

A Praise Song for Courageous Truth-Telling Women

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LCWR President Jane Herb, IHM, Executive Director Carol Zinn, SSJ, and I were privileged to attend the public launch on June 11, 2022, of the long-awaited, groundbreaking book by Dr. Shannen Dee Williams, *Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle*. It was a [sacred event](#). Held in Pittsburgh where in August 1968 the first gathering of the National Black Sisters' Conference (NBSC) took place, it was sponsored by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden and Duquesne University.

The evening began with powerful presentations by leaders of our nation's three Black sisterhoods: Sisters Rita Michelle Proctor, OSP, of the Oblate Sisters of Providence (Baltimore); Sylvia Thibodeaux, SSF, of the Sisters of the Holy Family (New Orleans); and Chala Marie Hill, FHM, of the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary (New York City).

The Church "gave little or no assistance" to the Oblate Sisters, the nation's first congregation of Black Catholic sisters, Sister Rita Michelle shared, "even told them to disband and go do housework." Established during slavery, the Oblate Sisters are about to celebrate 193 years of faithful service to God's people. "When faced with injustice and seemingly insurmountable circumstances," Sister Rita Michelle said, the community "operated within the framework, 'God can make a way out of no way.'"

The Sisters of the Holy Family also were formed during slavery. "We have survived splits, storms,

yellow fever, Covid, and we've battled racism. And still we stand," said Sister Sylvia. The Sisters this year celebrate 180 years "of believing in God, hoping in God, and loving God." Their founder, Venerable Mother Henriette Delille, is one of the six Black Catholics in the [process for canonization](#), as is Oblate founder Servant of God Mother Mary Lange,

Sister Chala Marie spoke of Jim Crow oppression in Savannah, Georgia, where the Handmaids were founded in 1916 to help ensure Black children were educated. To stay true to the mission, the community had to migrate north. "Today we're still living with racism and white supremacy," Sister Chala Marie said. Following their founder's prayer, "Lord, what would you have me to do," the Sisters are now involved in social justice ministries, "making sure that people are aware that Black Lives Matter...that God loves them and God will care for them."

When NBSC President Josita Colbert, SNDdeN, took the stage, she began by noting the historic nature of the event, celebrating the publication of a book "that



provides the full history of Black Catholic nuns in the United States and the many injustices suffered due to systemic racism.” She noted that Dr. Williams “has born testimony to this truth in her book. The history of the Church in America cannot be written without the inclusion of our story.”

Expressing the NBSC’s deep gratitude to Dr. Williams, Sister Josita also extended gratitude to another special guest at the event – Dr. Patricia Grey, the former Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, RSM, who in 1968 founded the National Black Sisters’ Conference. “We would not even be here today if it was not for her,” Sister Josita said of Dr. Grey. “She was only 24 years of age when she founded us, not even made final vows.” She thanked Dr. Grey and the sisters representing the three historically Black congregations “because, again, we wouldn’t be here if it hadn’t been for them showing that, yes, a Black woman can serve God in a very special way. These three congregations have done that – and then our Sister Patte Grey came along in 1968 to verify that we can do it.”

The author, Dr. Shannen Dee Williams, focused on sharing her personal story, describing the many providential turns of what turned into a 15-year journey to write this book. Inarguably now the nation’s foremost scholar on the history of Black Catholic nuns, Dr. Williams was lured into the topic by her amazement that Black sisters even existed. She saw them pictured in an old newspaper story in

microfiche about the 1968 gathering in Pittsburgh. Although a cradle Catholic, the only Black sister Dr. Williams had ever encountered was Sister Mary Clarence in Sister Act. The encounter was transformational, leading her to undertake vast archival research and oral interviews with more than 150 sisters to capture the story. Dr. Williams said, “Although it is a painful story, a story of perseverance and resistance to white supremacy and racism, it is also a story of the faithfulness, the educational expertise, the excellence of Black sisters that I hope that I convey in this book.” She added, “it is my greatest hope that *Subversive Habits* does their stories justice and is indeed a praise song for these courageous women.”

Dr. Williams spoke of encountering both “a brutal history of white supremacy” but also grace and beauty. “The beauty of the history of the National Black Catholic Sisters. The beauty and promise of justice and reconciliation and of peace.” She then extended words of gratitude to Dr. Patricia Grey “for showing me that, for keeping me in the Church. I want to thank Sister Mary Pellegrino of the Sisters of St. Joseph for showing me the power and possibility of reconciliation, of justice, of peace.”

That led to the final panel discussion which centered on a painful redemption story that is emblematic of the larger story captured in *Subversive Habits* of God’s call to extraordinary women of faith who suffered grievous injuries, all too often at the hands of white

Catholic sisters and clergy due to race-based biases and the heresy of white supremacy. Dr. Grey and Sisters Mary Pellegrino and Sally Witt of the Baden St. Josephs joined Dr. Williams on the stage.

The story that brought these women together began in 2015 at an international symposium in London, where Dr. Williams spoke of the race-based rejection in 1960 of a young Black aspirant, Patricia Grey, by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, a detail she did not typically include in her talks. Historian Sally Witt, CSJ,



Sister Josita Colbert, SNDdeN

who was attending the lecture, was shocked to hear that her congregation had rejected a woman who would have entered the same year she did. Sister Sally spoke of how she talked to Dr. Williams to see if it might be possible to contact Dr. Grey and then shared the story with Mary Pellegrino, who was Congregation Leader at the time.

“And Sally when you came home, I don’t know if you remember when you emailed me and told me what happened and sent me the story from NCR,” Sister Mary said. “I remember just sitting at my computer and reading that over and over and over again in disbelief. In many ways being ashamed that we had done that. In that moment knowing – I didn’t know what I was going to do but I knew – I had to do something.”

Dr. Patricia Grey recalled the calls she received at the time, first from Dr. Williams and then Sister Mary. “I was asked by you if I would contact the Sisters of St. Joseph and particularly you, Mary, who were reaching out to me to seek an opportunity for forgiveness. I was struck by this.” Dr. Grey then recalled the experience in 1960 of reading the letter responding to her request to enter the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden. “I had sat on that feeling that I felt when I got that letter,” she said, pointing out that she and her siblings had all been taught CCD by the St. Joseph Sisters. “We all knew them, and I never thought that I would not be accepted in the congregation.” Turning to the audience, she said, “I was really stunned when I read it.” Then, making the physical gesture, she said, “It was like a dagger going through me. I was sick deep in the pit of my stomach. And I crumpled it up because I really didn’t want to read it again, to have that feeling again.”



Sister Sally Witt, CSJ; Sister Mary Pellegrino, CSJ; Dr. Patricia Grey

It took her five months to respond, Dr. Grey said. “This was the Holy Spirit. It’s Holy Week, Redemption, everything’s around April that I called Sister Mary and we arranged to meet.” Sister Mary, who would soon be elected to the presidency of LCWR, had just come back from a meeting in Rome. “This was during the Pope’s Year of Mercy and she brought back a replica of the Door of Mercy. We were sitting and talking and reached the point of talking about forgiveness. There were many tears. We were



Sisters Rita Michelle Proctor, OSP; Sylvia Thibodeaux, SSF; and Chala Marie Hill, FHM

pretty much speechless but tears said it all. They spoke for us.”

Dr. Williams said that she had not fully understood “the purpose of my work” until Sister Sally came to her after her talk in London and asked, what can we do to reach out to Dr. Grey? She said, “I knew that I was telling Black sisters’ stories. I knew that it was important to Black history, Black women’s history, the history of the Church, the history of the United States. But I hadn’t considered the possibility of people being transformed by Black sisters’ truth telling.”



Sister Cora Marie Billings, RSM and Dr. Shannen Dee Williams



The event was hosted by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden. Here leadership team members meet with the LCWR officers present. Sisters Sharon Costello, CSJ; Lynn Szymkiewicz, CSJ; Jane Herb, IHM; Carol Zinn, SSJ; Elise Garcia, OP; Mary Parks, CSJ; Jean Uzupis, CSJ

Photos courtesy of Rustbelt Mayberry Photography