

Preface

This book makes two general claims about the Roman Catholic Church and a more specific one about the intersection of theology and antiblackness: first, the church possesses a truly corporate moral character; second, Catholic sainthood offers a particularly effective way to uncover it; and third, each of these assertions proves especially true with respect to the church's underappreciated participation in black chattel slavery and its ongoing Pan-American afterlife. Africanized slavery pervaded all of the Americas, from Canada to Chile; and although black slavery has been abolished in each of these countries, the racialized world it set in motion has yet to end. What I term antiblackness supremacy—the power nonblack people amass at the expense of black women, children, and men—persists as more than just a memory; it operates as a living, breathing legacy.¹ The claim that the church possesses a corporate body not just metaphorically but also in reality may at first appear rhetorically excessive. But for Catholics, as for other Christians, the ecclesial body of Christ is just as real, and therefore just as historically visible, as any individual human body.² Indeed, Christians become the corporate body of Christ every time they performatively receive his body in the Eucharist.³

So Catholics frequently speak about the church as though it enacts

1. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008), 6.
2. M. Shawn Copeland, "The New Anthropological Subject at the Heart of the Mystical Body of Christ," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 53 (2013).
3. M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

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a truly corporate body. Papal encyclicals and pastoral letters offer counsel not just to individual Christians or “men of good will” but also to the church as a corporate body; they describe how the church has acted in the past in order to instruct it how to act in the future. In response, Catholics implicitly credit the church with corporate virtues. But if the church’s corporate body enacts virtues, then can it not also succumb to corporate vices? The church’s corporate body possesses at least as much reality in its historically visible vices as it does in its virtues. This claim admittedly rubs up against perceptions of ecclesial purity and sinlessness. But while God may preserve an unpolluted space somewhere within the church, the church’s actions have left a mark on history that cannot be denied.

Catholic sainthood proves particularly adept at documenting the church’s corporate moral character, precisely because it emerges as a product of the church’s corporate body. Especially since the Council of Trent, canonization processes have passed through official institutional channels. They also typically require relatively intense and prolonged formal support from religious orders and/or organized laypeople in order to attain success. More than simply expressing how the church processes holiness, canonization campaigns also reveal how power operates in and through the church.

Sainthood also carries corporate memories within it. Official processes of canonization as well as more informally produced hagiographies serve as a popular and deeply rooted form of ecclesial autobiography.⁴ In this way, for example, opponents of the recent canonization of the eighteenth-century Spanish missionary Junípero Serra claim that his sainthood falsely portrays the church not as a collaborator in the oppression of indigenous people but as their savior. For them, Serra’s sainthood evidences that the church’s memory does not always match its lived history. More than simply revealing how the church remembers itself to have acted, sainthood can unveil how the church in fact did act.⁵ For these reasons, it enables the church

4. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 10, 27.

to examine its corporate conscience and reconsider its corporate character.

The gap between corporate memory and corporate history proves particularly large with respect to the church's corporate participation in what I term antiblackness supremacy. Although Pope John Paul II apologized to Africans for the church's participation in the slave trade, the church has yet to fully grasp the extent of the church's alliance with it.⁶ Much less has the church uncovered the ways in which antiblackness supremacy continues to inhabit its corporate body. The sainthoods of Peter Claver and Martín de Porres, because they are the only Catholics who have been canonized primarily due to their relation to the black chattel slavery that structured life in the Americas for nearly five hundred years, sheds a particularly clear light on the church's relation to antiblackness supremacy. These saints tell a story we ignore at our own peril.

5. Lawrence S. Cunningham, "Saints and Martyrs: Some Contemporary Considerations," *Theological Studies* 60, no. 3 (1999): 529–30.

6. E. J. Dionne Jr., "Pope Apologizes to Africans for Slavery," *New York Times*, August 14, 1985.