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February Social Justice Newsletter *by Maxine Smith*

Black History Month is celebrated during the month of February in the United States. In schools students have lessons, participate in assemblies, and take field trips to learn about the important contributions made by African American citizens to the culture and growth of our country.

In addition, the Catholic Church has set aside the month of November to

celebrate **Catholic** Black History Month, a history steeped in prayer and deep in compassionate care for the less fortunate.

In this issue of *We Commit Ourselves*, we focus on the history and experiences of Black Catholic sisters and priests in the United States.

I read many life stories, learned about many fortunate and unfortunate

attitudes toward race in our culture, and talked for hours with sisters about the history of Black Catholic sisters and priests and wish to share with you some of the knowledge I have gained.

By reading this issue, I hope each of you is inspired to learn a little more about the history and experiences of Black Catholic sisters and priests in the US. ■

Sister Cecilia Marie Morton *by Maxine Smith*

Currently, there are approximately 300 Black Catholic sisters living and ministering in the United States.

The National Black Sisters' Conference was founded in 1968 by Sister Martin dePorres Grey, RSM. Sister Martin saw that the Black Catholic clergy were organized and meeting to discuss ways they could meet the needs of the Black Catholic community. She desired to do the same for Black religious women in the U.S.

As in 1968, the need today in the Black Catholic community is education, be it in classrooms, churches, family settings, or in community centers.

Sister Cecilia Marie Morton is an active member of the NBCSC. Her continuing efforts to help the youth of St. Charles Lwanga Parish in Detroit through programs such as the "Rites of Passage" and those that help the young people understand the Black experience are a few of her ministries.

Sister belongs to her local Knights of Peter Claver Ladies Auxiliary and serves as the "Lady of Prayer," which is equivalent to the Chaplain in the men's Knights of Peter Claver.

Sister Cecilia Marie was awarded the honor of being named "Franciscan

Peacemaker" in June 2015 as an acknowledgement of her deep commitment to the Black Catholic community and her Franciscan values.

She was the recipient of the "Spirit of Detroit" award as further testimony to her selfless dedication to young Detroiters.

Sister Cecilia Marie embodies the teachings of both Jesus Christ and St. Francis of Assisi in her heart-felt commitment to all of God's children. ■



The Claver Prayer

God, our Heavenly Father, You have given us life through the death and resurrection of your Beloved Son, Jesus Christ;

Jesus, our Saving Lord, You came into a world darkened by a man's sin and gave it light through your teachings;

Holy Spirit, the Breath of God within us, You guide and enlighten us and give us the strength of our convictions; Saint Peter Claver, who became an example for us, You showed us the love of God, the light of Christ, and the strength of the Holy Spirit;

We pray now that all we say and do, in your honor, be a continuation of your work here on earth.

St. Peter Claver,
Pray For Us

Knights of Peter Claver Ladies Auxiliary *by Sr. Cecilia Marie*

The Knights of Peter Claver was founded on November 7, 1901 in Mobile, Alabama. They were incorporated on July 12, 1911 as a Catholic Fraternal organization in Mobile, Alabama.

A group of African-American Catholic men had approached the Knights of Columbus seeking to become members and were rejected because they were BLACK. These men, along with others, went on to form their own association which was called The Knights of Peter Claver, open only to Black Catholics in good standing in the Catholic Church. This is true today, except that now open to all races of people, no matter what color.

Why Peter Claver? Now Saint Peter Claver worked among and with

the African Americans at the time when most of the African Americans in the south were slaves. Saint Peter Claver dedicated his whole life to the African American slaves and became known as the "Servant to the Slaves."

The Knights of Peter Claver developed, and eventually grew into a FAMILY organization. First the Knights of Peter Claver Ladies Auxiliary was formed, and next came the Junior Daughters of Peter Claver.

The founders' vision was of SERVICE to our Catholic Church, our communities, and the Order of Peter Claver. They promote dedication and commitment through dedicated members and leadership. They are known all over the world for being an active part of funeral services of members, praying for

African Americans and all religious men and women, dedicated to religious life and to serving the Church. They serve food to families at churches and shelters. They care for the homeless and needy families all over the world.

They offer support to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and serve on subcommittees on African American Affairs and Conferences. They are an active part of the National Black Catholic Congress and Council Board of Directors. The list of the charitable and support services of the Knights and Ladies Auxiliary of Peter Claver goes on and on. They serve an active, prayerful, and service-oriented role in the lives of African American Catholics in our churches, cities, country, and world. ■

Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration

by Sister Rose Grabowski

researched the book, *Bayard Rustin, the Invisible Activist*.

The book is written with the intention of giving a whole new generation the chance to learn about one of the most brilliant, strategic, unsung heroes of the Civil Rights Movement.

He was a most effective "behind-the-scenes leader" who defended civil rights, gay rights, and human

rights through organized activism. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton stated: "*Bayard Rustin did not spend his life trying to fit in. Instead, Bayard's fascinating life story is the saga of one man's struggle to make the world fit his vision of justice.*"

Students from Amherst High School Chamber Singers led the audience

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Members of an inter-faith group of ladies and gentlemen in Stevens Point plan a yearly event to honor the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on his birthday.

This year the group invited Jacqueline Houtman from the Madison, Wisconsin area. Together with Walter Naegle and Michael G. Long, Ms. Houtman

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Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration

in singing the **Star Spangled Banner** and **Lift Every Voice and Sing**.

Jacqueline Houtman gave her address, “*Speak Truth to Power*,” and the assembled group learned that Bayard lived a non-violent life in order to help bring about social change. During this special celebration, the assembly prayed that our Creator will give us hearts to share the abundance in our lives so people will no longer find themselves imprisoned by poverty, prejudice, and ignorance.

Every year Justiceworks presents an award

to an individual who has done outstanding work in helping others.

*The mission of **Justiceworks, Ltd.** is to foster forms of justice that strengthen and heal the communities of Portage County, Wisconsin.*

As a non-profit corporation, **Justiceworks** is dedicated to the advancement of programs that secure right relationships between offenders, victims, and their communities.

Various churches in the area enjoy benefit from a good relationship with **Justiceworks**.

This year the awardee was **Kurt Helminiak**, a police officer.

Through his style of policing and mentoring, Helminiak often helped others. He extended a second chance to those in need of it. Helminiak was dedicated to public service in every job he held.

He served **Justiceworks** as a case manager in the offender mentoring program.

Kurt Helminiak died in July 2015. His wife and son accepted the award on behalf of Kurt. ■

Sister Rose Grabowski



Black Catholic Religious Congregations

There are only three congregations of black religious women in the United States: the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the Sisters of the Holy Family, and the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary.

In the past, women of color were not accepted in religious congregations because of their race.

On March 21, 2012 Dr. Shannen Dee Williams (Assistant Professor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville) just finished giving a lecture on the history of African American sisters at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee

when she was approached by a member of the audience. The woman informed Ms. Williams that she was one of the ladies just spoken of in the lecture. She said she was denied admission to a religious congregation in New York because she was African American. She was advised to seek admission into one of our country's congregations of Black sisters.

The admittance of African-American women to many congregations was blocked by feelings of racial prejudice. Since there were only three black congregations in which to make inquiries to see if the charism and

mission of that congregation was a fit for the potential candidate, many women gave up their vocation to religious life.

Shannen Dee Williams has written a book, soon to be available, entitled *Subversive Habits: Black Nuns and the Struggle to Desegregate Catholic America after World War II.* This will be the first book written to study the lives of African American sisters in the 20th Century. While it may be uncomfortable reading, it will reflect the culture of the United States during those years of struggle for racial equality for all citizens.

Perhaps they would like to join our congregation. ■



Dr. Shannen Dee Williams

Sharing a Co-Founder



The Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first congregation of Black women religious in the United States, was co-founded by Theresa Maxis Duchemin and a Redemptorist priest, Fr. Louis Florent Gillet, in 1829 in response to a need for sisters to educate Black students.

The IHM congregation (Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary), also co-founded by Theresa Maxis Duchemin and Fr. Louis Gillet, was founded later, in 1845, to educate students.

The Oblates are a congregation of Black sisters, while the IHMs are

comprised of mostly white sisters. The ministry of teaching the gospel message to students of all ages, however, is shared by both congregations.

In recent years it was revealed that the archives of the IHM congregation did not acknowledge the fact that Theresa Maxis Duchemin, a Black woman, was the co-founder of their congregation.

The leadership at the time the IHM history was written did not want to reveal that the congregation was co-founded by a Black woman.

Before the 1980s women in IHM formation did not learn about Duchemin

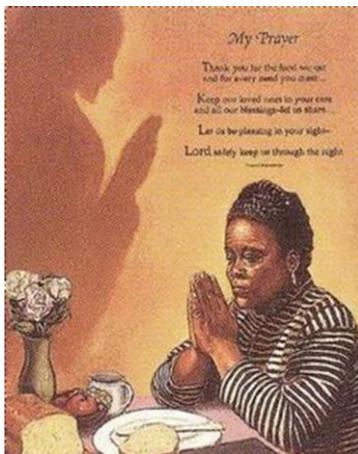
when studying the history of their congregation.

Both congregations have been successfully participating in efforts of reconciliation.

They are going beyond written history and celebrating common characteristics.

Through the peace-making efforts of the congregational leadership of both communities, Theresa Maxis Duchemin will have her proper place in the founding stories of both the Oblates of Providence and the IHM religious congregations. ■

Re-visioning the “Village” *by Sister Donna Wilhelm*



“It takes a village to raise a child.” This familiar maxim describes a fundamental family value in the infrastructure of the African American community. At least it did. Our society has changed not only for African Americans, but for all of us.

Our family structures are more fluid and varied. Many of the intergenerational supports that we relied on in the past are, in fact, past. Families just aren’t what they used to be. Urban neighborhoods as “villages” have for the most part vanished.

The Cleveland Foundation, a group of six city African American church-

es, their six pastors, and a lay leader/coordinator from each, have begun an innovative process to rebuild their “village” neighborhood infrastructures.

This collaborative effort, the Northeast Ohio Faith-Based Collaborative (NEO FBC) has the potential to recreate, reform, and rebuild the fabric of urban African American neighborhoods into “villages” where all people can grow and thrive, especially the young.

The Northeast Ohio Faith-Based Collaborative was formed in late 2014 at the invitation of, and with the leadership and financial support of, the Cleve-

land Foundation. The lead pastors chose a church leader/coordinator and invited six other faith communities in their geographic area to join them in collaborating in programs and services to be offered in their neighborhood.

Last summer the six collaboratives shared resources to reach out to the youth and others in their communities. They offered basic needs such as:

- food pantries,
- summer lunch programs,
- health literacy programs,
- reading programs,
- and opportunities for growth in arts and culture and physical activities.

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Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA

Sister Thea (Bertha) Bowman was born to a Methodist family in Yazoo City, Mississippi in 1937. At the age of nine, Bertha asked permission from her parents to become a Catholic. She later joined the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

As an adult, she spent sixteen years sharing the gospel message with elementary, high school, and college students.

Sister Thea was asked to be an ambassador for

the Church. She used her gifts of storytelling, preaching, and singing to help bridge the racial differences she witnessed in our culture while ministering to others until she died in 1990 at the age of 53.

Sister Cecilia Marie Morton knew Sister Thea personally and speaks highly of her life and ministry. She shared stories of Sister Thea's kindness and dedication to ending racial prejudice in our society.

Sister Helen Skok spoke with me (Maxine) about her recollection of Sister

Thea coming to St. Joseph Motherhouse many years ago. Sister Helen did not remember much about why Sister Thea came to Stevens Point, but clearly remembers Sister Thea's love of the delicious meals prepared and served by our sisters, especially the homemade bread!

Sister Thea Bowman's life is an inspiration to all ministers of God's people.

She taught us that racial and cultural barriers can be broken down through communication with one another. ■



Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA

St. Charles Lwanga and Companions

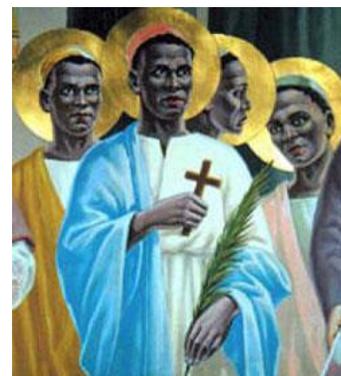
(Martyrs of Uganda, June 3rd)

Shared by Associate Brendall Johnson

When Charles Lwanga was sentenced to death, he seemed very peaceful, one might even say, cheerful. He was to be executed by being burnt to death. While the pyre was being prepared, he asked to be untied so that he could arrange the sticks. He then lay down upon them. When the executioner said that Charles would be burned slowly to death, Charles replied by saying that he was very glad to be dying for the True Faith. He made no cry of pain but just twisted and moaned, "Kotanda! (O my God!)." He was burned to death by the ruler Mwanga's order on June 3, 1886.

Pope Paul VI canonized Charles Lwanga and his Companions on June 22, 1964. We celebrate his memorial on June 3rd of the Roman calendar as The Martyrs of Uganda. St. Charles Lwanga is the Patron of African Youth of Catholic Action.

(An excerpt from <http://www.savior.org/saints/lwanga.htm>)



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Re-Visioning the "Village"

Staff from the Cleveland Foundation provides training in collaboration and nonprofit management for the pastors and the church leaders/coordinators throughout the year.

In addition, they provide grant monies to offer

salaries and to support the programs being offered in the six neighborhoods.

The dream and vision of NEO FBC is to become a self-sustaining catalyst for reweaving the "village" infrastructure of Cleveland's urban neighborhoods.

The Northeast Ohio Faith-Based Collaborative (NEO FBC) is on its way to becoming established as a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization with a Board of Directors. ■

Editor's Note:

Sr. Donna Wilhelm is proud to have been invited to represent the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis as a founding member of the Board of Directors of NEO FBC.



Father Augustus Tolton



Augustus Tolton was the first Roman Catholic priest in the United States publicly known to be Black when he was ordained in 1886.

He was born in 1854 in the state of Missouri to parents who were slaves.

When he tried to answer God's call to serve His people as a priest, he was met with racial discrimination and rejection.

After being forbidden to study for ordination in the Dioceses in the United States, he was assisted in going to Rome to study and be ordained.

In Rome he attended the Pontifical Urbaniana University where he became fluent in Italian as well as studying Latin and

Greek. He was ordained to the priesthood in Rome on Easter Sunday in 1886 at the age of 31.

Expecting to serve in an African mission, he had been studying its regional cultures and languages. Instead, he was directed to return to the United States to serve the Black community.

Once back in the U.S., Father Tolton was eventually sent to Chicago to minister to impoverished Black communities, which proved to be emotionally demanding and physically exhausting. Many of the people he served lived in the streets without the basic necessities of life.

Father Tolton obtained financial support from Mother Katherine Drexel

in providing religious education to the people to whom he ministered.

He was lovingly called 'Good Father Gus' by those who knew him and was known for his eloquent sermons, his beautiful singing voice, and his talent for playing the accordion.

Father Augustus Tolton died in 1897 at the early age of 43 but left a blessed legacy for the people of the Church.

On April 17, 2015 the Congregation for Causes for Saints at the Vatican declared in the affirmative the judicial validity of the Archdiocesan Inquiry into the life and virtues of Father Augustus Tolton. It is hoped the Pope can declare him 'venerable.' ■

"Stemming from our Franciscan values and the fact that all life is interconnected, members, vowed and non-vowed, are encouraged to be engaged in ministry with those living on the margins of society and struggling to live with dignity."

SSJ-TOSF Congregational Commitments
26th General Chapter

Sister Antona Ebo, FSM

On March 10, 1965, after Alabama state troopers attacked voting rights marchers on what became known as "Bloody Sunday," Sister Antona and other nuns from the Franciscan Sisters of Mary traveled to Selma and joined the march to Montgomery when it

resumed two weeks later. She became a key speaker at the march when a broadcaster recorded a confrontation between Sister Antona and local government agents. Her words—"I am here because I am a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness"—were broadcast around the world. ■



REMEMBER...

We welcome your submissions in the form of

- "Sightings"
- Brief write-ups of your activities, "prototypes," suggestions for workshops, books, articles, films, resources.

Please send these to Sister Shannon Fox by March 7th for inclusion in the March 2016 issue of our newsletter, *We Commit Ourselves*.

~Your Social Justice Committee