

St. James New Portraits

During Faith Formation sessions at St. James in 2018 and 2019, we discussed how the parish could become more attuned to the people of color in our congregation and neighborhood. Bob Anderson, the head of Art and Environment at St. James, was approached by a parishioner regarding lack of representation of people of color in our church art. As the discussion developed, it became clear that statues were so expensive that the decision to have paintings in church as the focus was made. The group decided to find a local artist and person of color to create the paintings. Everything in this journey stopped in 2020, as we dealt with the pandemic.

In 2021, we resumed working on the project. Marilyn Mahoney, a parishioner, saw the work of a few artists at an art show and brought pictures of their work to Bob and other parishioners. The work of Kwanza Humphrey stood out for the vibrancy in the faces of people he painted. He was contacted, and a few parish members discussed ideas with him. Kwanza was selected and commissioned to create four paintings. A grant written by Bob Anderson and contributions from parish donors fully funded the project. In 2022 portrait sketches were approved, and the four oil paintings were completed in October 2023.

We also discussed who we would like to have represented in the paintings. Augustine Tolton was suggested because he was born in Missouri. Kateri Tekakwitha was nominated as the first Native American saint. The Nigerian community recommended Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi. Sr. Thea Bowman was proposed for her work in Civil Rights, especially within the Church. These four people were selected, and their portraits now hang above the north and south doors of the church.

On the south side, on the right is Servant of God, Sr. Thea Bowman. She was born in Mississippi. Even though she was not a Catholic, she was sent to a Catholic school. At the age of nine, with her parents' permission, Thea became Catholic. Six years later at the age of 15, she joined the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Wisconsin — over her parents' objections. Sr. Thea earned degrees in English at Viterbo University (La Crosse) and at Catholic University of America (Washington, D.C.). She taught in various schools and universities and began the Institute of Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University (New Orleans). She is known for her impact in the Civil Rights Movement and for providing a foundation in liturgy for the distinct worship of Black Catholics. She also was instrumental in the publication of the hymnal "Lead Me, Guide Me: The African American Catholic Hymnal."

Next to her is Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi who was born in Nigeria. His family members were not Christians. He was sent to Holy Trinity School so he could get a better education to help lead the family out of poverty. He was baptized at the school and given the name Michael. After school, he became a teacher from 1919-1925. Then he entered a seminary even though most of the priests in Nigeria were Europeans and lived a much more comfortable life than the people. Michael's family was appalled by

his going to seminary since they wanted him to go into a profession where he would be well paid and thus help them get out of poverty. As a parish priest, he was known to live a very simple life – building his own house and living an austere life like his parishioners. He became a very popular priest and an activist. Michael helped people build homes that worked better for them. He was also known for his support of women and stood up for them against the oppression that was in the traditional culture. He later traveled to England where he became a monk. After his death, he was buried at the monastery and later his body was moved to the Cathedral Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity in Nigeria.

Venerable Augustine Tolton is on the north side, and to the left. He was born in slave in southern Missouri. His family became free, and he and his parents were baptized Catholics. In Quincy, IL, he wasn't able to attend the local schools because of discrimination, but his pastor encouraged him to consider entering the priesthood. He was denied entry to every seminary in the US but was sent to Rome where he studied for six years and was ordained a priest in 1886. He returned to the US and served a mostly black congregation in Quincy, IL before being asked to start an African-American congregation in Chicago. He became known throughout the US for his preaching, but mostly worked for his congregants in Chicago. He died in 1897.

Next to him is St. Kateri Tekakwitha. She was a Mohawk native American born in 1656. She was scarred by smallpox at age four and this outbreak killed her parents. She was raised by an uncle. As a young woman she refused all prospects of marriage. At 19, she converted to Catholicism and took a vow of chastity. She was very devout but was sickly and died at the age of 24. She was canonized in 2012 and is the patron of ecology, the environment, people in exile, and Native Americans.