News



From left: Fr. Willy Kingsley and St. Ann Social Justice Committee members Mary Sewell, Dolores Moore, and Ralph Moore stand in St. Peter's Square during their visit to Rome in October 2023. There they urged Vatican officials to expedite the causes of the first six African American Catholics on the path to sainthood. (Courtesy of Ralph Moore)

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It's been more than 400 years combined since the deaths of the first six African American Catholics now on the path to sainthood, and there is yet to be any clear sign from the Vatican that the first beatification is on the way.

In October, a lay-led group from Baltimore — which for years has been petitioning the pope to make a move — finally received a meeting with the Vatican's saint-making office.

Ralph E. Moore Jr., a member of the Social Justice Committee of St. Ann Catholic Church, spoke with BCM this week (Dec. 1) about the group's work, their long-awaited visit with the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, and the Baltimore group's plans for the future.

"Before All Saints' Day last year, we said that we were going to be in Rome for All Saints' Day this year," he told BCM.

"We had our passports and we even got on the phone one day and tried to call the Vatican and set up our own appointment."

As they learned more about the labyrinthine Vatican processes, a plan emerged with the inspiration of another Black Catholic who met with Church officials in 2022: Gloria Purvis. Her interview, conducted alongside staffers from America magazine, covered a wide range of topics but showed the group from Baltimore that such a meeting was not outside of the grasp of American Catholics.

Black Catholics nationwide have long bemoaned the prohibitively long and expensive conventional process for having a person beatified or canonized in the Church, and the St. Ann committee has been among the most vocal in recent years.

They feel the pope has the authority to expedite the process for those he deems worthy. Purvis' interview gave them the idea that, in order to have success in

reaching the Holy Father with their concerns, they'd need to start local.

"[Gloria] talked about Black Catholics, and how they were leaving the church. And Pope Francis said something to the effect that we should work with [our] bishops."

The St. Ann committee contacted their local urban vicar, Auxiliary Bishop Bruce Lewandowski of the Redemptorists, who got to work on securing a Vatican meeting, with copies in hand of the petitions the group had amassed over the course of more than a year. They report that more than 3,000 letters have been signed to date, with petitioners from around the globe.

Lewandowski's involvement with the initiative dates back to its earliest days, when he celebrated Mass for the launch on All Souls' Day in 2021 at St. Ann's, the historically Black parish where the Social Justice Committee is based.

The liturgy featured the installation of portraits of the first six U.S. Black Catholics on the canonization trail: Venerables Augustus Tolton, Pierre Toussaint, and Henrette DeLille, and Servants of God Julia Greeley and Thea Bowman. Mother Mary Lange, who in Baltimore founded the nation's first order of Black nuns, was named venerable just this summer.

By mid-October, the Baltimore committee had an audience scheduled with dicastery prefect Cardinal Marcello Semeraro; undersecretary Fr. Boguslaw Turek of the Congregation of St. Michael the Archangel; and dicastery staffer Fr. Patrick Dorelus of Brooklyn, who served as an interpreter.

"Fr. Turek seemed to have some interest in Mother Lange. Well, he was interested in all of them," Moore said, noting that he and his confreres from Maryland shared facts about the saintly six and about the experience of Black Catholics more generally — including the long history of white racism.



Auxiliary Bishop Bruce Lewandowski of Baltimore censes portraits of the first six African American Catholics on the path to sainthood, performed during an All Saints' Day Mass at St. Ann Catholic Church Nov. 1, 2021, in Baltimore. (Nate Tinner-Williams)

The meeting recalls similar overtures in the late 20th century, when African American Catholics traveled to Rome on at least one occasion to inform the Holy See of mistreatment at home and the need for change from the top down.

Those meetings are thought to have borne precious little fruit, but Moore says his group's gathering with Vatican officials has the potential for major effects. Among them is the committee's desire to have confirmation that their petitions have actually been delivered to the pope. They previously mailed boxes to the pope's address in Rome and have also contacted the U.S. apostolic nuncio in Washington, Cardinal Christophe Pierre, though without a response.

"We couldn't get a word back from him, and we had called repeatedly. We had mailed him letters, we had sent emails that the secretary requested, but never got a response," Moore said.

"It's interesting how the Catholics don't respond to you. It's part of the three Ss I love to talk about: silence, secrecy, and slowness. It's how they operate."

Pope Francis, to whom Pierre answers, has previously dispensed with at least one of the three in the recent past, canonizing the Italian missionary bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini in October 2022 without a second miracle attributed to his intercession. (The pontiff moved similarly with Pope John XXIII in 2013.)

The two miracles typically required for sainthood most often involve miraculous healings, but it can take centuries before the first or second is officially confirmed by the Vatican.

Several miracles have been reported in the past half-century concerning the African Americans eyed for sainthood, but none have yet been announced as verified in Rome — a process that, with the other stages of saint-making, can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Along the lines of the ancient practice known as "acclamation" — whereby Christian saints were proclaimed simply by a groundswell of public support —the St. Ann Committee would like to see Pope Francis canonize the saintly six outright, in the United States and somewhere in the nation's capital.

"[Prejudice, discrimination, and racism] has been allowed to exist — to prosper, really — in the Catholic Church, so we need the pope to make a big, strong statement," Moore said.

"This is what the people want. And it's not just Black people or brown people. It's also white people who don't want the feeling that the church doesn't acknowledge any Black Catholics from the United States as saints."

Support for the group's efforts has indeed been remarkably strong, including some $15,000 raised to support their trip to Rome to meet with the dicastery. A friend of the committee has also made plans for a documentary covering their experience there and the work being done to organize a grassroots movement like none seen before in the U.S. church.

For now, though, like centuries of African American Catholics before them, they wait.

"We haven't heard much back from the Vatican since our audience," Moore said.

"But we hope that we said some things that were meaningful to them."