report having heard a discussion at church about race relations or racial inequity during the 12 months prior to the survey, compared with 29% of Hispanic Catholics and 18% of White Catholics.

-At the same time, Black Catholics are **less likely** to say they heard sermons on abortion than are White and Hispanic Catholics. Roughly a third of Black Catholics (35%) say they heard a sermon, lecture or discussion about abortion in the 12 months prior to the survey, compared with half of White (50%) and Hispanic (51%) Catholics. Black Catholics are less likely than Hispanic Catholics, but more likely than White Catholics, to have heard sermons or discussion about immigration at church.

-If they had to find a new church, nearly all Black Catholics say finding a welcoming Church would be either very important (76%) or somewhat important (16%) to their choice. A similar share say it would be very (75%) or somewhat (20%) important for the parish to offer sermons that are inspiring. By comparison, only about a third of Black Catholics say that having most of the other attendees share their race would be at least somewhat important (32%) to their choice of a new church, while two-thirds say it would be “not at all” important. Black Catholics give similar priority to finding a congregation where most of the clergy share their race.

Here is link to:
[Pew Research Study](#)

New book points to need for racial reckoning in women's religious orders

By Carol Zimmermann Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Shannen Dee Williams describes her upcoming book about Black Catholic sisters as a "labor of love." Her book, **"Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle,"** which comes out in May, is the result of more than a dozen years of research and oral history interviews.



Shannen Dee Williams

(CNS photo/John Shetron)

It recounts not only how Black sisters were front-runners in pushing for desegregation in society at large but how they also had to do that on a very personal level in their push to get accepted into predominantly white religious orders and to persevere in their vocation when some of them endured not just prejudice but outright bullying in these orders.

Williams, an associate professor of history at the Marianist-run University of Dayton in Ohio, and a columnist for Catholic News Service, interviewed women religious and pored through the archives of many congregations for her work. Putting all of it together gets to some "true truths," she said, using one of Sister Thea Bowman's expressions. **The Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration pioneered the rights of Black Catholics and her sainthood cause is being considered by the Vatican.**

In a February interview, Williams said the idea for the book sprang from her own lack of awareness of Black sisters and once she started looking into them, she unearthed stories that had long been kept silent and women who were eager to share them. These are stories we need to champion, the author said, "not only within the church but also within our society," noting these women religious are the "forgotten prophets of American Catholicism and democracy."

Williams said the stories are painful in many ways because they seem to go against who Catholic sisters are but she says recounting them is part of a first step toward healing. She said many of the sisters she spoke with told her they were glad someone was interested and had been waiting for someone to come to them.

She presented some of her initial findings at a 2016 assembly in Atlanta for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, saying she needed help with this project. Several communities stepped forward and one gave her a grant. In recent years, she has been invited to speak to congregations across the country about how to look into and address their own links with racism. Some have started this examination by scouring their archives for details of excluding or mistreating women of color or relying on the labor of enslaved people.

Williams has urged congregations to recognize that "every community story is different" and that they need to find out exactly what they did. "You need to collect your own stories," she's told them. "Just because a white community is willing to educate Black children does not mean that they are auto-

matically committed to racial justice," Williams said, noting that some religious communities had "anti-Black admissions policies" in place prior to desegregation laws.

The untold number of Black women who were rejected from religious orders are lost vocations that the church should reckon with, Williams said. But also, if a congregation accepted a Black woman, it didn't mean they were "being racially progressive," she added.

Part of what pioneering Black sisters went through, including Sister Bowman, were abuses "designed to drive them out of religious life," Williams said, stressing that these stories are painful but imperative to hear. "It's gut-wrenching. It's hard," she said. For example, she said some orders that allowed Black sisters would not touch their utensils or use the same cups. They also required Black sisters to profess their vows separately in segregated ceremonies.

She said that was the experience of Sister Antona Ebo, a Franciscan Sister of Mary, known for marching with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., in his 1965 march on Selma in Alabama. The sister, who died in 2017, also spoke out in 2014 at protests in Ferguson, Missouri, following the shooting death of a Black man by a white police officer. Sister Antona's training and profession of vows took place separately from the white women who entered the order at that time.

The stories Williams heard from Black sisters who experienced prejudice and white sisters who witnessed it shows "heartbreak, built on top of heartbreak on top of heartbreak." Acknowledgment of what happened is a first step, she noted, followed by a hard look at what it means to make some type of reparation for how this has harmed the church.

Williams acknowledges that reparation is a big undertaking with no clear-cut direction on how to do it. For her part, as an educator, "historical truth-telling" is a beginning, and only that. It does not give congregations a pass to admit something bad happened and move on.

She said several congregations have started the work of reckoning with their own histories and also joining with groups fighting for racial equality, but there still is a long way to go. As she sees it, women religious can ultimately support the "freedom campaigns of the contemporary period" and all Catholics who want to reckon with the church's history can as well.

She said the models for the church now come from primarily Black congregations, such as the Oblate Sisters of Providence, who have been working for racial equality for close to 200 years and give "the blueprint for how we want to be." Williams noted they have always essentially been living out the slogan "Black lives matter" in their work.

The determination and persistence of Black orders and sisters, long ago and still today, is something Williams has faced straight on. "It's been with me a long time. So it's great to finally share it," she said.

in a word or two

The Archbishop Lyke Conference
will take place June 14-18, 2022
in Grapevine, Texas

Theme is:
Listen to the Lambs:
Black Confirmation
Rejoicing in the Gifts of the Young

The Conference will be held at the
Embassy Suites in Grapevine

For more information:
www.lykeconference.org
or call (504) 319-5951
email to:
rcheri@lykefoundation.org



(CNS photos by Andrew Rozario, Catholic Standard)



EASTER/APRIL FOOL 1991

by

Rev. Raymond Guidry, SVD

1928-2011

The joke's on hell" beelzebul
misjudged the Man from Galilee
and choked on God in human flesh.
the whole world shakes with laughter
loud

and clear as satan slinks away.
the Easter Son makes all things new
as death evaporates like dew.
He's risen now, the Christ. He lives!
He lives! Rabboni, Master, King!
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

HAPPY EASTER!!

Divine Word Missionaries is an international missionary community of over 7,000 brothers and priests. In 1905 the SVDs began working among African Americans in the Southern United States. Today, Divine Word Missionaries work in over 35 parishes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Florida and Arkansas.

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