

“Unrequited Love”

A Painting by Haman Cross III

Commissioned by and Co-Created with Fr. Larry Dowling

“Unrequited Love” is a co-creation of Mr. Haman Cross III and Fr. Larry Dowling and the Holy Spirit. I commissioned this painting as a centerpiece for a book I am writing and catechetical materials directed specifically toward White people – I am White, Mr. Cross is Black. The painting is meant to encourage civil, meaningful and courageous conversations on how we as White people unconsciously continue to participate in the original sin of our nation: racism.

My intent is to take the painting to different places where we can gather people in conversations that build bridges of Christian fellowship and connection and, once building a base of relationship, start talking about the continued effects of racism in our society and how we can move from “I’m not a racist” to “I’m an active Christian anti-racist.”

The main image, of course, is the image of Jesus hanging on the wood of the cross. He is suffering, weeping. If you look into His eyes, however, hopefully you see not only deep pain, but deep love, infinite love, God’s Love for us all! We know that is true because he cries out from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!” (Luke 23:34) And I believe that cry continues to echo across the ages even today as we unconsciously participate in the sin of racism.

The tendency for many is to concentrate on the people: the White people garbed in the colors of the American flag and overall beneficiaries of the American dream. The Black people who, from a distance, look like a mass of blank Black faces, yet who, when you get up close, have unique facial features. The message: to break down the blanket stereotyping of whole groups of people, we must get up close to each other to see that each of us are unique and precious in the eyes of God. And, as is the hope of God, that we are unique and precious in each other’s eyes!

The concept of the painting arises out of Christian Black theology, most significantly the writing of Dr. James Cone, and perhaps his most significant contribution: his book “The Cross and the Lynching Tree.”

Dr. Cone argues that Christians, White Christians in particular, have distanced themselves from the cross of Jesus, an event that happened ‘way back then’ and can seem to have no real relevance today. Yet Dr. Cone argues that the cross of Jesus is very much alive today in the suffering of Black people, most notably symbolized in the threat and horror of the lynching tree.

As White people, we have ‘sanitized’ the cross. We place our crucified images up high, some distance away from us. Jesus is most commonly looking up to the heavens in a cry of despair, or his head peacefully bowed down in death.

We wear the cross as jewelry, as a tattoo, as an ornament hanging from our car rear view mirror. paying little attention to its real meaning and the real cost of discipleship it signifies. We have tamed the cross and, in doing so, have distanced ourselves emotionally and spiritually from the true power of the cross. The cross that continues to be carried by Black people as a whole is real. It exacts an extreme cost on the Black community and, in fact, costs all of us, especially poor White people. In the words of Dr. Stephen Ray, retired President of Chicago Theological Seminary, “Racism is a cancer in the Body of Christ. It will not destroy the Body of Christ, but what it does is enfeeble the Body of Christ.”

In Jesus’ time, crucifixion likely involved the condemned person to carry a heavy crossbeam to a place on the road outside of Jerusalem. When they arrived at a place where there was a dead olive (or other) tree, they would strip the person, nail or bind them to the crossbeam, and then hoist the crossbeam and secure it to the dead tree trunk. They would nail or bind the feet and allow the person to ultimately die from blood loss and asphyxiation.

The important thing I wanted Haman Cross III to capture in the painting is the probable reality that Jesus, hanging on the cross, was directly facing any passerby. You either had to avert your eyes from the scene or be drawn to witness the horror and excruciating pain of the crucified. In the case of Jesus, innocent victim, also noting not just the deep pain, but the deep love in his eyes.

In viewing the painting, you must look into the eyes of Jesus, feel what you feel, be drawn into the mystery of someone so deeply hurt, betrayed, abandoned, rejected for loving ALL unconditionally; beaten, totally stripped of His dignity, nailed to a tree, YET still holding deep love for you, me and absolutely everyone.

Haman and I do not want to offer each of our specific interpretations of the painting. The meaning of the painting is going to be different for each person. Our desire is for it to be an entryway, a door, perhaps the beginning of a journey to a deeper understanding of Christ's/God's longing "That all may be one!" (John 17:21)

The title 'Unrequited Love' came to me in prayer.

Dwell with the painting for a while. Look at it from a distance and up close.

What emotions stir up in you?

What do you see when you look at the image of Jesus? What do you experience when you dwell on the face of Jesus? When you look into His eyes?

What does the painting and the title 'Unrequited Love' mean for you?

What does it mean to Jesus?

What impact does it have on you as a Black person?

What impact does it have on you as a White person?

What does it mean for other innocent people who suffer daily in this world?

What does it mean for the environment?

How does it call you to understand and fully embrace the cost of discipleship?

Where are you in the painting?

What does it challenge/ en-courage you to do from here?

Please share any thoughts or comments with Fr. Larry at denispadre@aol.com. Thanks!