

Mother Mary Theodore Williams Artist Statement

Chloe Becker

Mother Williams is shown with three children to reference her youth-centered work in her co-founded religious order, ultimately known as the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary. They established schools, (some of the first ever) pre-schools, and orphanages for Black children in Georgia and New York City.³² She is pointing towards the rising sun; reinforced by the painted quote, “The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,” which is the first line from the poem “The Heart of a Woman” by Georgia Douglas Johnson, a Black poet from the Harlem Renaissance (Mother Williams moved the order to Harlem in 1923, during the heart of the Renaissance).³³ The dawn is an allegory for so much of Mother William’s life—always finding possibility and chasing it with conviction: she formed her own order of Black nuns, moved that order to New York City, established schools and nurseries, formed religious education programs for parishes, started a soup kitchen in Harlem during the Great Depression, a food pantry for Staten Island, and countless other initiatives.³⁴ Yet the dawn is also a much greater symbol for the hope needed to commit to the difficult work of dismantling racism. The complete eradication of racism in all forms may be far away, but we can learn from Mother Williams: not allow our despair to stop us from continually pursuing the next visible possibility for a more just world, in hopes that one day, the sun of a united, all-inclusive world will rise.

The FutureChurch resource packet for Mother Mary Theodore Williams can be found here:

<https://www.futurechurch.org/women-witnesses-for-racial-justice-downloads>

³² “Mother Mary Theodore Williams,” St. Joseph of the Holy Family, <https://www.stjosephsharlem.com/reredos/mother-mary-theodore-williams>.

³³ Georgia Douglas Johnson, “The Heart of a Woman,” Poetry Foundation, 1918, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52494/the-heart-of-a-woman>; “Georgia Douglas Johnson,” Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/georgia-douglas-johnson>; Pat McNamara, “From Savannah to Harlem: Mother Theodore Williams,” Patheos, April 11, 2011, <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/04/from-savannah-to-harlem-mother-theodore-williams-pat-mcnamara-04-12-2011?p=2>.

³⁴ “Mother Mary Theodore Williams.”