



Venerable Henriette Delille

1812-1862

Archdiocese of New Orleans

Henriette Delille was born in New Orleans in 1813 of Creole Ancestry. Trained by her mother in French literature, music, dancing and nursing, groomed to take her place as the common-law wife of a wealthy white man. This system was known as concubinage and was accepted and recognized. It was into this world of ambivalent values and confused racial boundaries that Henriette was born.

But, Henriette was instead drawn to a strong religious belief in the teaching of the Catholic Church, resisting the life chosen for her by her mother. She was an outspoken opponent of the system on the grounds that it represented a violation of the Catholic sacrament of marriage.

Henriette was influenced by Sister Marthe Fontier, who had opened a school in New Orleans for girls of color. In 1827, at the age of 14, the well-educated Henriette began teaching at the local Catholic school. Over the next several years, her devotion to caring for and education of the poor grew, causing conflict with her mother.

In 1835, Henriette's mother suffered a nervous breakdown. Later that year, the court declared her incompetent, and granted Henriette control of her assets. After providing for her mother's care, Henriette sold all her remaining property. In 1836 she used the proceeds to found a small unrecognized congregation or order of nuns, the Sisters of the Presentation. The original

members consisted of Henriette, seven young Creole women, and a young French woman. They cared for the sick, helped the poor, and instructed free and enslaved, children and adults. They took into their home elderly women who needed more than visitation, and thereby opened America's first Catholic home for the elderly. The order was discontinued because it violated the laws of the state concerning segregation.

Through the intervention of Fr. Etienne Rousselon, the dream of Henriette and her childhood friend Juliette secured formal recognition of the new congregation from the Holy See. In 1842, the name was changed to the Sisters of the Holy Family. Henriette spent her whole life in service to poor blacks providing education, food, clothing, housing and nursing care.

Henriette, as she made her way through life, bore many crosses, encountered obstacles, and suffered personal illness. By her example she taught us that perseverance and sanctity can be attained by following the path of Jesus. It was in this manner that she dealt with her major obstacles and troubles to achieve her goals.

Some of the troubles Henriette Delille faced with the resistance of the ruling population to the idea of a black religious congregation; the lack of finances to more fully serve those in need; the taunts and disbelief of people in her mission; the lack of support from both the Church and civil authority and poor health.

However, Henriette practices heroic virtue. She had faith, lived in hope and love, and was compassionate, forgiving, and merciful. She believed in justice and was not afraid to do what was right in the eyes of God.

Henriette died November 17, 1862, at the age of 50. Friends attributed her death to a life of service, poverty, and hard work. Her funeral was held at St. Augustine Church. Her obituary states, "... Miss Henriette Delille had for long years consecrated herself totally to God without reservation to the instruction of the ignorant and principally to the slave..." "...Worn out by work, she died at the age of 50 years... The crowd gathered for her funeral testified by its sorrow how keenly felt was the loss of her who for the love of Jesus Christ had made herself the humble servant of slaves."

At the time of her death, there were 12 members of the order. The sisters worth noteworthy for their care for the sick and the dying during the yellow fever epidemics that struck New Orleans in 1853 and 1897. By 1909, it had grown to 150 members, and operated parochial schools in New Orleans that served 1,300 students. By 1950, membership in the order peaked at 400.

The Sisters of the Holy Family are still active, with over 200 members, still serving the poor, operating free schools for children, nursing homes and retirement homes in Louisiana, Washington, DC, Texas, Tennessee, California, Belize, Panama and Benin City in Nigeria,

Henriette Delille is the first U.S. native born African American whose cause for canonization has been officially opened by the Catholic Church. The process began in 1988. Henriette Delille was declared Venerable in 2010.

Timeline

- 1812 Henriette Delille is born in New Orleans, Louisiana
- 1836 Henriette had inspired a small band of women to assist the sick and dying and to catechize the uninstructed among her people.
- 1841 This group of pious women was both encouraged and recognized by the Church.
- 1842 The Sisters of the Holy Family are founded.
- 1851 Henriette had personally purchased a home for these women to live in in community and further their ministry.
- 1862 Henriette Delille dies at age 50.

Prayer for the Beatification of Henriette Delille

O good and gracious God, you called Henriette Delille to give herself in serve and in love to the slaves and the sick, to the orphan and the aged, to the forgotten and the despised.

Grant that inspired by her life, we might be renewed in heart and in mind. If it be Your will may she one day be raised to the honor of sainthood. By her prayers, may we live in harmony and peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen