

The Content of Her Character Honoring a Veteran for Justice and Peace, Sr. Mary Antona Ebo

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Editorial Note

In the first edition of the Journal, published in May of 2015, the inaugural Profiles in Courage was an interview with Sr. Mary Antona Ebo, FSM, one of the original six Sisters of Selma. Sr. Antona, a renowned social justice and human rights activist, passed away on November 11, 2017, Veterans Day. She, as well as her other religious colleagues who were in the first non-violent protest march in Selma after Bloody Sunday in 1965, have truly been “veteran heroes” for justice and peace. In honor of Sister’s life and passing, we are republishing the original interview here along with part of her obituary published last November in the St. Louis Review.

Introduction

Sr. Mary Antona was one of the original six Sisters of Selma who traveled with many rabbis, priests, and ministers to march in non-violent protest immediately following the horrors of Bloody Sunday on March 7, 1965 in Selma, Alabama. Because of the courage of these sisters, who had to overcome social prejudices of the times, many leaders of many faiths took to the streets in the next weeks. They stirred this nation’s conscience and ensured the ability of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others to march in greater safety from Selma to Montgomery later that month. In this 50th anniversary year of the original events, Sr. Antona’s story celebrates and brings to greater national attention the courage of the Sisters of Selma and their colleagues who risked so much that others might know freedom and justice. This article captures the living history of one woman whose life decisions and choices changed the course of history. Her deeds continue to inspire us today to become servant leaders of those in our world who are most in need.

The Interview

I met Sister Mary Antona Ebo, noted pioneer in the Catholic Church and civil rights advocate, in April 2014, while both of us were attending a conference at Tuskegee University. For several hours I had the privilege of recording her life story--an improbable and inspiring story.

Despite her slight frame, and a bit stooped at age 91, Sister Antona’s still sparkling eyes, mischievous grin, and quick and sometimes irreverent wit define a woman with a spirit not at all diminished by time. Known as one of the legendary “Sisters of Selma,” Antona earned her reputation during some of the darkest, yet most exhilarating, days of the civil rights movement.

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Born Elizabeth Louise Ebo in Bloomington, Illinois, “Betty Lou,” as she then was called, was one of three siblings, the daughter of an illiterate father who worked as a janitor in the Bloomington Public Library. Her mother took in laundry to help put food on the table in what could only be described as a very spare and modest home. When Betty Lou was 4, her mother’s sudden death from a ruptured uterus put added burdens on her father. “After Mother died, he spent all the family’s money to bury her,” Antona recalls, “and Dad wasn’t making that much money. There were rough days and we were hungry many of those days.”

As the Depression took its toll, her father lost both his job and their home, and no longer capable of supporting his two daughters and son, he placed them in the McLean County Home for Colored Children. “Life in the home was actually nice,” Antona remembers. “We were better off than kids nowadays who have foster parents. But kids were there for keeps unless their parents could take care of them.”

Betty’s father never visited his children in the home, but her Aunt Mary filled the void, becoming the family’s anchor and ensuring that Betty and her siblings were being cared for properly.

The young girl’s environment gave her a perspective not uncommon during the Depression in segregated America. As a youngster living in uncertain times in the 1930s, early mortality was common. She had witnessed the death of her mother and a young first grade friend, who died suddenly of a ruptured appendix. “All of those things added up to just one thing. Girl, take out an insurance policy on heaven because you may not get another chance. It could happen to me as a youngster. Except for my mom, those were just little kids like me.”

Her attraction to religion may at first have been nothing more than a young girl’s concern about the uncertainty of life in this world rather than in the next. Nevertheless, even before her teenage years, Betty Lou took out that “insurance policy.” She had been born into a Baptist family and, as was the custom in many black Baptist churches, she was expected to declare formally as Baptist. She did so at age 9 when she was baptized. “You better decide on your own,” Antona pointed out. “As a matter of fact, I was almost too young. I wasn’t supposed to know anything until I was 12 because that’s when Jesus got lost in the Temple. Kids were supposed to follow Jesus’s example. If you were going to join a church, you usually waited until you were 12.”

Betty Lou Ebo’s initial curiosity about Catholicism, a fascination that turned into a lifetime commitment, began innocently enough. In her world, as she remembers, black Catholics were not very common. “I never paid attention to the fact that blacks don’t become Catholics.” A young boy in her school changed all that. Branded with the name “Bish,” short for Bishop, and ridiculed for his Catholicism, the boy became a friend and playmate for a rebellious and independent girl quick to take on an underdog’s cause. What was this faith that engendered such loyalty that a young boy would endure the taunts of teachers and classmates? Curious, Betty Lou asked him, “What do you do in your church?” She had noted that the black Catholic family across the street with two little boys could not take Bish to church with them because the white woman who was president of the children’s home forbade it. But, as she observed, he was allowed to go to any of the Protestant churches. “How do you pray?” Betty Lou asked him. “You pray in Latin! Why don’t you talk to Jesus just like the rest of us?”

“Bish had been an altar boy. As Baptists, we didn’t have such things. I had him explaining everything to me about the Catholic Church.”

When I asked Sister Antona whether her fascination with Catholicism was fed in part by her zeal to defend her young friend, she grinned, “They weren’t being fair with Bish and that was the way I saw it. It wasn’t customary for Catholics to wear rosary beads publicly in those days, but Bish wore his and there was a cross at the end of it. So that made him Christian and a good Catholic. And that was his way of pushing it down their throats. And I liked that!” When I asked whether her lifetime commitment to social justice began with Bish, she reinforced my observation with a hearty laugh. “I suspect Bish was responsible.”

But there was far more to her flirtation with Catholicism than bucking the system and angering the management. Structure and discipline were part of the package and Betty Lou was starved for both. As I persisted in trying to tease out the answer, Antona told more of the story.

“There were three Catholic churches in town, but Saint Mary’s was right across the street from the schoolyard. One day Bish asked me, ‘If I go in that church would you tell on me?’ Well, I wasn’t going to tell on him because I wanted to see in that church. He walked into that church and went straight to the communion rail, knelt down, and started praying. He wanted to have his own faith and celebrate in his own way. And that was all that was left for him. I’ve told this story many times because it was such a sacred moment for me.”

“While he prayed I cased the joint. We didn’t have an altar in our church and gold candelabras and all that. And the windows had all the Bible stories we read about in the Baptist Sunday school. All that led me to the conclusion that we don’t all worship God in the same way and it’s still the same God. Well, I made up my mind that I was going to be a Catholic. I always believe that God put Bish there for me.”

Her dear friend eventually moved away and Betty Lou lost track of him. Nevertheless, the transition to her new faith continued into her teens. A bout of tuberculosis saw her hospitalized for some months during which time her thumb became badly infected and had to be amputated. “I lost the thumb and got religion.” During the long isolation in a sanatorium, she studied Catholicism.

Those studies led to an unforeseen consequence. The white supervisor of the home, Mrs. Monroe, was not supposed to know about Betty Lou’s interest in Catholicism. “She came to see me in the hospital, and that was the first time she saw me outside the home. ‘Betty, you’ve always been a good girl,’ she said. I was 18 then and felt liberated. I felt that I was not a good girl but a woman now. And Mrs. Monroe went on: ‘and you’ve made good grades in school. I’d like to take you back to the home but I understand you’re studying to become a Catholic.’ It was a now moment for me because I didn’t expect her to even ask me anything like that. I knew the way Bish had been treated and I didn’t think it would be the best idea to tell her. You can do a lot of thinking in a split second. My logic was that if I was going to build my faith in God based on the teachings of this particular church, then I got no business lying about becoming a member of that church. All of that came to me in that split second. So I just said yes, knowing my goose was cooked. I looked at her and she was turnin’ purple. I was scared because I had no roof over my head and no place to go. But I had other aspirations. I didn’t want to end up in somebody’s kitchen or answering the phone at someone’s residence. I just felt that I had more to offer and there was more to me. My sister liked to sew and cook and do all those things that little girls are supposed to like. And I didn’t like any of them.” By this time Betty Lou had turned 18 and considered herself emancipated. “If I decided to be a Catholic, I was going to be a Catholic.”

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“And that was it. I was out of the home and had to find another place to live. I had attended public school but wondered aloud one day why I shouldn’t be attending a Catholic school. In those days they were pretty strict about Catholic kids going to Catholic school.” But that technicality didn’t faze her. She became the first African-American to graduate from Holy Trinity High School in Bloomington and was baptized a Catholic in 1942 at age 18.

I asked Sister Antona how she went from attending a Catholic high school to becoming a nun. “On the way home from high school I used to see the sisters going from the convent over to the church. One day I saw a sister by herself and I got brave and asked what one had to do to be a sister. At that time, all I knew was that they lived differently but they always looked so peaceful.”

Her transition from student to sister was anything but smooth. Becoming comfortable with her new religious culture occasionally clashed with her old faith, causing Betty some embarrassment. She described one such episode at a well-attended High Mass. “The organ was playing and the choir was singing and everything was in line except me. I watched to see what other people were doing when they went up to receive communion. I got in line to kneel down to receive communion.” Several priests were required to serve the unusual crowd of worshippers. “I knelt down and did what I saw everyone else doing. As the priest gave them communion, he said, ‘Corpus Christi,’ which is the Body of Christ. And I said, ‘Amen.’ Then I got busy thanking God for the gift of my faith and I was sockin’ one of those good old Baptist prayers. The next thing I knew there was another priest saying ‘Corpus Christi.’ I hadn’t seen anyone else receive communion twice and thought ‘I don’t want Jesus to think I’m not grateful so I said Amen again and received communion a second time. I remember thinking to myself, ‘You had better get out of here. They’re gonna throw you out before you can do a third one.’”

Betty Lou entered the convent in 1946 and soon completed the transition from Baptist to Catholic to nun by becoming “Antona,” the name of a much loved high school math teacher. “I really liked Sister Antona and I never could understand how anyone that pretty and that nice could teach such an ugly subject as math.”

Other things were incomprehensible to the new convert and sister-in-training. Although she certainly had experienced racism in pre-war Bloomington, Antona was in for a rude awakening. If racism permeated society in general, the last place she thought she would find it was in her new church. “I learned about racism in the Christian-Catholic world,” she recalled.

She and two other black sisters were assigned to St. Mary’s Infirmary for the Colored, a hospital in downtown St. Louis. That assignment was no accident. Segregation in post-war Missouri was endemic. Blacks had to sit in the back of Catholic churches and receive communion last. But the climate was about to change. In 1947, a newcomer on the scene, Archbishop Joseph Ritter, proclaimed an end to racial segregation in all Catholic schools and hospitals in his St. Louis archdiocese. That same year, Antona became a Franciscan Sister of Mary, one of three African-Americans to become members of the Franciscan Order. An end to segregation did not necessarily mean an end to racism. While assigned to the Catholic hospital, Antona tried to apply for admission to its school of nursing. When she asked the nun in charge for an application, the sister retorted, “We’ve never taken a colored girl here before.” I never thought I was going to run into that--the race thing. She didn’t ask me about my grades at Holy Trinity--and I was the only black child there. She didn’t ask me about my health--and I had been

a patient and had become friends with many of the nurses and doctors. She didn't ask me any of those questions you would ask."

Although Antona resented the shabby treatment, she responded with "Anything they can do, I can do better. Those were my people in those beds. Those were my doctors. They wouldn't let one of the doctors examine my chest because I'd have to take off my gown. They didn't trust a black doctor with a black woman."

Despite this negative experience, Sister Antona spent a major part of her career in the healthcare field. She was working as Director of Medical Records at St. Mary's Infirmary when she heard about "Bloody Sunday," the violent attack on peaceful demonstrators by police on March 7, 1965, in Selma, Alabama. By her own admission, the civil rights movement was not on her radar screen at that time. The insularity and enforced apolitical environment of her order were partly to blame. Nevertheless, the dramatic events in Selma were about to change her life.

On the Tuesday evening following Bloody Sunday, the phone rang in her hospital office. "It was the superior of the house who asked, 'Did you hear about what was going on in Selma?' I didn't even know where Selma was, let alone what was going on there. I knew something about Martin Luther King. He was a man who was really making sacrifices for the struggle. 'How would you like to go to Selma tomorrow?' I said, 'What those people need are outsiders down there with them and clean that mess up. Mind you, that was the first time I ever heard of it, let alone go down and do something about it. If I didn't have all this stuff on [nun's habit], I'd be down there with those people. The only way I can describe what happened is, God called my bluff. I came through with all kinds of reasons why I should not go--with or without the habit. Eventually I ran out of excuses and it was put up or shut up time so I said I'd go."

"I watched the 10 o'clock news that night and it reported that a young white minister was beaten to death on the streets of Selma. I figured if they would do that to a white minister, what were they gonna do if I showed up? And then I thought that if we went to jail while we were down there, I wouldn't even be with the other sisters. And that's when it really hit me. I could be in a jail all by myself and nobody would have ever known what happened to me."

Five other sisters, all white and representing the Sisters of Loretto and Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, were a last-minute part of the St. Louis delegation to Selma on March 10, 1965. "They put the women in the front. All of the women were just the six of us," Antona pointed out. She also recalled that the two planes chartered to take the group to Selma had been in mothballs and were not in good flying condition. When one of the doors would not close properly prior to takeoff in St. Louis, one of the ministers in the group said, "Never mind praying; get out the bailing wire, I'm goin' anyway!"

After arriving in Selma, Antona's presence, along with that of the other sisters, was a much needed show of support to the marchers. When they reached the staging area at Selma's Brown A.M.E. Chapel, Andrew Young announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, one of the great moral forces of the world has just walked in the door."

Contrary to legend, the sisters did not march with the others to Montgomery nearly two weeks later. "We only walked about half a block," Antona recalled. The mayor of Selma and

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the posse and the state police were all there. They didn't expect to see sisters there. They had squad cars all lined up with dogs. Everybody was under control but they were so shocked to see six little old nuns. We had stolen the show on the boys because it was supposed to be their trip. A reporter asked me why I had come to Selma, but I was so scared I don't remember what I said or how I got the words out. Other people have told me what I said: 'I'm here because I'm a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness.' And those words have gone around the world. I even got a call from the Vatican newspaper. I got a letter from the Birch Society in California calling us dupes of the communists. The fear didn't end when we got back to St. Louis. There was always that fear that they can get you no matter where you are and what you're doing. People in this country were divided in their opinions whether I should have been in Selma or not. The popularity of the idea of the sisters even going is far more accepted now. People want to know who you are."

Today, there is little doubt that the ugly and turbulent events in Selma, and the role Antona and the other sisters played in that affair, aroused an apathetic nation to action, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was the result.

Antona reminded me that although she was typecast as one of the heroes for bearing witness at Selma, she had a whole career still ahead of her. In 1967, she was assigned to run St. Clare Hospital in Baraboo, Wisconsin. A year later she was a founder of the National Black Sisters' Conference, later serving as its president. She then earned a master's degree at Aquinas Institute of Theology, and later worked as a chaplain at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. Before moving back to St. Louis, she had remained active in her religious community. In 2000, the State of Alabama awarded her a State Senate Commendation for her contribution to civil rights.

Just a few years ago at a reunion in Selma commemorating Bloody Sunday, Sister Antona was scheduled to speak. The unexpected appearance of the Vice President preempted her. Nevertheless, her encounter with Joe Biden was memorable. "He came over and kissed me on my cheek. Then he rested his forehead on my brow and said, 'Sister, don't worry about it. I'm just one of those good little ole Catholic boys.' And I said, "Those are the ones I'm scared of."

In 2005, she was diagnosed with lymphoma, but with aggressive treatment, the disease went into remission. "Nobody told me I was supposed to have died." Still going strong in 2015 at age 91, she led a prayer service during the recent demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri, and still speaks occasionally to students. After spending several days with Sister Antona and hearing about her life, I concluded that the traditional labels attached to this truly remarkable woman--healer, human rights and voting rights activist, humanitarian, and trailblazer--are only partial descriptors. In his epic speech, "I Have A Dream," Dr. Martin Luther King proclaimed, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." If we judge Sister Antona Ebo's long record of accomplishment based on that premise, then she is precisely what Dr. King had in mind.

St. Louis Review Obituary November 16, 2017

The following is taken from Sr. Mary Antona's obituary published in the St. Louis Review on November 16, 2017. The full text with pictures of Sr. Antona can be found on the review's website at: <http://stlouisreview.com/article/2017-11-11/obituary-sister-ebo>.

Sister Mary Antona Ebo, a Franciscan Sister of Mary whose courageous words during the March 10, 1965, march in Selma, Ala., became a rallying cry for many in the Civil Rights movement, died Nov. 11 at The Sarah Community in Bridgeton. She was 93 and was a Franciscan Sister of Mary for 71 years.

A funeral Mass will be celebrated at 11 a.m., Monday, Nov. 20, at St. Alphonsus Liguori "Rock" Church, 1118 N. Grand Blvd. in north St. Louis. Visitation will take place at 9 a.m., preceding the Mass. Archbishop Robert J. Carlson will preside at the Mass.

For many, Sister Antona was the face of the Civil Rights movement, standing up with courage against racism and injustice. One of the pioneers of Civil Rights, on March 10, 1965, Sister Antona, the only African American sister in the crowd gathered in Selma, Ala., to march in protest against the brutality of Bloody Sunday just days earlier, was thrust to the forefront. She told the crowd, "I'm here because I'm a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness." Throughout her life she stood for justice and equality for all. Even in her 90s, she offered a reflection on justice at the archdiocesan prayer service in Ferguson on the 2015 anniversary of her historic march, and in July 2017, the Missouri History Museum honored her in a special "Celebration of Sister Anton Ebo, FSM," as part of the exhibit "#1 in Civil Rights: The African-American Freedom Struggle in St. Louis."

Elizabeth Louise Ebo was born April 10, 1924, in Bloomington, Ill., one of three children born to Daniel and Louise (Teal) Ebo. She was known as Betty when she was younger. When she was 4, her mother died suddenly at age 29 during pregnancy. During the following two years in the height of the Depression, her father lost his job and their home; At the age of 6, Betty and her older brother and sister were placed in the McLean County Home for Colored Children in Bloomington, where she lived from 1930-42. She was baptized Catholic on Dec. 19, 1942.

Determined to attend a Catholic nursing school, she faced numerous rejections because of race. She learned of St. Mary's Infirmary School of Nursing in St. Louis, run by the Sisters of St. Mary, and she enrolled there in 1944. On July 26, 1946, she became one of the first three African American women to enter the Sisters of St. Mary. She received the name Sister Mary Antona, and she professed final vows on Feb. 11, 1954. (In 1987 the Sisters of St. Mary reunited with the Sisters of St. Francis of Maryville, Mo., as the Franciscan Sisters of Mary.)

Sister Antona earned a bachelor's degree in medical records (1962) and a master's in hospital executive development (1970), both through St. Louis University. She earned certification in clinical pastoral education through Alexian Brothers in Elk Grove, Ill., (1976) and Mendota Mental Health Institute in Madison, Wis. (1977). She earned a

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master's in theology of health care through Aquinas Institute of Theology (1978) and was certified as a chaplain through the National Association of Catholic Chaplains (1979).

She has been awarded six honorary doctorates: Doctor of Humane Letters from Loyola University of Chicago (1995); Doctor of Humane Letters from the College of New Rochelle, N.Y. (2008); Doctor of Humane Letters from Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis (2009); Doctor of Humanities from St. Louis University (2010); Doctor of Humane Letters from the University of Missouri-St. Louis (2010); and Doctor of Laws from the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind. (2013).

She worked in medical records at Firmin Desloge Hospital in St. Louis (1955-61) and at St. Mary's Health Center in St. Louis (1961-62). She was director of medical records at St. Mary's Infirmary from 1962-67. It was during this time — March 10, 1965 — that Sisters Antona and Eugene Marie Smith flew to Selma, Ala., to take part in the march following Bloody Sunday. In 2007, a PBS documentary chronicling the events and prominently featuring Sister Antona was produced: "Sisters of Selma: Bearing Witness for Change." In the time since 1965, Sister Antona has often been asked to speak on civil rights.

She served for a year as director of medical records at St. Mary's Health Center in St. Louis. From 1967-71 she was executive director of St. Clare Hospital in Baraboo, Wis., the first African-American woman to administer a hospital in the United States. She served as assistant executive director at St. Mary's Hospital in Madison, Wis. (1971-74), then for two years as executive director of the Wisconsin Conference of Catholic Hospitals. She also was chaplain and pastoral associate at St. Mary's Hospital in Madison, Wis., (1978-81). She was chaplain at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson from 1981-87.

In 1987, Sister Antona was elected to congregational leadership at a special re-founding chapter that completed the process of reunification of the Sisters of St. Mary and the Sisters of St. Francis of Maryville, Mo., as the Franciscan Sisters of Mary; she served through 1991. She then served three-year terms (1991-94) as a member of the St. Louis Archdiocesan Human Rights Commission and a member of the Missouri Catholic Conference on Social Concerns. She was pastoral associate at her parish, St. Nicholas Church in St. Louis (1992-2008). She served on the Board of Directors for Cardinal Ritter Institute (now Cardinal Ritter Senior Services), serving also as secretary of the board.

Sister Antona was a founding member of the National Black Sisters' Conference (1968) and served as its president. In 1989, the conference awarded her the Harriet Tubman Award for being "called to be a Moses to the people." Besides her honorary doctorates, Sister Antona has received many awards and recognitions for her courage and her insight on civil rights issues. She received communion from Pope John Paul II and gave President Obama a hug after she offered an invocation at a dinner honoring him. A seminar room at the Cardinal Rigali Center in St. Louis, is named in her honor. She was featured prominently in the "Voices of Civil Rights" exhibit at the Library of Congress in 2005; despite age and frailty she continued to speak on her experiences on national and international levels well into her 90s, challenging listeners to live out the truth that all God's creatures are equal in the eyes and heart of God.

Archbishop Robert J. Carlson issued a statement on the death of Sister Antona. He stated, “We will miss her living example of working for justice in the context of our Catholic faith. I ask that the faithful of the Archdiocese of St. Louis join me in praying for the repose of the soul of Sister Ebo. Her family, friends, and her religious community will continue to be in our thoughts and prayers.”

A statement from the archdiocesan Peace and Justice Commission noted that Sister Antona’s “courage and work to end the injustice of racism provided the inspiration and guidance to the Commission as we began our task of responding to systemic injustice by building a more just community that strengthens the family and promotes human dignity for the common good.”

Sister Antona is survived by her sister-in-law, Maxine Ebo of Rancho Cordova, Calif. A private burial will take place in Resurrection Cemetery.



Sr. Mary Antona Through The Years: In the middle, Sr. Antona speaking during the March 10, 1965 non-violent protest in Selma, Alabama after Bloody Sunday. On the left side and upper right, two contemporary images of Sr. Antona. On the lower right, Sr. Antona meeting with Vice President Biden as mentioned previously in the article.