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The Inspiring and Challenging Legacy of Cyprian Davis, OSB¹

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I have been invited to speak of Fr. Cyprian as a member of the more recent generation of Black Catholic scholars, and to focus on what Cyprian meant to us and the lessons – even challenges – he leaves to the generation that now inherits his mantle.

I had the privilege of knowing Fr. Cyprian in multiple capacities: as a fellow Black Catholic priest and our membership in the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus; as a faculty colleague at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University (New Orleans); and as a fellow Black Catholic scholar and our membership in the Black Catholic Theological Symposium. Yet these are but only the formal settings of our professional relationships. More importantly and significantly, Cyprian was for me and many others a role model, a mentor, and even a legend. I always approached him with attitudes of awe, reverence, and respect – and deep admiration, appreciation, and affection.

There are few scholars whose works can be called “seminal,” “ground-breaking,” “essential,” and “indispensable.” Cyprian’s works richly merit these descriptions. But why? Allow me to answer by means of a metaphor.

We are all familiar with the affliction of Alzheimer’s Disease, and the tragedy of watching a person being robbed and stripped of his or her memory. A person without a memory is both rudderless and without anchor, lacking connection, direction, and even identity. Catholics of African descent in the United States were, for too long, suffering from a collective Alzheimer’s syndrome. We lacked answers to the basic questions of who were we and how came we here. Is our presence in this “white” church an anomaly? A curiosity? A mistake? A delusion? Or worse, one of the worst forms of cultural brainwashing?

¹Portions of this essay have been revised and augmented from an earlier contribution, Bryan N. Massingale, “Cyprian Davis and the Black Catholic Intellectual Vocation,” *U.S Catholic Historian* 28 (Winter 2010) 65-82.

Cyprian's works gave us our memory; they provided us with an anchor and a connection. His landmark study, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*,² tells our collective story, a narrative that is both tragic and inspiring. He relates the stories of a people who kept deep faith with Catholicism despite belonging to a church that too often betrayed their trust. By rooting us in our past of pain and triumph, he provided a compass to guide and inspire us in the present.

It has been said that amnesia is an enemy of justice. Cyprian's long and sometimes lonely hours in research, reflection, and writing were an indispensable contribution to our on-going quest for genuine equality in society and full inclusion in the Catholic Church. By exercising the historian's craft on our behalf, he told the truth or, at least, debunked some of the comforting fictions and convenient omissions that allow injustice to flourish. It is also said that history can be healing, if we have the courage to face its lessons. Cyprian, as our historian, has been a healer par excellence.

Cyprian's Lessons and Challenges for Black Catholic Intellectual Life

What, then, are some of the enduring lessons and challenges that Cyprian leaves to a younger generation as we strive to continue the path he pioneered? I believe that in his person and scholarship, Cyprian is an exemplar of characteristics that constitute the distinctive horizon of African American Catholic intellectual life.

1) Manifest Concern for the Legacy of Slavery for Church and Society. Engaging what M. Shawn Copeland calls the "virulent residue"³ of slavery is a cognitive, moral, and existential imperative for Black Catholic scholars. This stems from the fact that "black" was a racial identity formed in the modern consciousness during the European era of "discovery" precisely in order to mark those who were not "white" – that is European and Christian – as the nonhuman or subhuman "other" whose bodies could be exploited for commercial purposes. Thus "black" in the modern worldview is inseparable from slavery, colonialism, and injustice. Thus while "black" identity is neither equivalent nor reducible to "enslaved," the enslavement of Black peoples by those of European

²Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

³M. Shawn Copeland, "Theology as Intellectually Vital Inquiry: A Black Theological Interrogation," *CTSA Proceedings* 46 (1991) 51. Copeland elaborates upon the challenges the virulent residue of white racism poses for the entire guild of Catholic theologians regardless of race in her essay, "Racism and the Vocation of the Christian Theologian," *Spiritus* 2 (2002) 15-29.

descent is an inescapable component of intellectual reflection from the U.S. Black Experience.

Cyprian's writings attest to the central importance of slavery for Black Catholic intellectual discourse. He relates that this was the very reason why he initially resisted the study of American history as a professional historian. In an interview, he confesses: "I had no desire to study American history because I was not interested in reading about slavery, and to read about the problems of race and so forth. That was a painful subject and I didn't want to spend my time doing that."⁴

However, he returned from his studies at Louvain a changed man, a transformation occasioned at least in part by the charged racial climate and consciousness of 1960s America. He describes his new awareness: "The sixties changed me like it changed many others. I had gone to Europe as a rather prim and proper young man . . . I returned as a black man, part of a 'new breed' with a whole new understanding of Church history . . ."⁵ Engagement in civil rights activism and sensitivity to the hunger of Black Catholics to know their place in their church led him to the intellectual confrontation with the painful and tragic history he once strove to avoid.

Cyprian's research demonstrates the decisive impact that slavery has upon the history and moral authority of the Church in the United States. Describing a "church in chains," he documents the deep involvement of religious figures and church authority in the practice and intellectual defense of African chattel bondage. Yet he noted that this is not merely a tragedy of the past. Slavery set the tone for the U.S. Catholic community's subsequent and enduring relationships with African Americans, both Catholic and Protestant:

Slavery has cast a long shadow over the history of the United States. It has led to civil strife, racial violence, and ethnic resentments that still fester. American Catholic history is covered by that same shadow. . . . Not only laypersons but religious and priests availed themselves of slave labor. . . . (T)he Catholic church in the United States found itself incapable of taking any decisive action or of

⁴Mark Pattison, "Black Catholic priest-historian retraces his own history," *Catholic News Service*, (February 12, 2007). Available at <http://www.catholic.org>. Accessed January 7, 2010. See similar comments related in his 2006 Marianist Award Lecture, *To Be Both Black and Catholic* (Dayton: University of Dayton, 2007) 11. Here Cyprian states: "I did not want to study American history; I did not want to be taken up with questions of slavery and the tragedy of race."

⁵Davis, *To Be Both Black and Catholic*, 12.

enunciating clearly thought-out principles regarding slavery. This factor unfortunately prevented the American church from playing any serious role until the middle of the twentieth century in the most tragic debate that this nation had to face.⁶

Cyprian thus established how the experience of slavery sets the parameters of white/black relations that endure even today. One cannot understand contemporary struggles for racial justice without examining how these were forged in the crucible of Black enslavement. The mindset that enabled white supremacy to establish, promote and defend the enslavement of Black bodies – that is, seeing the Black body as inferior, defective, and a deficient specimen of humanity – has enduring manifestations to this very day. Cyprian’s personal and intellectual journey shows how Black Catholic intellectual life cannot evade a confrontation with the reality and continuing aftermath of African enslavement in the Americas.

2) Organic Connection to the Faith Community. From the Black Catholic Theological Symposium’s founding, Black Catholic scholars have not understood ourselves as “ivory tower” academics encapsulated in confines of abstract research. Rather, as “scholar-activists” we are vital participants both in our church and in the larger Black community.

Cyprian, despite being committed to a monastic vocation, models this organic membership and intellectual service. He states that he returned from his doctoral studies with “a totally different understanding of the role of monasticism in contemporary society.” Specifically, he understood that “the monastic scholar must make one’s own the quest for truth and the devotion to justice.”⁷ Never compromising nor apologizing for his monastic identity, he nonetheless was an essential participant in Black Catholic life in the 20th century. He was the major drafter of the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ pastoral letter on the sin of racism, *Brothers and Sisters to Us* (1979). He offered major contributions to the African American bishops’ pastoral letter on evangelization, *What We Have Seen and Heard* (1984). He was a major contributor to the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus’ racism statement on the 500th anniversary of the first enslaved African’s presence in the Americas (a.k.a. the “Sankofa” document).⁸ He either keynoted or lectured at every National

⁶Cyprian Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 65-66.

⁷Davis, *To Be Both Black and Catholic*, 12, 17.

⁸The National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus Statement on Racism: A Sankofa Observance of the 500th Anniversary of the First Enslaved African to Enter the

Black Catholic Congress gathering since its resumption in 1987. Spurning repeated overtures from more renowned centers of learning, he remained faithful to his vocation as a seminary professor and a mentor to pastoral ministers serving the Black Catholic faithful.

Cyprian's intellectual project thus shows that an organic connection to the lived experience of one's racial and faith communities is a *sine qua non* of Black Catholic scholarship. He challenges those who come after him to also understand that an effective solidarity with our stigmatized community of belonging is an essential part of the African American Catholic intellectual vocation.

3) Speaking Truth to and within the Church as a Means toward Justice. I have argued that a constitutive trait of Black intellectual life is a commitment to fuse the life of the mind with the struggle for justice.⁹ For U.S. Black Catholic scholars, this entails a commitment to speak uncomfortable yet necessary truths to and within the Church, challenging its propensity to ally itself both subtly and directly with the nation's endemic culture of anti-black racism.

Cyprian powerfully witnesses this willingness to speak difficult truths. He does this most particularly through his ability to unearth the suppressed and tragic memories of institutional complicity in the subjugation and humiliation of persons of African descent. He also challenged what he called "less than through" and thus self-serving treatments of U.S. church history:

What kind of view of the American Church do we give our students if they do not know that in St. Martinsville, Louisiana, it was taken for granted that a slave had to have his owner's permission to receive communion? What kind of American sacramental theology did we have in this country when it was the regular practice in much of the southern United States for white Catholics to receive communion first and Blacks to receive last? How many who teach pastoral theology know that this venerable custom was maintained until a very recent past? Historically, we like to speak of the American perspective on Church and freedom with John Courtney Murray and his contribution to political theology. Practically, we should examine that perspective from the viewpoint of parishes in Chicago which were in transition from white to

Western Hemisphere (1501-2001) (January 15, 2001). Available at <http://www.inaword.com/svd/sankofa.pdf>. Accessed January 9, 2010.

⁹Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

Black, with bitterness and even violence in some neighborhoods. . . . (W)e will find out about pastors standing on the church steps, barring entrance to baptized Blacks. This was also a vision of Catholic America that belongs to the very recent past and that affects us still.¹⁰

Cyprian's willingness to speak difficult and demanding truths was not without risks and attendant anxiety. He candidly disclosed his "panic" over the adverse consequences that could follow when he signed a prophetic manifesto, written by the inaugural gathering of Black Catholic clergy, which indicted the U.S. Catholic church as a "white racist institution."¹¹ Yet, he reminds us of the greater danger of silence when confronted with the reality of injustice: "History . . . has taught us that no one can remain silent in periods of great social turmoil and still retain any moral authority. It has also taught that there is no such thing as a political issue without moral consequences."¹² The danger of silence and evasion, he posits, is the betrayal of the Church's mission and integrity: "It is the Church's mission to transform society. It is a Catholic's duty to correct a wrong opinion regarding human rights."¹³ Cyprian thus provides for those who come after him a model of courageous truth-telling for the sake of justice.

4) Generosity of Spirit toward Racial Adversaries – even in the Church. One cannot read Cyprian's historical accounts of Black Catholic believers and not be struck by a constant and poignant dialectic: the institution's callousness, neglect, and abandonment vis-a-vis the faithful's obstinate clinging to a faith that gave them sustenance though no welcome. Cyprian relates that Black Catholics had to fight for their faith, but "their fight was often with members of their own household."¹⁴ They were a group that "she [the Church] treated as stepchildren, the last considered and the first to be jettisoned when funds and personnel were scarce."¹⁵ (One sees again how Cyprian was far from being a timid and retiring monk!)

Yet throughout Cyprian's accounts, and particularly in his own person, one finds a generosity and magnanimity of spirit toward racial adversaries. Dictionaries describe "magnanimity" as "greatness of mind

¹⁰Cyprian Davis, "Reclaiming the Spirit: On Teaching Church History: Why Can't They Be More Like Us?" in *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk*, Jamie T. Phelps, ed. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997) 46-47.

¹¹Davis, *To Be Both Black and Catholic*, 16.

¹²Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 117.

¹³Davis, "Reclaiming the Spirit: On Teaching Church History," 48.

¹⁴Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 259.

¹⁵Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 136.

and heart," "a refusal to be petty," "a heart big enough not to hold grudges," "generous in forgiving insult and injury," and "the ability to encounter danger and trouble with tranquility and firmness, while disdaining injustice, meanness, and revenge." Any fair-minded observer appreciates how such characteristics mark Black Catholics not only as a group, but also our intellectual projects. This seems to be rooted in an ability to distinguish between the core essentials of Catholic faith and its flawed institutional manifestations. Stated more colloquially, Black believers survive in the Catholic Church by recognizing that God is bigger than the church, and that the church is bigger than its leaders and wayward members.¹⁶

We have seen how Cyprian did not shrink from speaking demanding truths to the Church, forthrightly identifying its racist complicity and calling by name those who participated in wrongdoing. All the more, then, that one cannot fail to be moved by how he concluded a reflection upon his life's vocation, as he praised God for the gift of his Catholic faith and professed his love for the Church:

I shall always be grateful that God called me to serve him in the monastic way of life. . . . And I give thanks to God that I have been able to contribute to the building up of the Catholic Church. Daniel Rudd . . . was an ex-slave who sincerely loved the Church and the African American people. He said that black Catholics were to be the leaven in society. I hope that I have been a part of that.¹⁷

5) Universalism, Evidencing a Broadly Inclusive Perspective.

The noted African American philosopher, Cornel West, summons Black intellectuals to be "race-transcending prophets" who neither ignore the significance of race nor limit themselves to racial activism and investigation.¹⁸ Cyprian's work is animated by such a universal and inclusive perspective. He thus manifests a truly "catholic" outlook, one that stems from his deeply catholic understanding of the church. He related this understanding through using an architectural metaphor to describe his normative vision of the church:

I like to picture the Church as a very large family living in an ancient, rambling old house with solid foundations, enormous apartments, and a jumble of architectural styles

¹⁶Cyprian relates this realization in his account of his conversion to Catholicism, stating that he "learned that the holiness of the Church does not depend upon the holiness of its members." See *To Be Both Black and Catholic*, 9-10.

¹⁷Davis, *To Be Black and Catholic*, 17.

¹⁸Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 46.

that somehow never clash. Enormous cellars, musty libraries, huge fireplaces, grand staircases turning into narrow twisting ladders and sometimes disappearing all together, bricked up windows and doorways barely masking the sound of unseen voices on the other side, meandering corridors, lofty ceilings, narrow cubicles, secret passageways, gorgeous chandeliers and marvelous frescoes partly discolored, all of this together found in this old house. Somehow we all live here, some are here whom we do not see, some we see but we cannot reach, some are lost and we do not know how to reach them. But the old house stands, for it was built on rock.¹⁹

Cyprian thus summons those of us who share his scholarly vocation to also model this broad universalism and, in the words of West, to “put forward a vision of fundamental social change for *all* who suffer from socially induced misery.”²⁰

6) Concern for the Ordinary, the Absent and the Invisible. It strikes me that the writings of Black Catholic scholars often reveal modes of analysis that privilege vivid and concrete description over sterile and abstract speculation. This perhaps stems from a commitment to make visible those who have been erased from or rendered voiceless in the dominant accounts of knowledge. We see this in Cyprian’s intellectual work as he surfaced the protests of the unlettered that languished in nearly forgotten archives and retrieved the dormant memories of 19th century Black Catholic lay activism. In part, this is a consequence of his academic training, which taught him “to turn to the study of ordinary folk, to be concerned with those in the grass roots, to be interested in the humblest of society . . . the overlooked, the forgotten, the marginal.”²¹ His identity as a Black man led him to use his skills and sensitivity on behalf of those marginalized by our nation and church. He challenges we who remain to “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

7) Witness of Hope. I have often reflected upon the inscription Cyprian wrote when he signed my copy of his seminal monograph: “*That our history bring knowledge and hope.*” Because of the pervasive intransigence of white supremacist anti-blackness in our world, hope is a critical issue for Black people. For the enemies of justice are not only hatred, indifference, ignorance, and fear, but also weariness, cynicism,

¹⁹Davis, “Reclaiming the Spirit: On Teaching Church History,” 52.

²⁰West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 46; emphasis added.

²¹Davis, *To Be Both Black and Catholic*, 11.

resignation, and despair. Cyprian's works are a legacy that testifies to the power of memory to inspire future hope: a hope rooted not only in a community's dogged refusal to acquiesce to the limits imposed by society and church, but also in the God who claimed and stamped Black bodies with an indelible mark of dignity and worth.²² These, then, are among the signal features of Cyprian's life and intellectual legacy. Without exaggeration, he is an exemplar of a new tradition of Catholic scholarship and intellectual life. This legacy now stands as both an inspiration and a challenge to those who now and in the future will press ahead along the paths that he cleared for us – and perhaps take Black Catholic thought in new directions inspired by his contributions.

I want to conclude on the note of hope that Cyprian wanted to impart through his life and scholarship. Cyprian's historical accounts reveal that, despite how we might feel in the face of the contemporary struggles and challenges that confront Black people in general and Black Catholics in particular, we are not living in the worst of times. There have been eras, even centuries, of graver trials and difficulties for persons of African descent in the U.S. and in the Catholic Church. Yet, Cyprian shows us that we have survived and thrived in the midst of terrible and dreadful circumstances. Even more, in the midst of such trials, Black Catholics have provided the church with models of sanctity, leaders of conviction, and teachers of vision. I have no doubt that when a successor writes a future *History* that chronicles the contributions of this era's Black Catholics, Fr. Cyprian Davis will take his place among those models of sanctity, leaders of conviction, and teachers of vision.

May Fr. Cyprian rest in peace. May the Black Catholic Theological Symposium be worthy bearers of his mantle.

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A Bearer of Hope: a lesson he gives—despite the evidence to the contrary, these are not the worst of times. There have been other times of grave difficulty for persons of

²²Cf. "Stamped with the Image of God": African Americans as God's Image in Black, edited by Cyprian Davis and Jamie Phelps (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003).

African descent in the U.S. and in the Catholic Church. Yet, we have survived and thrived. And have provided the church with models of sanctity, leaders of conviction, and teachers of vision. Without doubt, when a successor writes a *History* that chronicles the Black Catholics of this era, you will be numbered among those models of sanctity, leaders of conviction, and teachers of vision.

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