



Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860

Diane Batts Morrow

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Founded in Baltimore in 1828 by a French Sulpician priest and a mulatto Caribbean immigrant, the Oblate Sisters of Providence formed the first permanent African American Roman Catholic sisterhood in the United States. It still exists today. Exploring the antebellum history of this pioneering sisterhood, Diane Batts Morrow demonstrates the centrality of race in the Oblate experience.

By their very existence, the Oblate Sisters challenged prevailing social, political, and cultural attitudes on many levels. White society viewed women of color as lacking in moral standing and sexual virtue; at the same time, the sisters' vows of celibacy flew in the face of conventional female roles as wives and mothers. But the Oblate Sisters' religious commitment proved both liberating and empowering, says Morrow. They inculcated into their communal consciousness positive senses of themselves as black women and as women religious. Strengthened by their spiritual fervor, the sisters defied the inferior social status white society ascribed to them and the ambivalence the Catholic Church demonstrated toward them. They successfully persevered in dedicating themselves to spiritual practice in the Roman Catholic tradition and their mission to educate black children during the era of slavery.

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