Venerable Pierre Toussaint: Ex-slave prospered, gave back in New York

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 1990, Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York moved the remains of a black Catholic layman to a niche in the Bishop's Crypt at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. It was a stark contrast from the days when his race prohibited him from entering Old St. Patrick's Cathedral in the city. Venerable Pierre Toussaint was the first and, to date, only layman to receive such an honor; the move was meant to foster devotion to his life and witness to the Gospel. Toussaint left a legacy of selflessness and charity.

Pierre Toussaint was born into slavery in modern-day Haiti and received his freedom in 1807. After arriving in New York City, he became successful as a hairdresser – earning a sizable salary, he saved his income to purchase his sister's freedom as well as that of his future wife, Juliette. The couple offered their lives to God in care of the poor and needy. Together they adopted Pierre's niece and provided for her education. They fostered and housed several orphans in their home over the years, and they were dedicated to doing works of charity throughout the city.

The Toussaints also offered much assistance to help their wards learn trades, in addition to operating a credit bureau and providing a shelter for immigrant priests. Pierre boldly crossed barricades to nurse the sick and destitute during a

cholera outbreak. When urged to retire and enjoy his remaining years, Toussaint is quoted as saying, “I have enough for myself, but if I stop working, I have not enough for others.” He attended daily Mass for more than 60 years until he died in 1853, two years after his wife.

- Read more about Pierre Toussaint.
- Read more about the contributions of black Catholics to the U.S. Church.