

Venerable Henriette Delille: Founded Sisters of the Holy Family

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.

The illegitimate daughter of a Frenchman and a free woman of color, Henriette Delille spent all her life in and around New Orleans' French Quarter. Advancing into the status of high society as a young woman, Delille was schooled in French literature and instilled with a fondness for culture. Delille's mother wanted her to take her place in the colonial plaçage system, where Delille hopefully would enter into a common-law marriage with an eligible man of European estate. In those days, women of mixed race weren't able to fully espouse white men. It seems as though Delille rejected the idea, since no record exists. However, some parish records show the possibility of her having birthed two sons who died in infancy, although it is uncertain if that's the case. It's clear, though, that, after receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation, Delille was a changed woman. She lived by the following, written in her prayer book: "I believe in God. I hope in God. I love. I want to live and die for God."

In her teenage years, she became influenced by the religious sisters with whom she taught alongside since she was 14. Though she believed she was called to religious life, two communities denied her entrance because of the color of her skin.

Not deterred by rejection, though, Delille's resilience

brought her to establish a religious congregation herself in 1836. With the funds inherited at the time of her mother's death, Delille began what became known as the Sisters of the Holy Family. The order's original mission was to serve the poor and sick and provide religious education to both slaves and free persons. Her generosity and love was known to everyone who knew her. Sacramental records show Delille served as the godmother and marriage witness of many.

Delille died at the age of 49 on Nov. 16, 1862, having spent her young life in love and service of others.

Delille's cause of canonization opened in 1988, and she was declared Venerable in 2010.

[Read more about Venerable Henriette Delille.](#)

[Read more about the contributions of black Catholics to the U.S. Church.](#)