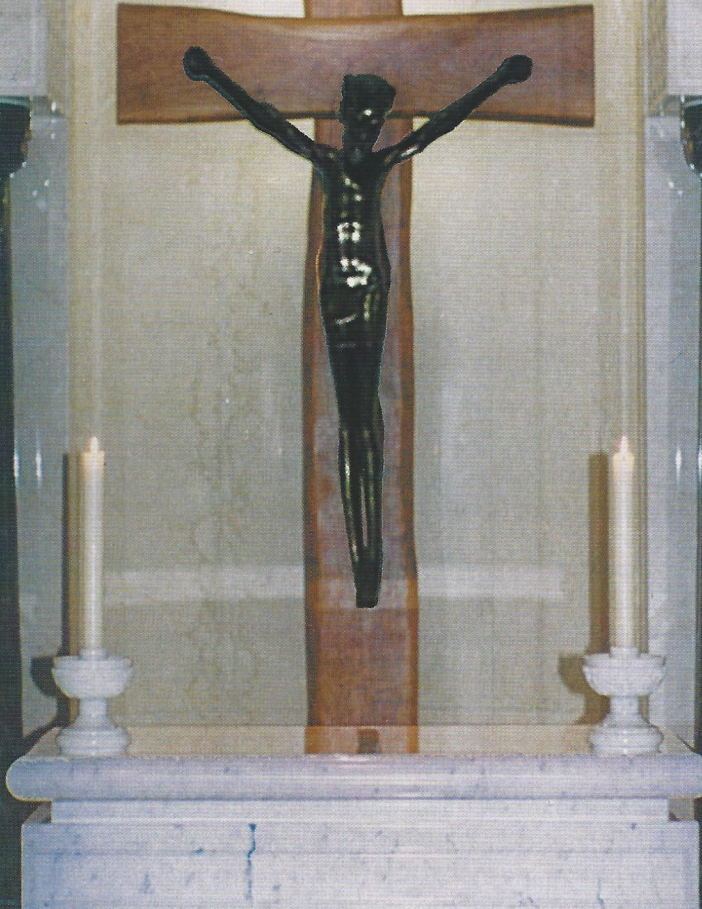


# A Celebration of Love and Freedom Expressed in Art and Architecture



*The Meaning of the  
Sculpture Program  
in Our Mother  
of Africa Chapel*

THE OUR MOTHER OF AFRICA CHAPEL IS LOCATED AT THE:  
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION  
400 MICHIGIAN AVENUE, NE  
WASHINGTON, DC 20017

At the Annunciation, Mary accepted the angel's invitation to become the Mother of God. Because she cooperated in giving the Redeemer to the world, the Church has taught that Mary represented the redeemed human race at that moment when she said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to Thy word" (Luke 1:38).

Because of the Incarnation, Christ's Passion and Death, and her assumption into heaven, Mary participates in the distribution of God's grace by her maternal intercession to her Divine Son. It is through the life of grace, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that we are united in the Mystical Body of Christ and receive the spiritual resources we need to work out our eternal salvation.

Mary's mediating role in this sacred drama is uniquely embodied in the African American experience and eloquently expressed in the sculpture program of Our Mother of Africa Chapel.

## A Sacred Conversation

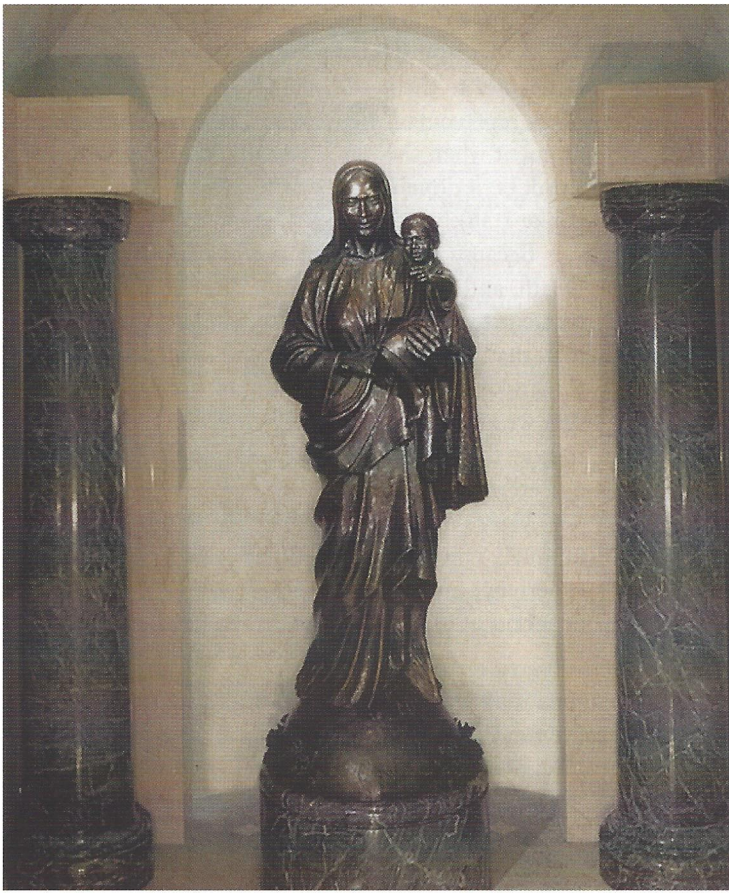
The statue of Our Mother of Africa holding the Christ Child faces a bas-relief in the nave, which chronicles the African-American odyssey, and draws us to the Crucified Christ in the sanctuary. These three sculptural components constitute a *sacra conversazione*, that is a sacred conversation, in which the spectator participates with Our Mother of Africa, her Crucified Son, and the African-American children in the sacred drama enacted here.

The sacred conversation, a representation of sacred personages in a single scene rather than in separate compartments, originated in the early fifteenth century. It is derived from altarpieces composed of three separate panels hinged together. By integrating all three panels, artists achieved a new realism in representing sacred space. The practice extended to sculpture; artists reached new levels of realism in which the spectator became an active participant in the sacred conversation, as in the Our Mother of Africa Chapel.

Our Mother of Africa, holding the Christ Child, looks down upon us. She strides forward toward the narrative relief in the nave, and her Divine Son gestures for us to read the relief, which spans the African American experience from slavery to emancipation.

The narrative begins with slave traders raiding an African village. They take men, women, and children from the sanctity and safety of their tribal homes and herd them into the hold of one of the many small merchant ships active in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the "triangular route" of transatlantic trade. Setting out from London, Bristol, and Liverpool, these three-masted, square-stern vessels, approximately sixty feet long, loaded with brass, pewter, woolens, East Indian textiles, arms, glass beads, and the like, traveled to the coast of West Africa.

Once these wares were bartered for slaves and ivory, the traders set sail for Jamaica, Barbados, South



Carolina, or Virginia. That leg of the voyage was known as the Middle Passage. In that two- to three-month trip across the Atlantic more than 200 slaves – men, women, and children – would be wedged into a hold ten feet deep and approximately twenty-three feet wide. In the New World, they were traded for cargoes of sugar, tobacco, hardwoods, indigo, and ginger bound for the return voyage to English and European markets.

At the entrance to the chapel of the floor of the nave is an abstraction in bronze relief of the *Henrietta Maria*, a seventeenth-century slave ship, which was discovered in 1972, thirty-four miles west of Key West, Florida.



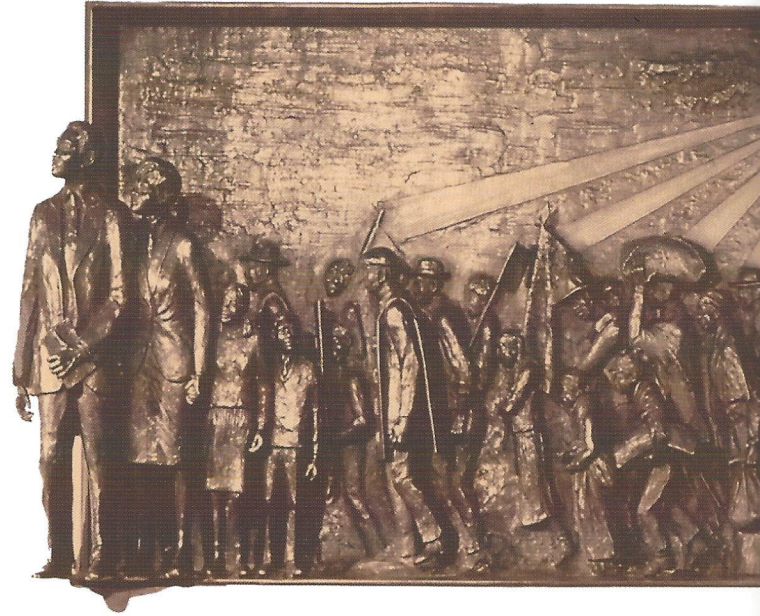
Those who survived the Middle Passage were sold at public auctions into slavery. Early on, many rebelled. From the runaway slave to the Underground Railway to Canada and freedom, the courageous spirit of the African American is portrayed here. With the shackles of slavery finally broken, African Americans begin to confront prejudice and discrimination by means of Civil Rights marches, legislation, and prayer, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who reigns above and dwells within. The narrative

culminates in the quest for full emancipation realized in the African American family of today.

The mother and father are modeled fully in the round. As if freed from the bronze of the relief, they step into the spectator's space and lift up their arms in supplication to Christ on the cross, while their young son and daughter gaze with hope across the nave to Our Mother of Africa and the Infant Jesus. Thus, the formal narrative, and symbolic elements of the drama of Mary's eternal intercession for her African American children are fully integrated through the *sacred conversation*.

### The Sculptural Elements

The sculpture program is the work of three different artists who combine romantic, classical, realist, and geometric forms to celebrate the sacred conversation in Our Mother of Africa Chapel.



Sculptor Ed Dwight created the statue of Our Mother of Africa and Divine Son and the narrative relief on the wall of the nave, which celebrates the African American experience. The artist renders Mary and the Infant Jesus with idealized African American features.

In Dwight's relief, which reads from right to left toward the altar and the crucifix, the figures at the beginning of the narrative are rendered in low relief, which makes them seem to emerge from the bronze background. As the journey toward emancipation progresses, the relief becomes higher, the figures more three dimensional, and the space they occupy more realistic, which not only animates the narrative but also intimately involves the spectator in the African American journey – a tableau of frozen movement.

That sense of living sculpture is heightened by the way the sculptor models and composes his figures, which has its roots in the rich figurative tradition of both African and Western Art. Dwight's deeply modeled surfaces and his range of movement – compassionate, violent, and varied – demonstrates his power of gesture. Ed Dwight forged a style and vision distinctly his own, which virtually transpires through every twist and turn of his figures and composition to give this odyssey of the African American experience its unique and timeless character.

The crucifix was created through the collaboration of the Tanzanian sculptor Juvenal Kaliki and the New York sculptor Jeffrey Brosk. Kaliki carved the figure of Christ, and Brosk designed the cross. Kaliki's geometric style is shaped by a carving tradition with its origins in Entebene tribal ritual and dates from the fifteenth century. Evidence of the style is found in the detailed masks and array of ceremonial artifacts used in that ritual, which honors deceased ancestors and assures abundant crops and fair weather.

With the introduction of Christianity in the nineteenth century, Tanzanian masters incorporated Christian symbols into their art, especially the preeminent Christian symbol, the image of Christ on the cross. Because Kaliki's medium is wood, his figures are usually executed in the round, which is influenced by the natural shape of the tree. In reducing his figures to their formal essentials, through his geometric style of carving, they are timeless and have an affinity to the archaic sculpture of antiquity



and to modern abstractions. Kaliki has carved the figure of Christ in ebony, a black hardwood, appropriate to the African American theme of the *sacred conversation* and compatible with Ed Dwight's African American Mother of Africa and Christ Child.

Jeffrey Brosk's cross was hewn in cherry wood. He has retained the irregularity of the bark surfaces and natural curves of the tree, organic forms which act as foils to Kaliki's geometric carving of the figure of Christ. The natural tone and grain of the wood are brought out by oils worked into its surfaces. An arc in the grain of the cross beam directly above the head of Christ suggests a natural aura, and subtle patterns in the grain of the vertical beam approximate tears, bringing to mind that when Christ died, all nature mourned.

The crucifix is suspended in the chapel above the altar and appropriately illuminated to emphasize its preeminence in the *sacred conversation*. On the altar, the Sacrifice of the Mass is celebrated and draws its power from the Sacrifice of the Cross, whose fruits it dispenses to all people. Sealed within the the altar, which is the symbol of faith, are the names of the benefactors who contributed to the Our Mother of Africa Chapel and Endowment Fund.

The collaboration of Juvenal Kaliki and Jeffrey Brosk in the crucifix of Our Mother of Africa Chapel transcends space

and time and reaches across the transatlantic thoroughfare of the Middle Passage as if to reaffirm humanity's unity in the Mystical Body of Christ.

## The Four Evangelists

The Chapel dedicated to Our Mother of Africa has been completed with the addition of four new sculptures of the four evangelists from the New Testament. These sculptures with distinct African features, of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are carved in gray Bardiglio marble.

Each of the Evangelists have become represented symbolically by one of the creatures described in the Book of Ezekiel 1:4-5 and in the Book of Revelation 4:7. Christian art and iconography have come to use these creatures as images found in Ethiopian Christian Art.

**Matthew is the Human/Angel** – this Gospel begins by telling the human ancestry of Jesus (Matthew 1:1).

**Mark is the Lion** – this Gospel begins in the wilderness (Mark 1:3)

**Luke is the Ox** – this Gospel begins with the temple, a place of sacrifice and tells of the birth of Christ in a place where farm animals lived. (Luke 2:16)

**John is the Eagle** – this Gospel begins far above all. (John 1:1)

These symbols are carved upon the clothing wrap of each Evangelist wherein the design of the creatures connects our church today with the riches of the past. Each of the carved creatures has the face of a human being, the face of a lion, the face of an ox and the face of an eagle.

The four evangelists are mounted within the walls of the Chapel in such a way that they become and invite the visitor to enter into the Sacred Conversation with the other art pieces in the Chapel – Our Mother of Africa in bronze, our ancestors in the bas Relief Panel in bronze and the crucified Christ, carved from Ebony Wood, on the Cross.



St. Matthew



St. Mark

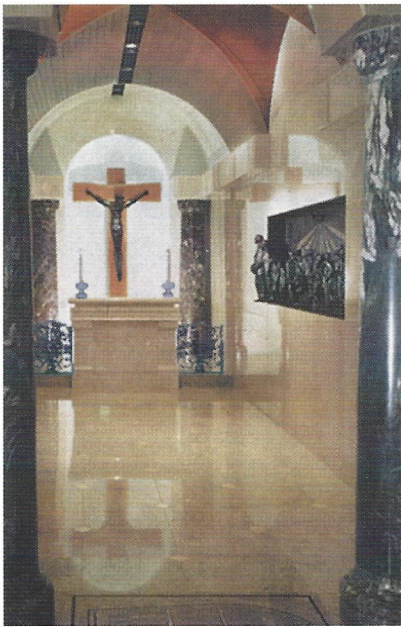


St. Luke



St. John

## Nguzo Saba — The Pillars of African American Society



The paired columns, which flank the entrance to the chapel and support the carved spandrels, and the columns within the chapel that support the vault symbolize the seven family values of African American people, Nguzo Saba.

The words for the seven principles that constitute the foundations of African American society, Nguzo Saba, were taken from the non-tribal Kiswahili language, so

that people of different African tribes could communicate with each other: Umoja—Unity, Kujichagulia—Self-Determination, Ujima—Collective Work and responsibility, Ujamaa—Familyhood and Cooperative Economics, Nia—Purpose, Kuumba—Creativity, Imani—Faith. Summarizing the African American value system, they serve as guides to daily living.

### The Unifying Role of Form, Tone, and Texture

Through the sensitive handling of form, tone, and texture, the architects, Leo Daly Associates, have united the architectural and sculptural elements in the chapel to create an appropriate ambience for the *sacred conversation*. The warm tones of the Botticino marble, the wood vault above the nave, and the crucifix are compatible and harmonious with the rich patina and animated modeling of the bronze statue of Our Mother of Africa with the Christ Child and the relief of the African American odyssey. The ambient and directed lighting are the essential features that unify these elements.

The wood vault of the nave is reminiscent of the vaults in America's colonial meeting houses, which were built by ship carpenters and, consequently, resembled the hulls of early



merchant ships, such as the *Henrietta Marie*. The representation of the *Henrietta Marie* beneath the wood vault in the nave floor also resonates with universal symbolism – the nave, a word which derives from the Latin word for ship, *navis*, symbolized the Church.

New additions to the altar area are the iron gates showing the Acacia Tree insignia, which is an icon of the Black Catholics in the United States. Also, solid marble candleholders have been installed on the altar.

Over the doorways, the altar area, and the alcove containing the statue of Our Mother of Africa, a consistent theme is carved. The grape leaves and sheaves of wheat etched in these areas symbolize the wine and bread of Holy Communion, and further integrate these different areas into the whole of the sacred conversation.



### The Sculptors

Juvenal Kaliki is the principal wood carver in the town of Morogoro in Tanzania. He works with a school of wood carvers in this ancient village, which is part of the Entebene tribe.

Ed Dwight studied art at the Kansas City Art Institute and the University of Denver. He served as a pilot and engineer in the United States Air Force for thirteen years, then worked in aeronautical and construction engineering before turning to sculpture full-time in 1978. He maintains a studio and foundry in Denver, Colorado.

Jeffrey Brosk earned a master's degree in architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, studied painting and sculpture there, and has combined the sister arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture ever since in his wall

sculpture and in his outdoor constructions. He maintains a studio in New York City.

Text by: Donald Martin Reynolds, Ph.D.; New York City, 1997.

Donald Martin Reynolds, Ph.D., art historian, author and lecturer, is Adjunct Professor of Art History at Columbia University and Director of The Monuments Conservancy. Dr. Reynolds served as consultant on the sculpture program for Our Mother of Africa Chapel.