

Summer 2000

# Bishop James Augustine Healy

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**From the Editor's Desk**

It has been a very eventful academic year. Convocation was a resounding success, filled with moments of reflection, inspiration, and even controversy. Eyes and ears were opened to new people, issues, and histories. *The Griot* has also taken us on some journeys, from West and Central Africa to Portland and greater Maine. This final issue of *The Griot* in this series will explore a largely underappreciated aspect of the



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Black Church, that is, African Americans in the Catholic Church. Among other things, it will examine the life and significance of Augustine Healy, the first African American to become a Catholic bishop in the United States.

As always, remember to check the back of *The Griot* for upcoming classes and an update concerning the African American Archives of Maine.

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**“Black Catholic” is Not an Oxymoron**

oxymoron: (n) “a figure of speech in which opposite or contradictory ideas or terms are combined”

– Webster’s New World Dictionary, second edition

Whether Baptist, Methodist, or AME Zion, African Americans have been predominantly Protestant. This is due to the extensive settlement of and proselytization by the English in the Thirteen Colonies and the subsequent United States of America. The presence of African Americans professing Catholicism has largely been limited to places such as Louisiana and Maryland where Black Catholicism can be traced back to French colonization and the Atlantic slave trade. Today, more contemporary Black Catholic populations are to be found in centers of Haitian, Cuban, and Mexican migration in Florida, Texas, New York, and California. These populations reflect an adherence either to traditional, European-based Catholicism or to the Caribbean- or Latin American-based syncretic fusion of Catholic and African elements.<sup>1</sup>

Religious historian and authority Albert Raboteau illuminates the position of Black Catholics as a minority within a minority, noting that approximately 25 percent of Blacks in America are Catholic, and that only 2 percent of American Catholics are Black.<sup>2</sup> This double minority status magnifies the majority position of Protestantism in the African American population.

Regardless of its religious position as a double minority, Black Catholicism and its infusion of African and Catholic elements represent some of the most dynamic manifestations of religious adaption and syncretism in the Americas. Haitian Vodun, Cuban Santería, and Brazilian Candomblé are all religious systems that developed out of the cohesion of African and Catholic deities, symbols, and rituals during slavery. This fusion was most profound and lasting where strong complements between

African and Catholic elements were found.<sup>3</sup>

One example may be drawn from Haitian Vodun where the *loa* (god) Legba occupies the position as guardian of the crossroads, the intersection of the material human world and the immaterial world of spirits. In western Africa, Legba’s symbol was a tree, having a composition that stretched out both horizontally and vertically. When Africans enslaved in Haiti (then Saint Domingue) were expected to convert to Catholicism, they were presented with various symbols that included the cross. In recognizing the complementary compositions of Legba’s tree and the Catholic cross, Blacks appropriated the symbol of the cross but used it to continue homage to Legba. This accommodation served at least two important purposes. It gave the appearance of successful conversion of allegedly heathen Africans and it created a syncretic religious form that allowed for the retention of highly significant African beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, being Black or African is not antithetical to being Catholic, or vice versa. When one travels outside the United States, one is struck by the reality that many members of the African diaspora identify Catholicism or a Catholic hybrid as at least one of their practicing faiths. From the Caribbean and South America to Francophone Africa, the colonization of African peoples with adaptive cultures has created a spectrum of religious forms that are both resilient and highly structured. The appeal of Caribbean Afro-Catholic forms has also led to a significant amount of commodification, aided by the technological and commercial opportunities of the Internet. This continues to romanticize and make exotic some forms of Black Catholicism.<sup>5</sup>

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 118. An in-depth treatment of African syncretic religions is Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, ed., *Sacred Possessions:*

(New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup>Raboteau, *Fire*, 117.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 105-106, 118.

<sup>4</sup>Legba also has been represented by Saint Peter. Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Sacred Possessions*, 4-5.

<sup>5</sup>Various Web sites have sharp, beautiful graphics, but fundamentally remain markets for selling spells, amulets, and dolls. See, for example, [www.folkart.com](http://www.folkart.com). Also, by entering the keyword “voodoo,” one is presented with an entire list of sites from which to choose.

**A Place in Time  
Bishop James Augustine Healy (1830-1900): Race, Religion, and Respect**

Born in Georgia in 1830, James Augustine Healy was the eldest son of Michael Healy, an Irish plantation owner, and Eliza Healy (also Mary Elisa), an enslaved mulatto woman whom he married “by frontier process.” Michael Healy technically owned James and his



Bishop James A. Healy (Gerald E. Talbot Collection, African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine Glickman Family Library).

other children, and amassed an estate including 1600 acres of land and some 60 slaves. Healy remained bound by Georgia laws that did not allow manumission of slaves and even levied \$1000 fines against planters who tried to do so. Because he wanted his children to grow up free from society’s stigma concerning miscegenation and interracial children, he began sending them to school in the North. Further, Michael Healy arranged that, upon his death, the proceeds of his estate would go to his children; the money would be channeled through Georgia executors to a legal representative in New York.<sup>1</sup>



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## A Place in Time

*Continued from the front*

James A. Healy attended different religious boarding schools in Long Island and Pennsylvania, before being admitted to College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts in 1844. Seemingly, Healy's life was significantly transformed by the experience, for he recorded in a later diary entry, "What a change! Then I was nothing; now I am a Catholic." Despite his optimism, Healy did not find the respite from racist innuendo he was looking for, and he struggled for years with subtle and covert negativism from his peers.<sup>2</sup>

While studying for the priesthood in a Montreal seminary in the spring of 1850, Healy received word that his mother, Eliza, had died; within months, news of his father's demise followed. Given the racial mores of the day, the questions of James Healy's status as the son of an enslaved woman, of the future of his siblings who remained in Georgia, and of the legality of his father's will all threatened to destroy his hopes of becoming a priest and even remaining free. After an anxious wait, Michael Healy's will was judged legally viable, and James's younger brother, Hugh, made a dangerous return to Georgia to take custody of their three younger siblings.<sup>3</sup>

James Augustine Healy made it through the various obstacles in his way, becoming a Catholic priest in 1854 and Bishop of the Portland diocese in 1875. This "experiment of a part-Negro pastor in a white church" was not a guaranteed success. Healy had been publically humiliated in Boston as having "indelicat blood," and in Maine the question of his reception loomed large. Ironically, despite his characterization as the "nigger bishop," Maine was the place that Bishop Healy seemed to flourish.<sup>4</sup>

Characterized by biographer Albert Foley as a "human shepherd," Healy survives in Portland lore for his concern for the material and spiritual interests of his parishioners. Foley relates:

In the churchlore of the neighborhood, the good bishop still rides about on his well-groomed horse, his saddle bags filled with groceries. He is still envisioned as he stopped at the backdoors of houses where the underfed school children lived, there to dismount, knock at the kitchen entrance, and be welcomed into the humble quarters at the rear of the house.<sup>5</sup>

In what would become 25 years as Bishop, Healy made remarkable strides in shoring up the Catholic faith throughout

the state of Maine; he has the distinction of having 86 mission and parochial schools and 50 church buildings built under his leadership. Healy died in Portland in 1900, and was appointed assistant to the papal throne the same year.<sup>6</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Albert S. Foley, S.J., *Bishop Healy: Beloved Outcaste* (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds Ltd., 1956), 12-21 passim; Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 123. Foley reports that the Catholic Church allowed a man to take a baptized woman as his wife without official ceremony in the event that a priest was not available at the time of the actual marriage or for a period of one month following.

<sup>2</sup>Foley, *Bishop Healy*, 16-21.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 42-46.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 108, 117, 121.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>6</sup>Patrick and Alexander Healy were also ordained to the priesthood, with Patrick holding the position as president of Georgetown University from 1873 to 1882. Sisters Eliza and Josephine entered the Convent of St. Jean in Montreal in 1853, entering lives of service as well. An older sister, Martha, had preceded them. E.L. Bute and H.J.P. Harmer, *The Black Handbook* (London and Washington: Cassell, 1997), 27; Foley, *Bishop Healy*, 46, 48, 193; Raboteau, *Fire*, 123; "Most Blessed Sacrament Church – Our Georgia Heritage," [www.accessatlanta.com](http://www.accessatlanta.com).

## African American Archives of Maine

The African American Archives and the USM Library would like to welcome David Andreasen, library assistant for the African American Archives. Although he has been working with the materials for a few months now, this is the first opportunity to welcome him to USM in the pages of *The Griot*. David comes from the library staff of the University of North Florida, and will be able to assist students, teachers, scholars, and lay researchers in accessing the Archives' materials. Public hours are as follows:

Monday	1:00-4:45 p.m. (10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m., by appointment)
Wednesday	10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.;
	1:00-4:45 p.m.
Friday	1:00-4:45 p.m.

David Andreasen can be reached at (207) 780-5492. The African American Archives of Maine are currently housed on the second floor of the USM Library in Gorham. They will continue there until renovations to the upper floors of the Glickman Library in Portland are complete.

## Calendar of Events Fall 2000

**HTY 341 Black Women in the Americas** – This comparative history course explores the histories of Black women in Canada, the United States, and the Anglo-Caribbean, particularly Barbados and Jamaica. Topics will include, slavery, women and paid labor, and Black feminism. Wednesdays, 4-6:30 p.m.

**HTY 400 The Color Line** – W.E.B. DuBois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." Using DuBois' study, assorted movies, and popular culture studies of the twentieth century, this course will explore the dynamics of color construction in the United States, and how the properties of whiteness and blackness are often defended at very high costs. Tuesdays, 4-6:30 p.m.

**"Black Leadership: Changing the Maine Landscape"** – Plans are being finalized for the fall 2000 exhibit of selected papers and visual objects from the African American Archives of Maine. It will draw heavily from the Gerald E. Talbot Collection. The exhibit is to be available for viewing from October 12 to November 21 in the Area Gallery of Portland's Woodbury Campus Center. A panel discussion and reception are scheduled for October 19, beginning at 7:00 p.m. Panelists and dates to be confirmed in the next edition of *The Griot*.

Please call Professor M. Elgersman Lee at (207) 780-5239 or email at [Elgersma@usm.maine.edu](mailto:Elgersma@usm.maine.edu) with questions or for more details on any of the events above.

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