



open wide our hearts

the enduring call to love *a pastoral letter against racism*

Prophetic Witnesses Against Racism

At times in its history, the Catholic Church in the United States has failed to denounce the evils of slavery, racism, and discrimination. But we have also been blessed with the courageous witness of many clerics, religious women and men and laypersons, who did respond prophetically by calling out sin and violent disregard for fellow human beings. Their lives remind everyone that we are all united in God's love and the life of Christ. Read about these four Catholics who worked to heal the evil of racism in their day. As you learn about their stories, reflect on how you can join this work of healing injustice in your community today.

Julia Greeley, Servant of God

Julia Greeley was born a slave in Missouri, sometime between 1833 and 1848. While still a child, her slave owner's whip caught young Julia's eye as she watched her mother being whipped. As a result, Greeley lost her eye. While much of her early life is unknown, it is clear that she experienced the tragedy of slavery's pain, hurt, and abuse. Still, even amidst so much hate, she did not hate. Rather, she dedicated her life to



helping others. Once she was emancipated after the Civil War, Greeley settled in Denver, Colorado, where she worked as a housekeeper and nanny. There she spent much of her modest earnings helping poor families in her neighborhood, many of whom were white. Realizing the shame people felt in being poor, Greeley left her donations for them at night. Despite all the trauma and poverty that she herself suffered, she mercifully opened her heart to others in need. In 1880, Greeley became a Catholic and later joined a Secular Franciscan Order. Throughout her life, Greeley's generosity and charitable activity brought joy and healing to her neighborhood. When she died, hundreds of people from many racial backgrounds came to mourn her. Greeley's limitless charity, selflessness, and devotion to Christ made her a model of mercy.

“Our faith gives us a treasury of inspiring holy men and women who courageously worked toward racial reconciliation, showing us the way forward.”

– U.S. bishops, *Open Wide Our Hearts*

Venerable Rev. Augustus Tolton

Fr. Augustus Tolton is known as the first recognizably black Catholic priest in the U.S., though the Healy brothers—three sons of an enslaved black woman and an Irish father, whose African heritage was less visibly apparent— had become priests before him. Fr. Tolton was born into slavery to Catholic parents whose owners allowed their slaves to be married in the Catholic Church. As a result, he was born and raised Catholic. Fr. Tolton became free when his mother escaped to the free state of Illinois when he was a boy. He was encouraged by his local priest to enter the priesthood, but had to study in Italy, since no American seminary would admit him due to his skin color. As a priest, he ministered to the black Catholic community in Quincy, Illinois. Known for eloquent sermons, generosity, and piety, he attracted both black and white Catholics to his parish. He inspired many of the affluent parishioners to support the parish's school and its mission to educate the community. Later chased out of Quincy, he was welcomed by the Archdiocese of Chicago, where he dedicated his ministry to serving impoverished communities. He died in 1897. Despite his experiences, Fr. Tolton remained steadfast: "The Catholic Church deplores a double slavery – that of the mind and that of the body. She endeavors to free us of both."



Msgr. Bernard Quinn, Servant of God



Photo courtesy of "The Tablet"

Msgr. Bernard Quinn was born to Irish immigrant parents on January 15th, 1888, which providentially was the same day that St. Peter Claver (patron of African American ministry and enslaved people) was canonized. In 1912, he was ordained to the priesthood for the Diocese of Brooklyn, and soon after volunteered to minister to the black Catholic community, who organized to request that the diocese establish a church for black Catholics. Msgr. Quinn supported their efforts by lobbying the bishop on their behalf and raising funds for the new parish. In 1922, the parish of St. Peter Claver was established for this purpose and Msgr. Quinn was appointed pastor. He zealously ministered to his parishioners and helped create a lay order for black men dedicated to serving the poor in their community. In 1928, he founded an orphanage for homeless black children, which still exists, and established a school to provide the community a quality education. The Ku Klux Klan twice burned down the orphanage. But Msgr. Quinn defied them and rebuilt it each time. In a letter to his parishioners, he wrote: "I love you, I am proud of every one of you, and I would willingly shed to the last drop my life's blood for the least among you."

César Chávez

César Chávez organized the first successful union of farmworkers in U.S. history. He was not only one of the great labor leaders of this century, he was also a heroic example of Catholic moral leadership. He was born in 1927 to a Mexican-American family who was forced to become migrant farmers during the Great Depression. As a child, he had to labor in the fields to support his family and was not able to advance past the seventh grade. As a young man with a wife and growing family, he was inspired by a priest with a passion for social justice to train as a community organizer.



He gathered the Mexican Americans in Delano, California, formed the United Farm Workers, and led a strike against local table grape growers. The struggle for fair contracts was long and drawn out. When the workers were threatened and attacked, Chávez rejected any violent retaliation and turned to non-violent actions. Going on a hunger strike, he fasted on a water-only diet for 25 days, which effectively drew national attention to the blatantly unjust wages and working and living conditions of the Hispanic migrant laborers in California. He was a devout Catholic who did not simply believe the teachings of Jesus Christ; he was transformed by them. They guided his efforts to secure just treatment for migrant workers.

For additional stories about Holy Men and Women struggling against racism, you can visit the website of the [USCCB's Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church](#).

*This handout is excerpted from the [Creating on the Margins Contest Packet](#). Visit [uscgb.org/youthcontest](#) or [uscgb.org/concurso-juvenil](#) to learn more about *Creating on the Margins*, a contest for youth in grades 7-12 that educates youth about poverty in the U.S. and our Catholic response. The 2018-2019 theme is "A Time to Heal Racism." The contest is sponsored by the [Catholic Campaign for Human Development](#).*

