



The Word from Lansing:
With Gratitude for African-American Catholics

By Paul A. Long
July 16, 2021

Last month, communities across the state commemorated the events of June 19, 1865—Juneteenth—when Union Major General Gordon Granger and two thousand Union troops arrived in Galveston, Texas, the furthest outpost of the Confederacy. There Major General Granger announced General Order Number 3, which proclaimed freedom from slavery in Texas. While the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution officially outlawed the practice of slavery in America, Juneteenth is also referred to as Freedom Day, Jubilee Day, Liberation Day, and Emancipation Day. The observance brings to mind the devastating effect of slavery, primarily for the families whose ancestors experienced enslavement. At the same time, it reminds Americans of two important truths:

1. Freedom had to be fought for; it was not fully realized for all at the nation’s founding. Every generation must continue to fight for and protect it.
2. The struggle for racial equality and the importance of reflection and action regarding the status of race relations within the country is ongoing.

Despite experiences of personal and, at times, institutional racism, African-American men and women have risen up to inspire a more equal and just society. Just a few of such American heroes include Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and Jackie Robinson. African-American Catholics have also contributed substantially to the shaping of communities across the country. While nearly a dozen individuals of American heritage have been canonized, six African-Americans are in the early stages of examination for sainthood. Their life stories and witness to the Gospel demonstrate the importance of generosity, faith, and perseverance in the midst of challenges:

- ***Pierre Toussaint*** was enslaved in America, but once freed he donated generously to charity and cared for those with yellow fever.
- ***Henriette Delille***, a free woman of color in the 1800s, created a religious order to serve those who experienced enslavement or who struggled with other basic needs.
- ***Fr. Augustus Tolton*** was born into slavery, then fled North with his mother before pursuing seminary studies and ordination in Rome. Fr. Tolton overcame discrimination at home to become a beloved parish priest and founder of the first “national parish” for Black Catholics.
- ***Mother Mary Lange***, the founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, created a free school in her home for African-American children in Maryland.
- ***Julia Greeley*** worked various jobs across several states to earn money in order to support others struggling with financial hardship. She later joined the Secular Franciscan Order.
- ***Sr. Thea Bowman*** was a teacher, writer, singer, and evangelizer. She sought to bring people of different backgrounds together, challenging racial and cultural barriers in the process.

It is exciting to imagine that soon, these men and women could become saints and join the ranks of other influential Catholics of African descent, such as St. Benedict the Moor, St. Charles Lwanga, St. Felicity, St. Josephine Bakhita, St. Martin de Porres, and St. Perpetua.

In a recent *Focus* publication distributed to Catholic parishes across the state, MCC highlighted the six African-American candidates for sainthood, while also emphasizing the Church's teaching on human dignity: "*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*" (www.micatholic.org/advocacy/focus/)

In a 2018 letter, [*Open Wide Our Hearts*](#), the U.S. bishops emphasize that racism is a life issue, "directly [placing] brother and sister against each other, violating the dignity inherent in each person." In response, all Catholics are called to acknowledge the harm of racism, to examine critically their own attitudes about race, and to listen to the experiences of their neighbors (especially those of races different than their own) in order to break down racism.

From its inception, Michigan Catholic Conference has been and is to this day, committed to supporting policies that promote the dignity of all persons and helping to dismantle the sin and evil of racism.

The Word from Lansing is a regular column for Catholic news outlets and is written by Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) President and CEO Paul A. Long. Michigan Catholic Conference is the official public policy voice of the Catholic Church in this state.