



# Sister Antona Ebo



*Sister Antona Ebo*  
Artist: Chloe Becker, 2020.

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## WOMEN WITNESSES FOR RACIAL JUSTICE



*Sister Antonia Ebo*  
Chloe Becker, 2020.

I am here because  
I am a Negro, a nun,  
a Catholic,  
and because  
I want to bear witness.

**Sr. Antonia Ebo**

## Sister Antonia Ebo

### “I’m Gonna Do What the Spirit Says Do”

On Sunday March 7, 1965, Alabama state troopers and local police beat and bloodied civil rights activists who had begun a 50-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital.

Immediately following the “Bloody Sunday” attack, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. issued a call for church leaders around the country to come to Selma and to join in the struggle for civil rights.

On March 10th, Sister Antonia Ebo, a Franciscan Sister of Mary, took off from Saint Louis, Missouri to Selma on a chartered plane that she joked had been pulled out of mothballs. The March 11th cover of *The New York Times* featured a photo of Sister Ebo marching alongside other protesters. That photo would become an iconic image of the struggle for voting rights.

Throughout her life -- both before and after Selma -- Sister Ebo, who died in 2017, was a civil rights pioneer. She credited the Holy Spirit for guiding her throughout her life and often sang the black spiritual, “I’m Gonna Do What the Spirit Says Do” whenever she talked to audiences about her experience in Selma and the ongoing struggle for racial justice. Indeed, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, may be the only explanation for how Sister Ebo ended up in Selma.

### “Bap-tic” Heritage

The spiritual comes from what Ebo calls her “Bapt-tic” heritage – a combination of Baptist and Catholic. Born in Bloomington, Illinois, Elizabeth Ebo was the daughter of Daniel and Louise Teal Ebo. Her grandfather was a

Baptist minister and her family attended the local Baptist church.

When Ebo was just four years old, her mother died and her father lost his job as a library custodian soon after. When he could no longer afford to keep their house, Antona and her siblings went to live at the McLean County Home for Colored Children – a heart-rending fate shared by so many black children across the country during the Great Depression.

It was there, however, that Ebo says the Holy Spirit introduced her to Catholicism through a young boy who was Roman Catholic but had been barred from attending a Catholic church while he was at the home. When she was about nine years old, Ebo and the boy -- nicknamed “Bishop” (Bish for short) because of the Rosary beads he wore around his neck – were sent to the bakery to pick up day-old bread. But on the way, “Bish” convinced young Ebo to go with him into a Catholic church.

There, as he knelt at the communion rail, “Bish” explained the Eucharist to her. Ebo, who became Catholic because of the Eucharist, says, “As an adult, as I reflect on that story, I think we were on the way to pick up day-old bread for our body. And this child taught me about the bread of life that was on that altar.”

### “I lost the thumb and got religion.”

A few years later, Ebo contracted tuberculosis and was in and out of the hospital. Her thumb would eventually become badly infected and need to be amputated. But her time spent in the hospital would provide her the opportunity to learn more about Catholicism and eventually convert. She jokes, “I lost the thumb and got religion.”

While she was in the hospital, remembering the experience she had in the church with “Bish,” she asked her nurse, Mary Southwick, to have the visiting priest come spend time with her. Soon the priest began teaching Ebo about Catholicism. With the help of Nurse Southwick and that same priest, Ebo enrolled at and desegregated Holy Trinity Catholic High School becoming the school’s only African American student and its first African American graduate.

There, she continued to learn about Catholicism and finally converted when she was 18 years old.

## Desegregating her community

Ebo had aspirations of becoming a nurse but was rejected by numerous nursing schools on the basis of race. In 1942 she entered St. Mary’s Infirmery, a nursing school in St. Louis which was run by the Sisters of Mary (now the Franciscan Sisters of Mary). Soon after, in 1946, taking the name Sr. Mary Antona (from a Sinsinawa Dominican sister who taught her math), she and two other women – Pauline Townsend and Hilda Brickus (photo below) -- entered the all-white order eventually desegregating it.



SR. ANTONA EBO, SR. PAULINE TOWNSEND, AND SR. HILDA BRICKUS  
DESEGREGATE SISTERS OF MARY

But, desegregating the order was not easy.

Sr. Ebo first thought of entering the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the nation’s first order of black nuns, since no white congregations in Illinois or Missouri accepted black candidates. But when she learned that the Sisters of St. Mary were considering lifting their ban on black members, she chose to enter. Thus, in July of 1946, Sr. Ebo became one of the first three African-American women accepted into the historically German order.

But, as Sr. Ebo notes in “Sisters of Selma”, they faced blatant discrimination. They were not accepted as full members, and were instead separated from their white counterparts.

Like many pioneering black sisters in white orders, Sr. Ebo endured discrimination. The Sisters of St. Mary built a separate novitiate for its first black candidates to ensure segregation in the dining, training and social interactions of the community. The white superiors also initially barred their black members from entering the motherhouse. On June 9, 1947, Ebo and the four other black members of the order professed their first vows

in a segregated ceremony at which the archbishop of St. Louis officiated.

But no experience of racism had a more formative impact on Sr. Ebo than an incident not long after she entered the order. During her father's final illness, a white sister refused to admit him into their all-white hospital, where Sr. Ebo was then working. Sr. Ebo later learned that the white sister callously dismissed her father's pleas that his daughter was a member of the order and had been granted permission to care for him. For Sr. Ebo, her father's death shortly thereafter in a different hospital forced her to face the ugly truth that the sin of racism darkened the minds and judgements of her white sisters. As such, the white sister who treated her father with such hard-heartedness was not rebuked.

Sr. Ebo refused to accept white supremacy as normal in her community and in her church and she fought to halt the humiliation of segregation in her community and in society.

## Bearing Witness in Selma

After watching footage of the violence on Selma's "Bloody Sunday," Sr. Ebo told the black women employees at St. Mary's, "I would go to Selma if I wasn't wearing this habit." But her superior, Sister Eugene Marle selected her as one of the two sisters asked to join the 50 person St. Louis delegation where other women religious had also joined. Sr. Ebo was rightly fearful of the violence being perpetrated by racist officials. News reports of what had happened spread quickly because of television, and the employees recounted how protesters had been clubbed, beaten, bitten by police dogs and horsewhipped by authorities in Selma.

"No, I wouldn't like to go to Selma," she first responded to Sister Marie. "I know I do a lot of fussing but I don't feel bad enough to want to go down there and be a martyr for somebody's voting rights," she continued.

But eventually Sr. Ebo decided she needed to "put up or shut up." The next morning she was on her way to Selma.

Later she said, "It turned out that the habit was what got everyone's attention very quickly, because nuns had not been seen doing anything like that before."

### **"You don't have to be white to be holy."**

When the delegation from St. Louis arrived at Brown's Chapel AME Church, the headquarters for the Selma

protest, the six nuns were greeted warmly by one of the leaders, the Rev. Andrew Young, who asked the people to stand and acknowledge that "one of the great moral forces of the world has just walked in the door."

Sr. Ebo was the only black nun in the delegation that day and a new sight for the protesters.



SR. ANTONA EBO MARCHING IN SELMA

The Rev. L.L. Anderson, pastor of Selma's Tabernacle Baptist Church remarked, "For the first time in my life, I am seeing a Negro nun." For him, Sr. Ebo was living proof to the officials in Alabama and those who had beaten the protesters "that you don't have to be white to be holy." Sr. Ebo remembers a young, black girl who ran up and embraced her saying that she knew sisters "but never had seen one like herself."

Sr. Ebo's presence at the protest that day was certainly something to celebrate. But it also caused her tremendous fear. Looking around at the group that had gathered in the church she noted, "They had bandages on their heads, teeth were knocked out, crutches, casts on their arms. You could tell that they were freshly injured." She remembered hearing the story of one protester, the Rev. James Reeb, a white minister who had traveled to Selma from Boston and was chased and brutally beaten to death. "If they would beat a white minister to death on the streets of Selma, what are they going to do when I show up?" she wondered. She also knew that if she were arrested, she would be separated from the rest of the sisters since she would go to a segregated jail.

But Sr. Ebo was inspired and emboldened by the crowds that packed the Church. "We're going to come on through like we always do!" they shouted. "They had already been through the battle ground, and they were still wanting to go back and finish the job," Sr. Ebo remembers.

“I just went to walk, not to talk,” Ebo says. But being the only black nun drew the attention of both protest organizers and the press.

Organizers convinced her to speak to the crowd gathered in the Church. “I am here because I am a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness,” she said.

After addressing the crowd, Sr. Ebo and the five other nuns led the group of protesters in a march. “They put the women in the front; all of the women were just the six of us,” she recounts. The group was only able to march a short way that day before being met by a line of state troopers.

But Sr. Ebo and the others began bearing witness to the press. When questioned about why she was there she responded, “We are here from St. Louis to demonstrate and to witness our love to our fellow citizens in Selma. We are here secondly, to protest the violation of rights.”



She also told reporters that she was “Negro and very proud,” adding, “I feel it a privilege to be here today. I am Sister Mary Antona from St. Louis, Missouri...I might say that yesterday being Negro, I voted. And I’d like to come here today and say that every citizen – Negro as well as white – should be given the right to vote. That’s why I am here today.”

By the end of the day, Sr. Ebo and the rest of the delegation were on their way back to St. Louis, but they had made their mark. At home, Sr. Ebo was an instant icon. Besides appearing on the front page of *The New York Times*, reporters from as far away as the Vatican were calling to speak with her.

## Bearing Witness in the Catholic Church

Sr. Ebo continued to bear witness beyond that day in Selma. Like many black Catholics, Sr. Ebo knew all too well that many in the church—like those who led the desegregation protests in New Orleans and those who violently protested open housing across the North and Midwest—were just as responsible for fomenting the racial hatred that had killed Dr. King as anyone else.

## Organizing for Change

In mid-August of 1968, Ebo joined 154 black sisters from across the country for a weeklong gathering at Mount Mercy College (now Carlow University) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to discuss their place in the burgeoning black revolution and to confront longstanding racism in their church, especially female religious life. During this first meeting of the National Black Sisters’ Conference, Sr. Ebo, who was elected to the organization’s first executive board, joined with the members of the nation’s historically black and white sisterhoods in recounting their often horrific experiences of racism in the church.

In the following years, many black sisters left religious life in protest against enduring discrimination. Sr. Ebo stayed, determined to fight. She served as the N.B.S.C. president from 1980 to 1982. In 1989, Ebo won the N.B.S.C.’s Harriet Tubman Award for her outstanding service and leadership.

## A Lifetime of Pioneering Leadership

Sr. Ebo was a pioneer. Along with her leadership in desegregating her religious community and working for civil rights, she was a leader in the healthcare world. Sr. Ebo broke boundaries by becoming the director of the medical records department at St. Mary’s Hospital in 1965. She was the first black supervisor in charge of any department at St. Mary’s. Sr. Ebo became the first African American woman religious leader to be in charge of a Catholic hospital in this country. In 1967, she was appointed as the executive director of the St. Clare Hospital in Baraboo, Wisconsin.

## Bearing Witness in Ferguson and Beyond

Sr. Ebo continued to speak out until her death in November 2017, standing up for the dignity of African Americans, women, and all of God’s creation. “We are



SISTER ANTONA EBO WITH CONGRESSMAN JOHN LEWIS

all made in the image and likeness of God, so there's more work to be done by every one of us," she says.

She lived just about eight miles from Ferguson, Missouri where the August 2014 fatal shooting of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson sparked a national debate about racism, police training, the use of deadly force, and the relationship between law enforcement and African Americans.

Sr. Ebo was one of the first Catholic leaders to join the protests where she led a prayer service.

She said that the protests in Ferguson and across the country are not unlike the marches held in Selma years ago: "When the young blacks in Ferguson speak, they are rabble-rousers, and that's what we were called when we went to Selma." She went on, "We were called rabble-rousers and dupes of the Communists because [then

FBI director] J. Edgar Hoover was working so hard to prove that Martin Luther King was not a Christian but a Communist. People who had put their trust in J. Edgar Hoover rather than J.C., if only they would have put their trust in J.C., they would have been on the right side of this thing. It's the same kind of stuff that's happening now."

Speaking at various gatherings about the events in Ferguson and around the country, she reminded listeners that racism and injustice are ongoing problems, even when there isn't unrest: "Every 20 years or so, we go through a new discontent."

Convinced that people too often take the "easy route" out of such discontent, she urged real dialogue between races and cultures: "Part of the problem is that we have not learned to listen to one another...not just someone talking up here at a podium, but taking the time to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit."

"How are we going to know each other as God's children if we have a group over here and a group over there?" she asked.

**"We need to learn to listen to one another so that we understand the difference in culture, in our relationship and in the way we talk with one another – 'with' not 'at.'"**

Sister Antona's life and witness challenges people to heed the example of the prophet Jeremiah who refused to remain silent regarding the sins of a people: "We've got to do what the Spirit says to do."

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Oh, freedom  
 Oh, freedom  
 Oh, freedom over me  
 And before I be a slave  
 I'll be buried in my grave  
 And go home  
 To my God  
 And be free

(sung by Sr. Antona Ebo in "Sisters of Selma")

## Prayer before reflecting

*Good and merciful God,  
 Creator of the universe,  
 you call us to reverence your divine image  
 and likeness in every member of the human family.*

*Yet, the equality of your daughters and sons of color  
 has not always been full acknowledged,  
 as we confess our complicity in the sin of racism.*

*As we reflect on the history and lives  
 of Black Catholic women in the United States,  
 may their witness touch our hearts, minds, and souls,  
 that through their Christ-like example,  
 you might call us in your Holy Spirit  
 to conversion, reconciliation, and renewed hope  
 for racial harmony, equality and justice.*

*We thank you, our good and merciful God,  
 for the witness of unsung, erased black Catholic women.  
 May we always remember and learn  
 from our Church's history of racism, and discrimination  
 in order that we might journey from death to new life.*

*We make this prayer in the Name of our Lord and Savior,  
 Jesus Christ. AMEN.*

Prayer composed by Sr. Anita Baird, DHM



*“The Saints of Selma”*  
Kelly Latimore  
Used with permission

## Reflection Questions

Sr. Antona Ebo said that “God called my bluff” when she reasoned she could not go to Selma. She said, “If I didn’t have this habit on, I would be down there with those people.” Still, she could not silence the Spirit’s call. She knew it was time to “put up or shut up.” She witnessed her faith.

*When have you been afraid to speak out for justice? When have you been afraid to be a witness for your faith? And when were the times when you finally understood it was time to “put up or shut up”?*

Sr. Ebo once said, “The one thing that I didn’t want to do was to become a sweet little old nun that was passing out holy cards and telling people ‘I’ll pray for you’... Sr. Ebo challenged religious and communal expectations in order to follow God’s Spirit and fulfill her God given calling. Doing so, she became nothing less than a prophet.

*When have you felt constrained by the expectations of others in your life? What helped you break out of those to follow God’s call?*

Sr. Ebo was one of the first Catholic leaders to join the protests in Ferguson after the death of Michael Brown. She was consistent in her call for full civil rights for Black people. She faced down racism and white supremacy at every turn.

*In what ways will/do you follow her prophetic example? What are your own goals for living a life in prophetic solidarity with our Black siblings?*

I’m here today  
because yesterday  
[in Saint Louis]  
I voted.

Sr. Antona Ebo, 1965





*Sr. Antona Ebo*  
Artist: Chloe Becker

**No lie can live forever.**

**Martin Luther King Jr.**

**The denial of  
the dignity and sanctity  
of Black life  
is a part of the DNA  
of this country.**

**It is also  
a foundational sin  
of the American  
Catholic Church.**

**Dr. Shannen Dee Williams**

## Ways to Take Action

From Fr. Bryan Massingale and Dr. Shannen Dee Williams

- **Admit your ignorance**, do something about it.
- **Confront your racism. Sit with the discomfort.** There is no way to tell the truth about race in this country without white people becoming uncomfortable.
- **Confront racism elsewhere** your family, friends, and colleagues courageously. Do not be silent. Until white people call out white people, there will always be safe places for racial ugliness.
- **Demand** that your parish and diocese sponsor a series on race. Tell your priests, religious educators, and ministers of the Word to make anti-racism a regular feature of their homilies and religious formation.
- **Contact your bishop** and ask how anti-racism is part of your church leaders' formation for ministry. Ask him to require the teaching of Black and Brown Catholic history in every Catholic educational institution.
- **Work for reparative justice.** Work to stop the closings of active African American parishes while reinvesting in and expanding the Black Catholic educational system.
- **Work in your community to protect Black lives**, eliminate racism in our systems, end mass incarceration, and secure police reform and accountability.



## Witnessing for Racial Justice Prayer Service

**Opening Song:**                      *Open My Eyes*                      J. Manibusan

*Open my eyes, God, help me to see your face.  
Open my eyes, God, help me to see.*

*Open my ears, God, help me to hear your voice.  
Open my ears, God, help me to hear.*

*Open my heart, God, help me to love like you.  
Open my heart, God, help me to love.*

**Opening Prayer:**

*The prayer leader welcomes the gathered community and invites all to pray:*

LEADER:        We give you thanks, O God,  
                      That you speak to us  
                      in ways that often surprise.  
                      And so we pause once more  
                      to remind ourselves to listen for your voice  
                      and to ask for your grace.

ALL:             Open our eyes to read the signs of the times.  
                      Open our ears to hear the voices of the poor and oppressed;  
                      the voices of our Black siblings who are enduring the violence and dehumanization  
                      of white supremacy and white privilege in our communities and in our institutions.  
                      Open our hearts that we might see anew and work together  
                      for a new way of being church.

We ask this in the name of Jesus  
and the communion of Black saints who are with us and who have gone before us,  
that we, your church, might be transformed. AMEN.

**Scripture Reading: 1 Kings 19: 11-15**

Then God said [to Elijah]: “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Eternal; I will pass by.”

There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before God—but God was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake—but God was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire—but God was not in the fire; after the fire, a light silent sound.

When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

A voice said to him, “Why are you here, Elijah?”

He replied, “I have been most zealous for God, the Eternal, but the Israelites have forsaken your covenant. They have destroyed your altars and murdered your prophets by the sword. I alone remain, and they seek to take my life.”

God said to him: Go back!

The Word of God  
Thanks be to God!

**Listening for the Voice of God:**

*Our Scripture reading reminds us that God often speaks to us in surprising ways and in surprising places. The passage also reveals a truth that so many of us know from experience: the voice of God often asks us to “move.” Normally the movement God is calling us to make, as individuals and as institutions, is a “metanoia” – a conversion of our very way of being and doing in the world. We take a moment now to listen for God’s voice.*

**Sung Response:**

*I’m Gonna Do What the Spirit Says Do*

Traditional Spiritual

*I’m gonna move when the Spirit says ‘move’  
I’m gonna move when the Spirit says ‘move’  
When the Spirit says ‘move, I’m gonna move, oh yeah,  
I’m gonna move when the Spirit says ‘move’*

**Readings**

*The witness of Philonise Floyd, brother of George Floyd who was murdered on May 25, 2020 by police officer Derek Chauvin, who knelt on George’s neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds as he cried out for his mother.*

George always made sacrifices for our family. And he made sacrifices for complete strangers. He gave the little that he had to help others. He was our gentle giant. I was reminded of that when I watched the video of his murder. He called all of the officers “sir”. He was mild mannered; he didn’t fight back. He listened to all the officers. The men who took his life, who suffocated him for eight minutes and 46 seconds – he still called them “sir” as he begged for his life.

I can’t tell you the kind of pain you feel when you watch something like that. When you watch your big brother, who you’ve looked up to your whole entire life, die? Die begging for his mom? I’m tired! I’m tired of pain, the pain you feel when you watch something like that. I’m here today to ask you to make it stop. Stop the pain. Stop us from being tired.

*Sung Response*

*The witness of Shannen Dee Williams, an African American Catholic and Historian*  
Slattery, John (2015, May 05). *The Church is Not Yet Dead: An Interview with Dr. Shannen Dee Williams*. *Daily Theology*. <https://dailytheology.org/2015/05/05/the-church-is-not-yet-dead-an-interview-with-dr-shannen-dee-williams/>

For the longest time, I could not wrap my mind around my mother's staunch loyalty to the Catholic Church, especially since I knew her experiences in the Church had been less than ideal. You see, my mother was in the first class of women admitted to the University of Notre Dame in 1972, and I grew up with a large, extended family that often celebrated the fact my mother was Notre Dame's first black woman graduate.

But, over the years, I watched my mother cringe every time the fact was mentioned and quickly change the subject. When I finally mustered up enough courage to ask my mother about her experiences at Notre Dame, she simply intimated that it was better left unspoken and immediately tried to change the subject. When I pushed harder, she made it plain that she did not want me to attend Notre Dame for college and then shut down completely.

I know my mother's experiences must have been truly horrific, which of course left me fiercely resistant to the idea of remaining in the Church as I left home for college.

But, I stayed—in large part because of my mother's influence, but also because worshiping in Atlanta's historically black Catholic parishes during college finally taught me that racism and white supremacy did not have to be a defining part of my church experience.

My journey in the Catholic Church, like my journey as an American citizen, has been frequently peppered with experiences of overt and covert racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. As a consequence, there have been more than a few times when I felt that I needed to leave the Church for my own sanity and survival. Yet, I have refused to abandon my faith or the Church of my birth.

While loyalty to my devout Catholic, African-American mother and attending predominantly black and thoroughly integrated parishes (when able) kept me in the Church through my mid-twenties, my "discovery" of black Catholic history during my doctoral studies at Rutgers cemented my resolve to remain in the Church. It also helped me to understand that black people have never been marginal to Catholic history and that the most authentic expressions of Catholicism have always come from the marginalized and the dispossessed.

U.S. Catholic history is filled with extraordinary testimonies of African-American faith and resilience in the face of strident white supremacy and unholy discrimination. Everyday I am strengthened by the fearlessness embodied by those African-American Catholics who steadfastly refused to abandon the faith even after they were forced to sit in segregated pews, relegated to the back of Communion lines, or physically thrown out of parishes by white Catholics, religious and lay, solely on the basis of race.

Indeed, Our faith is based on the belief in the death and resurrection of a brown social revolutionary who was put to death by the state for declaring with his words and actions that the lives of the poor, marginalized, and dispossessed matter. If the U.S. Catholic Church, and indeed the global Church, cannot collectively respond to the ever expanding #BlackLivesMatter movement in an uncompromisingly supportive and radical way, then the Church (in its present structure) is DEAD. But I do not believe that the Church is yet dead.

*Sung Response*

*The witness of Tamika Palmer, the mother of Breonna Taylor who was killed by police officers who entered her home in Louisville while she was asleep. <https://www.thecut.com/2020/06/breonna-taylors-mother-speaks-on-her-daughters-birthday.html>*

I was always telling [Breonna] growing up, “We got to change history.”  
I just think she was destined to be great. Breonna just loved life, and people gravitated towards her. She lit up a room and had this aura about herself. She was everybody’s Mama. She was everybody’s counselor. She wanted to take care of and protect everybody. She did everything right. She always wanted to do anything that would help her be a better friend, a daughter, a girlfriend.

I was definitely in awe of her. For her to die the way she did was a smack in the face. It just feels like they took a piece of me. It’s hard to breathe without her. It’s hard to think without her.

*Sung Response*

*The witness of Olga Marina Segura, a freelance writer and the opinion editor at National Catholic Reporter who previously served as associate editor at America Media and was a co-founder and former co-host of the podcast, “Jesuitical.”*

Every day, black women and men are faced with the reality that in America, all it takes is one person to see your body and the color of your skin as a threat. Black people are routinely viewed by white citizens and police as suspicious, dangerous and unworthy.

Many black and brown Catholics are turning to the church for solace, only to find, at worst, silence, and at best, a delayed response.

Black people are suffering. How can the church show that it is listening?

*Sung Response*

*The Witness of Adrienne Andrews Harris from St. Peter Claver parish in Philadelphia <https://why.org/segments/saying-goodbye-to-philadelphias-first-black-catholic-church/>*

*(For the last 30 years, former parishioners of St. Peter Claver have hoped for a miracle. They have prayed, lobbied, and begged for some intervention that will revive their church, officially closed by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in 2014. They have appealed for help from everyone they could think to ask, including writing Pope Francis at the Vatican. Their efforts slowed but did not stave off the Archdiocese’s closure or now its plan to sell the 176-year-old church.)*

I don’t want [St. Peter Claver] sold.

I think the history is too important, especially at this time when this country is so racially divided and things are so ugly. This is not a time to throw out black history.

This is holy ground. Our ancestors had their feet here. They sat in these pews... but anything black is replaceable.

*Sung Response*

*The witness of Tia Noelle Pratt, sociologist of religion and the scholar-in-residence at the Aquinas Center in Philadelphia <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/09/18/there-time-church-support-black-catholics-if-it-has-will-do-so>*

As the Catholic landscape changes, the centers of Catholic life in the United States are seeing many schools and churches close, with parishes being reorganized accordingly.

These changes disproportionately impact the poor and racial minorities. At a time when economic inequality is growing rapidly and the effects of racism are being felt more strongly than at perhaps any time in the last 50 years, black Catholics who need their church the most are losing their resources.

The moment has not passed. The work of racial justice is ongoing. There is still time for church leadership to stand with and for young people if they only have the will to do so.

*Sung Response*

*The witness of Fr. Bryan Massingale, professor of Ethics at Fordham University <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/assumptions-white-privilege-and-what-we-can-do-about-it>*

It has never been easy to be black in America. Still, the past few months have pushed me to depths of outrage, pain and despondency that are unmatched in my 63 years of life.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that while all might be vulnerable, we are not equally vulnerable. Blacks, Latinos and Native peoples are the vast majority of those infected and killed by this virus.

Ahmaud Arbery, an unarmed 25-year-old black man, was executed on Feb. 23 as three white men stalked him while he was jogging in Brunswick, Georgia.

Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old African American woman, was killed by Louisville police officers on March 13 after they kicked in the door of her apartment unannounced and without identifying themselves.

Christian Cooper, a young black man — a birdwatcher — was reported to the police May 25 by Amy Cooper (no relation), a young white woman, who called 911 to say that “an African American man” was threatening her in New York’s Central Park merely because he had the gall to ask her to comply with the park’s posted regulations to leash her dog.

George Floyd, an unarmed 46-year-old African American man, was brutally killed on May 25 in Minneapolis by a white police officer who knelt on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, despite being restrained, despite the urgent requests of onlookers, despite his repeated desperate pleas: “I can’t breathe.”

Omar Jimenez, a black Latino CNN reporter, was arrested on May 29 in the middle of doing live reports on events in Minneapolis, while a white CNN reporter doing the same thing, at the same time in the same neighborhood, was not only not arrested but was treated with “consummate politeness” by the authorities.

All of this weighs on my spirit. I try to pray, but inner quiet eludes me. I simply sit in silence on Pentecost weekend before a lit candle praying, “Come, Holy Spirit” as tears fall. Words fail me. I ponder the futility of speaking out, yet again, trying to think of how to say what has been said, what I have said, so often before.

Then it occurred to me. Amy Cooper holds the key. The event in Central Park is not the most heinous listed above. But if you understand Amy Cooper, then all the rest, and much more, makes sense.

After a black man tells her to obey the posted signs that require her to leash her dog in a public park, she tells him she's going to call the police "and I'm going to tell them that there's an African American man threatening my life." Then she does just that, calling 911.

She knew what she was doing. And so do we.

She assumed that her lies would be more credible than his truth.

She assumed that she would have the presumption of innocence.

She assumed that he, the black man, would have a presumption of guilt.

She assumed that the police would back her up.

She assumed that her race would be an advantage, that she would be believed because she is white. (By the way, this is what we mean by white privilege).

No one taught Amy Cooper all of this. Likely, no one gave her an explicit class on how whiteness works in America. But she knew what she was doing. And so do we. We know how race works in America.

So who taught her? Who taught us?

It's something that you absorbed just by living. Just by taking in subtle clues such as what the people in charge look like.

That's the reason for the grief, outrage, lament, anger, pain and fury that have been pouring into our nation's streets. Because folks are tired. Not only of the individual outrages. But of the fundamental assumption that ties them all together: that black lives don't matter and should not matter — at least not as much as white ones. This is what we mean by systemic racism.

The only reason for racism's persistence is that white people continue to benefit from it.

Repeat that last sentence. Make it your mantra.

*Sung Response*

**Reflection:** *allow for silent reflection, or a shared reflection by the group*

*In whose witness do you hear the voice of God calling you or our church to move or change our way of being and doing?*

*What might be a faithful response to that call?*

### **Prayers of Petition**

**LEADER:** Confident that God always hears us, we now lift up our voices in prayer.

**Response:** Hear us, O God.

For our Black siblings and their families and communities who have suffered unimaginable violence in our country. May we stand in solidarity and love with them and have the courage to fight racism and white supremacy where ever it is found, we pray:

For our white siblings, that they may hear and respond faithfully to the voice of Christ calling us to both personal and communal conversion and transformation. When our prophets speak, may they will have the courage and humility to listen, we pray:

For the leaders of nations; that they may to give voice to justice and compassion in our chaotic, tumultuous, and divided world, we pray:

For those who carry truths that must be spoken; may they be strengthened by Christ and the People of God in their prophetic work, we pray:

For those who are rendered voiceless by those in power; that we – and all people of good will – come forth to be their advocates, we pray:

For all of us gathered here; that we we may open ourselves to God who speaks to and through us, we pray:

And for the prayers we now voice .... we pray:

### **Closing Prayer**

LEADER: Holy God,  
Let us take the words we have heard today deep into our hearts.  
May we find the strength to transform ourselves and our world  
so that all may truly live together as your people in justice, peace, and in the fullness of life you  
have promised.

Together, let us pray:  
*(prayer by Dr. Yolanda Pierce)*

Let us not rush to the language of healing,  
before understanding the fullness of the injury and the depth of the wound.

Let us not rush to offer a bandaid,  
when the gaping wound requires surgery and complete reconstruction.

Let us not offer false equivalencies,  
thereby diminishing the particular pain being felt in a particular circumstance  
in a particular historical moment.

Let us not speak of reconciliation without speaking of reparations and restoration,  
or how we can repair the breach and how we can restore the loss.

Let us not rush past the loss of this mother's child, this father's child...someone's beloved son.

Let us not value property over people;  
let us not protect material objects while human lives hang in the balance.

Let us not value a false peace over a righteous justice.

Let us not be afraid to sit with the ugliness, the messiness, and the pain t  
hat is life in community together.

Let us not offer clichés to the grieving, those whose hearts are being torn asunder.

Instead...



Let us mourn black and brown men and women, those killed extrajudicially every 28 hours.

Let us lament the loss of a teenager, dead at the hands of a police officer who described him as a demon.

Let us weep at a criminal justice system, which is neither blind nor just.

Let us call for the mourning men and the wailing women, those willing to rend their garments of privilege and ease, and sit in the ashes of this nation's original sin.

Let us be silent when we don't know what to say.

Let us be humble and listen to the pain, rage, and grief pouring from the lips of our neighbors and friends.

Let us decrease, so that our brothers and sisters who live on the underside of history may increase.

Let us pray with our eyes open and our feet firmly planted on the ground.

Let us listen to the shattering glass and let us smell the purifying fires, for it is the language of the unheard.

God, in your mercy...

Show me my own complicity in injustice.  
Convict me for my indifference.  
Forgive me when I have remained silent.  
Equip me with a zeal for righteousness.  
Never let me grow accustomed or acclimated to unrighteousness.

Amen.

**Closing Song:**

*We Shall Overcome*

Civil Rights Anthem

attributed to Charles Albert Tindley

*We shall overcome  
We shall overcome  
We shall overcome some day  
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe  
We shall overcome some day*

*We are not afraid  
We are not afraid  
We are not afraid some day  
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe  
We shall overcome some day*

*We'll walk hand in hand  
We'll walk hand in hand  
We'll walk hand in hand some day  
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe  
We shall overcome some day*

*We are not alone  
We are not alone  
We are not alone some day  
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe  
We shall overcome some day...*

*We shall all be free  
We shall all be free  
We shall all be free some day  
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe  
We shall overcome some day*



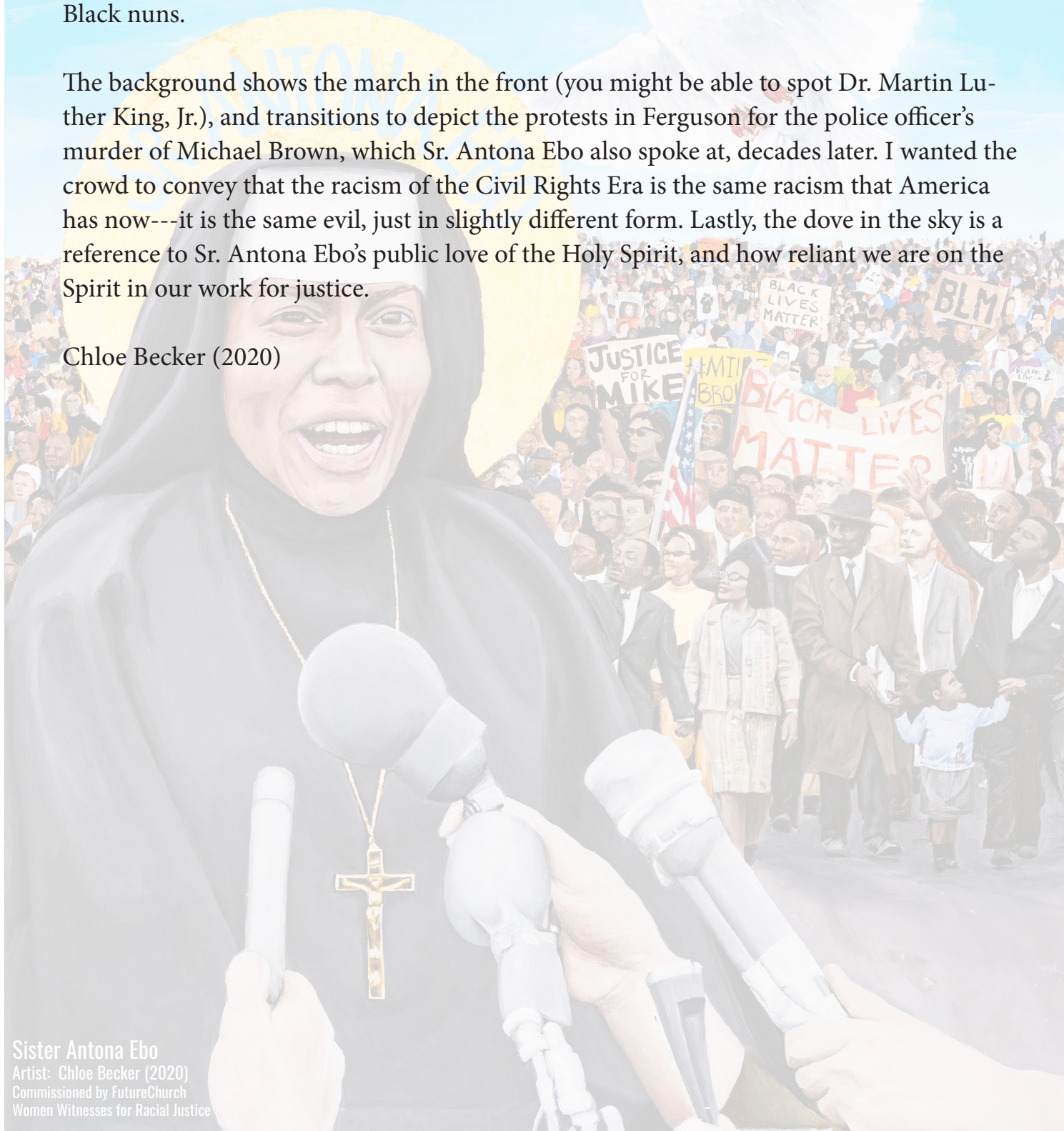
Sister Antona Ebo  
Artist: Chloe Becker (2020)  
Commissioned by FutureChurch  
Women Witnesses for Racial Justice

## Artist's Statement

Sr. Antona Ebo: This portrait represents the active and public contributions that Sr. Antona Ebo made to racial justice movements throughout history. I painted from her iconic picture of speaking to the press at the march from Selma, as that was a monumental moment for her beginnings in publicly acting against racism and for nationwide representation for Black nuns.

The background shows the march in the front (you might be able to spot Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.), and transitions to depict the protests in Ferguson for the police officer's murder of Michael Brown, which Sr. Antona Ebo also spoke at, decades later. I wanted the crowd to convey that the racism of the Civil Rights Era is the same racism that America has now---it is the same evil, just in slightly different form. Lastly, the dove in the sky is a reference to Sr. Antona Ebo's public love of the Holy Spirit, and how reliant we are on the Spirit in our work for justice.

Chloe Becker (2020)



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