



VENERABLE HENRIETTE DELILLE

1812-1862

For nearly fifteen years, Henriette Delille remained committed to a call from God made difficult to answer on account of man's sins. The reality was that no religious communities in New Orleans would accept her, as they were either racist themselves or unwilling to confront the systemic racism of the time. But on October 15, 1851, Delille at last was able to profess poverty, chastity, and obedience and give her life to Christ as a professed religious. A few details of Delille's profession are significant and shed light on the enormity of what she undertook that fall day in the chapel of the Ursuline convent in New Orleans's French Quarter. Her bishop received the vows,

which brought formal recognition to Delille's vocation and advanced establishment of her new religious order. Taking the religious name Marie Terese, Delille took upon herself a task of reforming religious life, much like her inspiration Saint Teresa of Ávila. While Teresa had worked to overcome the lax and lavish lives of the Carmelites in her day, Delille had to overcome the prevalent racist mindset that plagued the Church of her day, especially in the United States.

Delille's entrance to religious life occurred outside of customary norms. At that time, aspirants to religious life were young, came from relative affluence, and were white. Delille had none of these qualities. Delille was a fourth-generation freedwoman, her family having gone from slavery to owning slaves. She was expected to follow the course of her family's matriarchs and form a liaison relationship with a white man in what was known as the *plaçage* system. This afforded them a better life than marriage to a man of color like themselves. In fact, without the ties brought by marriage, the women who adhered to the *plaçage* system remained solely in charge of everything, from finances to their children's upbringing.

Delille's mother groomed her to take up this way of life. Records indicate Delille entered into such a relationship early in her life, but that it did not last long. It produced two children who both died in infancy. Not long

after, a court declared Delille's mother mentally insane. Just past twenty years of age, Delille found herself surrounded by grief and hardship.

In 1834, Delille experienced a conversion, and her faith was intensified and reinvigorated. After receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation, which was received in those days by only the most devout in practice of the Faith, Delille became a woman wholly committed to the Lord. Her guiding motto, written in a prayer book, captures what defined her heart and spurred her vocation: "I believe in God. I hope in God. I love. I want to live and die for God."

Her desire to live the Faith more fully brought her closer to like-minded friends, Juliette and Josephine. Together they engaged in ministry to enslaved and free girls and women of color. Laying the foundation for her order, which at the time was known as the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, she wrote their rule of life in 1836. Through her motivation and vision, this new congregation would bring Christ to the peripheries of their city and beyond.

Delille's new congregation chose "one heart and one soul" as its motto, reminiscent of the apostolic way of life in Christianity's earliest days. Their desire was threefold. First, they sought to "bring back glory to God and the salvation of the neighbor by a charitable and edifying behavior." They were committed to be Christian women of utmost authen-

ticity and integrity. Second, the women resolved to help each other in this task and in the work they set out to accomplish. Third, they pledged to serve those in need throughout the wider community. Their mission was to care for the poor, sick, and elderly, “the first and dearest objects of the solicitude of the congregation.” And the new sisters were intent on teaching “the principal mysteries of religion and the most important points of Christian morality” to both slave and free children.

The congregation would not have existed, without the support and patronage of New Orleans’s Archbishop Antoine Blanc and his vicar general, Father Etienne Rousselon. The latter was a source of generosity and support to the fledgling community and a spiritual mentor to Delille. Both clerics assisted the women in the formalization of their community and their recognition within the Church. By 1842, the congregation became known officially and for good as the Sisters of the Holy Family.

As the congregation grew, Delille contributed the inheritance she received after her mother’s death to begin growing an institutional presence. By the 1850s, Delille’s community had a convent with classrooms, operated an orphanage, and educated young girls in literacy and catechism while teaching them skills like sewing. They provided education to enslaved children in Louisiana, even though it was outlawed at the time. Their service to the sick included the

victims of a yellow fever epidemic, and they also brought into their home elderly, infirm women, a first in the United States.

Everyone who knew her attested to Delille’s generosity and selflessness. She responded to the Lord’s call with great love, requisite perseverance, and heroic virtue. The last decade of Delille’s life was dedicated to attracting new members to the congregation. At the time of her death, twelve sisters of varied racial descents resided at the convent.

Delille truly was a mother not just to the congregation of sisters she established, but to all she encountered. Parish sacramental records show she even served as godmother and marriage witness in many circumstances. Delille died on November 16, 1862, at the age of fifty. An obituary summed up her calling: “For the love of Jesus Christ she had become the humble and devout servant of the slaves.” Delille’s cause for canonization opened in 1988, and she was declared venerable by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010.

A miracle attributed to Venerable Henriette Delille’s intercession was accepted for further investigation and review in 2019 by the Holy See’s Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Should the miracle, which was first investigated by the Diocese of Little Rock, Arkansas, be judged authentic by the congregation and the pope, Delille’s beatification would follow.

Prayer for the Beatification of Venerable Mother Henriette Delille

O good and gracious God, you called Henriette Delille to give herself in service and in love to the slaves and the sick, to the orphan and the aged, to the forgotten and the despised.

Grant that, inspired by her life, we might be renewed in heart and in mind. If it be your will, may she one day be raised to the honor of sainthood. By her prayers, may we live in harmony and peace, through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.



Delille: A School of Perseverance and Patience

Father Josh Johnson

The beatification and canonization of Venerable Mother Henriette Delille is not just for her or her religious community, the Sisters of the Holy Family. Her path toward canonized sainthood is a gift for the entire Catholic Church. Delille's witness to Jesus and his Church will undoubtedly inspire marginalized Catholics to persevere in relationship with Christ in the sacramental life of the Church he founded.

Delille's story can also motivate white Catholics to intentionally reach out to people of color to discover how they can best accompany disciples of Jesus Christ who may not

be invited to participate in small group Bible studies, Rosary prayer groups, RCIA, fellowship opportunities for the poor, and worship at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Raised in the Catholic Faith, and devout even as a young child, Delille's relationship with Jesus was strengthened early on through the ministry of a white Catholic nun, Sister Marthe Fontiere. Sister Marthe opened a school for young Black girls in the New Orleans community. Through her ministry of teaching, she was able to cultivate intentional friendships with her students and plant seeds of the Faith in their hearts.

Amid the season of pain and suffering that young Delille experienced, she had an encounter with Christ. Instead of navel-gazing, she opened herself to the relationship with Christ. She chose to focus on worshipping God at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass at St. Claude School and Convent and serve poor children of color by praying for them, feeding them, and teaching them about Jesus and the Church.

Through her time of worship, prayer, study, and fellowship with the poor, she perceived an invitation from God to become a religious sister. Unfortunately, many religious communities in the United States had racist practices and policies. That meant that, for the most part, only white Catholics were accommodated and granted access, while Black Catholics were discriminated against in their written and unwritten rules. Delille applied to enter the

Ursuline convent and the Carmelite community but was denied access for no other reason than because of the color of her skin. Subsequently, she attempted to found an interracial community with a white woman, but her efforts were shut down by leaders in the Church who did not think it was appropriate for Black and white women to live together in religious life.

Undeterred by the rejection she experienced from her fellow Catholics, Delille continued to remain close to Jesus through worship at the Mass, prayer (especially the Rosary), and service to the elderly poor and uneducated children whom she continued to feed and teach. Finally, after years of persecution by many white Catholic leaders in the Church, Delille gained the support of Bishop Antoine Blanc and his vicar general, Etienne Rousselon, both of whom witnessed her life of prayer and her works of evangelization and charity for the disenfranchised and marginalized people in New Orleans. Thanks to their intervention, Delille was able to profess religious vows on the feast day of Saint Teresa of Ávila in 1851.

Her decision to profess vows on Saint Teresa's feast day was prophetic. Teresa of Ávila is the founder of the Discalced Carmelites. Many people are aware that she founded the Discalced Carmelite community as a reformed order that was rooted in asceticism and deep prayer. However, many do not know that Teresa also founded

the Discalced Carmelites because the Carmelite order in Spain had a racist policy, which stated that no woman of Jewish or Moorish blood could enter their community. Unbeknownst to her sisters in religious life, Teresa came from a Jewish lineage. When she founded the Discalced Carmelites, she wrote a policy that intentionally welcomed baptized women from any lineage. Likewise, Mother Delille was discriminated against because of her Black lineage. Inspired by the example of Saint Teresa, in Mother Delille's community, women of color were welcome.

Even though her day of profession was certainly filled with joy, it was also accompanied by interior sorrow. While Mother Delille was able to profess vows as a religious sister and foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Family, she was not allowed to wear a habit like her white counterparts. It was not until many years later, after her death, that her sisters were able to wear a habit that would set them apart as brides of Christ.

Getting to know the saints is more than learning facts about them. We are invited to develop a relationship with them. In my experience, the best way to get to know the saints is to spend time praying with them. Since my ordination to the priesthood in 2014, I have prayed, fasted, and worked for racial healing and transformation in the Catholic Church. In many parishes throughout our country, black and brown people of color are still being neglect-

ed by Catholic leaders in their geographical boundaries. It has been through my spiritual friendship with Venerable Henriette Delille that I have been filled with a spirit of hope that racial reconciliation is possible.

Delille's story has the capacity to inspire Black Catholics who have felt rejected by church leaders in their parishes, schools, and dioceses. She and so many others have persevered and remained close to Jesus Christ crucified, who was also misunderstood, rejected, betrayed, abandoned, mocked, and abused by people he spent his life serving. Likewise, Delille's story has the potential to motivate white Catholics who hold leadership positions in the Church to become more aware of who is being invited to discipleship in their parishes and schools and who is not being invited to sit at tables of discipleship throughout the diocese.

Although Venerable Mother Henriette Delille was persecuted by many white Catholic leaders in her generation, her story includes being nurtured and supported in her love for Jesus Christ by some white Catholic leaders. Let us pray that her cause for canonization continues to move forward so that, by her witness and example, Our Lord can heal the racial divide in the Catholic Church in our country. Her canonization would be a gift, as she shows us how to remain faithful to Jesus and to abide in an intentional relationship with every member of the Body of Jesus Christ, no matter their race, nation, tribe, or tongue.

Venerable Mother Henriette Delille, pray for us!
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BLACK CATHOLICS ON THE ROAD TO SAINTHOOD

Michael R. Heinlein, Editor

**Foreword by
ARCHBISHOP JOSÉ H. GOMEZ**



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