

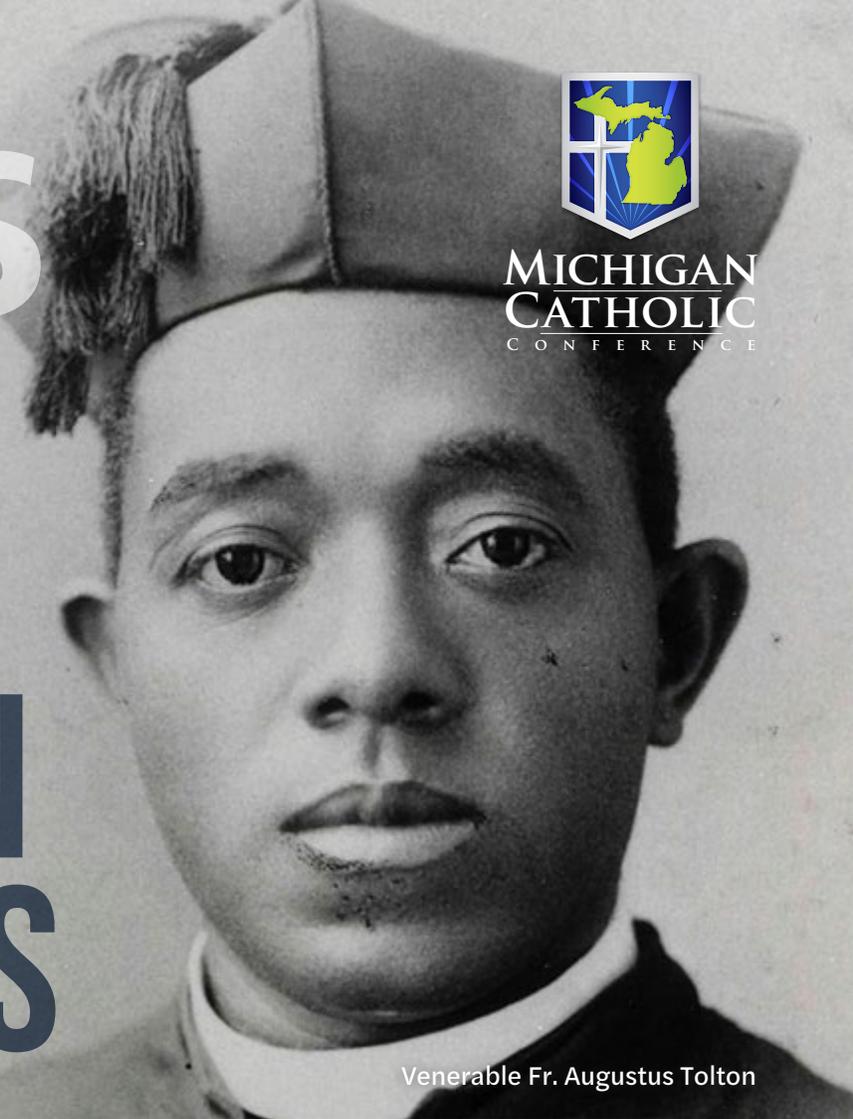
focus

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MICHIGAN
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

WITH GRATITUDE FOR AFRICAN- AMERICAN CATHOLICS



Venerable Fr. Augustus Tolton

United States history includes a wealth of inspirational African-American men and women.

Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, Rosa Parks, Jackie Robinson, and Martin Luther King Jr. are well known examples in the fight for equality and justice.

There are also many individuals in the Catholic tradition who have contributed significantly to racial equality and improving civic life in American communities. Henriette Delille, a free woman of color in the 1800s, created a religious order to serve those who were enslaved. Fr. Augustus Tolton, he himself a former slave, faced hostility and discrimination during his own journey into the priesthood. Mother Mary Lange, the founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, created a free school in her home for African-American children since one was not otherwise available. For today's generation, these Black men and

women demonstrate the importance of perseverance and hope amid intolerance and ignorance.

The Catholic Church strongly condemns racism. It is a sin against the dignity of the human person and has no place in the Church. According to the U.S. bishops, racism arises when:

“Either consciously or unconsciously—a person holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard. When this conviction or attitude leads individuals or groups to exclude, ridicule, mistreat, or unjustly discriminate against persons on the basis of their race or ethnicity, it is sinful... [it reveals] a failure to acknowledge the human dignity of the persons offended.”¹

Sadly, racism has harmed individuals of every ethnicity in society, and it has been carried out by those of differing races. In particular, generational and institutional racism has plagued varying ethnicities, impacting Native

American, Latino, and Black families who have especially felt the effects of personal and institutional prejudices. The lingering discrimination is clearly visible in various areas of society, including education, employment, criminal justice, and housing. Regrettably, violence and racist actions against Asian Americans are also on the rise these days.

In recent months, conversations about race and injustice haven't taken place across the nation. In particular, the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and his words "I can't breathe" reverberated across America. Protests broke out nationwide shortly afterward, forcing communities to evaluate the status of race relations within the country. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops called the killing of Mr. Floyd "senseless and brutal, a sin that cries out to heaven for justice."²

Reflections Against Racism

The Catholic Church teaches that everyone is made in the image and likeness of God...

...therefore, believers can see the face of God in every person and should treat each person with dignity. People of all skin colors and ethnicities reflect the beauty of God, just as He intended.

Within the Catholic Church, there have been clear examples of leaders and laypeople living up to the call to respect the value of every person and to speak out against racial injustice. For example, priests and religious sisters walked hand in hand alongside Martin Luther King Jr. from Selma to Montgomery, marching for Black Americans to receive the right to vote. Of local note, the early advocacy of the Michigan Catholic Conference is strongly tied to the civil rights movement. One year before the national Civil Rights Act passed in 1964, the state bishops' conference issued a statement advocating for civil rights. In the years that followed, the Michigan Catholic Conference opposed policies

Although important strides toward equality have been made in years past, it is important to recognize the ongoing challenges facing the Black and broader minority communities today. In 2018, the Catholic bishops in the United States wrote in their pastoral letter *Open Wide Our Hearts—The Enduring Call to Love*, that "we all need to take responsibility for correcting the injustices of racism and healing the harms it has caused." It is impossible to address the full history of racism, particularly against the Black community, in one publication. Recognizing that reality, **focus** seeks to offer opportunities for reflection, ideas for advocacy action, stories of inspirational Black Catholics who enrich our faith, and additional resources to combat the ignorance and sin of racism. ■

such as segregation in schools, unfair loan practices, and race-based criteria for home sales. Michigan Catholic Conference also assisted migrant farmers directly through the creation and promotion of job training programs.

At the same time, regrettable instances from the distant past exist where Catholics fell short in failing to oppose slavery or even 'owned' slaves themselves. In some places, various Catholic institutions and parishes practiced segregation, which branded African-Americans "with the message that they are inferior" and left many "[struggling] against perceptions that they do not fully bear the image of God."³ In other cases, people of African descent have not felt welcomed or included in their parish community or have experienced racism "when individuals, communities, and even churches remain silent and fail to act against racial injustice when it is encountered."⁴ There is still work to do that includes listening and learning.

What actions can Catholics and all people of goodwill pursue, considering the racism that remains in American society today? While emphasizing a message of justice and peace during the protests of 2020, MCC stated:

"The Church can...[provide] safe spaces for people to come together, [share] the importance of loving one's neighbor, [encourage] active listening over partisan bickering, [call] out the evil and sin of racism, and [advocate] for policy changes that address unjust societal structures, especially those that disproportionately impact people of color."⁵

Major Takeaways from *Open Wide Our Hearts*

Open Wide Our Hearts—The Enduring Call to Love placed particular emphasis on the experiences of African-American, Native American, and Latino families in this country. Catholics are encouraged to read the letter in its entirety at usccb.org/racism. Critical points from the document include:

- Racism is a life issue. It “directly places brother and sister against each other, violating the dignity inherent in each person.”
- America needs to acknowledge the harm of racism. “The evil of racism festers” partly because there has been “no moment of atonement, no national process of reconciliation.”
- People of faith “are called to listen and know the stories of our brothers and sisters...with open hearts” to empathize with one another and to promote justice.
- Each person should first examine their own lives and attitudes about race. “Do [these] attitudes reflect mistrust, impatience, anger, distress, discomfort, or rancor?”
- Dismantling personal and systemic racism is a job for all Catholics and people of goodwill, as “love compels each of us to resist racism courageously.” ■



Advocacy Recommendations

“Racism can only end if we contend with the policies and institutional barriers that perpetuate and preserve the inequality—economic and social—that we still see all around us.”

—*Open Wide Our Hearts*

As the official public policy voice of the Catholic Church in Michigan, Michigan Catholic Conference evaluates how best to advocate continually for justice and peace in the midst of today’s highly divisive political and cultural climate. Such advocacy must recognize that racism exists, as many current inequalities “are rooted in our country’s shameful history of slavery and systemic racism.”⁶ MCC encourages policymakers to consider legislation and other policies that will:

- Recognize June 19, or Juneteenth (*see below*), as an official state holiday.
- Require all law enforcement officers in Michigan to complete training on de-escalation techniques, implicit bias, and procedural justice, while also providing mental health resources for officers and supporting their efforts to keep communities safe.
- Promote employment, decent working conditions, adequate income, health care, housing, school choice and quality educational options, all with an emphasis on benefiting traditionally underserved communities.
- Address policies within the criminal justice system that disproportionately affect Black and other minority populations. ■

What is Juneteenth?

Juneteenth commemorates the events of June 19, 1865, when approximately two thousand Union troops arrived in Galveston Bay, Texas to announce the abolishment of slavery. While President Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation two years earlier in January 1863, declaring all the slaves within the Confederate States freed, its immediate implementation was difficult in places remaining under Confederate control. Juneteenth did not mark the end of slavery in the United States; the Thirteenth Amendment officially outlawed the practice. However, the National Museum of African American History and Culture calls Juneteenth “our country’s second independence day” and an opportunity to recognize “the value of never giving up hope.” (Photo: Juneteenth celebration in Texas, June 19, 1900)

Black Catholic Saints⁷

As members of the universal Church, Catholics celebrate and follow the example of ordinary persons who lived extraordinary lives in the face of challenging or life-threatening realities.

Saints come from every race, ethnicity, and culture. Each enriches the faith, as is seen by the lives of just a few of the Black saints shown here.



St. Benedict the Moor



St. Charles Lwanga, the patron saint of African youth and Catholic action, was a chief of the royal pages and a Ugandan martyr. St. Charles lost his life for refusing to violate the teachings of his faith and for protecting his friends from a threatening ruler.



St. Josephine Bakhita, the patron saint of human trafficking victims, was kidnapped and sold into slavery at age seven. Later in life, St. Josephine felt drawn to Catholicism. After receiving her freedom, she joined the Canossian Sisters and devoted her life to the faith.



St. Benedict the Moor (*left*), the son of African slaves in Sicily, is the patron saint of African-Americans. St. Benedict's patience in the face of a racist incident drew the attention of Franciscan hermits. He went on to lead their community and later joined a Franciscan friary.



St. Martin de Porres is the patron saint of social justice and race relations. St. Martin was known for his tenderness. As a Dominican brother, he established an orphanage, a hospital for poor children, and an animal shelter.



St. Perpetua and **St. Felicity** were martyrs during the Roman persecution of Christians. St. Perpetua was a noblewoman, and St. Felicity was her pregnant maidservant. Each stayed steadfast to their faith amid torture, imprisonment, and death.

Several saints of European ancestry dedicated their lives to working with other races. **St. Katharine Drexel**, the foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, used family wealth to address the needs of Native and African-Americans. She created the first U.S. Catholic institution of higher education for African-Americans, Xavier University in New Orleans. **St. Peter Claver, SJ**, a Spanish missionary provided care to slaves in Cartagena and preached about the dignity of every person.

Open Sainthood Causes

There are several open causes for sainthood among African-American Catholics, “a treasury of inspiring holy men and women” who demonstrate the way forward “toward racial reconciliation.”⁸ To become a saint, the Church closely dissects, researches, and examines a candidate’s life. At least two miracles must result from personal intercession to that person. Each of the following individuals is in the early stages of investigation for sainthood. They faced difficulties because of their race, including within the Church, yet they persevered and highlighted Christ in all they did.



Venerable Pierre Toussaint (1776–1853) came to America as a slave from Haiti. There, he learned to read and write and served as a hairdresser’s apprentice. Pierre lived a life of devout faith, helping people of all races during his servitude and upon receiving his freedom. He became a successful entrepreneur and donated generously to local charities while also caring for those with yellow fever.⁹



Venerable Henriette Delille (1812–1862) was born a free woman of color in New Orleans who experienced a religious conversion at age twenty-four. She later founded the Sisters of the Holy Family, a religious order dedicated to serving and educating the enslaved, the sick, and the poor. Henriette is the first U.S. native born African-American whose cause for canonization has been officially opened by the Church.¹⁰



Venerable Fr. Augustus Tolton (1854–1897) was born into slavery and later escaped North with his mother and siblings. As he grew, Fr. Tolton expressed interest in the priesthood. After several U.S. seminaries refused to accept him because of his skin color, he studied at the Pontifical Urban University in Rome and was ordained a priest on the Easter Vigil of 1886. Upon his return, Fr. Tolton served as the first Black priest in the U.S. and established a “national parish” for Black Catholics. Fr. Tolton was granted the title “Venerable” by Pope Francis in 2019.^{11,12}



Servant of God Mother Mary Lange (1784–1882) was born in Cuba and later moved to Maryland. Since free public education was not available for African-American children, she opened a school in her home. Mother Lange founded the first congregation of African-American women religious in the Church, the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Today, the order takes special care of those suffering from poverty, racism, and injustice.¹³



Servant of God Julia Greeley (between 1833 and 1848–1918) was born into slavery in Hannibal, Missouri. Once freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, Julia worked for families across several states. She used whatever money she had to help poorer families in her neighborhood. Julia enthusiastically promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and later joined the Secular Franciscan Order.¹⁴



Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA (1937–1990) was a granddaughter of African slaves who became a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration. She used her talents and love for God as a teacher, writer, singer, and evangelizer. Throughout her life, Thea sought to break down racial and cultural barriers, promoting greater communication among people of all backgrounds.¹⁵

The life of Fr. Augustus Tolton provides an historical reminder of how faith can overcome tremendous adversity, even within one’s own religious tradition. While the personal faith of each Catholic is unique, it is instructive for the wider Church to examine the inspiring perseverance practiced by African-American Catholics and continue to foster vocations within the community. Today, there are some 800 parishes, 250 priests, 5 bishops, 400 religious sisters, 50 religious brothers and 437 deacons of African-American heritage; 75 men are in seminary formation for the priesthood across the country. In 2020, Most Rev. Wilton Gregory, Archbishop of Washington, became the first African-American member of the College of Cardinals.¹⁶ ■

Prayer to Heal Racial Division

“We thank you, O Lord, for in your loving wisdom, You created one human family with a diversity that enriches our communities. We pray to you, O Lord, that we always recognize each member of this human family as being made in your image and beloved by you, with worth and dignity. We pray to you, O Lord, that we may envision a way forward to heal the racial divisions that deny human dignity and the bonds between all human beings. We pray to you, O Lord, that we may affirm each person's dignity through fair access for all to economic opportunity, housing, education, and employment. We pray to you, O Lord, that we may have eyes to see what is possible when we reach out beyond fear, beyond anger, to hold the hand of our sisters, our brothers. We thank you, O Lord, for your call and challenge to us that we may reveal your teachings and your love through our actions to end racism and to proclaim that we are all your children, heirs to your sacred creation. Amen.”

—Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism, USCCB

ORGANIZATIONS AND RESOURCES FOR FURTHER LEARNING

Knights and Ladies of St. Peter Claver
kofpc.org and kofpc.org/ladies

National Black Sisters Conference
nbsc68.com

National Catholic Black Congress
nbccongress.org

Xavier University of Louisiana
xula.edu/history

USCCB Resources to Combat Racism
usccb.org/racism

USCCB National Black Catholic Sites
bit.ly/3gvq315

1. *Open Wide Our Hearts—The Enduring Call to Love*, USCCB, 2018: bit.ly/3w0Q3GO **2.** “Statement on George Floyd and the Protests in American Cities,” USCCB, 5/31/20: bit.ly/3epHKMQ **3.** *Open Wide Our Hearts* **4.** *Open Wide Our Hearts* **5.** “Do Justice, Love Goodness, and Walk Humbly With God,” MCC, July 2020: bit.ly/33HzgLS **6.** “What is Systemic Racism?” USCCB, 2018: bit.ly/33HrvG2 **7.** “Black Saints and Martyrs,” National Black Catholic Congress, accessed 4/18/21: bit.ly/3eHknzy, as well as relevant saint pages from Catholic Online (catholic.org) and Franciscan Media (franciscanmedia.org) **8.** *Open Wide Our Hearts* **9.** “Venerable Pierre Toussaint,” Archdiocese of New York Cultural Diversity Apostolate, accessed 4/19/21: bit.ly/3ocjeDn **10.** “Venerable Henriette Delille, Servant of Slaves,” Sisters of the Holy Family, accessed 4/17/21: bit.ly/3blQGSM **11.** “Augustus Tolton,” Archdiocese of Chicago, accessed 4/17/21: bit.ly/33CPKVP **12.** “The Ven. Augustus Tolton Scholarship,” Lansing Diocese, 7/9/20: bit.ly/3oWAXPA **13.** “Mother Mary Lange,” Oblate Sisters of Providence, accessed 4/18/21: bit.ly/3w6QgHx **14.** “Welcome,” Julia Greeley Guild, accessed 4/18/21: bit.ly/3cCHPMX **15.** “Sister Thea Bowman, Cause for Canonization,” accessed 4/18/21: bit.ly/3eFO58a **16.** “African American Affairs-Demographics,” USCCB, accessed 4/28/21: bit.ly/3bpfBVs **Photo credits:** “Saint-Antoine-l’Abbaye” (*background photo*) by Guillaume Piolle / CC BY 3.0 (bit.ly/33Ziata). “St. Kizito being baptised by St. Charles Lwanga at Munyonyo” by Wulman83 / CC BY-SA 4.0 (bit.ly/2SgMhtG). St. Josephine Bakhita icon written by Br. Claude Lane of Mount Angel Abbey. “San Martín de Porres - Reconstrucción Facial 3D” by Cicero Moraes / CC BY-SA 4.0 (bit.ly/3fzvBFB). St. Perpetua and St. Felicity original art by Tracy L. Christianson. Venerable Henriette Delille painting by Haitian artist Ulrick Jean Pierre, courtesy of the Sisters of the Holy Family. “Sister Thea Bowman, on stage and smiling at Walsh University” by KatieHutchison / CC BY-SA 4.0 (bit.ly/3hOwzAm). Several of the fonts used in this focus publication were designed in whole or in part by Black typographer Joshua Darden.

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