

BLACK CATHOLIC NOVEMBER 2022 HISTORY MONTH

BLACK CATHOLIC ARTISTS & ATHLETES

St • Pius V
ANTI-RACISM
& EQUITY

*rooted and grounded in
the Gospel of Jesus Christ.*



St. Pius V Catholic Church
November 27, 2022



ELLEN TARRY by Deacon Patrick McCrudden

Ellen Tarry was born in Birmingham, Alabama. Although raised in the Congregational Church, she converted to Catholicism after attending the St Francis de Sales school for girls being educated by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. The school, founded by Sister (now Saint) Katherine Drexel was for African-American girls due to segregation. Interestingly she was sent to this Catholic boarding school after the death of her father, whom she promised she would never become Catholic. Tarry then attended Alabama State Normal School, and became a teacher in Birmingham. In 1929, she moved to New York City in hope of becoming a writer. There she became a part of the “Harlem Renaissance” of African-American literary figures such as Langston Hughes.

Tarry would author the first African-American picture book, “Janie Belle,” in 1940. Tarry went on to author several books for children and teenagers and two autobiographies. Among

her published works is “The Other Toussaint” (1981), a biography of Pierre Toussaint, the Haitian slave credited with funding the construction of old St. Patrick’s Cathedral in lower Manhattan. She wrote a young adult book about Katharine Drexel and served as a member of the committee for Drexel’s beatification.

Tarry later became active in the Friendship House movement, which was a missionary movement founded in the early 1930s by Catholic social justice activists and one of the leading proponents of interracial justice in the period prior to the mid-20th-century civil rights movement. Tarry died at the age of 101 in New York City on September 23, 2008. You can learn more about Ellen Tarry’s life by reading her autobiography: *The Third Door: The Autobiography of an American Negro Woman* which is available at the St. Louis Public Library.

REFLECTION by Deacon Patrick McCrudden

I’m immediately struck by how Tarry used her gifts for the benefit of the community, both her own African American community but the broader community as well as the Catholic community. In her autobiography, Tarry acknowledged the real limitations of racial prejudice while also affirming the idea that individual acts could create new circumstances for growth. It is often easy (for me) to become overwhelmed by the structural forces that lead to injustice but as Tarry reminds us the actions of a few concerned individuals can help people

overcome those structural forces. Tarry was focused on the centrality of a “here and now” perspective in her life which was reflected in her picture books. It reminds me of the quote “Do what you can, with what you’ve got, where you are.” We can see our gifts as insignificant, but God can take those gifts and use them for building up the kingdom. Tarry was heavily influenced by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. They helped lead her to conversion to Catholicism and the education they provided gave her a firm intellectual and spiritual foundation for the future. At its best that is what our Catholic education system does...prepares formed Christian disciples who bring their faith into the world. I find it interesting that her most famous children’s book, “Janie Bell,” recounts the story of an African-American girl abandoned in the garbage who is cared for and adopted by a white nurse at the hospital where she is brought. This seems like a counter intuitive message for black children, but I wonder if Tarry was trying to demonstrate a positive image of the white world to children who were living in the shadow of the Jim Crow south. Perhaps a lesson for all of us to portray people always in the best light, which is how God sees them.