

Love Requires Justice

by Chloe Becker



“We need to tell one another in our homes,
in our church, and even in our world,
I really, really love you.”

- Sister Thea Bowman

Introduction

This document is an artist statement for the mural that I created for my Agape Experiment. An artist statement is a way for an artist to give others a glimpse into their perspective on their piece of art. My aim in this artist statement is to share why and how this mural came to be, background information about different aspects of the mural, and my own theological insights. This document is simply meant to scratch the surface of the artwork by providing some context and allowing me to communicate with the Magnificat community my hope and purpose.

Although I have done thorough research, I am only beginning to learn about the saints, injustices, or theology that the mural explores. My hope is that this artist statement will give you some context from which to view the mural and to better understand its intention as you engage with it personally.

Chloe Becker, Magnificat '20



My Agape Experiment

The goal of my Agape Experiment was to respond to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) pastoral letter, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, by doing my part to strengthen the Catholic Church's voice against racism. The letter was released in November 2018, which is Black Catholic History Month, and addressed the discrimination that Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans face. The letter calls on Catholics to play a larger role in the fight to end the racial discrimination which has continued to endure after the Civil Rights Movement. The bishops specifically "charge our...educational institutions to break any silence around the issue of racism, to find new and creative ways to raise awareness, analyze curricula, and to teach the virtues of fraternal charity."¹ I chose to focus on education and awareness in my Catholic school about the history of Africans and African Americans and the racism they encounter in the U.S.

I wanted my Agape to fulfill two functions. Firstly, I wanted to celebrate African American and African leaders and saints in the Catholic Church. The pastoral letter mentioned many African American Catholic leaders of which I was previously unaware. Through my artwork, I wanted to improve the representation of these leaders in our Church. Secondly, I wanted to raise awareness of the

racism that African Americans presently face in the U.S., firmly dispelling the false belief that we live in a "post-racial society."² Catholics have to reconcile with the fact that the Church did not play as large of a role in the Civil Rights Movement as we should have. The new pastoral letter calls all Catholics to be more vocal and visible in our objection to the racism of the twenty-first century. The racism that African Americans face today looks different than the racism that we are taught about in history books. The discrimination is often less blatant than the Jim Crow laws of the late 19th and 20th century, but this new, "elegant racism" (as journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates describes in *The Atlantic*) continues to oppress African Americans. A vital part of my Agape was to emphasize that the fight against racism is far from over, and that we as Catholics can and must play a larger role in this struggle.

I was determined for this message to manifest itself in the form of a mural because I've always been fascinated with the communal claiming of murals. Artwork can be hung up and taken down, but a mural is sewn into the framework of a building or city. In this way, I hope Magnificat collectively claims the call of this mural. Every student, teacher, faculty member, parent, and member of our community—past, present, and future—can feel proud of the saints painted on this wall, and with that, recognize our shared responsibility to seek racial justice.

About the Mural

The mural displays three saints (St. Augustine, St. Monica, and St. Benedict the African) and two leaders in the Church that both have causes for canonization (Sr. Thea Bowman and Fr. Augustus Tolton). Because there are not photographs for some of the saints, I chose to represent all of the saints with present-day people. The people representing the saints in the mural are likenesses of parishioners from St. Adalbert's in Cleveland who graciously welcomed me into their parish to celebrate Mass with them and have their picture taken to serve as models for the saints.

I decided to keep the saints in “ordinary” clothing to emphasize the call we all have to sainthood. Too often, we place the holiness of saints on an unachievable pedestal, a level of holiness too great for us to even set as a goal. But that is not the case—God calls us all to the holiness of the saints. Pope Francis stresses this in his catechesis on the universal

call to holiness, as he proclaims to Catholics that, “the call to holiness is not just for bishops, priests or religious ... No. We are all called to become saints!”³ I wanted the saints in the mural to serve as role models for the Magnificat community to look up to as we try and live up to the level of holiness that they embodied.

I portrayed the saints holding the Sacred Heart, firstly to reference the pastoral letter, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, as the document emphasizes that our call to love with the heart of Christ involves working to end racism. However, the symbol also plays with the Christian symbol of light. I wanted to display the idea that Christ's light shines on the lives of these saints that have been kept hidden for so long. It emphasizes the fact that these saints were close to and served Christ—metaphorically holding Him in the palms of their hands. Ultimately, it represents that we, too, continue Jesus' work in our hands when we take action against racism.



The Sacred Heart, as depicted by Chloe Becker.

About the Saints

St. Augustine was born in the Roman province Numidia in Northern Africa. Augustine was born to a devout Catholic mother, St. Monica, who wanted him to be raised as Catholic. However, Augustine fell away from the faith in his young adulthood. At thirty one, he formally converted to Christianity. Augustine is known for being the Bishop of Hippo, and was an influential preacher in Africa for Christianity. He is celebrated as a doctor of the Church for his many writings which helped develop Christian theology, including *Confessions* and *City of God*. St. Augustine is remembered for his insights into original sin, grace, and the Trinity.⁴

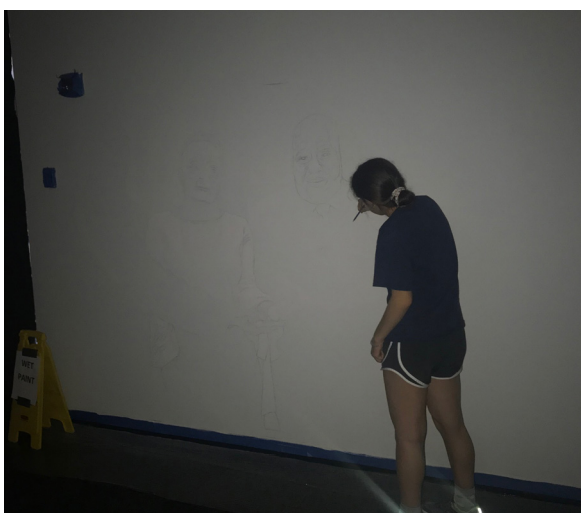
St. Monica was the mother of St. Augustine, and was forced into a marriage with a pagan, Patricius. Her piety and charity convinced Patricius and his mother to convert to Christianity. When St. Augustine turned away from Christianity, Monica prayed and fasted for him to return to his faith. She died shortly after Augustine was baptized. Without her parenting and prayers, St. Augustine would not have returned to the Church.⁵

Fr. Augustus Tolton was the first African American priest. Born in Missouri to parents who were the slaves of a White Catholic family, Tolton grew up a Catholic. In 1862, Tolton and his family escaped slavery by crossing the Mississippi River into Illinois. Tolton attended Catholic schools, and wanted to become a priest, but seminaries in the U.S. would not accept him because he was an African American. So, Fr. Tolton travelled to Rome and attended a seminary

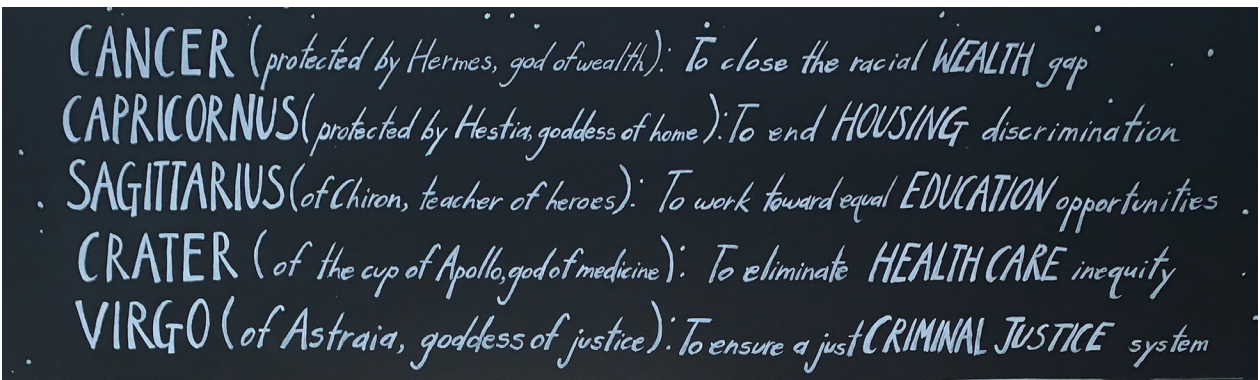
there, returning to the U.S. to become the first African American priest in the U.S in Quincy, Illinois. He was the pastor at St. Monica's parish in Chicago until his death in 1897.⁶

Sr. Thea Bowman was born in 1937 as the granddaughter to slaves in Mississippi, and was raised as a Protestant. At the age of nine, she asked her parents if she could convert to Catholicism. She was drawn to how Catholics put their faith into action and their love for the poor. At fifteen, she joined the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, where she was the only African American member. She spent much of her life teaching in elementary schools, high schools, and universities. After 16 years of teaching, she was invited to be the consultant for intercultural awareness in the diocese of Jackson, Mississippi. Throughout the 1980s, she travelled the country giving presentations about creating racial and cultural harmony. Known for her lively storytelling, singing, and preaching, Sr. Thea educated and inspired Catholics across the nation.⁷

St. Benedict the African was born into slavery in Messina, Italy in 1526. He was freed when he was eighteen, and soon lived with a group of friars, working in the kitchen. He was promoted to be the superior of the friars, and was known for his cheerful and humble leadership. After his term ended, he gladly returned to his work in the kitchen, continuing to choose to live in poverty and fasting. People all over Sicily travelled to meet St. Benedict to ask for his prayers and advice. He is honored as the patron saint of African Americans.⁸



Chloe Becker photographed parishioners from St. Adelbert Parish in Cleveland to represent the saints. In the photos above, she sketches and paints their likenesses on the wall outside the Lourdes Chapel at Magnificat High School.



About the Constellations

The mural not only celebrates the greatness of African and African American Catholics, but also addresses the seriousness of racism in our country in the present day. Racism takes many forms in America right now, but I chose to focus on systematic racism, mainly because there is a great deal of confusion and misinformation about what it is. Systematic racism (also known as institutional or structural racism) is the collective form of racism that is found in our social and political structures. I chose to represent five areas of systematic racism: wealth, housing, education, health care, and criminal justice. While there are many other areas of systematic racism, I chose five of the most general factors to define in my mural. For each factor, I found a constellation that connected to it through the archetypal Greek and Roman gods and goddesses related to each area. I chose to incorporate constellations in the mural because using the sky as a symbol for the divine is an important aspect of my artistic style.

Wealth (Represented by the constellation Cancer)

African Americans make up roughly 13% of the U.S. population, but own only about 2% of the nation's wealth.⁹ The racial wealth gap is rooted in the economic discrimination that faced newly freed slaves. The poverty that the majority of slaves were forced to live in because of the denial of economic opportunities created a future of poverty for their children and grandchildren. Poverty is passed on through generations, and the economic discrimination that continued to endure throughout the twentieth century is a major factor in why 20% of African Americans live in poverty compared to only 8% of White Americans (most recent data from 2017).¹⁰

Housing (Represented by the constellation Capricornus)

Forty-two percent of African American families own homes, compared to 72% of White families in the U.S. This disparity is rooted in redlining, the discriminatory practice of banks refusing to offer mortgage loans to people in neighborhoods marked as "hazardous" because of their racial composition.¹² Home ownership is one of the best ways to grow wealth

in the U.S., serving as an investment for the homeowner as the value of houses increases over time. Thus, housing discrimination has played a large role in the racial wealth gap.

Education (Represented by the constellation Sagittarius)

The racial wealth gap and housing both heavily affect education. Discriminatory housing practices and higher rates of poverty mean that the schooling in African American communities is often underfunded. In addition, one study showed that regardless of poverty, predominantly African American schools faced funding discrimination. At every level of wealth, predominantly African American schools received less government funding compared to predominantly White schools.¹³

Healthcare (Represented by the constellation Crater)

The racial wealth gap and employment discrimination also play significant roles in the limited access African Americans have to healthcare. Housing discrimination means that predominantly African American neighborhoods often have hospitals that are underfunded and understaffed. The life expectancy of African Americans is much lower than White Americans: 70.2 years compared to 76.8 years.¹⁴ Studies have shown that this is in part because of chronic stress from racism.¹⁵

Criminal Justice (Represented by the constellation Virgo)

African Americans make up 13% of the population but 40% of those incarcerated.¹⁶ 69% of African Americans killed by police were unarmed or suspected of a nonviolent crime.¹⁷ The disparities in our criminal justice system are vast and complex, making them difficult to summarize. In order to really grasp a better understanding of how our criminal justice system is rooted in racism, personal research may be necessary. As Bryan Stevenson says in his book, *Just Mercy*, "the true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned." Ultimately, Stevenson captures the Christian call we have to seek justice where justice is lacking.

So Now What?

The highest form of love that we are called to as Catholics is Agape love—a Christ-like love that is extended to the whole world without limits. Agape love requires us to love those that society keeps at “the margins” as much as we love our own families by recognizing the innate kinship of humanity. This is why our love requires justice. We cannot truly achieve kinship if the lives of some are valued less than others in our world. It’s important to note that this justice work is a continuous process—this mural is only a tiny step in the justice work that needs to be done to actually achieve kinship for the world. We as Catholics must continue to grow by staying informed, open-minded, and vocal about injustices about racism, because our individual actions matter. It is through our actions, no matter how insignificant they seem, that we have the power to create the conversion of the heart and mind that brings healing to brokenness.

I truly believe that art is a form of love because you give so much of yourself in order to create it, so this mural is my way of giving Agape love. It is my way of standing in solidarity and in kinship with African Americans’ experiences by emphasizing the abhorrent injustices that occur in our country. It is my prayer that we see a world where Agape love exists in all things, brought about by the love and work of people like you and me.

For Further Learning

Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love by United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2018)
<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts.pdf>

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption by Bryan Stevenson (2015)

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander (2012)

“13th” (film) by Ava DuVernay (2016)



St. Adelbert's Parishioners joined Magnificat President Moira Clark '77, Sr. Helen Jean Novy, HM, Chloe Becker '20, and Theology Teacher Miss Sadie Curtin at The City Club of Cleveland on June 27, 2019 to learn more about the Thea Bowman Center in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood of Cleveland. Sr. Thea Bowman (represented in the mural by Sandra Gay-Chapman, second from left) and Fr. Augustus Tolton (represented in the mural by James Napier, second from right) are on the path to canonization. Michael Sitts, center, represented St. Augustine in the mural.

Citations

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love," USCCB, November 14, 2018, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts.pdf>, 26.

² Jeremy Nesoff, "The Myth of a Post-Racial Society After the Obama Presidency," *Facing Today - A Facing History Blog*, February 8, 2017, <http://facingtoday.facinghistory.org/the-myth-of-a-post-racial-society-after-the-obama-presidency>.

³ Pope Francis, "Pope at Audience: The Universal Call to Holiness," *Vatican Radio*, November 19, 2014, http://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2014/11/19/pope_at_audience_the_universal_call_to_holiness/en-1111603.

⁴ Tejvan Pettinger, "St Augustine of Hippo Biography," *Biography Online*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.biography-online.net/st-augustine-hippo-biography.html>.

⁵ "Saint Monica," *Franciscan Media*, 2019, <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-monica/>.

⁶ Clifani Stephen, "Biography of Father Tolton," *Fr. Tolton Catholic High School*, <http://www.toltoncatholic.org/biography-of-father-tolton/>.

⁷ "Sister Thea Bowman's Story," *Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration*, <https://www.fspa.org/content/about/sister-thea-bowman>.

⁸ "Saint Benedict the African," *Franciscan Media*, 2019, <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-benedict-the-african/>.

⁹ Antonio Moore, "America's Financial Divide: The Racial Breakdown of U.S. Wealth in Black and White," *Huffpost*, HuffPost News, December 6, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/americas-financial-divide_b_7013330.

¹⁰ "Poverty Rate by Race/Ethnicity," *The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation*, 2019, <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-raceethnicity/>.

¹¹ J.D. Morgan, A.C. De Marco, D. R. LaForett, S. Oh, B. Ayankoya, W. Morgan, X. Franco, & FPG's Race, Culture, and Ethnicity Committee, "What Racism Looks Like: An Infographic," *The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*, May 2018, <https://fpg.unc.edu/node/9611>.

¹² Beatrix Lockwood, "The History of Redlining," *ThoughtCo*, Dotdash, February 14, 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/redlining-definition-4157858>.

¹³ Gillian B. White, "The Data Are Damning: How Race Influences School Funding," *The Atlantic*, September 30, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/09/public-school-funding-and-the-role-of-race/408085/>.

¹⁴ "Institutionalized Racism in Health Care," *The Lancet*, March 6, 1999.

¹⁵ Douglas Jacobs, "We're Sick of Racism, Literally," *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, November 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/11/opinion/sunday/sick-of-racism-literally.html>.

¹⁶ Kim Farbota, "Black Crime Rates: What Happens When Numbers Aren't Neutral," *HuffPost*, HuffPost News, September 2, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/black-crime-rates-your-st_b_8078586.

¹⁷ "Mapping Police Violence," *Mapping Police Violence*, 2019, <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>.

Magnificat High School, a girls' Catholic, college-preparatory high school, founded and sponsored by the Sisters of the Humility of Mary, calls young women to live *Mary's Magnificat* in the world.

MISSION

We educate young women holistically to learn, lead, and serve in the spirit of *Mary's Magnificat*.



MAGNIFICAT

Magnificat High School
20770 Hilliard Boulevard
Rocky River, OH 44116
440.331.1572
magnificaths.org