



# ENCOUNTER BLACK CATHOLIC HISTORY

This encounter is an opportunity for you to “walk with” the Black community within our Diocese. This day trip in the City of Alexandria will have you visiting historical sites, learning about Black Saints, and encountering the beauty of Black Catholic expression. Moreover, you will prayerfully examine the effects of racism and how Jesus calls us to empathy, contrition, and healing.

This document provides a general overview of this experience, however, please go to [www.tinyurl.com/blackcatholic](http://www.tinyurl.com/blackcatholic) on your portable device (or scan the QR code below) for links to the full experience.



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DIOCESE OF ARLINGTON  
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YOUTH, CAMPUS, &  
YOUNG ADULT MINISTRIES



“You know what I’m talkin’ about Church? I mean, are y’all walking with me Church? Surviving our history physically, mentally, emotionally, morally, spiritually, faithfully, and joyfully – our people developed a culture that was African and American”[...] and, despite all of this, [...] Blacks [...] are still struggling [...] still trying to find home in the homeland and home in the Church.” (Sr. Thea Bowman’s Address to the U.S. Bishop’s Conference June 1989).

The Black Catholic experience is robust. It is ripe with beauty, brimming with joy, and spurred by heartfelt passion and religious devotion. However, part of the story comes from the communal ability to maintain these qualities amidst prejudice, fear, ignorance, and ultimately, sin. Sister Thea’s words challenge us, as a Church, to not stand still amidst racial tension. Rather, she asks that our “next step” be to “walk with” her and the Black community; to face and absorb the rich and complex journey of what it means to be Black, American, and Catholic. Within our Diocese, the City of Alexandria has become a repository of African American culture and history due to its complicated and unique role within our nation’s struggle with racial issues. That is why today we take Sr. Thea up on her challenge to walk with her, the Black community, and Jesus Christ so that the entire human family can find their “home and homeland in the Church.”

## PLACES TO VISIT

St. Joseph Catholic Church in Alexandria. Established in 1915, this beautiful church welcomes people of all races and nationalities and many are drawn by its friendly atmosphere and African-American talent for liturgical expression.



Alexandria African American Heritage Memorial Park. The park was established in 1995 and includes a one-acre 19th century cemetery, sculptures, and wetlands.



Edmonson Sisters Sculpture & Historical Marker. Erected by the city of Alexandria in 2010, this sculpture depicts the Edmonson sisters who were enslaved until freed in 1848.



Freedom House Museum. Once the largest and most successful domestic slave trading firm in America, this building has been converted into a museum that tells the story of the slave trade and those who suffered because of it.



Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery. A burial ground for countless people who found refuge in Alexandria when the Union occupied it. Black Union soldiers were also buried here until they demanded the honor of being buried in Soldiers’ Cemetery.



The Pauline Bookstore. A Catholic shop run by the Daughters of St. Paul right here in Alexandria. Be sure to drop by and get something to commemorate your trip!



## BEFORE YOU GO

### Plan your visit by:

1. Checking out the websites for each place.
2. Reading all the resources to choose which ones you want to use.
3. Make a packing list to include: your favorite snacks, lunch, sunscreen, a hat, picnic blanket, water, umbrella, journal, pen, money, printouts of Rev. Scott A. Bailey’s article “Ministry in the Black Catholic Community, and something to listen to music and podcasts.

# INTRODUCE CHRIST CHECKS

Begin the day by reading Matthew 18:20. As Jesus promises to be in the midst of us, take him up on the offer. Imagine Jesus as a real person, walking among you. Throughout the day, call out “Christ Check” among the people you are with and encourage them to share or write in a journal where they see Christ right then and there and what he is doing. Note: This imaginative prayer exercise may be powerful for some and difficult for others. Be sure to challenge people to participate but respect their freedom if it is too hard.

## SAMPLE SCHEDULE

1. Start your day by:
  - a. Introducing “Christ Checks”
  - b. Visiting St. Joseph’s and/or reading the Black Catholic History resource together. Be sure to call St. Joseph’s ahead of time to schedule your visit!
  - c. Listening to the Morning Glory Podcast – Catholics & Racial Justice (28:09-38:55) on your way. If time permits, listen to Sr. Thea Bowman’s music. (see *Resources on the Encounter web page.*)
2. Have brunch or lunch at any of the suggested restaurants!
  - a. During lunch, read the excerpt from “Black Spirituality” section of Rev. Scott A. Bailey’s article “Ministry in the Black Catholic Community” and discuss the questions.
3. Do a Walking Tour
  - a. Start at the African American Heritage Memorial Park, then walk to the Edmonson Sisters Sculpture & Historical Marker, and finally stop at the Freedom House Museum.
4. Walk to Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery
  - a. Listen to Bishop Burbidge’s reflection at the Requiem Prayer Service as you walk and/or
  - b. Spend some time at the memorial. Read excerpts from *Open Wide Our Hearts*. Discuss together.
5. Grab some dinner and/or dessert!

## SAINTS



St. Katherine Drexel. Although she was not of African descent, St. Katharine Drexel, the foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, dedicated her life to the defense and promotion of Native and African Americans.



Ven. Augustus Tolton. His parents were enslaved, but God had bigger plans. He was not able to attend Catholic School, but the Sisters of Notre Dame tutored him privately. He was not able to attend seminary, but his parish priests educated him in theology. Nothing could stop God’s plan for his life, which was to become the first publicly recognized Black priest. He was finally accepted into seminary and after 2 years he was able to study in Rome. He was ordained in 1886.



Servant of God, Sr. Thea Bowman. She was born in 1937, was convert to Catholicism and later became a sister with the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. She was the first and only African-American in her religious congregation. She was declared a Servant of God in May of 2018.

## TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

Perhaps reflect on these questions:

- What was the most interesting thing you learned about Black Catholic history or religious expression?
- What was the most inspiring thing that you saw or heard today?
- Have you ever witnessed or experienced racism? When or where?
- What can we do as a community to address racism?
- How might you grow in your faith life or relationship with Christ as a result of today's journey?

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### Photo credit information:

Photo of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Alexandria, VA: [www.stjosephalexva.org/](http://www.stjosephalexva.org/)

Photo of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Alexandria, VA: [www.pinterest.com/pin/470133648572598997/](https://www.pinterest.com/pin/470133648572598997/)

Photo of Alexandria African American Heritage Park: [www.alexandriava.gov/historic/blackhistory/default.aspx?id=37348](http://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/blackhistory/default.aspx?id=37348)

Photo of Edmonson Sisters statue: [www.thezebra.org/2019/02/10/alexandrias-african-american-history/](http://www.thezebra.org/2019/02/10/alexandrias-african-american-history/)

Freedom House photo: [nvulypn.wildapricot.org/About-Us-\(NOVAUL\)](http://nvulypn.wildapricot.org/About-Us-(NOVAUL))

St. Katharine Drexel image: [www.nbccongress.org/black-saints-and-martyrs.html](http://www.nbccongress.org/black-saints-and-martyrs.html)

Sister Thea Bowman photo: [www.nbccongress.org/black-catholic-sainthood.html](http://www.nbccongress.org/black-catholic-sainthood.html)

Contraband and Freedmen Cemetary photo: [www.alexandriava.gov/historic/info/default.aspx?id=110662](http://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/info/default.aspx?id=110662)

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