



Covering religion as a reluctant Black Catholic journalist

Nate Tinner-Williams

blackcatholicmessenger.org

Journalism and theology

- Became a journalist somewhat by accident
- Always interested in journalism since childhood
- At Pepperdine University, studied theology, another passion of mine
- Passions of journalism and theology intersected only later





Little Mt Zion Missionary Baptist
Church

Newburgh, Indiana

Faith and conversion

1. I was raised in various Christian traditions
2. Explored Black Baptist and United Methodist churches
3. Encountered Eastern Orthodox Church in San Francisco
4. Became open to non-Protestant Christianity

Black Catholics and the media

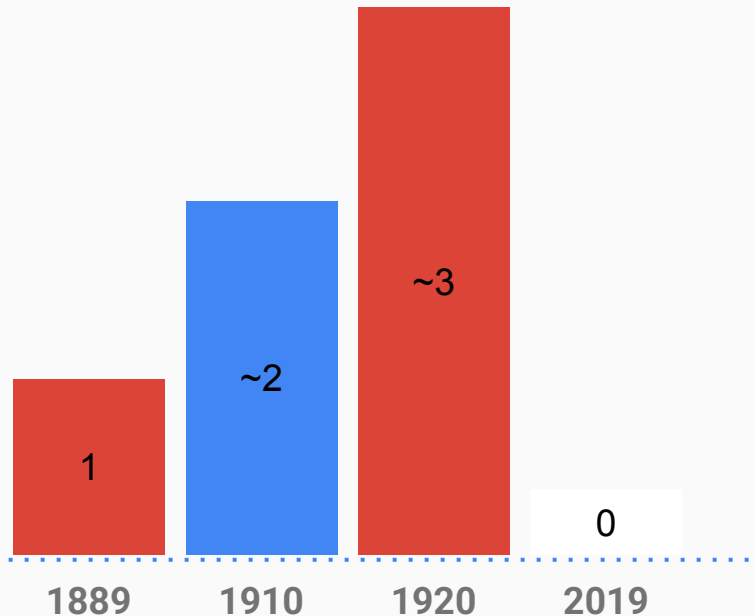
- The Black Catholic tradition
- Black Catholics were the first Africans in the Americas
- Hundreds of Black Catholic parishes exist in the U.S.
- I joined the Church in 2019, soon writing on Blackness and Catholicism
- It is a topic underrepresented in media



The second conference of the Catholic Interracial Council, Fordham University, August 1936 (Catholic University of America Archives)

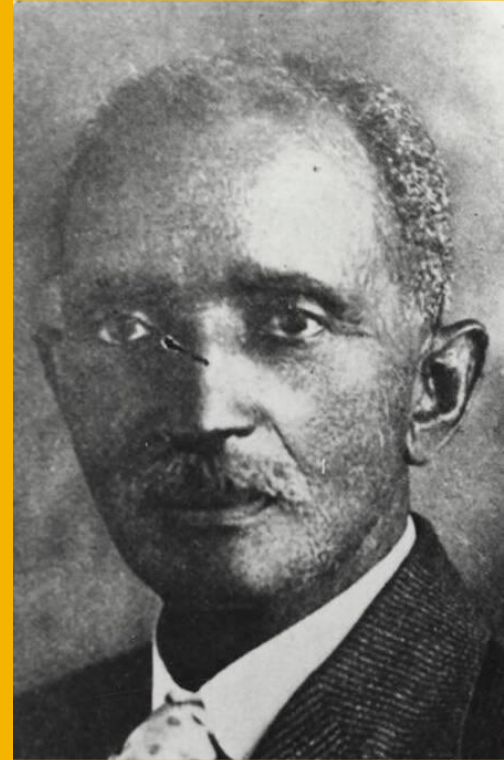
The problem

- At the end of the day, mainstream U.S. Catholic media is largely a White phenomenon.
- Before the racial reckoning of 2020, it had been roughly a century since a Black-led Catholic newspaper existed in the United States.



***Black Catholic Messenger:* a new nonprofit newspaper**

- Black Catholic Messenger co-founded in 2020
- Inspired by Daniel Rudd's 1885 newspaper, *The American Catholic Tribune*
- Aims to amplify Black Catholic voices



Daniel Rudd

A five-year learning period

- I cofounded BCM after less than a year as Catholic. 🤨
- Became editor with no full-time journalism experience. 🤨🤨
- (Faith and community support were crucial.)



Filling a Catholic media gap

- Lack of Black voices in Catholic media, and the dearth of Catholic coverage in much of Black media.
- Amanda Gorman was our first “viral story” in *BCM*.
- Knowing our coverage mattered
- “Is there a Catholic angle?”
- 3 million U.S. Black Catholics



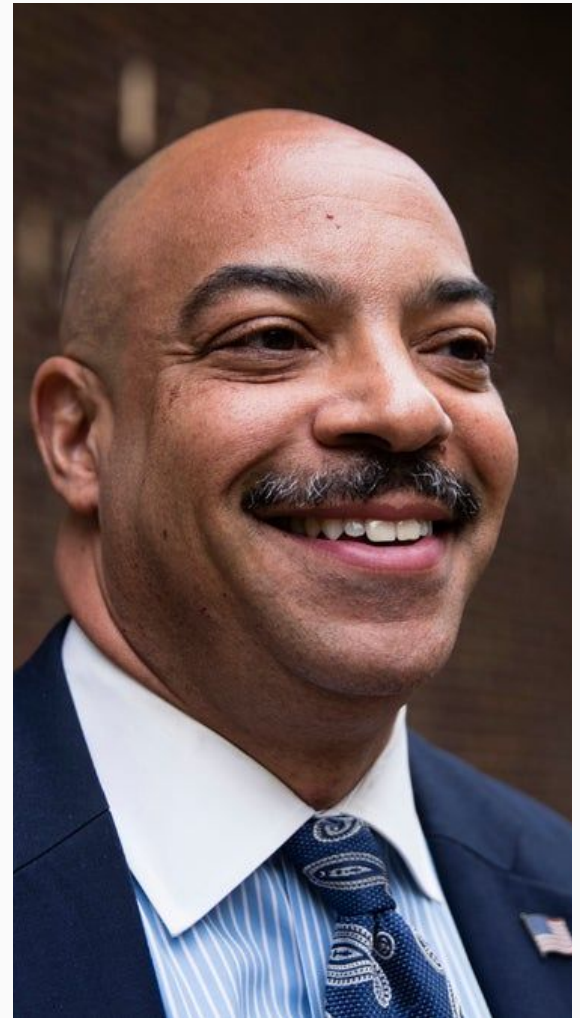
Modern Black Catholic figures of note

- Claire Babineaux-Fontenot: CEO fighting hunger as Feeding America leader.
- Simone Biles: Greatest gymnast of all time
- Kelley Robinson: President and CEO of Human Rights Campaign
- April Verrett: Current president of Service Employees International Union.



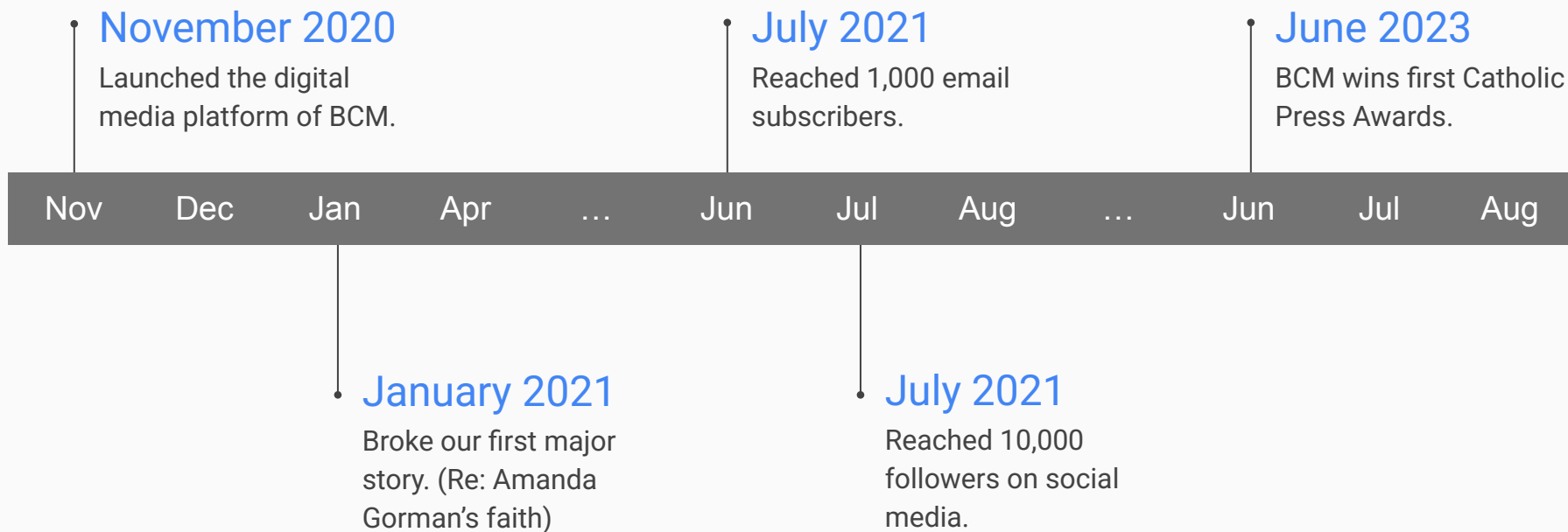
Seeking justice: Calling the Church to account

- A cradle Catholic, R. Seth Williams was raised in Philadelphia and was an activist from his youth.
- Graduated from Georgetown Law in 1992.
- He became the first Black district attorney of Philadelphia in 2010.
- The next year, he initiated the first lawsuit for priest sex abuse against the Church. The priest was later convicted.



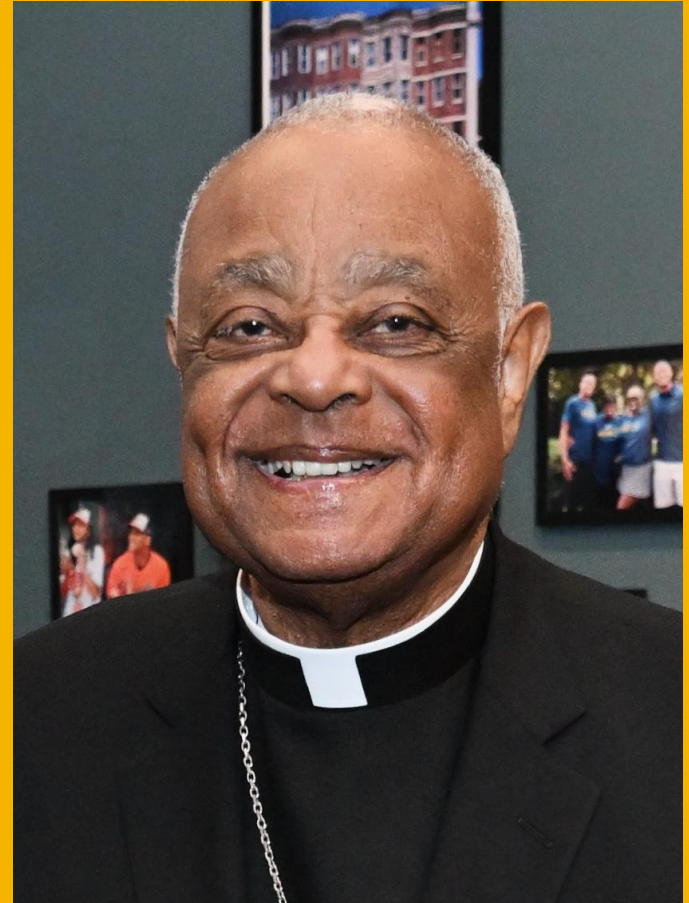
Milestones

“The Catholic Church alone can break the color line. Our people should help her to do it.”
—Daniel Rudd, 1886



Black Catholics make history

- One of the “first 10” African-American bishops.
- Became Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago in 1983 at the age of 35, one of the youngest in history.
- Became first Black president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2001.
- Became Archbishop of Atlanta in 2004, and first Black Archbishop of Washington in 2019.
- In 2020, became first Black American cardinal.
 - In 2025, became the first to vote in a conclave.
- Known for advocacy against clerical sex abuse.





Hidden roots: Pope Leo XIV

- The surprise American pope from Chicago has Black Creole roots in Louisiana.
- Research on Pope Leo XIV's lineage is an ongoing, and in September we covered his acknowledgement of the research.
- This history sheds light on the unique experience of Black Catholics in America.

Black Catholic Messenger FAQ

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Black Catholic Messenger website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'ABOUT', 'AUTHORS', 'DONATE', 'CONTACT', 'ADVERTISING/SPONSORSHIP', 'CALENDAR', 'CLASSIFIEDS', 'ORGANIZATIONS', and 'PODCAST'. The main content area features several articles. On the left, there is an article titled 'Black Catholic LGBTQ+ activist testifies before U.S. Senate on Equality Act' by Nate Tinner-Williams, dated June 26, 2023. Below it is an article titled 'Institute for Black Catholic Studies, Knights of Peter Claver set to convene in New Orleans this summer' by Nate Tinner-Williams, dated June 23, 2023. In the center, there is a large article titled 'Cabryni University to close permanently in 2024' by Nate Tinner-Williams, dated June 27, 2023. On the right, there is a 'Latest' section with a list of recent articles, including 'Michael A. Healy and the forgotten Black history of the Coast Guard' by Nate Tinner-Williams, dated June 25, 2023, and 'Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse' is an unmitigated cultural triumph' by Nate Tinner-Williams, dated June 3, 2023.

(Black Catholic Messenger homepage, June 2023)

- **Is BCM a national publication?**
Yes. We cover stories across the country (including Puerto Rico and U.S. territories), as well as some coverage Africa, Latin America, and Rome.
- **How does BCM find writers?**
Often, writers find us. The Black Catholic voice is often not welcome in mainstream Catholic media, and many writers find us on a whim. We also solicit pieces we believe will be valuable to our audience.
- **How does BCM make money?**
We have ~2500 paid subscribers as well as donors. (We could always use more.)

Recommended reading

- **“History of Black Catholics in the United States”** (Fr Cyprian Davis, 1990)
- **“Black Society in Spanish Florida”** (Jane Landers, 1999)
- **“Let It Shine! The Emergence of African American Catholic Worship”** (McGann, Lumas, and Harbor, 2008)
- **“Racial Justice and the Catholic Church”** (Fr Bryan Massingale, 2010)
- **“Authentically Black and Truly Catholic: The Rise of Black Catholicism in the Great Migration”** (Matthew Cressler, 2017)
- **“Daniel Rudd: Calling a Church to Justice”** (Gary Agee, 2017)
- **“Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle”** (Shannen Dee Williams, 2022)
- **“Black and Catholic: Racism, Identity, and Religion”** (Tia Noelle Pratt, 2025)