

# 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 6, 2022



## **BILLIE HOLIDAY** by Gen Cassani, SSND

Iconic Jazz singer Billie Holiday is remembered today for her unique sound, troubled history, and a catalogue of that includes such resonant songs as “Strange Fruit” and “God Bless The Child.”

Just before or around the time she began singing in cabarets, Billie Holiday did sing in church: the Catholic chapel of a convent reformatory, the Baltimore House of the Good Shepherd for Colored Girls. There are hints of the liturgical music she sang every day in her songs, particularly her diction, idiosyncratic stresses, and phrasing. Holiday’s song, “God Bless The Child,” is a swing spiritual with Catholic roots that has been performed by gospel choirs across the world. Holiday also received the sacraments, prayed the rosary, and maintained a lifelong friendship with well-known priest and

jazz musician, Norman O’Connor, In her 11-plus months at the House of the Good Shepherd, Holiday attended a compulsory Catholic Mass every day and sang every day from the Liber Usualis, the common book of Latin chant used in all Masses and celebrations in the liturgical year. The Liber Usualis was the work of the Benedictine monastery at Solesmes, France, which undertook a modernizing renewal of Gregorian chant at the end of the 19th century.

## **REFLECTION** by Ruth Ehresman

The Racial Equity and Anti-Racism Working Group decided to celebrate National Black Catholic Month, by focusing on athletes and artists who share the Catholic faith, rather than on individuals who have been declared saints, or are being considered for sainthood. These are “regular” folks who have made a significant contribution to society. We assume that their Catholic faith in some way contributed to who they are and to their contribution. This strikes me as a bold step, since as “regular” folks they are often complicated. As are all of us.

Billie Holliday was extremely complicated. Although details vary, childhood was undeniably chaotic. She was placed at the Good Shepherd House because of her truancy. She was placed there a second time for protection when she was the victim of attempted rape. She began singing in cabarets when she was 14. Her mother was not a steady influence or support, but Holliday worked hard to support her. One biography states that Holliday received her only formal vocal instruction at the Good Shepherd House. She was released from the House at about the same time that she discovered jazz records. I grew my musical chops by playing and singing church music, and it is appealing to think that Holliday did as well.