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Diamond, Gold, Ruby, and Hope

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Change is difficult. Substantial change requires substantial effort, and often carries risks. As black Catholics who are dedicated to the fundamental humanity of all persons, we understand this. It is this shared vision that empowers us – both to recognize the injustices that surround and threaten us, and then, together, to press the “reset” button to re-center our world, to help turn it to a direction of justice.

This has never been more true than this year. The many ways in which the very humanity of our brothers, our sisters, and ourselves has been challenged are shocking to the extreme. Yet, we are reminded by our former President, Barack Obama, that we have been through darker times than these, as the history of the BCTS certainly demonstrates. This is the year of several noteworthy anniversaries, all of which punctuate a dark moment in the history of the nation, a moment in which a response to the darkness, through hope, carried a ray of light.

The first event happened sixty years ago, in 1958, making 2018 a Diamond Anniversary year. In October of that year, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was named Pope John XXIII (now Saint John XXIII). Months after being elected, he announced the convening of the Second Vatican Council. At a time when racial inequality, segregation and oppression, were the norm, and in which the American Church was complicit, Pope John hoped to forge a path out of that darkness. Though he did not live to see it, one of the most profound fruits of that work was the document *Lumen Gentium* (Light of Nations) which embraced diversity and acknowledged that there is no place in the Church for racial or national inequality.¹ *Lumen Gentium* would excite the imaginations of black Catholics and their allies in the 1960s and 1970s, giving them important tools and vision as they strove to find a place for themselves in the Church. *Lumen Gentium* was effectively the spark that ignited the Black Catholic Movement.

The next anniversary event happened in 1968, fifty years ago, which makes this a Golden Anniversary moment. It was then that the

¹ Kimberly Flint-Hamilton, “Theology, A Portrait in Black: Product of Vatican II and the Civil Rights Movement; Catalyst for Future Black Catholic Scholarship,” *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium IX* (2016): 40-41.

seeds of the BCTS's existence were planted. It started with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968, which sparked protests and riots in cities all over the United States. Several politicians reacted violently to the riots, including Chicago mayor Richard Daley who issued a "shoot to kill ... shoot to maim" order to stop protesters.² Herman Porter, a black priest from Illinois, urged all black priests to gather a day in advance of the regularly-scheduled Detroit Conference of Catholic Clergy on the Interracial Apostolate in Detroit. The priests who responded formed a caucus, which would become the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus (NBCCC). According to Cyprian Davis, OSB, who was present at the meeting, the original intent was to plan a strategy to react to the situation. But the group quickly turned to sharing experiences and feelings of marginalization, inequity, and oppression in nearly all-white parishes and orders. In Davis' words:

Not all had had the same experience. Not all were of the same mind, but enough were so that a unity was formed and the decision emerged to challenge the American bishops and publish a manifesto.³

On April 18, 1968, the manifesto was published. The stunning first line of the manifesto reads:

The Catholic Church in the United States is primarily a white racist institution, has addressed itself primarily to white society and is definitely a part of that society.

It took a substantial act of courage to sign that document. Davis reflects:

I'm thinking to myself as we were standing in line, 'what will my Abbot say?' But then it came to me. If my Abbot says anything, I'm going to say, 'you must understand that the Catholic Church was corrupt, was even moribund! ... And this was one of those times!'⁴

Later that same year, a gathering of black sisters convened in Pittsburgh, PA. They issued a similar statement, and would eventually

² *Ibid.*, 42.

³ Cyprian Davis, OSB, "To Be Both Black and Catholic," *Marianist Award Lecture 2006* (The University of Dayton, 2007): 15.

⁴ Cecilia Moore and Kimberly Flint-Hamilton, "Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.: To Walk a Path, To Be Transformed, and To Transform," *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium IV* (2010): 45.

form the National Black Sisters Conference.⁵

Thaddeus Posey, OFM Cap, was also present at that historic 1968 gathering in Detroit. He was a seminarian at the time – the only seminarian at the gathering, and likely to have been the man taking the greatest risk. Posey was one of the signatories of the manifesto. He was appointed secretary of the NBCCC and held that position for over a decade. He was ordained in 1971, and, though he like most black priests was assigned to work in predominantly white parishes, Posey never stopped working for social justice for blacks, Latinx, and other underrepresented groups.

Fast forward in time another decade. A second gathering took place in 1978, a gathering organized by Posey, and 2018 marks the fortieth, Ruby Anniversary of that moment. Posey invited black priests, brothers, and nuns to meet at the Motherhouse for the Oblate Sisters of Providence for a long weekend of reflection on black Catholic theology. Rather than challenge the Church as a racist institution, this gathering was meant to foster an approach to Catholic theology viewed through the lens of blackness – a new way of conceptualizing Catholic theological scholarship.

The Black approach to Theology is rooted in a positive identification and creation. It is positive because we affirm ourselves, our history and our destiny in the Faith. These are God's gifts. Until recently, the Church has not encouraged this through identification among Black Catholics. Yet the Church has always existed in, expressed herself through and identified with the cultural heritages of many nationalities and racial groups without doing harm to her radical, God-given unity. Theology as we know it, is the collected expression of each segment of this unity: HOW EACH SEES AND HAS COME TO KNOW GOD.⁶

Dedicating themselves to pursuing non-traditional lines of scholarship was a risk for the members of this embryonic group. There were no role models, no mentors to guide the way. For those who were pursuing their doctoral degrees or who had just recently completed

⁵ Flint-Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁶ Thaddeus Posey, "Preface," *Theology: A Portrait in Black – Proceedings of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* (National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, 1980): 3 (emphasis in the original).

them, a research agenda focused on black Catholic scholarship made the pursuit of tenure more challenging. Even publishing this new brand of scholarship was challenge in itself. Yet, inspired by hope, these scholars took up the challenge, and their work motivated and inspired future generations of black Catholic scholars and scholarship. This very publication, *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium*, grew out of that legendary meeting in 1978.

Forty years later, we find ourselves jolted into the shocking reality that we have not come nearly as far as we might have thought just a few years ago. Perhaps this was the natural result of a phenomenon that Barack Obama described before he was elected President in 2008:

[After the 1960s], the problems of race, war, poverty, and relations between the sexes did not go away... after Reagan the lines between Republican and Democrat, liberal and conservative, would be drawn in more sharply ideological terms.⁷

With the election of Donald Trump, those ideological boundaries would be stretched to their limits. In less than two years since Trump has taken office, we have seen our nation descend into a mournful abyss. We've watched as Muslims are banned from entering the United States,⁸ as thousands of children are forcibly separated from their mothers, many of whom were placed in cages.⁹ In response to missing the first of several court-ordered deadlines to return the children to their families, President Trump threatened, "Don't come to our country illegally."¹⁰

Nations with poorer populations of black and brown people are described as "s---hole countries".¹¹ Transgender recruits are effectively banned from the military, despite the issuance of three injunctions

⁷ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 40.

⁸ ACLU Washington, "Timeline of the Muslim Ban," accessed September 6, 2018, <https://www.aclu-wa.org/pages/timeline-muslim-ban>.

⁹ BBC News, "Trump Migrant Separation Policy: Children in 'Cages' in Texas", June 18, 2018, accessed September 6, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44518942>.

¹⁰ Jacqueline Thomsen, "Trump: Solution to Reuniting Immigrant Families Is 'Don't Come To Our Country Illegally,'" *The Hill*, July 10, 2018, accessed September 8, 2018, <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/396263-trump-solution-to-reuniting-immigrant-families-is-dont-come-to-our>.

¹¹ Eli Watkins and Abby Phillip, "Trump Decries Immigrants From 'Shithole Countries' Coming to US," *CNN Politics*, January 12, accessed September 8, 2018, <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/396263-trump-solution-to-reuniting-immigrant-families-is-dont-come-to-our>.

against the ban.¹² Conservatives in Congress are making attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act, which would result in nearly 30 million Americans losing health insurance, including those with pre-existing conditions.¹³ All this and more, on top of what appears an unmistakable and successful attempt on the part of the Trump campaign to conspire with Russia as they tampered with our election process. These are frightening and dangerous times.

And yet, forged in the crucible of this moment, a light is emerging. Throughout history, every time we have looked into the darkness, armed with faith, hope and courage, and working together to face the murky depths head-on, we have emerged as a better and stronger people. Obama remarked on this:

And so in response to the stain of slavery and segregation and the reality of racial discrimination, the civil rights movement not only opened new doors for African-Americans, it also opened up the floodgates of opportunity for women and Americans with disabilities and LGBT Americans and others to make their own claims to full and equal citizenship. And although discrimination remained a pernicious force in our society and continues to this day, and although there are controversies about how to best ensure genuine equality of opportunity, there's been at least rough agreement among the overwhelming majority of Americans that our country is strongest when everybody's treated fairly, when people are judged on the merits and the content of their character, and not the color of their skin or the way in which they worship God or their last names. And that consensus then extended beyond our borders.¹⁴

It will take time to forge the path that leads to justice. It will take patience and persistence. W.E.B. DuBois reminds us that we must believe in ourselves to effect change.

¹² Dave Philipps, "Ban Was Lifted, But Transgender Recruit Still Can't Join Up," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2018, accessed September 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/05/us/military-transgender-recruits.html>.

¹³ Economic Policy Institute, "How Would Repealing the Affordable Care Affect Health Care and Jobs In Your State?," accessed September 8, 2018, <https://www.epi.org/aca-obamacare-repeal-impact/>.

¹⁴ CBS News, "Obama's Full Speech on the State of American Democracy", September 7, 2018, accessed September 8, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/barack-obama-speech-full-transcript-2018-09-07/>.

I believe that all men, black and brown and white, are brothers, varying through Time and Opportunity, in form and gift and feature, but differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and in the possibility of infinite development. ...

Finally, I believe in Patience – patience with the weakness of the Weak and the strength of the Strong; the prejudice of the ignorant and the ignorance of the Blind; patience with the tardy triumph of Joy and the mad chastening of Sorrow – patience with God.¹⁵

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction – Isaac Newton made this observation centuries ago. This time is no exception, and what has proven true so many times in the past will certainly prove true today. The signs are real. The shadow of Trump may be a long one, but people dedicated to justice are responding. Journalists are responding to his attack on the media.¹⁶ Democrats have been dominating elections in the past year,¹⁷ including nine individuals who are openly transgender.¹⁸ There may be darkness, but there is also hope.

This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies says: Judge fairly, and show mercy and kindness to one another. Do not oppress widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor.

Zechariah 7:9-10

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."

Deuteronomy 31:6

¹⁵ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), 214.

¹⁶ Nataly Pak, "More than 300 Newspapers Join a Nationwide Effort To Publish Editorials In Response to Trump's Attack on Media," *ABC News*, August 16, 2018, accessed September 8, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/300-newspapers-publish-editorials-response-trumps-attack-media/story?id=57194338>.

¹⁷ Amanda Terkel, "Democrats Dominate at the Ballot Box In The Age of Trump," *HuffPost*, January 23, 2018, accessed September 9, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/democrats-dominate_us_5a610995e4b074ce7a06bdbc.

¹⁸ Brooke Sopelsa, "Meet 2017's Newly Elected Transgender Officials," *NBC News*, December 28, 2017, accessed September, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/meet-2017-s-newly-elected-transgender-officials-n832826>.

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