The Healy Family: A family of firsts in the U.S. Church

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 19th century, a family of black Catholics attained many "first" accomplishments in the Church in the United States, although most people didn't know they were black. That's because the nine Healy children were born of a common-law marriage between a biracial slave and an Irish immigrant plantation owner in Georgia. Of them, three became priests – all of whom were trained in Paris, but controversially did not widely identify as black in their lifetime.

One became the first black president of a Catholic university in the United States – Jesuit priest Father Patrick Healy of Georgetown University. Father Alexander (Sherwood) Healy was a canonist who died at 39 in Boston. The oldest son became the first American bishop of African-American descent – Bishop James Augustine Healy, second bishop of Portland, Maine. Three daughters became nuns with the Congregation of Notre Dame – the order founded by St. Marguerite Bourgeoys in Montreal, Quebec. Sister Eliza Healy, CND, became the first superior of African-American descent in a religious community in the United States.

- Read more about the Healy family.
- Read more about the contributions of black Catholics to the U.S. Church.