

[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



Cantor Kim R. Harris sings during the New York Archdiocese's annual Black History Month Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City Feb. 5, 2023. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Efran Menny

[View Author Profile](#)

Black Catholic Messenger

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

July 9, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Being Catholic since 2018, I've seen firsthand the rise of a reactionary wing of right-wing Catholicism.

About the time of my confirmation at the Easter Vigil in 2018, the world was rocked by new revelations in the global sexual abuse scandal, with America's own Cardinal [Theodore McCarrick](#) featuring prominently. At the same time, shock-jock Catholic influencers like [Taylor Marshall](#) only stirred the waters of derision. It seemed as though he and other ultra-conservative voices such as Archbishop [Carlo Maria Viganò](#), Cardinal [Raymond Burke](#) and Bishop [Joseph Strickland](#) only became more popular.

Perhaps these elements were always brewing even prior to my reception into the church, but during that time I found it odd that I was entering a minefield of hyperpartisan church politics.

After finding community with other Black Catholics, I saw that these small yet influential powerhouses of dissent made plenty of us feel unwelcomed with their hostile rhetoric toward Pope Francis and many aspects of Catholic social teachings that are central to the African American experience.

Things seem to have been on a continual decline. There have been no major improvements in the atmosphere for Black Catholics. In fact, with a multitude of anti-intellectual campaigns and materials published against critical race theory, "wokeism," and DEI efforts, the climate has become rife with vipers hellbent on maintaining the status quo.

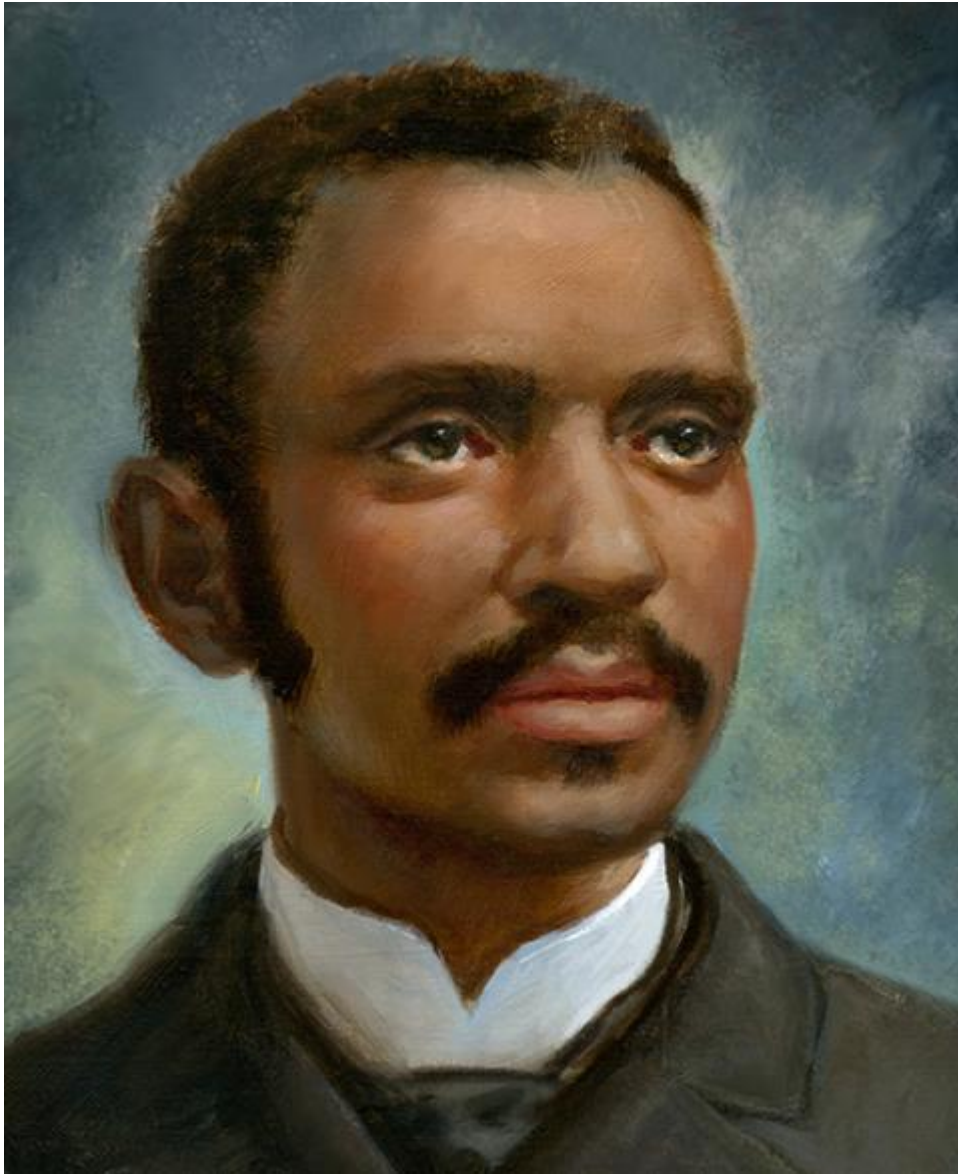
Advertisement

These crusades have continually ostracized the rising and millennial generation of Black Catholic voices that see so much of the discourse as counterproductive to spiritual and racial justice work.

Because our society is increasingly [becoming more diverse](#), traditional institutions that have benefited white Americans will advance efforts to marginalize "otherness."

With this, more structural and institutional mechanisms for oppression will be put in place against those groups that have been historically neglected and underserved.

This type of doctrinal and cultural constriction can only make conditions worse for Black Catholics — and Black Americans in general.



Daniel Rudd is portrayed in an undated painting. (CNS/Courtesy of National Black Catholic Congress)

If you ask the average Black Catholic, they will rightfully stand their ground in their Catholic faith. Leaving the church would be an unthinkable move. To them, their response to confront many of our struggles for racial justice is similar to [Daniel Rudd](#)'s, the forerunner of the [Black Catholic Movement](#): "The Catholic Church alone can

break the color line. Our people should help her to do it."

The church can play a vital role, but if we wait around for the hierarchy, expecting positive results, nothing will get done. Because of the long-standing reticent approach to our predicament from those in leadership, Black Catholics mustn't try to appease them and their proxies.

As it is, Black Catholic spirituality is in a freefall. The recent news from Baltimore regarding the alarming number of Black Catholic parishes [closing and consolidating](#) is only the latest distress call. Though our faith is not relegated to a building, these community institutions matter to our identity and are a testament to our triumph over the white Catholic community forcing us into second-class spiritual status.

In the same way, the rampant closure of Black Catholic schools — institutions that have historically been a vessel for integration into the Catholic faith — is an affront to centuries of groundwork to evangelize Black Americans. How we evangelize the community and reach parents with the teachings of the church is at risk.

In our increasingly inhospitable church, our only recourse should be to revert back to our time-tested ingenuity and ability to create solutions. One of the beauties of the Black Catholic experience here in America is that we can look at the past for a road map on how to impact our future. Through the 19th and 20th centuries, we saw Black Catholics rising to the occasion to forge their own path when there were seemingly insurmountable odds stacked against them.



Students sing "Oh Happy Day" at the conclusion of a Jan. 30 Mass at St. Frances Academy in East Baltimore that honored its foundress, Mother Mary Lange, who is one of six Black Catholics who are candidates for sainthood. (OSV News/Catholic Review/George P. Matysek Jr.)

I am reminded of Rudd himself, who worked at the vanguard of Black Catholic journalism and activism. Through his great work and unwavering commitment to the written word as a means of Black advancement, he created The Ohio Tribune, said to be the first newspaper published by and for the Black community.

Our great Black religious sisters gave us the model of how to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice for the glory of God. Mother [Mathilda Beasley](#) embraced her community through her vocation as the first Black nun in Georgia. She played a crucial role in secretly serving the educational needs of enslaved children and creating an orphanage. In the same way, Venerable [Henriette DeLille](#), Mother [Mary Theodore Williams](#), and Venerable [Mary Lange](#) carried the torch of vocations and service for Black women.



Black liturgist and musician Fr. Clarence Rivers (CNS/Courtesy of Catholic Telegraph)

Elevating our Black identity and culture, Fr. [Clarence Rivers](#) served as the first Black priest for the Cincinnati Archdiocese, trailblazing in his work as a liturgical music mastermind and pioneering composer — integrating Black American gospel into the Catholic liturgy. He dismantled prevailing white liturgical standards and animated the church with an authentically Black imprimatur.

With these marvelous figures, it is evident that Black Catholic DNA is undeniably a code for triumph. We carry the lineage of liberators, healers, spiritualists, activists, teachers, doctors and saints. We need to look to our rich history to maintain our longevity for the future.

It can't be that when times were apparently tougher — with blatant signs of institutional white supremacy, hierarchy neglect, and spiritual oppression — we had greater resolve to preserve the historic Black Catholic patrimony. They handed down to us a time-tested faith that is incorruptible. We owe it to those change agents to strengthen the faith today.

When I survey the landscape of the Catholic Church, I see that there are plenty of ways we Black Catholics can own our own destiny.

One contemporary issue is the canonization process for our sainthood candidates. Though they deserve a place at the forefront of the global church, we can safeguard their virtues and legacy within our own tradition. As soon as they leave the sacredness of Black Catholic spaces, their legacy will become diluted into a palatable story to lessen white spiritual suppression or downplay the sociopolitical climate of the Catholic Church.



Venerable Henriette Delille, who founded the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans in 1842, is depicted in a stained-glass window at St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Moreover, when this exhausting process [doesn't benefit Black people](#), we should consider preserving their uniqueness in our own self-recognized feast days where we lift up all our holy ancestors with the illustrious crown for their earthly example.

We can also return to our creative roots of establishing our own racially affirming and culturally competent rite and religious orders. This could create meaningful solutions to our vocational crisis.

It could mean loosening the discipline of clerical celibacy and opening the door for married Catholic priests (as seen in the predominantly white [Anglican ordinariates](#)). We can push for permanent diaconate approaches that still effectively form men, yet without unnecessarily drawn-out processes.

Alternatively, we could provide a more targeted parish-level initiative for increased outreach, resources, engagement and formation within Black Catholic families on how to nurture and expose aspirations for religious life. Also, making nonordained life more appealing has to be at the forefront. Many men and women in our community already have dedication to service, contemplative circles, and helping professions, so empowering them to make vows in a way that elevates unity, identity and collective ownership would be a critical next step.

Even how we engage the possibility of a third-order lay vocation could be a catalyst. Millennials value community and belongingness, so harnessing those aspects could be a spark for a secular order.

Though our own Black Catholic rite is [much-needed](#) and we would need to have autonomous control of its affairs and handlings, we could still operate within the church as our own group, dedicated to the advancement of our people's spiritual well-being and longevity. With this determination to decide and regulate our conditions, we would be in a prime position to take crucial elements such as vocations, evangelization and racial justice into our own hands.



Women religious from the National Black Sisters Conference process into St. Raymond-St. Leo the Great Parish Church in New Orleans July 30, 2018. They gathered with members of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, the National Black Catholic Seminarians Association and the National Association of Black Catholic Deacons for the opening Mass of the Joint Conference 2018. (CNS/Clarion Herald/Frank J. Methe)

Many may read this and conclude that I advocate for some type of segregation in the Catholic Church. On the contrary, I don't support some 3 million U.S. Black Catholics splintering away. Just the opposite: I want us to make and claim our own fate in the only spiritual place many of us have called home for generations.

These long-standing contemporary issues should force us to look inward and rediscover a resolve to be grafted into Christ, elevating what makes the Black Catholic ethos something truly imbued with divine favor, seen in centuries of rich expression. When we look to our history, legacy and movement, we find that collective unity has always been a staple for how we address our community's

spiritual and material standing.

We see the signs and the grim displays of continual disregard. Now is an opportune time to look to the past fighters in the church for their intercession. Their benevolent prayers and empowerment can help us establish unity and common purpose in the body of Christ in a time when attacks are unceasing.

The Black Catholic community has its best days in the future. The almighty Father is attentive to our beckoning cries. The Lord Jesus is with the oppressed, and diligently fights for them. The Holy Spirit intimately knows the plight of Black Catholics. It's through the radiating all-powerful nature of the Trinity that we find hope for our advancement.