



Carmelite Spiritual Center

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Life is Worth Giving

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JAMES A. HEALY: THE SLAVE WHO BECAME A CATHOLIC BISHOP

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

To rise from being an ordinary priest to become a bishop is a rare and unusual feat for most Catholics, but to rise from a negro slave to become a consecrated prelate is a more than extraordinary accomplishment, especially in the 19th Century.

It happened, however, to American Bishop James Augustine Healy who overcame his original status as a slave, opposition from racial and religious prejudice, and a lack of self-confidence --- all of this to become an outstanding member of the Catholic hierarchy in the 19th Century as Bishop of Portland, Maine.

Birth in the South

James Augustine Healy was born near Macon, Ga., on Apr. 6, 1830, the first-born son of Michael and Mary Eliza Healy. Michael Healy, a native of Co. Roscommon, Ireland, emigrated to the U.S. in 1818, to find a better life in America. It must be considered the "luck of the Irish," but some five years later he became the owner of a plantation of over 1,000 acres which he won in a lottery in Jones County, Ga.

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The future bishop's mother was Mary Eliza Smith, then a 16-year-old mulatto slave. The couple had ten children together.

Racial Prejudice

Although the wealthy and successful elder Healy had amassed a sizeable fortune from his plantation, this did not guarantee success or acceptance for his mixed-race children, especially for his first-born son. In the pre-Civil War South, the Healy children, although only partially black, were classified as both negroes and slaves. This designation meant that they were ineligible for an education, and unable to own or inherit the property of their wealthy white father.

But Michael Healy, who had already suffered greatly from discrimination for both his race and religion in his native Ireland, refused to accept the discrimination visited upon his children. He then began to prepare them for their rightful place in American society.

Education in the North

In 1837 James Healy and his older brothers were enrolled at a Quaker School in Flushing, Long Island, N.Y. Even here, however, they were subjected to racial taunts by some local residents. The elder Healy, a friend of Bishop Fitzpatrick of Boston, Mass., then decided to enroll his sons in 1844 at the grammar, secondary and collegiate schools of the new Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass., conducted by the Jesuit Fathers.

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It was here that the future bishop began to exhibit the intellectual prowess that would mark his career in the service of the Church. James Augustine Healy was the top student in the first graduation class of Holy Cross College in 1849. Two years later he earned his master's degree.

Thoughts of Priesthood

About this time James Healy began to have thoughts of serving others, especially the poor and orphans, as a priest. He soon enrolled at the Sulpician Seminary in Montreal, Canada, and completed his studies in Paris, France. It was during his five years of seminary training that James Healy's life was virtually free from racial prejudice. In the seminary he was accepted as a brilliant and diligent student who found great joy and purpose in serving others, especially the poor and outcasts.

Ordination in Paris

Ordination day came for Fr. James Augustine Healy on June 10, 1854, at the relatively young age of 24. With family members present, he was ordained in the magnificent Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Following the ceremony, his father's long-time friend, Bishop Fitzpatrick of Boston, encouraged the newly-ordained priest to "cut the moorings of racial fears and become a fisher of men in Boston." That diocese would then become Fr. Healy's home and apostolate for the next 21 years and win him an outstanding reputation as an apostolic priest, but not without drawbacks.

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Civil War Clouds

The period of the 1850s in the United States was a very turbulent time with Northerners wanting to abolish slavery and preserve the Union, and Southerners determined to preserve slavery and to secede from the Union, if necessary. It was a more than difficult time for a young priest of mixed ancestry. But young Fr. Healy won the hearts and minds of the Bostonians with his outstanding service, especially to the victims of a cholera epidemic. He cared not only for the parishioners of St. John Church but for all who needed his ministry. His work with the poor and sick won him the acceptance and also admiration of many. He ministered to all of every race and need. He was especially helpful to the Irish immigrants who flooded into Boston following the Great Famine of 1845-50.

And as an assistant to Bishop Fitzpatrick, Fr. Healy helped to establish homes for the orphans of Civil War soldiers killed in action. He likewise helped to raise funds for the homes of the Good Shepherd Sisters, and for St. Anne's Foundling Home. The orphans especially enjoyed the visits of the energetic young priest who seemed to have an almost endless supply of cookies and candies in his pocket for them.

An excellent singer himself, Fr. Healy also organized the choir at the Boston Home for Orphan Boys and proudly had his singers perform well for appreciative audiences in many parts of New England.

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A Family Man

Fr. Healy, the oldest of the family, kept a watchful and interested eye on his younger siblings, especially after the death of their parents in 1850. Three of his sisters became nuns, and two of his brothers also joined him in the priesthood. One, the Rev. Dr. Patrick Healy, S.J., became the second founder of the famous Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and another, Rev. Alexander Healy, followed his oldest brother as rector of Boston's Holy Cross Cathedral.

During his 21 years in Boston, Fr. Healy served as Bishop Fitzpatrick's secretary, first chancellor of the diocese, assistant at St. John's Church, rector of the cathedral, and also as pastor and builder of St. James Church to serve the area's Irish community. He was also active in Boston's Catholic Layman's Union which worked to redress the legitimate griev^Aences of the immigrants whose rights had been violated by the courts or public officials.

He also battled valiently for youngsters caught in the harsh criminal justice system for minor offenses, for Catholic orphans assigned to Protestant families, for the poor in state institutions, ~~for~~ for those who were ill and sought spiritual solace from priests, and he also won the right to hold Catholic services in public institutions. In addition, Fr. Healy successfully defended a challenge to the Catholic Church's tax-exempt status by some Massachusetts anti-Catholic legislators.

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Fr. Healy reminded the legislators of the great amount of funds that the Church saved the commonwealth by caring for so many people through their social welfare work.

A gifted speaker, Fr. Healy was often called upon to address various Irish, Catholic and other groups, plus delivering dedication sermons for church^{es} and other institutions. He was also chosen to be the principal orator at Boston's first Catholic Festival in 1874. He, indeed, seemed to be everywhere, but especially in the minds and hearts of the poor and neglected segments of society.

A Bishop in Maine

For his great and good efforts in Boston, Fr. Healy, to no one's surprise, was named Bishop of Portland, Maine, by Pope Pius IX in 1875. The vast diocese covered both the states of Maine and New Hampshire. During his 25 years there, Bishop Healy founded 60 parishes, 18 schools, and an equal number of convents and welfare institutions. The Catholic population doubled to nearly 100,000.

He was especially noted as "The Children's Bishop" because of his efforts in caring for orphans and opposing child labor abuses. His generosity towards the poor remained legendary. He cared for children, too, by visiting them in reform schools and writing hundreds of letters to find them good foster homes. And he was always loving and gentle towards them.

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A favorite story is told about a young girl who confessed to him that she had said the bishop was black as the devil. He told her gently, "Say I'm black as coal or black as the ace of spades, but please don't say I'm black as the devil."

His great concern for the poor soon overcame the community's anti-Black and anti-Catholic attitudes. He also patiently contended with the Know-Nothings and other anti-clerical secret societies.

Final Resting Place

When Bishop Healy died on Aug. 5, 1900, hosts of people mourned his passing, especially the poor. At his direction, no long eulogy listed his great accomplishments, and he was buried in a simple wooden coffin in the cemetery among his people.

But as a tribute to his great and loving efforts, the laity who came to love him collected funds to erect a beautiful Celtic Cross which marks his burial place to this day.

The former slave of Irish and negro ancestry, had risen in life to become the bishop of the poor, and spent his life in their loving service.