

PAULI MURRAY

b. November 20, 1910

d. July 1, 1985

Her book “States’ Laws on Race and Color” (1951) was described by Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall as the bible for civil rights lawyers.

“As an American, I inherit the magnificent tradition of an endless march toward freedom and toward the dignity of all mankind.”

The Reverend Dr. Pauli Murray was a lifelong civil rights attorney and activist against racial and sexual discrimination. She was the first African-American female Episcopal priest.

Born in Baltimore, Maryland, Murray lost her mother when she was 3. She was sent to Durham, North Carolina to live with her maternal grandparents and aunts. Raised by older relatives, Murray grew up with a strong sense of independence and self-reliance.

In 1933, Murray graduated from Hunter College and taught for the WPA Worker’s Education Program. Wishing to pursue legal studies, she applied to the University of North Carolina, but was rejected on the basis of race. This discrimination impelled Murray to pursue a Bachelor of Law degree at Howard University and become active in the civil rights movement. She joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and organized sit-ins to end segregation at restaurants in Washington, D.C. Murray cofounded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), along with Bayard Rustin, who was openly gay.

Denied admission to Harvard Law School due to her gender, Murray earned her master’s degree at the University of California, where she focused on equal rights for women. She became the first African-American female deputy attorney general of California.

Murray returned to New York and practiced law privately for five years. Her book “States’ Laws on Race and Color” (1951) was described by Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall as the bible for civil rights lawyers. In 1956, Murray published “Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family,” a biography of her grandparents’ struggle with racial prejudice.

In the 1960’s, President Kennedy appointed Murray to the Committee on Civil and Political Rights. She worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the civil rights movement. Murray spoke out against the marginalized role black women played in movement leadership.

Though Murray never identified as a lesbian, her longest lasting relationships were with women. Refusing to accept her homosexuality due to its association at the time with mental illness, she ultimately self-identified as a heterosexual man.

In 1977, Murray became the first African-American female ordained an Episcopal priest. She died at age 74. Her autobiography “Songs in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage” (1987) was published posthumously.



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