

Sister Antona Ebo

God's Work in Living Color

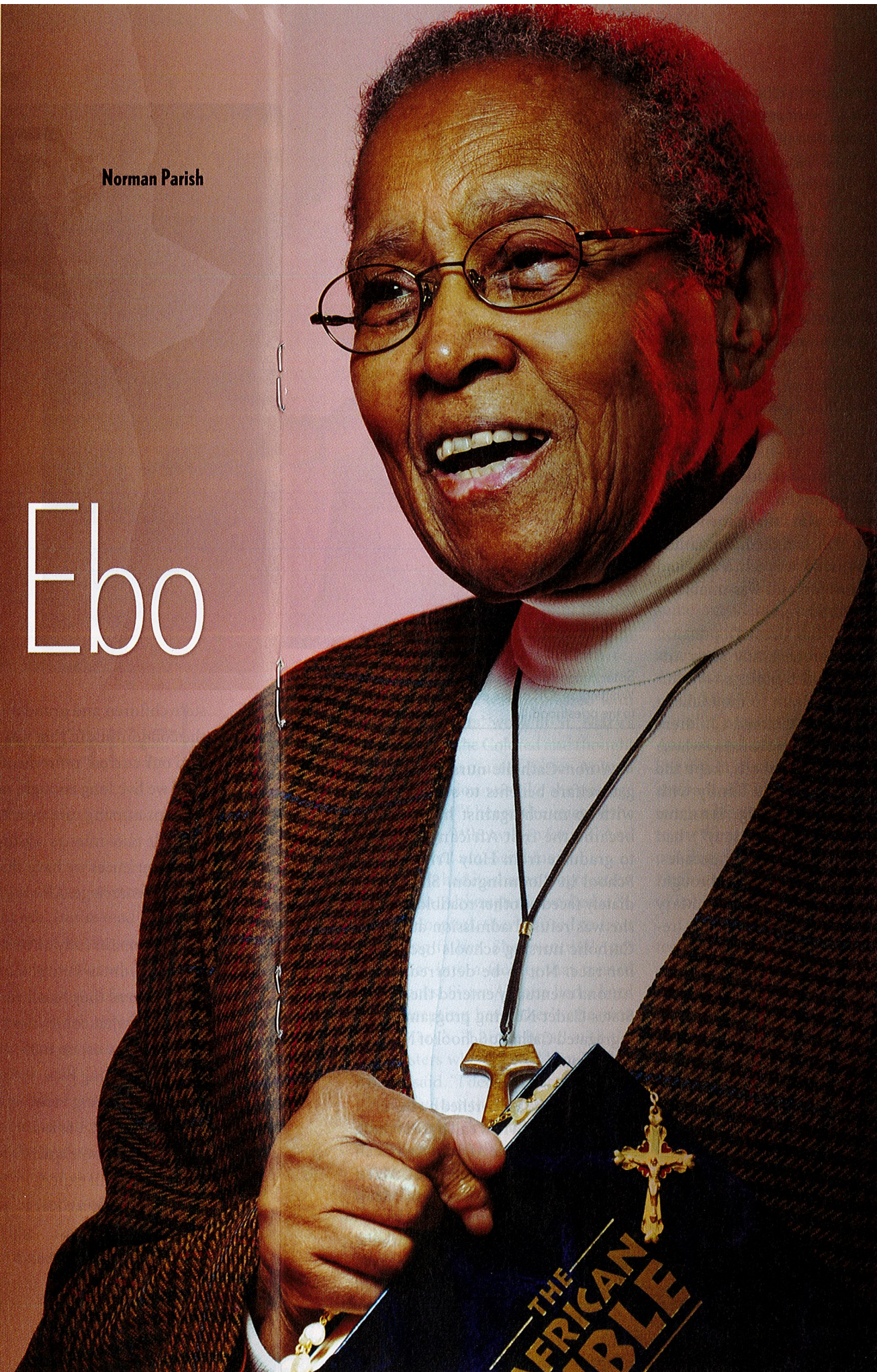
SISTER ANTONA EBO, FSM, likes to start her day worshipping the Lord. But the 85-year-old retired health-care expert with the Franciscan Sisters of Mary can no longer drive to church. Instead, she watches daily Mass on television.

"My first line of defense is the Spirit and the Eucharist," says Sister Antona, who lives in a one-bedroom apartment on the north side of St. Louis, Missouri. "Yes, I would prefer a live Mass. Then I could receive Communion and be in the physical presence of the Lord....But as the old folks say, 'make do with what you got.'...I've got television Mass."

Just as she watches televised services to replace live Masses, Sister Antona has always found a way to address her concerns. And there was a time when she was on the other side of the television screen.

In 1965, while working in a St. Louis hospital, Sister Antona heard about the bloodshed that occurred during a voting-rights march in Selma, Alabama. So, in

Norman Parish



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response to a call from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., she and five other religious sisters joined a second protest there.

Sister Antona acknowledges she didn't know what to expect in the demonstration. She did know the march from Selma to Montgomery might be dangerous, but she relied on her faith through prayer.

With protection from the National Guard and under the spotlight of television cameras, the protest eventually succeeded. March 2010 marks the forty-fifth anniversary of the controversial event, which attracted national attention and even inspired a PBS movie.

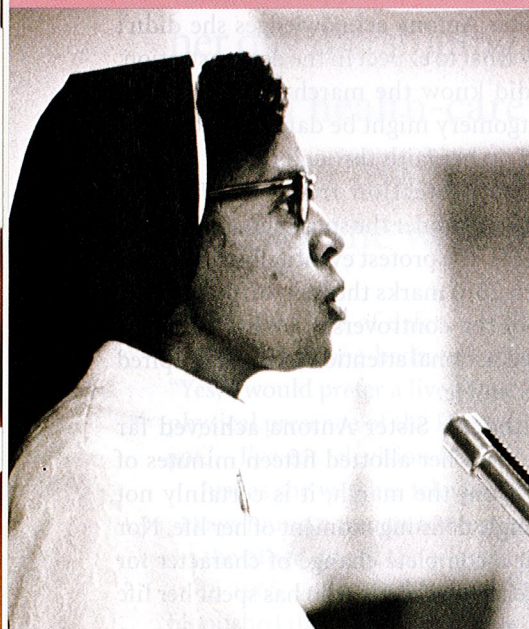
Although Sister Antona achieved far more than her allotted fifteen minutes of fame from the march, it is certainly not the single defining moment of her life. Nor was it a complete change of character for this feisty black lady who has spent her life bucking the status quo.

WILEY PRINCE

Since the march, she has become the first black Catholic sister to head a Catholic hospital in the U.S., and she helped found the National Black Sisters Conference—eventually serving as its president. She has also battled cancer and recently survived a flood. Through it all, she says the same strong trust in God that carried her through the march from Selma has encouraged her to face all her challenges.

She has shared her experiences with thousands on the speakers' circuit—particularly with young people. She has been recognized for her efforts with numerous awards and has received three special doctoral degrees from various colleges, including

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Loyola University in Chicago, Illinois, and Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis. A room is named in her honor at the Cardinal Rigali Pastoral Center in the Archdiocese of St. Louis—the only one named after a black woman at the site.

"She is an example of what social justice is all about," said Gwendolyn Crimm, 59, a long-time friend who worked with Sister Antona in the former St. Louis Archdiocesan National Black Catholic Congress. "She comes up with a solution to the challenge. I always say, 'When I grow up, I'm going to be like her.'"

Sister Antona was born in 1924 in Bloomington, Illinois. By the time she was four, her mother, Louise Teal Ebo, had died. Her father, Daniel Ebo, who was illiterate, had lost a janitor's job and was unable to support his children.

Eventually, the Great Depression was too much for the family. Sister Antona and two older siblings—Walter and Mary—were sent to the McLean County Home for Colored Children. But even then Sister Antona, whose first name was Elizabeth, kept the faith. She came from a family with pride. *Ebo*, her family's Nigerian name ("man child born on a Tuesday"), had been kept in her family for decades. An aunt visited the home and brought gifts for the Ebo children. Aunt Mary Drake was like a mother to them, recalls Sister Antona.

She continued to face tough challenges. When she was a teen, she lost her thumb after contracting tuberculosis. While recovering in a sanatorium, she became interested in the Catholic faith. When she was due to return to the McLean County Home, an official kicked her out because she was taking Catholic classes.

Sister Antona says she could have returned to the home if she would have lied. "What good would it have been to believe what I was studying and not have faith or integrity?" she recalls thinking.



Sister Antona prays over Brother Paul Whittington, OP, on the eve of his ordination to the priesthood.

A non-Catholic nurse helped her get welfare benefits to survive. Even with so much against her, she still became the first African American to graduate from Holy Trinity High School in Bloomington. She immediately faced another roadblock when she was refused admission at several Catholic nursing schools because of her race. Not to be deterred, Sister Antona eventually entered the United States Cadet Nursing program in the segregated Catholic School of Nursing in St. Louis.

In 1946, she again relied on her faith and heeded a new call by becoming the first of three African American women to join the Sisters of St. Mary, now the Franciscan Sisters of Mary. Sister Roberta Fulton, SSMN, principal of St. Martin de Porres Catholic School in Columbia, South Carolina, and current president of the National

Black Sisters Conference, says the Order went against the grain by allowing Sister Antona and other blacks to join the group. Segregation was prominent during that period. "They suffered a lot of insults for allowing black women into the Order," Sister Fulton said.

It worked both ways: "Some (sisters) suffered a lot of insults for being black women in (white)

orders," Sister Fulton said.

Sister Antona was impressed with the white sisters' work at St. Mary's Infirmary for the Colored and thought she could be an asset. Sister Antona said her decision was like the passage in Isaiah 6:8: "I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here I am. Send me.'"

St. Louis had its share of segregation and racism. Although she worked at St. Mary's Hospital, they refused to treat her ailing father. She eventually got her father into a facility that treated only blacks. Sister Antona had a hard time accepting her father's rejection by St. Mary's. "I broke bread with the same sisters who rejected him," Sister Antona said. "I decided not to let them forget that I am the daughter of a black man and a black woman."

She also recalls that some priests mistreated blacks, refusing to give them Communion until whites were served. "I knew this was not God's will," Sister Antona said. "Through it all, like the song says, 'I learned to trust in God's word.'"

By spring of 1947, Joseph Cardinal Ritter, using a threat of excommunication, announced an end to segregation in Catholic schools, hospitals, and parishes in St. Louis. "God can help us with anything," Sister Antona said.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr., also made progress in race relations. He broke barriers in places like Montgomery, Alabama. He and other civil-rights activists ended segregated seating arrangements on buses, but they struggled with voting rights. On March 7, 1965, about 600 voting advocates were attacked by lawmen with clubs and tear gas on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. Many marchers were injured, and two died. The incident is known as Bloody Sunday.

Sister Antona told a hospital worker at the time, "I think those folks need some outsiders to help them." When her superior asked if she would like to attend the next march in Selma, Sister Antona says she felt she should "put up or shut up."

So on March 10 of that year, Sister Antona and others arrived in Selma. She was immediately ushered to a rally at a packed Catholic church. Sister Antona and five white sisters were brought to the front. She told the group, "I am privileged to be here. I believe every Negro, as well as whites, has the right to vote."

Later, at the group's attempted protest march, Sister Antona and the other sisters were once again brought to the front of the group, where she found herself eye-to-eye with state troopers and local officials. Her words were broadcast worldwide: "I am here because I am a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness."

But Sister Antona wasn't brutalized. The incident helped attract other religious women to the effort. Protesting in the South was an unusual act by Catholic sisters. "Until that point

Sister Antona becomes one of the first black women to join the Sisters of St. Mary.

Catholic sisters weren't really involved in the civil-rights movement," Sister Antona said.

Their efforts were not in vain. By March 21, a federal court order forced local officials to allow a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

In 1967, Sister Antona again broke new ground when she became the first black woman religious to run a hospital—St. Clare Hospital in Baraboo, Wisconsin. For decades she had worked in hospital-related jobs from nursing to keeping medical records. She'd gotten a bachelor's degree in medical records administration in 1962. In the next decade, she received master's degrees in hospital administration from St. Louis University and in the theology of health care from Aquinas Institute of Theology.

Despite her busy schedule, Sister Antona continued to help blacks. This time, she did something to help African American sisters like herself. In 1968 she helped found the National Black Sisters Conference. The group, started by a few sisters, now has about 100 paid members.

Sister Antona served as the organization's president from 1979 to 1981. The group gave her its Harriet Tubman award in 1989 for her leadership as a



“She is officially retired, but she hasn’t given up. She is still a fighter.”



Sister Antona surrounded by youth at a recent speaking engagement at De La Salle North Catholic High School, Portland, Oregon

Catholic sister. “She is a Harriet Tubman and Moses for her people,” said Sister Fulton. “She is very committed. She has been a mentor to a lot of us. She says things like ‘Keep on keeping on.’”

Sister Fulton recalls Sister Antona’s singing to the group, “If I can help somebody as I pass along, then my living will not be vain.” Sister Antona has rarely missed a major meeting. “We call her one of the ancestors of the faith,” Fulton said. Despite her age, Sister Antona continues to dedicate a lot of time to the group. She is currently a member at large and is expected to be at the National Gathering of Black Catholic Women later this year in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Sister Antona’s reputation for helping with black causes has made her a popular speaker. In September, she spoke at a Mass for students at Hales Franciscan High School, an all-boys school on the south side of Chicago, which is predominately black. “She was excellent,” recalls Father David Jones, a 47-year-old teacher at the school. Sister Antona talked about “you have to move when the spirit says move,” Father Jones said.

Citing Sister Antona’s courage in responding to issues like voting rights in the South, Father Jones says, “She brings personal witness (to civil rights). The students learned that history ties them together.”

Back in St. Louis, Sister Antona continues her involvement with local groups. She is a member of the African-American/Jewish Dialogue Group and the Pastoral Council of the St. Louis Catholic Archdiocese. She is one of thirty people who advise Archbishop Robert A. Carlson.

“She has valuable opinions,” said Monsignor Vernon Gardin, a Vicar General for the St. Louis Archdiocese, who sits on the panel with Sister Antona. He pointed out that she has lived through many eras—from segregation to civil rights to today. He said she brings her own energy to the group and is often on point. “She is officially retired,” he added, “but she hasn’t given up. She is still a fighter.”

In 2005 Sister Antona was diagnosed with lymphoma. A special prayer service was held for her at St. Matthew’s Church in St. Louis in August 2005, and both whites and blacks attended the service. At St. Alphonsus “Rock” Church in St. Louis, a photograph of Sister Antona was placed at the shrine of Sister Thea Bowman, and a weekly petition was added to the Prayers of the Faithful.

“My faith told me, ‘you are in control of all of this,’” Sister Antona said. “I refused to fall apart. The doctor told me I was going to lose my hair during the chemotherapy, and I was wonder-

ing how I was going to deal with that. I decided I was going to offer it up.

“I also thought about the people I needed to pray for. I thought about people whose heads were similar to mine, and I decided to pray for the skinheads. Some of my friends thought I was crazy. They asked what I was doing praying for them. I told them I wanted the skinheads to change their hearts.”

Although she isn’t sure whether that has happened *yet*, there was, however, a change in Sister Antona’s health. By August 2006, a doctor told her that her cancer was in remission. She said she remembered the prayers of the people at St. Matthew’s. She also recalled Romans 8:28, “All things work together for good for those who love God.”

In 2008, Sister Antona’s apartment in University City, Missouri, was flooded during a bad storm. She was at her congregation’s facility when nearly four feet of water rushed into her one-bedroom unit. “Almost everything was damaged but a few clothes hanging up high,” recalls Sister Susan Scholl, FSM, who helped Sister Antona clean up her apartment. “A lot of important personal items were destroyed,” added Sister Scholl, “but there was no ‘how could this happen to me?’ by her.”

Sister Antona says her order helped replace destroyed items, while “I said a prayer and thanked God for the sixteen years I had lived in that apartment. A brother and sister died while I lived there. I thanked God for getting me through all those years. I am glad that God has brought me this far by faith.

“Things worked out in the end,” Sister Antona continued. She eventually ended up in a newer and more modern complex that ironically used to be a hospital that treated blacks—Homer G. Phillips. Life, it seems, has come full circle for this *not-so-quiet* servant of God. ■

Norman Parish is an editor with the Chicago Sun Times.