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Healy broke ground for black Catholics

A century after "shattering stereotypes" for Catholics of African-American descent, the Healy family remains for many people an enigma.

Few Catholics — even black Catholics — are aware that three of the sons of Michael and Mary Eliza Healy, an Irish immigrant and his slave "wife," became the first black Catholic priests in the United States, and one of them, the first black bishop.

Moreover, daughters Martha Ann, Amanda Josephine and Eliza later became women religious, although Martha left her order after 10 years and married.

Despite such ground-breaking advances by these six, some of the younger siblings and their descendants weren't told of their slave ancestry, or refused to discuss it, according to historians. And the Healys themselves shied from discussing their background or taking stands with other blacks.

"It wasn't a 1996-mind set when somebody would have stood up and set everybody straight," argued Father Douglas McMillan, OFM Conv., of the Diocese of Syracuse. In explaining some of this reticence, he noted that for many years prior to the Civil War, the Healy children could have been sold into slavery had they returned to their native South.

Yet there is no doubt the Healys "shattered all the stereotypes of people of African-American descent," said Father

McMillan, director of the Syracuse's Office for Black Catholic Ministries. "Even though they never set out to do it, by their mere presence they were doing it."

Of the 10 children born to Michael and Eliza Healy in the early- to mid-1800s in Georgia, James Augustine became the first black Catholic bishop in the United States; Alexander Sherwood became the chancellor of the Archdiocese of Boston and served at the Vatican Council in 1870; and Patrick Francis became president — and was often called the "second founder" — of Georgetown University. Ironically, Georgetown did not admit African-American students until the mid-20th century.

Meanwhile, their brother Michael became a commander in the U.S. Revenue Service, forerunner of the Coast Guard.

Their father was a successful plantation owner. Their mother was a slave, however, and that legally determined the children's status.

Healy sent his older sons north for schooling — Quaker schools in Flushing, N.Y., and then New Jersey, accepted them. Later, he had a chance meeting with Bishop John Bernard Fitzpatrick, who would become head of the Catholic Church in England.

Bishop Fitzpatrick recommended that the boys attend the Jesuits' new College of Holy Cross, in Worcester, Mass.

According to Father Albert S. Foley, SJ, who chronicled James Healy's life in the 1954 book, *Bishop Healy: Beloved Outcast*, Bishop Fitzpatrick continued to watch over the family and became known to them as a "second father." While the boys were attending Holy

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Story by staff writer Kathleen Schwar