News
Religious Life



Sr. Mary Ann Baichan, center, professes first vows during a Mass in 2016 during the centennial year of the founding of the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary at St. Charles Borromeo Church in the Harlem section of New York City. (OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

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Black Catholic religious vocations emerge from a long tradition of faith, nurtured by silence and prayer within the life of the church, said a religious sister at an event dedicated to those vocations.

"I stand on the shoulders of giants. ... Vocations grow; they don't just happen," said Sr. Mary Francis Bard, a member of the Sisters of the Holy Family, in an April 23 reflection for the National Day of Prayer for Black Vocations.

The online gathering — moderated by Nate Tinner-Williams, co-founder and editor of Black Catholic Messenger and a Josephite seminarian — was sponsored by the National Black Catholic Seminarians Association, which established the observance in 2010. Founded in 1970, the nonprofit NBCSA, an affiliate of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, supports Black Catholic seminarians preparing for priesthood and religious life in the United States.

The day of prayer is annually held on the Sunday closest to the ordination anniversary of Venerable Augustus Tolton (1854-1897), a former slave who became the first known Black Catholic priest from the United States. Rejected by Catholic seminaries in the United States because of his race, Tolton entered formation at the Pontifical Collegium Urbanum de Propaganda Fide in Rome and was ordained there in 1886 at St. John Lateran Basilica. He returned to the United States to serve in Chicago.

Tolton's parents, both Catholic, were instrumental in fostering his faith, particularly his mother, Martha Jane, who was left to raise Tolton and his siblings after his father died while serving in the Union Army during the Civil War.

"[Religious vocations] come from families," said Bard, the first woman religious invited to address the annual prayer gathering. "Nobody has a perfect family, but [vocations] come from families."

In addition, vocations derive "from vibrant parishes, and dynamic schools, colleges and universities," said Bard, who serves at the New Orleans motherhouse of the Sisters of the Holy Family, a historically Black religious community.

"All vocations are born out of prayer," she said, including the "prayers from a mother, or a blessed grandmother and even a trusted friend — a simple, cherished prayer that we remain faithful to our God and faithful to our church."

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Both "sacred Scripture and the lives of the saints confirm that God calls all kinds of people" to religious life, regardless of skin color, she said.

"I refuse to believe God does not call people that look like me," said Bard, who is Black. She said she had encountered individuals in religious life who "didn't know any African American nuns or African American priests or sisters or brothers."

According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University in Washington, only 4% of the ordination class of 2022 in the United States were Black, African or African American. A CARA study from 2021 estimated just 4% of women and men entering religious life in the United States since 2005 were Black or African, with the majority — 82% — having been born overseas.

Bard, who entered her congregation in 2012, is considered to be the only living person from her native Kentucky area to enter a historically Black religious community. Her congregation was founded by Venerable Henriette Delille (1813-1862), a free woman of color who was born and raised in New Orleans.

Discerning a religious vocation requires a willingness to cultivate stillness and a humble openness to hearing from God, Bard said.

"You hear God in the quiet," she said, describing how her own recognition of a call came amid an extended vacation to the African nation of Cameroon.

"I was in a cocoa field, being a typical 'first world' woman complaining about nothing," she said. "And you know what God told me? You're not getting married. ... You're going to serve your people, and you're going to serve my people. And I'm

going to show you that I will be enough."

Bard said she "had two choices that day: Was I going to run from God? Or was I going to embrace God?"

She chose the latter, she said, and hopes to "live up to the words" of Delille, whom she quoted at the conclusion of her reflection.

"I believe in God. I hope in God. I love. I want to live and die for God," the foundress said.