A few years after I was ordained a priest, I took a road trip with my parents to Alabama for a weeklong retreat. We celebrated Mass together everyday, adored the Eucharist in the Blessed Sacrament, and visited different holy sites in the surrounding area. Upon entering a Catholic gift shop at one of our pilgrimage sites, I was shocked to see a large statue depicting Saint Michael the Arch-Angel as a white man with blond hair and blue eyes standing on top of the Devil who was portrayed as a brown skinned man with African American features. My father, a black man, who is not Catholic and my mother, a white woman who is a devout Catholic entered the gift shop after me and I prayed they would not see the statue as I knew it would offend them as much as it was offending me.
With my best effort, I tried to steer their attention away from the disgusting statue. Unfortunately, my father’s eyes eventually fell upon the statue of a white man stepping on top of a black man. My father pulled me to the side and said, “Son, did you see that?” I said, “Yeah dad.” He said, “That’s just not right son. That’s just not right.” I then approached the clerk at the checkout desk and asked her to either remove the statue because it was offensive or to repaint the statue so that the angel and demon were not depicted as white and black people. She informed me that the artist who made the statue did not intend to be racially offensive and she was not going to remove it or have it repainted. I relayed to her that my father was not Catholic and statues like this in Catholic gift shops are barriers for many people like him from becoming Catholic. Artwork, statues, icons and stained glass windows can be gifts that draw people to a relationship with Jesus Christ in the sacramental life of the Catholic Church and they can also be barriers for people who are being drawn to the Catholic Church.

In July 2016, the shooting of Baton Rouge, Louisiana citizen Alton Sterling brought civil unrest in our diocese. In response to this, my bishop invited me, the only African American diocesan priest in our diocese, to serve as co-chair for our newly formed Diocesan Commission on Racial Harmony. After accepting his invitation, I was able to collaborate with my bishop and other leaders in our diocese in addressing many concerns, one of which was the artwork in our diocesan offices. I first invited my bishop and our commission to address an unnecessary image that was hanging in the corridors of our diocesan office: a historical image of a Catholic priest, depicted as a slave owner, blessing a rebel flag after the Civil War. I vividly remember being offended as a seminarian upon viewing this piece of art initially and knew that many, many black people who visited our diocesan chancery were also offended. Our diocese eventually removed this piece of art.
With this effort came an opportunity to ask Catholic Churches, schools, administrative offices and gift shops to remove racially offensive artwork and statues while at the same time inviting them to replace this offensive work with diverse Catholic art. This has become an important part of my ministry.

In 2017 I was assigned pastor of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Catholic Church in St. Amant, Louisiana. With this assignment, I immediately felt called to give my parishioners a Wall of Saints. On this wall, I wanted to include a number of images of diverse saints who came from different backgrounds so that everyone who came into our church could see someone who looked like them or had a similar story to their own experience. I made sure to include black saints like Sister Josephine Bakhita, Friar Martin de Porres, and Charles Lwanga. I included the Native American saint, Kateri Tekokwitha. I included the Mexican saints, Father Miguel Pro and Juan Diego. I included the European saints Sister Bernadette of Lourdes, Pope John Paul II and Pope John 23rd. This wall also includes men and women who were married, single, clergy and religious. There are children and elderly individuals who are depicted on this wall as well. It is important to me that everyone who comes to worship at our church leaves knowing someone who looks like them or who has a similar story to their own can provide inspiration for them in their walk toward eternity - so that they too can be a saint!

My next big project at the parish was to provide a place for the poorest of the poor in our community to be loved well. After being in the parish for a little over a year, we opened up “The Full of Grace Cafe.” This sacred place provides a number of services to the poor and needy in
our community including a food pantry, coffee shop and cafe, dining area for lunch and dinner, a barbershop and hair salon, a diaper bank, after school tutoring, small group bible studies, human resource directors to help our guests find jobs, and counselors and lawyers to help people who are experiencing trauma and injustices. We also have a Creighton fertility care specialists on staff who assist couples who are experiencing infertility or who desire to learn about natural family planning. Each of the rooms in the cafe’ has a scripture on the wall and an image of a saint who is interceding for the people in that space. We were very intentional with including diverse saints throughout the cafe’ so our clients who came to receive our services would see someone who looked like them or had a similar story to their own life experiences. We portrayed diverse images of the Blessed Virgin Mary including Our Lady of Kibeho, Africa, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico and Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, Europe. We also included diverse saints and men and women on the path to canonization like Father Augustus Tolton, Mother Henriette Delille, Perpetua and Felicity and children saints like Jose Sanchez and the visionaries of Fatima, Francesco and Jacinta.

Since all of the services we provide in the Full of Grace Cafe are free, my team came together and discerned that we needed to come up with a plan to sustain our works of charity and justice. After months of praying, we discerned that our Lord Jesus Christ was inviting us to add a gift shop to our Cafe’ so that all of the proceeds from the gift shop could financially support and sustain all the good works we were providing for our beloved poor.

As we began working on the Sacred Arts and Gifts of Jesus & Mary shop, we were intentional with the merchandise we wanted to provide for our customers. We contacted the National Black Catholic Congress so that we could collaborate with their office in providing diverse gifts for the men and women who visited. Our gift shop includes diverse artwork, black and brown statues of saints, crucifixes, calendars, candles and t-shirts with depictions of the six African Americans on the path to sainthood, hair bows for little girls with images of Saint Josephine Bakhita and Saint Kateri Teokokwotha, coffee mugs and rosaries with the Black Madonna and child Jesus, Magnetic Mass kits with black nuns and brown priests, and books like the African American Youth Bible. Our Gift Shop is also working with the National Black Catholic Congress in providing small statues of Our Lady of Africa as depicted in the National Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC. In addition to these gifts we sell scented soap made by the Benedictine Monks of St. Joseph’s Abbey, sacramentals, exorcised salt jars and holy water bottles. We also carry paintings of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary as well as my first book with Ascension Press, *Broken and Blessed*. 
Visitors to Sacred Arts and Gifts of Jesus and Mary will not only be able to bless their loved ones with diverse Catholic gifts, they will be able to bless the good works our community
provides for the poor with their financial support since all of the proceeds from the gift shop go directly to the Full of Grace Cafe.

Our gift shop is open on Sundays after our 7:00 a.m., 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Mass as well as Tuesday from 12:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m., and Wednesday and Thursday from 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 pm. We look forward to collaborating with the National Black Catholic Congress so that we can continue to build bridges for people of all races and nations so that we can all abide in the love of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church!

Father Joshua Johnson