

## **Our Black Sisters of Social Service...**

### **How They Have Made History Being a Sister of Social Service**

*“We have been believers believing in the black gods of an old land...and in the new land believing in the conjure of the humble and the faithful and the pure. In our hunger we beheld the welcome table and in our nakedness the glory of a long white robe. We have been believers in the new Jerusalem.”*

~An excerpt from *We Have Been Believers*, Margaret Walker

In a year that has been turbulent and taxing on all of us, inflicted with the painful maladies of mind, body and soul, it seems fitting that we turn our attention during Black History Month to the substantial, life-giving presence and activity our Black Sisters of Social Service have made throughout our long history. The SSS is a small community of less than 75 Sisters, and four of them are Black; one of Nigerian heritage and three of African-American heritage, all with varying backgrounds, and bringing to the community a variety of life, career and religious life experiences that have shaped our perspective with grace and humility. Now more than ever do we offer our gratitude for the gift of their meaningful presence in the life of our community. Undoubtedly faced with a myriad of social, cultural and religious challenges and expectations over the course of many decades, we listen to the voices of our Black Sisters to uncover how they believe they've made Black History as a Sister of Social Service.

### **Sr. Betty Harbison, SSS**

#### ***Being an SSS is part of the continuum of Black history – Healing Hurts, Renewing Hopes***

When Deacon James Carper asked me to stand and proceeded to introduce me as “Sister Betty Harbison” at the end of St. Bernadette Masses following the June 2019 S.S.S. Novitiate Reception, members of my home parish community informed me that my pursuit of a lifelong desire to become a religious was not as history making as the Sisters of Social Service’s acceptance of me as a novice was. Story after story after story was shared by some of the most stalwart, generous Catholic role models and elders in my parish, single women and great-grandmothers, recounting their experiences of rejection from different religious communities based solely on racial prejudice and quoting blatant, denigrating statements made by vowed members of those groups--retold with such clarity, such anguish and such anger so many years later, frequently accompanied by affirmative nods from fellow listeners, if I had not been pulled aside for a private “Sister Betty, come here a minute. How’s it going, baby?” Numerous

times, these stories were punctuated with snippets of more recent atrocities committed against every African American male sent from our community to our local diocesan seminary and followed up with what Black people had to do to nurture our children's vocations and to circumnavigate Catholic racial injustice. Even in my own Protestant household (I am the only Catholic in my family), the words, "They'll let you serve, but they'll never accept you as a Sister," could only be dispelled by a written declaration, officially signed, sealed, laminated and delivered, a declaration I included as part of the reception invitations. My guests, who attended the Novitiate Reception, represented various backgrounds, parishes, faith traditions and ethnicities, but were dominantly minorities, dominantly African American. A few of them asked me if it would be all right if they could come and bring so and so with them. Oftentimes, a question mark plants itself on the back burner in my mind, but I dismiss it in the heat of the moment, caught up in the logistics of coordinating the details of an event.

Only now, almost two years later, do I begin to fathom the significance of my guests' presence beyond their much-appreciated support of me, the individual, and cherish it more as witness to a communal dream and a communal hope for a more just world for my people and a church more representative of all peoples of color. I humbly embrace the challenge of the additional scrutinizing layer of being an African American Catholic religious role model every time a young person is introduced to me anywhere or interacts with me in my public school setting, and I gratefully acknowledge my own S.S.S. role models of the African Diaspora--Sr. Lois Davis, Sr. Eva Lumas and Sr. Anne Arabome, whose very presence, warmth and excellence offer me hope in pursuing a dream much bigger than myself.

This I know. I may or may not have "made Black history as a Sister of Social Service," but I certainly am part of the continuum of it. The continual expressions of joy, the heartfelt promises of prayerful support and the on-going inquiries to monitor my progress not only in my parish but also in neighboring parishes, reveal a profound communal pride and unflagging spiritual hope--God's affirmation to honor long suffering, to answer prayer and to affirm my people as God's people, against all odds, especially as African American people in the Catholic Church.

### **Sr. Anne Arabome, SSS**

#### ***Black history is rooted in African soil and those roots run deep within me***

Every woman who becomes a Sister of Social Service (SSS) makes history. This history is particularly poignant when that woman is Black as I am. What makes my journey unique is the uniqueness and distinction of my Black culture and heritage. The expressions of this uniqueness unfold in a variety of ways, including ways of thinking, foods of distinction, dance and prayer,

with drumming and laughter. As the first African woman to enter the Sisters of Social Service, I am the privileged bearer of the gift of my roots planted firmly in Africa. Besides I bring the sufferings of my people and the cultural distinctions of my ancestry. Also, I bring the rich outlook of African religion. The sum of the foregoing is a way of being human that is captured in the expression "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*," that is, "A person is a person through other persons" or "I am because we are." As an African woman, I am possessed of a deep sense of communality, belonging, and shared purpose. Not least, I bring the gift of dance and the movement of the Spirit of life that is nurtured by the creativity and love of my family.

In sum, my Black culture and heritage find eloquent expression in the declaration of Pope Benedict XVI, in his homily at the opening of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, on 4 October 2009, that "Africa is the depository of a priceless treasure for the whole world: its profound sense of God... Africa constitutes an immense spiritual 'lung' for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope." This is the belief that roots me in this community and the gift that gives me wings to fly and flourish as a history-making Black Sister of Social Service.

### **Sr. Eva Lumas, SSS**

#### ***The Contours of Making Black History***

I was born during segregation into a family that taught me to believe that each person is an intentional creation with inherent dignity and worth, that African Americans did not come from slavery—we came through slavery, that our sojourn from bondage to freedom is not over, that we are tasked with helping to make the world more holy and humane, and doing that requires us to claim our true selves, develop our best selves and bring our whole selves to the service of God. In sum, I was raised in a family that gave me a positive identity and a strong sense of purpose. The convergence of Vatican II and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s gave me the opportunity and affirmed my commitment to cultivate both. It was during that same time that I met the Sisters of Social Service. The sisters who befriended me at my parish, at the Newman Center and later at Stanford Home quickly became allies—they embraced my socio-cultural and ethno-religious struggles as their own! And, while my journey as an SSS has

not always been smooth sailing, few if any real relationships are, the Sisters of Social Service not only continue to be allies, they are extended family!

As a Sister of Social Service, I have had the support and encouragement to steep myself in a fuller understanding of Black spirituality, psychology, religiosity and culture, Black faith that rests upon the belief that God will have the last word. I have had the support and encouragement to explore the relationship between faith and culture—a necessary bond that led Pope John Paul II to say, “a faith that does not become culture is a faith that is not fully understood, not fully received, not fully lived!” Moreover, I have had the support and encouragement to share what I have learned about the “the gift of Blackness” throughout the United States and beyond in parish, diocesan and conference seminars, by developing Diocesan guidelines and resources for Africentric faith formation, co-founding and teaching in two faith formation programs and one for liturgical ministers, teaching for 18 years in the Pastoral Ministry program, and serving as an instructor and/or Administrative team member of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies for 35 years.

I crafted my ministry to and with the Black community to help Blacks in the diaspora rise to their full stature by learning, cultivating and drawing upon the well-spring of ethno-religious and socio-cultural resources of God’s Black creation. I have tried to craft my ministry through the Black community as a resource for empowering the larger society to fulfill their noble ambitions. And, while I readily acknowledge that many others have done as much, if not more to cultivate and share the gift of Blackness, I can say with confidence that I have done, and will continue to do what is mine to do as a Sister of Social Service!

**Sr. Lois Davis, SSS**

***Blackness: Not for Ourselves Alone***

When I think of my journey as a Sister of Social Service, I like to think that my “yes” to being an SSS has given witness to the fact that God is everywhere and we as a multicultural group, actively learning from and sharing with each other, can be and do so much more than any of us as individuals or insular groups can be or do alone. My “yes” has given me the opportunity to develop and place my gifts at the service of the community as well as the varied persons and groups we serve. My “yes” has given

witness to the fact that Black history (meaning what becomes of Black people as individuals and groups) is an integral part of human history, Catholic history, American history, SSS history. We help each other grow into our best selves—something that none of us as individuals, ethno-cultural groups, faith traditions, or citizens can do alone. I'm glad to be doing my part!

Blackness...properly used will deliver (Blacks) from the madness of the American power structure and make it possible for Black Americans to (help) remake society with the patience, faith, and love which the dark past has taught us... This is the task of Black believers. (C. D. Coleman, "Agenda for the Black Church", 1974)

In closing, the Sisters of Social Service will continue to face these challenges together, in an effort to bridge the gaps of social and racial inequality that divide us as families, communities and nations. This has been, and always will be, a core value of our charism and our mission.

There are fitting words to part ways with you now from Sister Frederica, our Foundress, who said during Lent in 1954: *"During the Lenten season we want to perfect ourselves in a particular way in the divine virtue of charity: charity, kindness, understanding, courtesy, refinement in our dealings with one another in the convent and in our work. We serve Christ in every one whom we serve. Nothing but the best is good enough for Him; nothing but the best in our work is good enough to fulfill our vocation."*

Amen.