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Oregon African American Catholics' legacy of joy amid injustice



Alaina Hardy, pictured as a high school junior, grew up at Immaculate Heart Church in North Portland. She says her parish was like a big family but that she experienced painful prejudice in other Catholic settings. Recent protests and conversations about race inside and outside the Catholic Church give Hardy, now 20, hope for the future. (Courtesy Alaina Hardy)



Katie Scott
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Sonora Thirdgill, sitting in front of her North Portland home, is a longtime member of Holy Redeemer Church, just blocks away. "One of my biggest fears was when my sons started driving and if they might reach too quickly for their wallet if stopped by an officer and that it would be misconstrued," said Thirdgill, mother of three. (Katie Scott/Catholic Sentinel)

This is the second story in a two-part series on racism toward African American Catholics. The first piece explored [U.S. and Oregon church history](#).

Alaina Hardy recalls many similar stories, but one stands out. She was about 10, standing beside her mother during Mass at a large Oregon parish.

When it came time for the Our Father, the man next to Hardy's mother crossed his arms and would not link hands.

"I thought nothing of it at first, because some people don't like to touch others, or he might have been sick," said Hardy, now a junior at a California college.

At the sign of peace her mom turned to the man, who was white, with an outstretched hand. He nodded his head with his arms crossed, then proceeded to reach out to give the sign of peace to other worshippers.

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The local church's response

Days after George Floyd died in police custody, Archbishop Alexander Sample and priests around the Archdiocese of Portland addressed racism directly during Sunday Masses.

We must "look honestly inward," said Deacon Joseph Piper, of the St. John Society, during Mass at St. Mary Parish in Corvallis June 7. "Is there some racism lurking there? Is there some indifference? Then ask God to come and transform the heart."

Archbishop Sample in his weekly 30-minute livestreamed "Chapel Chats" has continued to address racial divisiveness, calling for social changes informed by faith and prayer. His reflections on racism always include condemnation of violent elements within the ongoing protests.

The archbishop also has encouraged small groups in parishes to take up the issue of racial justice, and at least one parish has embraced that recommendation.

St. Ignatius in Southeast Portland this month began a faith formation program meant to reveal hard truths about race, promote healing and transform unjust social systems. In Southwest Portland St. Clare Parish released a statement pledging that the community stands firmly against racism. Earlier this summer there was a Mass for peace and justice at St. Mary Cathedral downtown and there have been Holy Hours for unity.

Mary Elizabeth Harper, a member of Resurrection Parish in Tualatin, is attempting to organize Zoom gatherings among parishes. "I want our people to understand that not all white people are bigots, but education can bring change, and the church can be taking a more active role in making a difference."

Matthew Cressler, professor of religious studies at the College of Charleston in South Carolina, has been following church leaders' reactions nationally. He said many bishops have made "striking and profound statements," but he believes the bishops as a whole could address racism more fearlessly and persistently, offering a unilateral endorsement of racial justice as they have on other dignity of life issues.

Black Catholics in Oregon have diverse views about how the church has responded to racism recently. Some would like to see an ongoing recognition of injustices and specific changes.

Tony Jones, chair of the African American Catholic Community of Oregon, wrote a letter to the Pastoral Center last month urging more comprehensive training around racism for seminarians and asking that priests be encouraged to continue to address racial justice from the pulpit. The letter also asked for promotion of leadership roles for African Americans in the archdiocese.

"I was old enough to know that this man didn't shake our hands because we were Black," Hardy said. "He showed his disgust and discomfort through his body language, the way he looked at us, the way he turned and walked away at a time we were supposed to be embracing our brothers and sisters in Christ."

Alongside this memory are fond recollections from Hardy's diverse home parish, Immaculate Heart in North Portland, where she felt enveloped in love. There were welcoming Bible studies and youth groups and hours spent chatting and laughing as parishioners young and old prepared parish meals.

"It was like a big family," she said. "No one ever gave you a side-eye in church, or if they did it was because you deserved it because you were misbehaving."

In Oregon, as in cities nationwide, African American Catholics know this joy of parish life as well as the injustice Hardy and her mother encountered as they prayed. Many, the 20-year-old included, believe the persistent calls for racial equality this summer have the potential to strip away some of the racism present both in society and the Catholic Church.

"This year is complicated and painful and scary and raw," Hardy said. "But I think it's going to bring some of the change we so desperately need. I think it's going to force us to grow."

Unexamined biases beneath Oregon's progressive image

Black Catholics in Oregon remain influenced by a history of exclusionary practices in the state, such as a constitution that barred Blacks from living within its borders. Today African Americans account for 2.2% of Oregon's total population, according to 2019 census data, with the largest concentration in Portland. At just 6% Black, the city is among the whitest large cities in the country.

At the same time, the nation's broader history has shaped the institutions and structures currently being scrutinized in Oregon and across the country, said Matthew Cressler, a Catholic who is professor of religious studies at the College of Charleston in South Carolina.

For most white Catholics, police departments have not been among the institutions requiring harsh critique. The Public Religion Research Institute in Washington, D.C., reported in 2018 that more than 60% of white Catholics felt the police killings of Black men were isolated incidents and not reflective of pervasive bias.

Sonora Thirdgill is a member of Holy Redeemer Parish in North Portland and a single mom of three. She does not perceive the killings as isolated.

Sitting mask-clad on the lawn of her house, just a few blocks from her parish, Thirdgill said speaking with her kids about how to handle police interactions is part of her foremost responsibility as a parent — it's about keeping her kids safe.

"You have to have the talk," said Thirdgill, an investigator for the Metropolitan Public Defender, a nonprofit agency serving low-income clients. "One of my biggest fears was when my sons started driving and if they might reach too quickly for their wallets if stopped by an officer and that it would be misconstrued."

A report last year by the Portland Police Bureau's training advisory council indicates Portland police use force on Black people at higher rates than on any other race.

Thirdgill, 54, said "the talk" cannot end with a discussion about the potential actions of police officers. She has told her children not to go into grocery stores with food, or they could be accused of stealing an item. They cannot walk around stores with their hands in their pockets, or someone might worry they have a concealed weapon.

Every African American interviewed for this piece, including Father Charles Wood, pastor of St. Wenceslaus Parish Scappoose, at some point has been followed by security in an Oregon grocery or retail store. "It happens a lot," said the priest, recalling a recent instance in the Lloyd Center shopping mall in Portland.

Thirdgill said one of the reasons she sent her children to Catholic schools, first Holy Redeemer then Central Catholic High School, was to make sure they were safe and protected from racism as much as possible. She's heard of previous race-related tensions at the Southeast Portland high school, but that's not been a part her children's experience, and they've thrived there.

Janet Steverson is a law professor at Portland's Lewis & Clark College and the former dean of diversity and inclusion at the school.

She describes Portland, where residents often tout their inclusivity, as "an interesting place."

"There are areas where you are accepted for who you are, but there are contingents of Portland where there's a white



savior mentality or biases that go unexamined because people view themselves as a progressive liberal” and therefore free of prejudice.

Steverson, an Immaculate Heart parishioner, said hiring practices in organizations are an example of pervasive institutional racism.

“People say they are for diversity and inclusion and equity, but then when it comes down to implementing it and it would be a disadvantage to them or the candidate they want to advance, they will revert to, ‘No, let’s not do this exact process,’” said Steverson, 59.

“Or they will say, ‘We can’t find any qualified folks of color.’ Then you find one. And then they start changing the criteria to get the hire they want.”

Steverson said it’s human nature to be drawn to people who are similar to you, and without self-awareness it can hinder intended inclusivity goals and blind people to the best candidate.

Black employees who are hired often lack adequate support from Oregon employers if they bring up race-related concerns, according to Shirley Jackson, chair of the Black Studies Department at Portland State University. The university recently conducted a study looking at why people of color leave the area. “There’s a desire to increase diversity here but often not an effort to retain it,” Jackson said.

Mary Elizabeth Harper, a member of Resurrection Parish in Tualatin, moved to the state a decade ago after being recruited by a national educational organization. Currently on the boards of Catholic Charities of Oregon and St. Vincent de Paul, she has a law degree and for years advocated for inner-city youths.

When Harper, now in her 60s, showed up at the appointed time to meet her boss, “I sat in the office, and no one introduced themselves; they kept walking by without a word,” she said. “When they finally found out who I was, their mouths fell open. They couldn’t believe I was the one they’d hired. Some immediately adjusted their expressions, but it was a very uncomfortable position.”

Harper admits she sometimes has to psych herself up to go out into the Portland suburbs, where she is regularly the only Black person.

“I tell myself, ‘They need to see you and what it means to be around diversity,’” said Harper.

Steverson said that overall she’s felt comfortable living in Portland, and she believes it’s crucial to share with her students of color the markedly positive experiences she’s had.

“It helps balance the other instances, like when I went into a store and was followed around,” she said. Steverson tells her students: “I need you to see a balanced view, otherwise you start hating a whole group.”

Interpersonal, structural racism in the church

One way racism played out in the church 50 years ago and continues today is that some white Catholics assume “they are the authentic Catholics and that Black people are not,” Cressler said.

He believes an expression of this prejudice is in people’s reactions to Black worship music.

The 1970s saw a flourishing of experimentation in Black Catholic worship styles that were tied to African Americans’ roots. Sister Thea Bowman, an African American who is being investigated for sainthood, helped create the first Catholic hymnal that included gospel music.

Teletha Benjamin, a matriarch at Immaculate Heart, recalled that in the 1980s parishioners established a gospel choir — and a number of white members subsequently left the parish. The 83-year-old also described how at an annual Martin Luther King Jr. memorial Mass at St. Mary Cathedral in downtown Portland, “a few attendees got up and walked out because the gospel music used didn’t match their views.”

“I’m not against traditional music, but there’s such a beautiful spirit in gospel music,” said Benjamin. “There’s a place for it.”

Thirdgill, at Holy Redeemer, said in all her years at her parish — she attended grade school there — she’s never felt uncomfortable. The parish has a few Black families but in recent years is predominately white.

In the week after George Floyd died in the custody of Minneapolis police, Thirdgill received phone calls from Holy Redeemer parishioners she barely knew, fellow Catholics checking in to see how she was doing, to ask how they could support her family.

“It was truly wonderful,” said Thirdgill.

Thirdgill still has had painful, if rare, experiences related to her skin color within the Catholic community. As a junior at Southwest Portland’s St. Mary’s Academy, one of the first schools in the state to enroll Black students in the 1930s, she was playing defense during a basketball game. The players were taught to be vocal, and she was communicating with a teammate.

“Shut up, N-word,” a player from the other team told her.

“My whole world stopped around me,” recalled Thirdgill.

From where the girls were on the court, the opponents’ coach could hear the interaction. He began to laugh.

“I flipped out when I heard the laughter and explained what happened, but nothing was done,” Thirdgill said. Her coach

later pulled her aside and said she needed to apologize to the other team's coach.

"I was humiliated," she said.

Hardy and other Black Catholics shared more recent stories of racial divisiveness in the faith community.

Instances of people not holding her hand during the Our Father or offering the sign of peace remain among the most difficult for Hardy to grasp.

"When you receive the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist, you're supposed to let it change you, to make you more Christlike. It's as if some people don't allow that."

She said the dearth of Blacks depicted in sacred art in Oregon parishes also is harmful to the faith life of Black Catholic youths. It's a deficiency Blacks see nationwide.

"What does it tell children, who are visual learners, that when they look up at a beautiful ceiling there are no Black angels?" asked Hardy. "What does it tell them if their coloring book for CCD has no pictures of Black saints? That no one in this vast and great religion looks like them?"

Steverson was drawn in part to the diversity of backgrounds and views at Immaculate Heart, which is about 40% Black. But she said it's also "just nice not to stand out."

"You can bring your whole self and you can let your guard down. You don't always realize how much weight you're carrying" in nearly all-white environments.

She's been to other churches in Oregon where people will not sit next to her. "That's cool on a plane, but when I go to parishes and that happens, you wonder, 'What is the reason?'"

In similar situations, "the reason is often negative not positive, which is why you're braced all the time."

Father Wood, who grew up on the East Coast, said he feels "uniquely blessed to have not experienced overt church-based racism."

However he knows individuals who have been victims in heartbreaking ways.

The priest recalled how during his diaconate year he was invited to a Thanksgiving meal at a Protestant church in Portland, where he met the pastor of the congregation.

The African American pastor told Father Wood that he'd been raised Catholic in the city and had been an altar server in the 1960s.

One day his parish priest said to him, "You are my top altar server — reverent, skilled. It's too bad that young Black men can't become a priest."

The pastor told the story without rancor or bitterness, said Father Wood. "But there was sadness still in his voice."

The young altar server went home that Sunday and told his parents he no longer wanted to be an altar server or to be Catholic.

"It breaks my heart recalling his story," Father Wood said. "That white priest's words were cruel and inaccurate." In fact more than a decade prior the Portland Archdiocese ordained its first Black priest, a native of Mississippi.

"This might have happened years ago, but if this guy had a call to the priesthood and if things had played out differently, perhaps we could have had an African American priest from here serving the people today — a Black priest with a homegrown vocation," said Father Wood. "I don't know what the ripple effects would have been, but it very well might have inspired vocations among Blacks and others."

According to Father Wood, currently there are only two African American priests, himself included, ministering in the archdiocese, and neither man is from Oregon.

He said it's unclear if there were any broader institutional structures that may have influenced this white priest who altered a young Black man's spiritual trajectory.

Shannen Dee Williams is a professor at Villanova University in Pennsylvania who specializes in African American Catholic history. She said it is imperative to understand that anti-Black racism in the church is not only interpersonal but institutional and structural.

Her research on the history of racial segregation and exclusion in female religious life, for example, reveals that Black women and girls called to religious orders in Portland were systematically barred from entering white sisterhoods ministering in the city into the 1960s. "An essential question to ask is how many Black Oregon natives became sisters?" said Williams. "How many Black Oregon natives became priests?"

Those questions and their answers, "along with the lived experiences of Black people in other Catholic institutions, tell the full story."

The varying degrees of racism or prejudice Black Catholics have faced comes with an enduring faith.

Black people who have remained Catholic in spite of centuries of "unholy discrimination simply refuse to surrender their church to those committed to division and hate," added Williams. "They have trusted God and believed wholeheartedly in Catholic social teaching, which affirms the life and dignity of every human being."

"When it comes down to it, so much of my experience with the Catholic Church is joy, of really trying to follow the example of Jesus, of love," said Steverson, articulating feelings expressed by many other Black Catholics in Oregon. "For me, challenging the status quo is something Jesus did his whole life."

Calls for justice 'impossible not to hear'

The Black Lives Matter movement is "without a doubt the most significant civil rights effort since the U.S. civil rights movement of the past century," according to Cressler.

Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers, a member of Immaculate Heart and an EWTN radio co-host, has with fellow Black Catholics repeatedly and emphatically affirmed he does not support the Black Lives Matter organization, which has some platforms contradictory to church teaching. Rather, he supports the global movement calling for racial justice.

"We have a Gospel imperative to work toward racial equality," said the deacon's co-host Gloria Purvis, who has offered fervent exhortations against racism on air and in interviews.

Members of the Black Lives Matter movement have called for various approaches to police reform, which has roused debate inside and outside the church. Purvis pointed to the Catholic social teaching of subsidiarity, which holds that human affairs are best handled at the lowest possible level, closest to the people affected.

"Solutions might look different in different locations, but from the point of subsidiarity, local governments, local communities, have the right to have a voice in such decisions."

She encourages Catholics not to mock ideas but get involved.

"We get hooked into the left-right divide and we don't engage with the issues," said Purvis. "As soon as we start mocking we decide we don't want to consider what others are saying or to bring forth our own ideas."

She believes it's fully Catholic to participate peacefully in protests. "Bring your Catholic identity with you, bring your rosary beads," she said. "We believe in the truth, Jesus Christ. Why wouldn't we bring him into the streets?"

Every evening since Floyd's death, protests for racial justice have been held in downtown Portland. Smaller gatherings have risen throughout the state.

Harper, from Resurrection Parish, said Oregon has a long way to go when it comes to racism, but she's been impressed by the level of white participation in protests and with white individuals' commitment to self-reflection.

Hardy grew up hearing stories about how her mother and father, grandmother and grandfather fought racism.

"We've shouted for racial justice in our cities," she said. "We've talked about it calmly. We acted it out in our movies and shows. We put it in art and on stages; we put it in everything we produced. And people watched and people clapped. But they never heard.

"Now, finally," Hardy said, "we are going through a time that I think it's impossible not to hear."

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Resources to promote racial justice, understanding of the U.S. Black experience

TO READ

- ["Open Wide Our Hearts,"](#) U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' 2018 pastoral letter on racism
- [USCCB materials addressing racism](#)
- [National Black Catholic Congress](#) website with historical information, current news, spiritual resources
- "Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II," by Douglas Blackmon
- "The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America," by Richard Rothstein

TO WATCH

- Available for streaming: PBS' ["The African Americans,"](#) written and presented by Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., and ["Eyes on The Prize"](#) series

Sources: Gloria Purvis and Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers of EWTN

Related Articles

[Racism and resilience: An overview of Catholic African American history](#)