Spirituality



The tomb of Venerable Pierre Toussaint in the crypt of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. (Nate Tinner-Williams)



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I’m on the train, about four hours into my trip to New York, when I remember Pierre Toussaint. He’s buried down in New York City, where I’ll be spending a couple of days for a birthday celebration. So, I guess this trip is a pilgrimage.

When I go to his tomb, the day is just starting, and even for a large city like New York, it feels like a quiet morning. There aren’t many people in the cathedral, and most of them are there for the daily Mass in the Adoration chapel. In St. Patrick’s — a gothic marble building that is relatively short compared to the Midtown skyscrapers — Toussaint’s body is kept underneath the high altar, alongside the late archbishops of New York and other high-ranking clergy.

Toussaint, the only layperson buried there, was a formerly enslaved hairdresser for the New York elite. As I knelt to pray at the crypt, I peered in. I could make out the name "Pierre."

Toussaint’s story has fascinated me for a while, and not just because he is one of seven African-Americans up for canonization in the Catholic Church. Toussaint was a Haitian American, spending his life first in the Caribbean and then in New York during the nation's earliest years.

He was born on a sugar plantation and brought to America with his fleeing owners due to the rumblings of the Haitian Revolution, which intended to overthrow the colonial force and establish a new state of entirely free citizens. Haiti was the first sovereign state in the Caribbean and later became the second republic in all of the Americas. Toussaint was close to freedom, but was instead taken to New York where his bondage continued.

In the city, he found his way as a hairdresser to support his owner, Madame Bérard, after her husband died. Pierre Toussaint made a career doing French hairstyles for the rich and famous (his clientele included Eliza Hamilton). Bérard eventually freed him, but only on her deathbed, 20 years after Toussaint’s arrival in America.



Painting of Pierre Toussiant holding golden scissors in shape of cross (CNS photo/Christina Miller)

Reading about his life, I noticed that writers portray Toussaint as a happy-go-lucky slave who made a lot of money and graciously served his master. I questioned whether I was going to the shrine of the Catholic "Uncle Tom." Was Toussaint really the best exemplar of holiness, especially for Black folks?

But it seems Pierre was more strategic than I initially realized. Could he have exhibited the double consciousness described by W.E.B Du Bois, always being aware of his state as he interacted with the White folks around him? From his position of influence, he became not just a successful businessman but also a philanthropist. He helped finance Old St. Patrick's Cathedral and paid for impoverished White Catholics to attend seminary. But he also advanced and fundraised for Black causes, purchasing his family's freedom and donating to institutions helping African-American women and children in New York.

When Black people navigate historically White spaces, there is always a sacrifice. We watch our words and actions carefully, smiling at microaggressions and patiently enduring ignorance. To some it can look like capitulation, but could it actually be one's own form of resistance? To exist in spaces not made for you is a constant cross to bear. In Venerable Pierre, we see a man who maintained holiness in these spaces, being a light of Christ in a society that systemically oppressed him.

In our modern day, racial oppression looks different; but it can still be found in the glaring silence (or even outright alignment) of the church with movements that devalue Black and brown bodies. While Catholicism integrates itself more and more into American life, culture and politics, Black experiences are ignored and, instead, a whitewashed version of the faith and our country persists. But our presence in spite of this is a powerful witness.

After gaining his freedom, Pierre didn't take the name of his former master. Instead, he took the last name "Toussaint," honoring the revolutionary leader of his homeland. Perhaps Pierre Toussaint's life was his own quiet revolution.

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