

***We've Come This Far By Faith***  
**African and African American Catholic History**

On **July 24, 1990**, the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB] designated November as Black Catholic History Month. The descendants of Africa had a significant part to play in the history of American Catholicism. However, until recently their story had not been told. From the early 15<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, African American Catholics had continuous active participation in the Church. In a reflection on the African American Catholic experience, Bishop Joseph L. Howze, now retired from the Diocese of Biloxi, Mississippi, wrote:

*“The struggles of African American Catholics in the United States are recorded in historical documents. In spite of the social conditions of segregation and discrimination, African American Catholics have held steadfast in the practice of their faith. As disciples of Jesus Christ, they have taken up their crosses to follow Jesus. That is a mark of true discipleship.”*

The African American Catholic experience is a story of faith. From the small number of Black Catholic inhabitants of the New World to the more than 2.3 million in the United States today, our story is an integral part of the American religious tradition.

In celebration of Black Catholic History Month 2011, the Office of African American Ministry of the Diocese of Beaumont invites you to read, learn and be blessed by this rich history of African and African American Catholics to the Catholic Church.

## AFRICAN POPES

Roman Africa was Roman in name and government, but not in population. The names of the gods and people became “Latinized” because Latin was the language of the masters of commerce. However, the majority of the people were Black and the Punic language [*the language of ancient Carthage, related to Phoenician*] was spoken until the Islamic invasion in the Eighth Century.

Africa made a significant contribution in the spiritual history of mankind. One of the most zealous churches of early Christianity came into being in Africa. From Africa came neo-Platonic thought and the first experiments in monasticism. Three of the early popes were black: Ss. Victor I, Miltiades and Gelasius. They occupied the Papal Chair between the second and fifth centuries, A.D., and made significant contributions to the growth of Christianity and the development of the Roman Catholic faith. They were Africans and they contributed immeasurably to the propaganda of the Gospel and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

## POPE ST. VICTOR I



The fact that Easter is always celebrated on a Sunday and that the liturgical language of the Roman Catholic Church is Latin is due to the decision of Pope Victor I, the fourteenth Pope in line after St. Peter. It is certain that Pope St. Victor I was an African but the precise date of his birth is unknown. When he ascended the Papal Chair in 189 A.D., the date of Easter continued to be a matter of controversy. Many of the Christians in Rome who had come from the province of Asia were accustomed to observing Easter on the fourteenth day of the moon. That was the day on which the Jews had been commanded to kill the lamb. It

was necessary to finish the feast on that day, whatever day of the week it might be. Instead of recognizing Good Friday as the day of the death of the Lord, the Asiatic Christians kept the Jewish feast on the fourteenth day after the new moon, with which the month **Nisan** [in the Jewish calendar, the seventh month of the civil and first of the religious year, usually coinciding with parts of March and April ] began. For that reason, they were called Quartodecimans [refers to the custom of some early Christians celebrating Passover beginning with the eve of the 14th day of Nisan.]

Pope Victor I found it disturbing to have one set of Christians observing the fast of Lent and commemorating the passion of Christ while other Christians were joyously celebrating the Feast of the Resurrection. He was determined to have one observance of the Easter festival. He set about persuading the Quartodecimans to join in the general practice of the Church.

Pope Victor I called a meeting of Italian bishops in Rome. This is the earliest Roman Synod on record. He also wrote to the leading Bishops of the various districts, urging them to call together the bishops in their sections of the country and to take counsel with them on the question of the Easter festival. The letters all unanimously reported that their Easter was observed on Sunday.

Pope Victor I now called upon the bishops of Asia to abandon their old custom and accept the practice of the majority by celebrating Easter on Sunday. If they failed to abide by his ruling, Pope Victor I declared he would excommunicate all the Christians of Asia. There is no record to show whether Pope Victor I relented towards the province of Asia. All that is known is that, in the course of the third century, the Roman practice of observing Easter on a Sunday became gradually universal.

Pope Victor I was an energetic and zealous Pontiff who served the Church of Rome with unwavering faith, even though his firmness in certain issues, notably the Easter controversy, made him somewhat unpopular with certain bishops. He died in 199 A.D., and was buried in the Vatican near St. Peter.

Although nothing is known of the circumstances of his death he is venerated as a martyr and his feast is kept on July 29<sup>th</sup>. Today, in the history of Roman Church Pope Saint Victor I is remembered, not only for his ruling that Easter should be celebrated on Sunday, but he is named in the canon of the Ambrosian Mass and he is said by St. Jerome to have been the first in Rome to celebrate the Holy Mysteries in the Latin language.

## POPE ST. MELTIADES I



Pope Miltiades, also written *Melchiades*, is the second pope identified as African. The year of his birth is not known. Like, Victor I, Miltiades was a native of northern Africa. His election marked the end of the period known as *sede vacante* [a Latin expression from the Code of Canon Law meaning “the seat is vacant”]. The *sede vacante* had lasted from the death of Pope Eusebius on August 17, 310 until Miltiades was elevated to the papacy in 311.

Miltiades was responsible for bringing the remains of his predecessor, Eusebius, from Sicily back to Rome where they were interred in a crypt in the catacombs of St. Callistus. Little is known of Miltiades except that during his reign as Pope, the Emperor Constantine decreed tolerance for Christianity. Miltiades decreed that none of the faithful should fast on Sunday or on the fifth day of the week because this was the custom of the pagans. He further decreed that a portion of the offerings from all churches should be sent for the popes’ consecration. This was called “leaven”. Also during his reign, Pope Miltiades discovered a Persian based religion – Manichaeism – residing in Rome. Miltiades is credited with starting construction of the Lateran Basilica in Rome. Additionally, during his reign as Pope, the Classical Era of Persecution came to an end. The Church, however, was faced with more subtle trials. St. Augustine praised St. Miltiades as a man of moderation and peace and a father to Christians. St. Miltiades died in Rome in 314. Miltiades is buried on the famous Appian Way.

Pope St. Miltiades I feast day is December 10.

## POPE ST. GELASIUS I



The forty-ninth Pope after St Peter – Gelasius I – has been described by some contemporaries thus:

*Famous all over the world for his learning and holiness*

*More a servant than a sovereign*

*In his private life, Gelasius was, above all, conspicuous for his spirit of prayer, penance and study. He took great delight in the company of monks.*

Pope Gelasius I was born in Rome of African parents. He took office in the year 492 A.D. Although his pontificate was a short one, he showed himself to be a man of vigor who could speak firmly to the Emperor Anastasius about the need of independence for the Church.

It has been claimed by high church dignitaries that no one had spoken with loftier eloquence of the greatness of the See occupied by the Popes than Gelasius. Pope Gelasius showed firm belief in the Chair of St. Peter.

Intelligent and energetic, Pope Gelasius I knew what steps he should take to establish a secure future for the Church. He saved Rome from famine and was emphatic on the duty of bishops to devote a quarter of their revenue to charity, stressing that *Nothing is more becoming to the priestly office than the protection of the poor and the weak.*

Although Pope Gelasius I was a staunch upholder of old traditions, he nevertheless knew when to make exceptions or modifications, such as his decree insisting on Communion under both species. This was done in order to detect the Manichaean heretics, who, though present in Rome in large numbers, attempted to shift attention from their hidden beliefs by pretending to practice true Catholicism. As they held wine to be impure and essentially sinful, they would refuse the chalice and, thus, be recognized.

In his zeal for the beauty and majesty of Divine service, Gelasius I composed many hymns, prefaces and collects and arranged a standard Mass book. He died November 19, 496 A.D. Like St. Victor I and St. Miltiades, Pope Gelasius I was canonized. As a Saint, his feast day is held on November 21. St. Gelasius I has been described as *Great even among the Saints.*