

Ugandan Nun Shines Light on Sacred Tradition of Black Catholic Women

This mass movement of black women and girls into Catholic religious life has revolutionary implications for the Church and wider society.



Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe's inclusion on Time magazine's 2014 list of the world's 100 most influential people represents a pivotal breakthrough moment for black Catholic nuns in the Atlantic world, although most people don't realize it.

Featured alongside the likes of Pope Francis and music entertainment mogul Beyoncé, Sister Rosemary is the first black nun to be named to this prestigious list of world leaders, and this fact should not be so easily overlooked.

After all, the 2013 controversy surrounding the casting of five-time Tony Award winner Audra McDonald as Mother Abbess in NBC's live remake of *The Sound of Music* painfully revealed that there are still plenty of people in the world (and especially in the United States) who believe that black nuns are historical and contemporary impossibilities.

Moreover, Sister Rosemary's inclusion on Time's "Most Influential" list is arguably as significant to the contemporary history of black nuns (and Catholic sisters more generally) as the canonization of St. Josephine Bakhita, who in 2000 became the first black woman to be declared a Catholic saint in the modern era.

Indeed, Time's recognition of Sister Rosemary and her transformative ministry to young victims of sexual violence in Uganda and Sudan not only signals a major turning point in mainstream awareness

(and acceptance) of black nuns, but also brings critical attention to one of the most significant, yet under-reported, social revolutions of black women in the contemporary era.

Over the past five decades, the global population of black Catholic nuns has experienced unprecedented growth, with the vast majority of new sisters coming from Africa. According to a Catholic World News report released in 2013, the population of African nuns increased by 28 percent between 2010 and 2011 -- the highest of any continent. When compared with only 18 percent growth in Asia and steep sister-population losses in Europe (-22 percent) and the Americas (-17 percent), it is clear that if this trend continues the dominant face of the Catholic sister will soon be brown, and most likely African.

Despite this historic shift in the racial and ethnic makeup of the global nun population, very little mainstream attention has been paid to this mass movement of black women and girls into Catholic religious life and its revolutionary implications for the Church and wider society.

By rejecting the confines of marriage and biological motherhood and renouncing the legitimacy of a world rampant with racial, sexual, economic, and religious oppression, African nuns are creating and sustaining social and educational institutions to uplift their respective communities (especially women and girls) from the ravages of war, poverty, and violence. They are also revitalizing and revolutionizing an ancient and sacred tradition of black women that has yet to be fully realized or documented in world history.

Since at least the 5th century, thousands upon thousands of black women and girls have professed the sacred vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in the Roman Catholic Church. In doing so, they provided a powerful refutation to Europeans (and European-Americans) who characterized Africa-descended people as sub-human and used the ideology of white supremacy and racist manipulations of the Bible to justify African enslavement, segregation, and colonialism in the modern era. These black women and girls have also helped to transform celibacy into a radical sacrament of black liberation.

Because of the Catholic Church's deep social and economic investments in the institutions of slavery and apartheid in the Americas and Africa, black nuns were severely marginalized within the Church and female religious life prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In particular, the longstanding practices of racial exclusion and segregation in female religious life kept the global population of black nuns numerically low (and statistically insignificant in certain areas of the world) well into the 20th century. Nonetheless, by embracing the celibate state and pioneering black

educational and catechetical ministries, black sisters forced an often reluctant Church hierarchy to adhere to Catholic social teachings and commit vital resources to its vast black constituencies. They also used their religious calls to contest assaults on black morality and humanity throughout the Atlantic world.

In the United States, for example, black women founded the Western world's first black congregations to ensure the development of black female religious life and the African-American apostolate (mission). Of the eight known historically black Catholic sisterhoods established in the U.S., all were founded in the South, where the vast majority of black Americans resided, and all but one were (or slated to be) teaching communities.

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