

[Culture](#)



Maggie Smith as the Reverend Mother and Whoopi Goldberg as Deloris Van Cartier in a still from the 1992 film "Sister Act." (Newscom/Cover Images via ZUMA Press)



Tulio Huggins

[View Author Profile](#)

Black Catholic Messenger

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

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

September 19, 2026

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

More than three decades after its release, "Sister Act" has found a new audience. The 1992 comedy has resurfaced in popular conversation amid its continued availability on streaming platforms and renewed interest in a potential third installment. Yet beyond its enduring humor and memorable music, "Sister Act" offers something worth considering in the Catholic Church today: a reflection on what happens when a Black woman brings her culture, gifts and way of worship into a community that does not initially know what to do with them.

At the heart of the film is Deloris (Whoopi Goldberg), a Black lounge singer who enters witness protection at the all-white St. Katherine's convent after witnessing a murder. There, she encounters a community defined by the strict and somber leadership of the Reverend Mother (Maggie Smith). From the moment Deloris arrives, her presence is treated as a disruption to the convent's carefully maintained uniformity.

The Reverend Mother's initial reaction to Deloris is telling. When she enters her office to meet Deloris, there is a visible look of disgust on her face. She excuses herself, closes the door, and tells the priest, "Absolutely not, I couldn't possibly!" She later explains that Deloris is not "a person you can hide," but rather "a conspicuous person, designed to stick out," referring to Deloris' appearance and, implicitly, her Blackness.

Though fictional, the movie depicts a reality that many Black priests and religious experienced as some of the first to integrate religious orders and the diocesan priesthood. In particular, aspects of the movie can be seen as parallels to the real-life experiences of Servant of God Thea Bowman, who endured racism and significant hardship while integrating the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

Like Deloris, Thea Bowman understood that her Blackness and the gifts that came with it were not something she needed to leave at the door of the Catholic Church. Instead, she championed the incorporation of Black spirituals, Gospel music, and

other elements of Black culture into Catholic worship. Described as coming to the Church "fully functioning," Thea Bowman used her talents to enlighten and enrich the Church.

Deloris does the same in "Sister Act." In one of the film's most famous scenes, newly elected choir leader Deloris leads the formerly tone-deaf choir into a lively and joyful rendition of "Hail Holy Queen." The performance delights the congregation — aside from the Reverend Mother — and draws curious young adults from the surrounding community. Their music even catches the attention of Pope John Paul II, who comes to visit the sisters for a concert in the movie.

Advertisement

Under Deloris' example and leadership, the community is revitalized. The convent is no longer confined within its gates, but becomes an active force in the broader neighborhood community. What initially appeared to be a disruption ultimately becomes the very thing that helps the community flourish.

Though highly relevant to this past history, "Sister Act" also offers lessons and messages worthy of reflection for Black Catholics and the wider church today.

According to a [2022 Pew Research study](#), roughly 75% of Black Catholics attend parishes where they are in the minority. For many Black Catholics, then, Deloris' experience can serve as a reminder that bringing your Black self into the church can be an immense gift to the communities we call home.

Our Blackness does not have to be something that is diminished in order for us to belong. Rather, "Sister Act" demonstrates that God's desire is not for uniformity, but unity. Unity does not mean that everyone looks, sounds or worships the same. It means that our differences can come together and strengthen the whole body of Christ.

This can also serve as an invitation to the wider Catholic Church: to not view differences as threats, but as opportunities for synodal reflection, rooted in the work of the Holy Spirit.

As [stated](#) by the late Pope Francis, "The Church is called to walk together, to be synodal. ... It means walking side-by-side, without shoving or stepping on others,

without envy or hypocrisy, without letting anyone be left behind or excluded. Let us all walk in the same direction, tending towards the same goal, attentive to one another in love and patience."

St. Katherine's Convent could only become truly synodal when it began to listen to Deloris and walk with her in her own journey. And in doing so, every one of the sisters — and the community around them — was changed for the better.

Perhaps this is one of the most important lessons "Sister Act" offers Black Catholics today. The call is not simply to enter the Church, but to bring our full selves with us. Like Thea Bowman, Deloris shows what can happen when Black Catholics are able to share the gifts God has given them rather than feeling the need to leave those gifts behind.

"Sister Act" gives us a vision of what the Black Catholic experience can bring to the wider American Catholic Church — and what can happen when the broader church is willing to listen.

[Read this next: The many faces of the movie nun](#)