

Pauli Murray, Episcopalian: Parishioner, Activist, Priest, and Saint
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The Rev. Dr. Brooks Graebner, Historiographer of the Diocese of North Carolina
& Rector Emeritus of St. Matthew's, Hillsborough

1. Pauli Murray's early religious formation

Pauli Murray's connection with the Episcopal Church was forged through her grandmother, Cornelia, who was baptized along with her siblings here at the Chapel of the Cross in 1854. This was the doing of her grandmother's aunt and enslaver, Mary Ruffin Smith, in whose memory this very lectern was given.

After emancipation, Cornelia insisted on retaining her membership in the Episcopal Church, even when she married the Presbyterian Robert Fitzgerald. All her daughters were baptized in the Episcopal church, first in Hillsborough; then in Durham, where the family moved in the 1880s.¹

Cornelia herself briefly attended St. Augustine's School and insisted on sending her daughters there: Pauline in 1880, at age 10, then Pauline's younger sister Sallie also attended-for a time, as did Pauli's mother, Agnes.²

After Agnes married William Murray and they settled in Baltimore, the couple joined the historically-black Episcopal Church, St. James, and Pauli was christened there as a 6-month-old by the rector, the Blessed George Freeman Bragg.³

At St. Augustine's, the Fitzgerald sisters formed a close attachment to Henry Beard Delany and the Delany family. According to Pauli, the Fitzgerald sisters looked on Delany as pastor, priest, and big brother.⁴ In the mid-1890s, Pauline agreed to teach in Warrenton and Littleton NC in schools that Delany oversaw there. Delany

¹ Pauli Murray further notes that her grandmother Cornelia was confirmed at age ten; that she memorized the Lord's Prayer, Creed, Ten Commandments, and Catechism from the Book of Common Prayer, and that she taught them to her own children without the aid of a book. Pauli Murray, *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* (New York, 1978), 53; 159; illus. facing p. 203; 229; 238.

² Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (New York, 1987), 5.

³ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 7.

⁴ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 49.

returned the favor in 1908, when he became the archdeacon (or supervisor) of all black ministry in the diocese and immediately took steps to encourage the formation of St. Titus' in Durham.⁵

In 1914, Delany took personal charge of St. Titus' and arranged for Mr. Small, in training for ordained ministry, to serve as lay reader in his absence. By 1915, the Rev. Mr. Small was deacon in charge; then priest; and in 1922, he and his bride, Sallie Fitzgerald, moved to rural Maryland, where he took charge of three small congregations.

In her autobiography, *Song in a Weary Throat*, Pauli describes attending St Titus' and spending summers with her aunt and uncle in Maryland. At age nine, she was confirmed by the recently-consecrated Bishop Delany, and in 1928, her aunts took her to see the Bishop on his deathbed, where he gave Pauli his blessing and called her a "child of destiny." Pauli's connection with the Delanys would continue into adulthood; and, while a student at Hunter College in New York City, she sought out Bessie Delany as her dentist.⁶

Simply put, Pauli was steeped in the Episcopal Church as a child and would be a lifelong Episcopalian—the third generation of women in the Fitzgerald family to belong to the Episcopal Church. Notably, this formation centered on institutions and relationships forged in Raleigh, Durham, Hillsborough, and Chapel Hill.

2. Pauli Murray's religious/spiritual life

Pauli Murray described herself as faithful in worship, but not parochially active from young adulthood into her fifties. During her early years in New York, she attended All Saints' Mission in Woodhaven (Queens) with her Cousin Maude's family and sang in the choir. She also mentions growing to love the pageantry of "high church" liturgy—without, she reports, understanding any of its sacramental significance. Like her aunts Pauline and Sallie, Pauli served the church in the roles open to her: altar guild, choir, occasional organist, Sunday school teacher. Tellingly, she notes in her autobiography that she was "vaguely aware that women did not serve on vestries and other governing bodies of the church, and I responded to this lack of representation when I became an adult by a studied indifference to church organization. I confined myself to attending worship service and remained

⁵ Pauline F. Dame, "Autobiography of My Life" (Typescript, 1944) 11; Robert J. Johnson, "St. Titus Chapel" *The Carolina Churchman* (May, 1912) 11.

⁶ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 48-55; 70.

aloof from parish life. My feelings toward the church were ambivalent: I could neither stay away entirely nor enter wholeheartedly into Christian community.”⁷

But if she was indifferent to church organization, she nevertheless reflected an immersion in the life and liturgy of the church through her poetry.

Here are two poems written in 1959, both in response to the lynching of Mack C. Parker in Poplarville, Mississippi.

The first, entitled “Collect for Poplarville,” invokes a collect from Evening Prayer:

*Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord;
Teach us no longer to dread
Hounds yelping in the distance
The footfall at the door,
The rifle butt on the window pane.
And by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night;
Give us fearlessness to face the bomb thrown from the darkness,
The gloved hand on the pistol,
The savage intention.
Give us courage to stand firm against
Our tormentors without rancor—
Teach us that most difficult of tasks—
To pray for them,
to follow, not burn, thy cross!*

The second, entitled “For Mack C. Parker,” begins with a petition from the Great Litany:

*In the hour of death, in the day of judgment, Good Lord, deliver us!
The cornered and trapped,
The bludgeoned and crushed,
The hideously slain,
Freed from the dreaded waiting,
The tortured body’s pain,
On death’s far shore cast mangled shrouds
To clothe the damned whose fear
Decreed a poisoned harvest,
Garnered a bitter grain.*

⁷ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 73; 369.

For these who wear the cloak of shame
 Must eat the bread of gall,
 Each vainly rubbing the 'cursed spot
 Which brands him Cain.⁸

Pauli Murray's engagement with the church began to shift in the 1960s, however, as she and Irene "Renee" Barlow settled into a deeper participation in the life of the parish they attended together: St. Mark's in the Bowery, where Renee was one of the first women elected to the vestry.

In truth, it was familiarity with the language of the Prayer Book which led Pauli Murray to first recognize Renee as a fellow Episcopalian. (They worked at the same law firm.) Here's how she tells the story in her autobiography:

Some weeks after I came to work for the firm, Renee invited me to lunch as a courteous gesture to a new employee. Our conversation was tentative and formal until she unconsciously used the phrase "the blessed company of all faithful people," which I immediately recognized as coming from the Book of Common Prayer. Our discovery that we were both worshipping Episcopalians was the beginning of a spiritual bond which found its first expression during Lent that spring, when we used our lunch hours to attend the Wednesday services at St. Bartholomew's Church on Park Avenue, a few blocks from our office. The bond deepened over the sixteen years I knew and worked with Renee within the Episcopal Church. It helped to reinforce our faith as we struggled in the 1960s to express the full personhood of women in our religious communion and felt the pain, and often the rage, of rejection at the deepest levels of our being.⁹

Pauli experienced a personal crisis of faith in relation to the still-delimited role for women in the church, and she describes the moment in March, 1966, when she became so angry that she walked out of church and wandered about the streets of NY "feeling alienated from God." That afternoon she wrote a letter to the rector and vestry, outlining her grievances and declaring that discrimination on the basis of sex is as wrong as discrimination on race.¹⁰

⁸ Pauli Murray, *Dark Testament and Other Poems* (New York, 1970; 2018), 32,33.

⁹ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 316f.

¹⁰ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 370, 371.

This moment ushered in a profound decade of change in the life of the church and in the life of Pauli Murray. Pauli would now follow closely the movement within the Episcopal church to open the way for full inclusion of women in the decision-making bodies of the church and soon thereafter, the ordained ministry of the church. On a personal level, she would be profoundly affected by Renee Barlow's diagnosis of breast cancer.¹¹

Her interest in religious and racial issues was further intensified by her participation in the World Council of Churches meeting in Uppsala in 1968. She came home with "a renewed determination to return to the United States and proclaim through my own life and work the universal sisterhood and brotherhood I experienced during those eighteen days."¹² In other words, Pauli Murray now had a religious vocation, and she started to see herself as heir to the legacies of her friend, Eleanor Roosevelt, and of the recently-slain Martin Luther King, Jr.¹³

By 1970, Pauli had gained visibility in Episcopal church circles and found herself appointed to a special commission on ordained and licensed ministries. She attended organizing meetings that would soon lead to the creation of the Episcopal Women's Caucus.¹⁴ As she did in her legal writings about Jim and Jane Crow, she upbraided the Church for perpetuating patriarchy by addressing Civil Rights and Black Power without giving the same regard to the rights of women.¹⁵

Indeed, the lackluster 1970 General Convention response to women's issues led Pauli to stop attending church altogether. But Renee Barlow's recurrence of cancer triggered an intense personal engagement with God. Pauli's ministry and prayers at Renee's deathbed, followed by her planning Renee's funeral, led her to interpret Fr. Tom Pike's question, "Have you ever thought of ordination?" as a sign from God.¹⁶

Now Pauli experienced an urgency to take up her religious vocation and seek ordination: "Once I admitted the call of total commitment to service in the church, it seemed that I had been pointed in this direction all my life and that my experiences were merely preparation for this calling. In spite of my own

¹¹ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 373, 374.

¹² Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 380-385.

¹³ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 417.

¹⁴ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 418.

¹⁵ Pauli Murray, "Reflections on the Special General Convention," in *Selected Sermons and Writings* (Maryknoll, 2006), 181-188. Note how this critique echoes the complaint made by Anna Julia Cooper in the 1880s.

¹⁶ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 423-425.

intellectual doubts and the opposition to women's ordination which was widespread within the Episcopal Church at the time, I took the fateful step of applying to the Rt. Rev. John M. Burgess, bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts, for admission to holy orders."¹⁷

Pauli was made a postulant in 1973; she attended General Seminary; then for her final year, Virginia Seminary, before graduating from General in 1976. During that time, she attended the 1974 ordination of eleven women in Philadelphia, and she became immersed in liberation and feminist theology. In 1976, General Convention took the necessary steps to regularize the ordination of women, beginning in January 1977, and Pauli herself was among the first ordained—and the first African American woman.¹⁸

Pauli Murray's life now centered on the metropolitan areas of New York, Boston, and Washington. But she received an invitation from Peter Lee, rector of the Chapel of the Cross, to return here for her first celebration of the eucharist. Lee had read *Proud Shoes* and was aware that Pauli Murray's connection to the Episcopal Church could be traced to her grandmother's baptism at the Chapel of the Cross in 1854. Dr. Murray accepted the invitation, and her remarks at the time, and her subsequent reflections on that event, became the culminating moment of her life and her ministry:

On Sunday, February 13, in the little chapel where my Grandmother Cornelia had been baptized more than a century earlier as one of "Five Servant Children Belonging to Miss Mary Ruffin Smith," I read the gospel from an ornate lectern engraved with the name of that slave-owning woman who had left part of her wealth to the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina. A thoroughly interracial congregation crowded the chapel, and many more stood outside until they could enter to kneel at the altar rail and receive Communion. There was great irony in the fact that the first woman priest to preside at the altar of the church to which Mary Ruffin Smith had given her deepest devotion should be the granddaughter of the little girl she had sent to the balcony reserved for slaves. But more than irony marked that moment. Whatever future ministry I might have as a priest, it was given to me that day to be a symbol of healing.

¹⁷ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 426,7.

¹⁸ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 427-435.

All the strands of my life had come together. Descendant of slave and of slave owner, I had already been called poet, lawyer, teacher, and friend. Now I was empowered to minister the sacrament of One in whom there is no north or south, no black or white, no male or female—only the spirit of love and reconciliation drawing us all toward the goal of human wholeness.¹⁹

3. Pauli Murray, saint

On the 30th anniversary of that service in Chapel Hill, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori came to stand here where Pauli Murray once stood. Addressing a similarly overflowing and interracial congregation, she invoked the life and witness of “Mother Murray” declaring, “I know that I stand here today only because she stood here before me. Her proud shoes have carried many others down the road to freedom.” The Presiding Bishop recalled Pauli Murray’s tireless work as teacher, lawyer, and writer, combating the twin evils of “Jim and Jane Crow” (racism and sexism) which she had encountered in her own life.

But the Presiding Bishop did not come merely to acknowledge the accomplishments of Pauli Murray; she came to call her hearers to work yet to be done. Pauli Murray had once written that “Freedom is a dream.” Bishop Katharine noted: “That dream of freedom has not yet been realized, in any community in this land or across the globe. As long as any of us is restrained by custom, law, prejudice, or bigotry, we all remain in chains. We have dreams to dream, proud shoes to put on, and work to do. May we befriend this world and lay down our lives for our six billion brothers and sisters. Our brother Jesus offered his life in that service, and our sister Pauli did as well. You and I are also God’s beloved friends—can we do any less than lay down our lives for that dream of freedom?”²⁰

From that February 2007 service came the 2009 diocesan initiatives to add Pauli Murray to the calendar of saints for our whole church, (approved at General Convention in 2012), and to launch what is now an annual service to commemorate her life and witness every July at St. Titus’ in Durham.²¹

¹⁹ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 435.

²⁰ Katharine Jefferts Schori, “Pauli Murray 30th anniversary celebration of her first mass” (Typescript; February 8, 2007)

²¹ *Journal of the 193rd Annual Convention of the Diocese of North Carolina in the Episcopal Church* (2009), Resolution 2009-3, p. 124f; “Pauli Murray Named to Episcopal Sainthood,” *Duke Today*, July 14, 2012. <https://today.duke.edu/2012/07/saintmurray>

In an act of serendipity (or dare I say, “providence”), this was also the time that the Pauli Murray Project got underway in Durham. These became mutually-reinforcing initiatives and remain so today.

Let me close by speaking about why I continue to look upon Pauli Murray as a guiding figure and inspiration for my own vocation over the past fifteen years.

During that time, much has been written about Pauli Murray, including four book-length studies plus a feature film.²²

Much of that recent attention has focused upon personal and political issues, some of which she openly acknowledged in her autobiography, and some of which she did not. What is incontrovertible is that her life was marked by deep trauma and struggle; that love and acceptance, from herself and from others, didn’t come easily. In these struggles, race, gender, sexuality, vocation, and family history all played a part. She retained a pervasive sense that she didn’t fit in; she knew she didn’t conform to convention. As she herself put it, she found herself a “minority within a minority.”²³ She contributed to many fields, but she never built a career in any one of them.

But throughout her life, she clung tenaciously to her claim to be an American and an Episcopalian. These were her birthright. And she posited her own life, and her own familial history, and her own experience, at the core of what it truly means to be an American and an Episcopalian. In effect, she said, if you want to see what it really looks like to be an American family, just look at my own. And if you want to see what reconciliation really looks like, just look at all the diverse and competing strands that are woven into my very being.²⁴

So, for me, among the great strengths of Pauli Murray, were her candor, courage, and tenacity, traits that she attributed to her grandfather Fitzgerald. She was willing to engage in struggles for civil rights and women’s rights (including the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church) regardless of immediate outcome.

²² Sarah Azaransky, *The Dream is Freedom: Pauli Murray and American Democratic Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Patricia Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady: Portrait of a Friendship. Pauli Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Struggle for Social Justice*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2016); Rosalind Rosenberg, *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Troy R. Saxby, *Pauli Murray: A Personal and Political Life*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Betsy West and Julie Cohen, *My Name is Pauli Murray*. Amazon Prime Documentary, 2021.

²³ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 240.

²⁴ See Azaransky, *The Dream is Freedom*, 47; 129f.

But more than that, she was an advocate for the indivisibility of human rights. She saw the intersectionality and interconnectedness of issues; she refused to separate civil rights from women's rights from ageism and ableism and homophobia. She attended the ordination of the Philadelphia 11 in 1974, a service where Barbara Harris happened to be the crucifer. Afterwards, Pauli Murray took Barbara Harris to task for saying she considered herself too old to enter the ordination process. Pauli Murray's view was that if race and gender shouldn't be barriers to ordination, then neither should age (Barbara Harris had just turned 44 earlier that summer.)²⁵

Above all, what I cherish about Pauli Murray was her embrace of complexity and particularity, especially as it applies to the examination of racial history. Pauli Murray was a steadfast enemy of bifurcation and over-simplification.²⁶ As she famously said, "It had taken me almost a lifetime to discover that true emancipation lies in the acceptance of the whole past, in deriving strength from all my roots, in facing up to the degradation as well as the dignity of my ancestors."²⁷ Pauli Murray didn't posit a pristine past, but a past filled with possibilities for improbable, grace-filled reconciliation. That profound reconciliation can't happen until there is honest and comprehensive examination of what really occurred.

What applies to the study of the past, may well apply to the analysis of our present situation and to charting the path forward. In 1975, Pauli Murray allowed herself to picture the future of the Episcopal Church over the course of the next century; we're now almost half-way to the year 2075. The future she envisioned for us was of a church enriched by the fullest utilization of its most neglected assets: its women and its ethnic minorities. The future she envisioned was of a church which nurtured one-on-one relationships of reciprocal affection and esteem, where a deep sense of relatedness could be discerned and then expressed.²⁸

Blessed Pauli Murray still beckons us, and inspires us, to be truth-tellers and seekers of reconciliation. There's still time, and there's still work to be done.

²⁵ Story related by the Rt. Rev. Barbara Harris during the program "*Singing of a New American*," *Pauli Murray's Legacy and Justice in the 21st Century*, Howard University School of Law, September 15, 2017.

²⁶ See Anthony B. Pinn, "Introduction," in Murray, *Selected Sermons and Writings*, xxxviii.

²⁷ Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 311.

²⁸ Murray, "What the Protestant Episcopal Church of the USA Could Be Doing the Next Century: 1975-2075," in *Selected Sermons and Writings*, 189-195.