

[News](#)

[News](#)



An undated photo of Sr. Mary Roger Thibodeaux, who died March 11 in Pennsylvania. (Beulah Martin/Facebook)

Nate Tinner-Williams

[View Author Profile](#)

Black Catholic Messenger

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

Philadelphia — March 18, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Sr. [Mary Roger Thibodeaux](#), a veteran member of the [Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament](#) and a leading Catholic light of the 20th-century Black freedom struggle, has died in Pennsylvania. At the time of her passing on March 11, she resided at Paul's Run Retirement Center in Philadelphia and was eight days from her 87th birthday. No cause of death was released.

Her order, founded by St. [Katharine Drexel](#) to serve Native and African Americans, announced the news on March 12. It was first shared by her fellow Black SBS sister, Beulah Martin.

"My friend, sister, and woman of God, Sr. Mary Roger Thibodeaux, SBS went home to God early this morning," she posted on Facebook.

"Please pray for her family, SBS family friends, and especially the sisters at Paul's Run. May she continue to rest in heavenly peace."

Born in 1937, Thibodeaux was a native of Louisiana and reared in the Catholic faith at [Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church](#) in Lake Charles, as well as the parish's elementary and high schools. Both were run by Drexel's order.

As an adolescent, Thibodeaux had planned to attend Columbia University in New York but slowly came to realize a religious call to enter the sisterhood.

"What was going on inside of me was getting stronger as I approached my senior year. Very strong," she said in a 2021 [video interview](#) with the SBS order, which she entered in 1955 and made final vows in 1963 as one of its early Black members.

"I have not ever regretted making the decision to follow the call."

Advertisement



(David Goodner/Twitter)

Thibodeaux would eventually move to New York, though as a nun rather than a student, her first assignment being a teaching job at St. Thomas the Apostle School, part of a historic Black parish in Manhattan. She also taught at All Saints Catholic School in the same borough.

Thibodeaux was among multiple family members to enter religious life—including a cousin, Sylvia Thibodeaux, who joined the [Sisters of the Holy Family](#) in New Orleans. Both would go on to represent a new era of African-American nuns during a Black

Catholic religious boom in the mid- to late 20th century.

In 1968, Sr Mary Roger became a founding member of the [National Black Sisters' Conference](#), one of the core organizations of the [Black Catholic Movement](#). Like the others, the NBSC was borne of the Black Power fervor then quickly gaining strength among African-American Catholics.

Thibodeaux would make a lasting mark on the movement with her 1972 book "[A Black nun looks at Black power](#)," containing her poetic reflections on the struggle for Black freedom in America, viewed from a Catholic lens. The work would go on to be cited by various historians in their explication of the Black Power Movement's wide-ranging impact.

Thibodeaux's writing therein has since been immortalized in the [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) in Washington, where a large monument contains a quote from the book:

Black Power is not foreign to Yahweh and Yahweh is not foreign to Black Power... The cause of Justice is and always will be in strict accordance with the Will of God.

In Washington, Thibodeaux served for seven years in the [National Office for Black Catholics](#) during its heyday, leading its education department and organizing workshops around the country. She was also an early Black collaborator with the Women's Ordination Conference and served for 15 years on the board of the National Catholic Reporter newspaper.

Later in her ministry, Thibodeaux led her order's SBS Center for Evangelization in Pennsylvania, spearheading efforts to synergize the sisters' work with Pope John Paul II's vision for outreach in the modern era.

She received the Philadelphia Claver Award from the [Knights of Peter Claver and Ladies Auxiliary](#) in 2009 and continued to work in various arenas even during retirement.

"Sister was a trailblazer when it came to evangelizing," said Sr Lynn Marie Ralph, SBS, on social media following Thibodeaux's death. "Truly an angel who has earned her wings."

Thibodeaux's funeral Mass will take place on Monday, March 18, in Philadelphia at Our Lady of Calvary Catholic Church, where the homilist will be Fr Stephen Thorne. The [livestreamed](#) ceremony will begin at 10am ET, with burial to follow at the SBS Motherhouse Cemetery in Bensalem.