

Pauli Murray: A Life Like No Other

Pauli Murray was the first African American woman ordained to the Episcopal priesthood. Her life experiences led her to advocate for “the universal cause of freedom” throughout her life. She worked ceaselessly and with distinction as a lawyer, an activist, a professor, and a writer before becoming a priest in 1977. She was a model of the Christian life in modern America, and an inspiration for future seminarians of color today.

Anna Pauline Murray was baptized in 1911, a seventh-generation Episcopalian. Named for a beloved aunt, she later adopted “Pauli” for her name. Orphaned at an early age when her father was beaten to death by a white man following the prior loss of her mother, she drew upon a strength of will and intelligence that attracted attention early on. A bishop, who knew her, declared her a “child of destiny” at age 17.

Murray’s career, imbued with Christian principles, particularly a thirst for social justice, would fulfill his prediction. But it wasn’t an easy road. Prejudice dogged her. The University of North Carolina rejected her because of race. After graduating from Howard University, Harvard Law rejected her because of gender. This experience led her to recognize the connections between racism and sexism before many others did, a condition she called “Jane Crow.”

She later became the first African American to earn a Doctor of Juridical Science degree from Yale Law School. As a lawyer, Murray argued for civil rights and women's rights.

Thurgood Marshall called her 1950 book, *States' Laws on Race and Color*, the “bible” of the civil rights movement. It was the foundation of his arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, which declared segregated schools unconstitutional.

In 1971, Ruth Bader Ginsburg named Murray as a coauthor of a brief in *Reed v. Reed*, a groundbreaking case on gender discrimination.

As an activist, Murray attempted to desegregate buses and helped organize sit-ins a decade before the civil rights movement. She later served on President Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women. She co-founded the National Organization for Women in 1966. Although, for Murray, the civil rights and women’s movements were intertwined, true to her experience, she criticized the sexism and racism she found in both.

As an academic, Murray helped found the American Studies program at Brandeis University, an interdisciplinary field fitting for someone who lived so consciously at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Murray wrote numerous essays, a book of poetry *Dark Testament* (1970), and two memoirs *Proud Shoes: Story of an American Family* (1956) and *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (1987).

Even as she advocated for women, Murray struggled to understand her own sexual and gender identity, sometimes describing herself as having an “inverted sex instinct.” She was briefly married to a man and had several deep relationships with women. In the 1950’s, she met Renee Barlow, who became her long-term partner. Although Murray publicly identified as female, she sometimes considered herself a male.

Perhaps Murray best pursued her destiny in her pioneering path to the priesthood. Her journey began at the deathbed of her beloved Aunt Pauline in 1955. In the absence of a priest, Murray read to her from The Book of Common Prayer. The experience led her to question a male-only priesthood and to consider whether she had a calling. Over a decade later, Murray and Barlow walked out of services at St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery because women weren’t allowed at the altar. They found a more accepting parish elsewhere.

Renee Barlow died in 1973, with Murray at her bedside, reading the 23rd Psalm. Murray planned the memorial service. The priest praised its beauty and asked her if she had ever thought about being ordained.

Murray soon left academia and entered General Theological Seminary and earned a Master of Divinity. Again, it was not an easy path. The Episcopal Church did not yet ordain women; and she was not well received by many seminarians. Nevertheless, she persisted. On January 8, 1977, at age 65, Murray was ordained at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

Drawing upon her life and experience, Murray preached a doctrine of reconciliation. As one whose very being interrogated the social boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality, she presented herself as a symbol of healing.

Cancer cut short her ministry of healing, and Pauli Murray died at home on July 1, 1985. The General Convention added her to the church’s calendar in 2012. The prayer for her day aptly sums up her life:

Liberating God, we thank you most heartily for the steadfast courage of your servant Pauli Murray, who fought long and well: Unshackle us from bonds of prejudice and fear so that we show forth your reconciling love and true freedom, which you revealed through your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen*

