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# Truth and Justice

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# University of Dayton, Ohio (url: <http://www.udayton.edu/index.php>)



## Truth and Justice

**02.05.2007 | Catholic, Campus and Community** The Rev. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., who wrote a groundbreaking book chronicling the history of black Catholics in the U.S., paints a church with a checkered past but embraces a faith he chose as a teen-ager without regret.

"I came to understand the universality of Catholicism. The Catholic church transcended all races, colors and cultures," the Benedictine monk told about 300 faculty, staff and students at the University of Dayton Feb. 1 as he accepted the Marianist Award. "I realized that when a Catholic institution refused entrance to blacks...theirs was a flawed Catholicism.

"As a friend of mine, black and Catholic like me, said, 'I did not become a Catholic to waste my time looking at those prejudiced Catholics.' By that time, I had learned that the holiness of the church did not depend upon the holiness of its members."

The Marianist Award honors a Roman Catholic whose work has made a major contribution to intellectual life. It highlights a series of events on campus that celebrate the University of Dayton's Catholic, Marianist heritage.

A Benedictine monk for more than half a century, Davis serves as professor of church history at Saint Meinrad School of Theology in Indiana. In 1991 he won the John Gilmary Shea Award from the American Catholic Historical Association for his book, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, a work Publishers Weekly labeled as "groundbreaking research" and "a chronicle both sad and inspiring."

Davis' contributed to the U.S. bishops' 1979 pastoral letter, "Brothers and Sisters to Us" and to the black bishops' 1984 pastoral letter, "What We Have Seen and Heard."

"He has lifted up the life and legacy of African African-American Catholics," said the Rev. Paul Marshall, S.M., rector at the University of Dayton.

Ironically, Davis never wanted to study the history of black Catholics. "I was interested in medieval monasticism," he said. "I did not want to study American history. I did not want to be taken up with the questions of slavery and the tragedy of race."

He became caught up in the times. With three other monks, he traveled to Selma, Ala., in response to Martin Luther King's invitation to clergy to demonstrate for civil rights. In the wake of riots after King was assassinated in 1968, black Catholic priests gathered in Detroit and signed a manifesto that called the Catholic church "a white racist institution." Davis remembered feeling panic-stricken, then recalled the corrupt 18th century clergy in France and other times in history when the Catholic church did not always live out its mission.

"Church history saved me," said Davis, noting that his abbot never questioned him about his signature.

As he looks back on a life of scholarship and faith, Davis said, "I shall always be grateful that God called me to serve him in the monastic way of life. To be a Benedictine monk is to live a great tradition. ... Through no merit of my own, I was given the inestimable gift to use my research and scholarship in the service of the church and for the advancement of truth and justice."