

# WITNESS TO FREEDOM

## VEN. HENRIETTE DELILLE



(CNS photo/Clarion Herald)

*"I believe in God.  
I hope in God. I love.  
I want to live and die for God."*

Servant of Slaves. Witness to the Poor. Declared Venerable by Pope Benedict XVI on March 27, 2010.

Henriette Delille, a free woman of color, lived in New Orleans in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. She affirmed the God-given dignity of persons of African descent during the era of slavery. With immense love and courage, she confronted the dehumanizing conditions that the Black population, slave and free, endured.

Descended of an enslaved African woman and white slave owner, Henriette was born into the precarious class of Creoles or free Blacks of mixed heritage. They lived resourcefully by purchasing property, working as entrepreneurs, and finding ways to creatively secure financial resources. For many women in this situation, such avenues included concubinage. Rejecting that option, Henriette promoted sacramental marriage.

A devout Catholic, Henriette worked to bring religious education and the sacraments of the Church to the many enslaved as well as free

persons of African descent. Consequently, Henriette served as the godmother, sponsor, and catechist for many infants, youth, and adults presented for Baptism, Holy Eucharist, and Holy Matrimony.

Using her meager personal resources, Henriette devoted her adult life to exercising Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. She enlisted the support of two other free women of color, Juliette Gaudin and Josephine Charles. Together, they sought and cared for orphans, the aged, disabled, infirm, and indigent in the community.

As honorable as these efforts were, Henriette confronted many obstacles. Most of the ruling class, including Church officials, opposed a Black religious association. There was never enough money. Further, Henriette suffered poor health. However, Henriette's efforts were supported by *zéloteurs* – lay men and women donors and associates, both free and enslaved. Named the Association of the Holy Family, the laypeople advanced a common mission: "to teach catechism to the poor and to prepare them for first Communion."

Henriette, Juliette, and Josephine did not wear an official habit, and they made no public vows. Nevertheless, their service, mercy, and love was the catalyst for founding of the Sisters of the Holy Family congregation, which continues to serve the people of God throughout Louisiana and neighboring states, as well as Washington, DC, California, and areas of Central America and West Africa.\*

In the midst of struggle, Henriette persevered. She was determined to serve, and her persistence leaves a legacy for all Catholics who seek to overcome racial division in our country.

**Venerable Henriette Delille, Servant of Slaves, pray for us!**

\*Cyprian Davis, *Henriette Delille: Servant of Slaves, Witness to the Poor* (Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, 2004), p. ix, 51.



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