

Q & A on Sisters of Charity of New York and Racism

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Q. What is the difference between the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s and the Sisters of Charity of New York?

A. In August 1817 Mother Elizabeth Seton sent Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s from Emmitsburg to staff an orphanage in New York. Mother Seton died in 1821. The community grew and spread throughout the United States. In 1850 it became united with the international Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul whose motherhouse was in Paris.

In the mid-1840s, Bishop John Hughes asked the Sisters of Charity then serving on missions in his diocese to make a separate, independent foundation in New York. A diocesan congregation was formed on December 31, 1846, and continues to this day. Its formal title is “Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, of New York,” more popularly known as “Sisters of Charity of New York.”

Q. Did the Sisters of Charity of New York ever own slaves?

A. Research is ongoing, but to date no documentation has been found that the Sisters of Charity in New York owned enslaved persons in any of the institutions they founded or staffed from 1817 on.

Q. Did the Sisters of Charity of New York ever speak out against slavery and discrimination against people of color?

A. A notable and visible statement was the Harlem March for racial and civil justice, March 14, 1965, in which many in the Congregation, including its leadership, participated. Since then, the Congregation has issued or supported numerous calls for racial justice, especially in response to violence against people of color.

Sisters of Charity and the ministries they have founded are committed to providing education, health care, social and pastoral services to people of every race, without partiality. An example would be the integration of our high school in Nassau, Bahamas.

Advocacy on behalf of racial justice and on related issues of immigration, human trafficking and climate is ongoing through our Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation Office and several committees, such as Global Poverty, Immigration, Voting and Anti-Racism.

Q. What is the history of the Sisters of Charity regarding admitting women of color?

A. Since the 1950s, women of color have been admitted to membership. Anecdotes exist that at least one woman of color was refused prior to that time. Records currently available do not provide evidence, but anecdotes also exist that Mother Mary Rosina Wightman (administration 1891–1894) may have been of mixed race.

Q. What are the Sisters of Charity doing to dismantle racism?

A. In addition to ongoing advocacy for racial justice, leaders and members are committed to educating ourselves on our racial history as Sisters of Charity and as Americans.

- Leadership attended LCWR National Assembly 2015 when Dr. Shannen Dee Williams spoke racism in the history of religious congregations and participated in the ritual of repentance.
- Leaders committed to learn about racism, especially in our own congregational history, and to educate ourselves on the effects of America’s racist history.
- Similarly, leaders participated in LCWR Region 2 meetings and prayer rituals on the same topic.
- A goal of the Leadership Team for 2020–2021, continued to 2021–2022, is to educate our members and associates on racism. We also encouraged local initiatives.

Some highlights of past and current efforts are:

- Involving sisters and college students in Network-sponsored workshops and other workshops on the Wealth Gap between White and Black Americans.
- Frequent notices in our weekly newsletter, *Focus*, about educational and advocacy opportunities on the issue of racism. As a result, sisters and associates have participated in programs such as the Ignatian Solidarity Network trainings on becoming anti-racist.
- We have supported a local safe house for trafficked women both financially and with volunteers.
- A series of videos on racial micro-aggressions was purchased and circulated to local communities for discussion.
- Associates held a series of meetings on racism which included educational segments and sharing of experiences.
- A planned Congregation Day featuring speakers CND Sisters Patricia Chappell and Anne-Louise Nadeau on Racism had to be postponed due to COVID but was held on Zoom in September 2021.

- An extensive bibliography on racial topics by Black authors was prepared by two sister-librarians and published to the congregation. A selection of those titles was purchased, and collections placed in three accessible sites for borrowing. Some readers have added more books to the collections, and some book discussion groups have happened.
- Several films touching on racism have been chosen for viewing and discussion at our retirement convent. A good number attended and responded positively to the first one.
- Seventeen former members who are persons of color have been contacted and invited to tell us of any experiences of racism in the Congregation. Five very positive responses have been received so far.
- The Leadership Team is currently reading *The 1619 Project* and will be holding discussions.
- Currently, the Leadership Team is collecting titles of short videos to use for Zoom discussions with sisters and associates.

Q. What is the stance of the Sisters of Charity of New York today in relation to the history of racism?

A. We deplore the actions and omissions of people in past generations who did not see or challenge the injustices of their times, yet we cannot erase the wrongs of the past. We are responsible for our own moment in history, for what we have done and what we have failed to do in response to it. We apologize to the individuals or groups we have offended by our actions, words or silence. We humbly ask their pardon for times we have not spoken or acted forcefully enough against discrimination and prejudice.

We recommit ourselves to our mission to reveal God’s love, with and for all in need, especially those who live in poverty. We re-commit ourselves to be “...*women of healing, sensitive to the wounds of persons and to the systemic evils of our times.*” (Constitution, Sisters of Charity of New York, #1.4)

We commit ourselves to walk with our sisters and brothers of color, to work for an end to racism, and to respect the dignity of every person, which is the heart and core of Catholic social teaching and the spirit of Charity.

Q. Did Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821) own slave(s)?

A. This latest research found no new evidence that Mother Seton owned an enslaved person. In 1777, Elizabeth Ann Seton’s grandfather, the Rev. Richard Charlton, bequeathed Elizabeth a “Negroe Boy formerly named Brennus” in his will. She was 3 years old at that time. There is no further record of Brennus, and researchers, including Dr. Catherine O’Donnell, author of

“Elizabeth Seton: American Saint,” believe Brennus may have escaped during the American Revolution.

Q. Did Elizabeth Seton own enslaved persons as an adult in New York?

A. Although their Bayley and Seton families did own enslaved persons, census records indicate that there were no enslaved persons in the household of Elizabeth and William Magee Seton during their marriage or when Elizabeth lived as a widow.

Q. Did Elizabeth Seton teach children of enslaved persons?

A. We know from her writings that she and the Sisters gave religious instruction to Black children in Emmitsburg. She wrote of her joy in doing so.

[Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings, vol. 2: 329-330, 1815 Journal to Rev. Simon Bruté]

Some facts about slavery in New York

1. Enslaved persons were brought to New York by the first European settlers.
2. In New York in the 1730s, over 40% of the population owned slaves — a higher percentage than any other colony except South Carolina.
3. It has been well documented that New York’s growth and prosperity depended on the slave trade and was largely built on the labor of enslaved persons.
4. An official slave market existed from 1711 on Wall Street between Pearl and Water Streets. It closed in 1762 but the selling of men, women and children continued throughout the city. See <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2015/06/29/slave-market>, among other sources.
5. Slavery in New York was officially abolished July 4, 1827, but discrimination, racism and violence against people of color continues to this day.

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