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The Black Jesus Statue of Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, Michigan¹

Steven Hamilton
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Near the corner of Chicago Boulevard and Linwood Street on the campus of Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, Michigan stands a stone grotto with a life-sized statue of Jesus that was erected in 1957 to commemorate Pope Pius XII's encyclical on devotion to the Sacred Heart.²

¹ Image source: Google Images Labeled For Reuse With Modification.

² Kathy Schiffer, "'Black Jesus': Sacred Heart Seminary's Symbol of Racial Reconciliation," *National Catholic Register*, July 26, 2017, accessed September 12, 2018, <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/kschiffer/black-jesus-sacred-heart-seminarys-symbol-of-racial-reconciliation>.

On July 23, 1967, Economy Printing Company was located at 9125 12th Street, about three blocks from Sacred Heart Major Seminary. At 3:30am, Detroit police arrived at the printing company and raided an upstairs welcome-home party for two Vietnam War veterans. Dozens of African American community members were arrested. Police alleged they were operating a "blind pig", a slang term for an unlicensed drinking establishment. Emotions boiled over as "high levels of frustration, resentment, and anger that had been created among African Americans by unemployment and underemployment, persistent and extreme poverty, racism and racial segregation, police brutality, and lack of economic and educational opportunities"³ ignited a five day period of arson, looting and violence in and around the area.⁴

The Seminary survived the Civil Unrest of 1967 unscathed⁵, but sometime in the afternoon of July 23rd, a person or persons from the Black community painted the face, hands and feet of the statue of Jesus Christ with black paint.

The reactions to the black-faced statue were mixed. Some were outraged by what they considered vandalism. Others pointed to the Negroid Jesus as exemplifying ethnic pride, social and religious justice. Monsignor Francis Canfield, who served as seminary rector at the time of the riot, wrote in the *Michigan Catholic* on September 14, 1967 that the original white had been restored, although he gave no indication as to who repainted it. He wrote, simply, "Statue painted by three white men."

But when community activists complained, accusing the seminary of racism, Msgr. Canfield ordered the Christ figure to be returned to black. "The decision was reached," he posted three days later on September 17, "to repaint it black, in order to retain the symbol." Christ, he noted, is for all people, black and white.⁶

³ Tragina Quarks Emeka, "Detroit Riot of 1967", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Updated July 16, 2018, accessed September 12, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Detroit-Riot-of-1967>.

⁴ Louis Aguilar, "Site Where 1967 Uprising Began Sees New Signs of Life", *The Detroit News*, July 20, 2017, accessed September 12, 2018, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2017/07/20/detroit-rising-ashes/103840222/>.

⁵ "(28052) Landmarks, Black Jesus, Sacred Heart Seminary, Detroit, 1998", Wayne State University, accessed September 12, 2018, <https://reuther.wayne.edu/node/8438>.

⁶ Kathy Schiffer, op. cit.

The statue has undergone regular maintenance over the decades, and the seminary has continued to repaint the statue's face, hands and feet with black paint.⁷

By the mid-1970s, the property where Economy Printing Company once stood had become so undesirable that the city turned it into what is now Gordon Park. In 1976, 12th Street was renamed 'Rosa Parks Boulevard,' in honor of the civil rights leader."⁸

⁷ "(28052) Landmarks, Black Jesus, Sacred Heart Seminary, Detroit, 1998", op. cit.

⁸ Louis Aguilar, op. cit.

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