

## February Black History Month Prayer Service

*By Sisters Kay Manley, SP, and Maureen Abbott, SP*

**Leader** During Black History Month, we raise up the memory of Black Americans whose lives inspire us to live our baptismal call to the fullest, and implore their intercession to blot out the sin of racism. In that spirit, let us sing along with this congregation.

Song Lead Me, Guide Me

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLpB-dE2DHM>

## Inspirational Lives of Black Americans

**Leader:** Let's recall the lives of three remarkable Black Catholic Americans.

**Reader 1** Pierre Toussaint was born into a Catholic slave family on June 27, 1766, on a French plantation in modern day Haiti. The Bérard family educated him as a house slave and took him with them when they moved to New York City in 1787. He was apprenticed as a hairdresser, and since the wealthy had hairdressers come to their homes and he was allowed to keep much of his earnings, his kind and cheerful disposition assured a steady and lucrative position in the society of the time. He took the surname of "Toussaint" in honor of the hero of the Haitian revolution. Due to his service to the family he was freed at age 45. He then married and purchased a house where together he and his wife fostered orphans, supporting them in getting an education and learning a trade. Bilingual in French and English, he was able to help many Haitian immigrants, organizing a credit bureau, an employment agency and a refuge for destitute travelers. He attended daily Mass and was a benefactor of many charitable organizations. He died on June 30, 1853, and was declared Venerable in 1996.

*Reflective silence*

O God, through your servant Pierre you show us the many ways of bringing about social justice in society;

**All: Move us to actions of solidarity with the poor, the humble, and the lowly.**

Reader 2 **Mary Elizabeth Lange** was born around 1789 in Santiago de Cuba, where she lived in a primarily French speaking community. She came to Baltimore, where a great number of Catholic, French-speaking refugees had settled. Although Elizabeth was a refugee, she was well-educated and wealthy due to money left to her by her father. In 1828, with the help of Sulpician Father James Joubert, she and two other Black women started a school for Black Catholic children. The following year she and three other Haitian women pronounced vows in what became known as the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first religious order of women of African descent. At first their educational work met with success and the sisters won praise for nursing victims of a cholera epidemic, but internal difficulties led to a split. Mother Lange eventually resumed leadership in 1844 and despite discouragement, racism and a lack of funds, the sisters continued to educate children and minister to the needs of the Black Catholic community. She died on February 3, 1882, but the Oblate Sisters continue.

*Reflective silence*

O God, your servant Mother Mary Lange brought the light of learning to a generation struggling to find a place in society;

**All Help us to be Providence as we find ways to contribute to the betterment of others' lives.**

Reader 3 **Thea Bowman** was born in Mississippi on December 29, 1937. Her grandfather had been born a slave but her father was a physician and her mother a teacher. Though they were Methodists, they enrolled in her in a Catholic school and at age nine she asked them if she could become Catholic. After high school she joined the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration at LaCrosse, Wisconsin, the only Black sister in the congregation. She went on to higher studies at the Catholic University in Washington, D.C., earning a Ph.D. in English. After teaching for sixteen years, she became directly involved in ministry to her fellow African-Americans. Gifted with a brilliant mind, a beautiful

voice and a dynamic personality, Sister Thea shared the message of God’s love through inspirational talks across the country and beyond. Her work had a huge impact upon Catholic liturgical music in providing an intellectual, spiritual, historical, and cultural foundation for developing and legitimizing a distinct worship form for Black Catholics. In 1984, Sr. Thea was diagnosed with breast cancer. She prayed “to live until I die.” Her prayer was answered, and Thea continued her gatherings seated in a wheelchair. In 1989, the U.S. bishops invited her to be a key speaker at their conference on Black Catholics. She died at age 52 on March 30, 1990.

*As an alternative to the reading,*  
watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDmgMEIJEAY>

*Reflective silence*

O God, you raised up your daughter Thea to show us the beauty and joy of a worship that is grounded in life experience;

**All**            **Teach us to pray from our hearts in ways that spill over into service for justice.**

Leader        During the early years of our country, God’s invitation to a deep spiritual life was widely felt among the early American Black community. A recent posting of Richard Rohr’s Daily Reflections gives us a glimpse of three Black women mystics:

Reader 4     **Sojourner Truth** (1797-1883) was born a slave. Her mother taught her children strategies for survival by sitting under the stars and calling upon God. Her contemplation of the book of nature expanded her understanding of the biblical story of creation. “If God is all in all, God cannot tire and rest, for the waters would not flow, and the fishes could not swim, and all motion must cease.” Her strong inner life made her a fearless speaker of convincing insights.

**All**            **May our listening hearts move us to serve in love.**

Reader 5 **Rebecca Cox Jackson** (1795-1871) was born into a free family. One night, shuddering with fear during a lightning storm, she was overcome with feelings of peace and protection and a desire to share the love God had poured into her. She became an itinerant preacher and founded the first Black Shaker community.

**All** **May our listening hearts move us to serve in love.**

Reader 6 **Jarena Lee** (1783-1864) was born of free Black parents, but was hired out to work for other families far from home. In a quiet moment she heard a voice telling her to “Go preach the Gospel!” She was told by her church that only men could preach and asked, “Why? Seeing that our Savior died for the women as well as the men. If to preach the gospel by the gift of heaven comes by inspiration solely, is God straightened?” She became the first authorized woman preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

**All** **May our listening hearts move us to serve in love.**

## Reflections on Racism in America

Leader Sad to relate, American society at large did not always appreciate the contributions of Black Americans. Rather, the dominant white culture fostered the belief – either consciously or unconsciously – that whites were a superior race, so persons of other races or ethnicities were inferior and unworthy of equal regard. Such racist convictions are directly opposed to Jesus’ teaching.

Reader 7 Jesus asked, “Which of these, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He replied, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10: 36-37)

Leader Some of us have had the privilege of working alongside others in the Black community. All of us have become aware of the sufferings of those subjected to overt racism. As we reflect on our experience, for whom and for what shall we pray?

*All are invited to mention an experience or incidence of racism, together with a prayer of intercession for those affected.*

**Leader** In all humility we strive to honestly assess our own unconscious motives and deepen our belief that we are all made in the image of God, brothers and sisters sharing life on a fragile planet. In this spirit, let us pray:

Provident God, aware of our own brokenness, we ask the gift of courage to identify how and where we are in need of conversion in order to live in solidarity with Earth and all creation.

**Side 1** Deliver us from the violence of superiority and disdain.

**Side 2** Grant us the desire and the humility to listen with special care to those whose experiences and attitudes are different from our own.

**Side 1** Deliver us from the violence of greed and privilege.

**Side 2** Grant us the desire and the will to live simply so that others may have their just share of the Earth's resources.

**Side 1** Deliver us from the silence that gives consent to abuse, war and evil.

**Side 2** Grant us the desire and the courage to risk speaking and acting for the common good.

**Side 1** Deliver us from the violence of irreverence, exploitation and control,

**Side 2** Grant us the desire and the strength to act responsibly within the cycle of creation.

**All** **God of love, mercy and justice, acknowledging our complicity in those attitudes, actions and words which perpetuate violence, we beg the grace of a nonviolent heart.  
Amen.**