

Sr. Sara Postlethwaite and Sr. Maeve Heaney, A Black Lives Matter Litany of the Saints Reviewed by Julia D. E. Prinz

Under the leadership of Sister Sara Postlethwaite, VDMF, a talented team of artists from Postlethwaite's Roman Catholic congregation, the Verbum Dei Missionary Fraternity, created a liturgical outcry responding to the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020.

On May 16, 2020, Jeanette Kong, VDMF, a young Singaporean sister of the Verbum Dei, did her solemn profession of final vows under COVID-19 rules with only eight people present in the Sanctuary of St. Borromeo Parish in North Hollywood, California, with hundreds of friends, family, and community from around the world connecting online. During the celebration, a Litany of the Saints is prayed and sung, asking all saints to support the consecration of the sister professing solemn vows and the community receiving her. For every big celebration like this, the VDMF musicians change the names in the litany, choosing saints that are significant for the person and saints with names that belong to the family. Sr. Sara Postlethwaite, VDMF, with Sr. Teresa Malave, VDMF, did this for that celebration.

Only nine days after this joyous occasion, on May 25, 2020, the horrid murder of George Floyd happened. An African American man died because a White police officer kneeled on his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, even though Floyd repeatedly told the officer that he couldn't breathe.

The community met on May 26, 2020, in despair and with the deep desire not to let this pass. The unison desire was twofold: we needed to pray, and we needed to ask the ones who were killed for their support. After reaching out to African American members of the community, it became clear that lamentation would be the appropriate way forward, giving us a way to express our despair and anger. A week of lamentation from Sunday to Sunday was planned in which people from the community were invited to give witness and share the realities of discrimination and oppression they had experienced.

With the impact of just having prayed the Litany of the Saints for the final vows of Sr. Jeanette Kong, VDMF, it became clear that the community wanted to remember the ones who had been killed so atrociously as part of a Litany of the Saints. They specifically wanted to celebrate the tradition of saints of African and Native American descent and those whose lives were closely interwoven with theirs, and they wanted to honor and remember the lives and names of the ones who had been brutally murdered in the United States by excessive police force in recent years.

As Sr. Sara Postlethwaite, VDMF, expressed it, the community needed to have these murdered people as mentors and intercessors by honoring their deaths and learning from them to change the way we as a society function and live our religious imagination. The unsettling reality of the week of lament was that between the first prayer on Sunday, June 7, 2020, and the last one on Sunday, June 15, 2020, a name had to be added to the Litany of Saints: Rayshard Brooks, an African American man who had fallen asleep in his car at a Wendy's drive-through and was fatally shot while running away from police.

The Litany of the Saints, rewritten and performed by Sr. Sara Postlethwaite, is sung to an original tune by another member of the VDMF: Sr. Maeve Heaney. Sr. Laryn Kovalik, VDMF, prepared and recorded the prayer as a YouTube video that used some of her original art and art by friends of the community. In that form, it has been used in a diversity of prayer settings and has often helped to channel feelings of anger and lament in a transformative way as the litany found liturgical ways not only to remember the names but to sing them, to honor them, and to turn their reality as victims into their reality as intercessors and as an active presence for change.