Bishop Harold Perry: First recognized black bishop in the U.S.

February's celebration of Black History Month in the United States traces its roots back to the 1920s, although it gained more formal recognition in the '70s. All during February, we'll be sharing stories of holy and often unknown black Catholics.

In the midst of the racial tumult of the 1960s, Bishop Harold Perry was named an auxiliary bishop in New Orleans in 1965, the same year as the Selma to Montgomery march. He was the first black bishop in the United States to be recognized as such; technically, the first was the biracial Bishop James Healy, who identified mostly with his father's Irish heritage.

Ordained a priest for the Divine Word Missionaries in 1944, Bishop Perry became the 26th black priest ordained in the United States. After several years of pastoral work throughout the South, he became rector of the seminary operated by his order – originally founded to prepare African-American men for the priesthood.

Then-Archbishop (later Cardinal) Egidio Vagnozzi, apostolic delegate to the United States, is quoted as saying at Bishop Perry's ordination, "the consecration of Bishop Perry was not an honor bestowed upon the Negro race, so much as it was a contribution of the Negro people to the Catholic Church."

Bishop Perry was ordained at New Orleans' St. Louis Cathedral in 1966 amid racist demonstrations outside, including a woman who characterized the event as "another reason why God will destroy the Vatican."

New Orleans Archbishop Francis B. Schulte said of Bishop Perry

at the time of his 1991 death, “he was a symbol of the great changes which have taken place in our Church and in our country.” Since Bishop Perry’s time, 23 African-American priests have followed in his footsteps and have been ordained bishops in the United States – including another of the same name: Chicago Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry (no relation).

- More about Bishop Perry.
- Read more about the contributions of black Catholics to the U.S. Church.