



February 1, 2024

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we begin the annual commemoration of Black History Month, with our fellow Americans we honor the legacies of African Americans throughout history, including noted civil rights pioneers such as Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks. Because of their profound witness, we embrace the innate human drive to affirm the dignity of every human person and to celebrate the rich diversity of races and ethnicities that fashion our national identity.

Our Diocese, like the Universal Church, is blessed with this same diversity and finds joy in celebrating the unique contributions of African American Catholic life both in its long-standing forms and in its new expressions shaped by African immigrants among us today. Knitting together the old and the new, the face of African American Catholic life is mutually enriched by such examples as the Servant of God, Sister Thea Bowman; the Servant of God, Julia Greeley, who was born into slavery and became Catholic in 1880; and the African Saint Josephine Bakhita, whose feast day is February 8th. Kidnapped as a child from her home in the Darfur region of Sudan, Josephine suffered countless beatings, lashings, and painful brandings from her many owners. Yet, through all the suffering, she showed mercy and love. Saint Josephine once said, “If I were to meet the slave traders who kidnapped me and even those who tortured me, I would kneel and kiss their hands, for if that did not happen, I would not be a Christian and religious today. The Lord has loved me so much. We must love everyone.”

Her striking message of love and mercy continues to resonate today when many people experience racism and hatred. Decades after Saint Josephine, Dr. King would remind us of the same truth: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” We need to be intentional and persistent in our continued efforts to heal the prejudice, bigotry, and racial tensions within our broader society by being instruments of light and love. In doing so, we proclaim the dignity and sanctity of every human life.

I invite you to celebrate the history and culture of our African American and African Catholics through our annual Black Catholic History Mass. This year, the Holy Mass will be celebrated February 11 at 11:30 a.m. at Saint Joseph Parish, York. All are welcome to worship together as one Catholic community and to make present the Church, called to be God’s instrument of peace and healing in our world today. May our prayers and actions make that so.

Sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Timothy C. Senior
Bishop of Harrisburg