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Cyprian Davis's Contributions to the Study of African American Catholic History: Articles in the *U.S. Catholic Historian*

Christopher J. Kauffman
Editor of *U.S. Catholic Historian*

*In celebration of Father Cyprian Davis's eightieth birthday, the BCTS invited his friend and fellow historian, Dr. Christopher Kauffman to reflect on the meaning of Father Cyprian's articles published in the *U.S. Catholic Historian* from 1986 to 2006. Dr. Kauffman pays special attention to the relationship of these articles to Father Cyprian's 1990 study *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, to his inspirational writings, and to his ongoing research and writing of *Black Catholic history*.*

In the pages of our *USCH* Winter 2010 issue, seven historians honored Father Cyprian Davis. Now I have the pleasure of contributing an article on Cyprian's work in the *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium*. I pleasantly recall many dinners we have shared during the evenings of academic conferences. At one meeting he gave me a copy of the first issue of the *Symposium*. He grinned with pride knowing I was unaware of its first publication.

As editor of the *USCH* I am grateful to have published six articles of his over a period of twenty years, from 1986 to 2006. Cyprian's gifts to our journal have underscored our niche as a publication committed to vital themes and greatly contributed to the advancement of fine history. This article will explore three themes: the making of his 1990 book *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, his inspirational articles and a few glimpses into the soon to be revised edition of his book.

Father Cyprian's first articles for us, "Black Catholics in Nineteenth Century America" anchored the issue titled "The Black Catholic Experience". Focusing on the 19th century this piece reveals some realities which were significantly expanded within his classic book. The first trend was the Catholic Church's complicity with slavery: priests, bishops, religious communities of women and men owning slaves while only European Catholic leaders opposed slavery. The second is "Elements of Sanctity": the foundation of the Oblate Sisters of Providence by Elizabeth Lange, assisted by Father James Hector Joubert, S.S., and the Sisters of the Holy Family founded by Juliette Gaudin and Henriette Delille. Father Cyprian tells the story of three black priests, the sons of Michael Morris Healy, a farmer in Georgia and Eliza their slave mother. This couple sent their sons to be educated in the North. Three of them were ordained in European seminaries and held prominent positions in the church in the U.S. Patrick Francis, who passed for white, became President of Georgetown University; Sherwood Alexander was appointed chancellor of the Diocese of Boston and James Augustine was appointed Bishop of Portland, Maine. None of the Healy brothers identified with the Black Catholic community. Cyprian concludes his article with the story of Daniel Rudd, a former slave who in 1886 founded the *American Catholic Tribune*, a Black Catholic weekly newspaper and who, three years later, initiated the first Black Catholic Congress held at St. Augustine's black parish in Washington, D.C. Father Augustus Tolton the first black priest in the U.S. recited a Solemn High Mass and Cardinal James Gibbons preached on the opening day of the Congress. The delegates went on record calling for Catholic schools, the opening of labor unions to blacks, improved housing and other social programs. There were four more Congresses, attended by lawyers, doctors, librarians, state legislators and others who expressed "to a national audience their sense of identity, their pride and their sense of confidence as Catholics and as Blacks." Though the delegates consistently asserted their deep loyalty to the Church the agendas of these subsequent congresses became more demanding, with an almost military tone. Without thorough documentary evidence Cyprian considered this latter attitude the rationale for the bishops'

calling for the termination of the Black Congress movement after its fifth meeting.

This issue of the *USCH* so expanded the historical self-understanding the Black Catholic community that there was a demand to publish more copies. Because we underestimated the extent of market demand, particularly among diocesan offices of Black Catholic Ministry, we published a third edition. The three editions also, of course, enhanced our journal's general readership.

Father Cyprian's second article was in the Historical Analysis section of a double issue titled "The Catholic Community 1800-1987." The front six articles were followed by a second section of two reflections on the National Office of Black Catholics and a brief piece on Offices of Black Catholic Ministry. The final section featured nine brief theological, sociological and historical papers which had been presented at the "sixth" National Black Catholic Congress held finally at The Catholic University of America on May 21-24, 1987. I was present at the event to underscore our intention to publish the proceedings of that Congress. We staffed a *USCH* table to extend our gratitude for the great interest in "The Black Catholic Experience," to provide copies at a good price and to add new subscribers among the hundred in attendance.

Cyprian's article was "The Holy See and American Black Catholics: a Forgotten Chapter in American Catholic History." While his first article regarding the five Black Catholic Congresses totaled only three pages, this next article devoted twelve pages to the movement, symbolic of a vast amount of new research. The last nine pages indicate the impressive extent of Cyprian's research in the Archives of Propaganda Fide in Rome and in the so-called Secret Archives of the Vatican. In the Archives of Propaganda Fide he found a January 1904 letter from Cardinal Girolamo Maria Gotti, Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide to Archbishop Diomedeo Falconio, the Apostolic Delegate to the US, about reports "that in some of the dioceses of the United States the conditions of the Catholic negroes, not only in respect to their faithful but also in

respect to their pastor and bishops is very humiliating and entirely different from that of the whites.” Gotti asked Falconio to call this to the attention of Cardinal James Gibbons so that a gradual improvement of conditions could transpire and lead to a removal of these inequalities. There was no evidence of Gibbons having initiated any inquiry about these humiliating conditions.

Later, from 1912 to 1921, two curial cardinals wrote letters to the apostolic delegate. They noted three principal concerns. They wanted to adopt a plan for evangelizing Black Catholics and to create an effective contingent of missionaries prepared to pool their resources to engage the apostolate to the Afro-American community. Father Cyprian said “Here the supposition was [that] a nation-wide ordinariate or independent episcopal jurisdiction for Black Catholics in America would probably be the most effective [means].” The third concern was for ending discrimination against Blacks through Catholic instructions of high learning, especially Catholic University, and the ordination of Black men to the priesthood. The bishops generally opposed the ordinariate. The Cardinal agreed to a provisional delay of the ordinariate and was satisfied to know there was an indication of preparing men for ordination. Though I am merely highlighting a portion of this article, Cyprian’s fine book fully narrates the Roman concerns and elaborates on other topics in a long chapter.

Inspirational Articles

Our double issue Winter/Spring 1989 was Spirituality, Devotionalism and Popular Religion. Three of the ten articles were related to Black Catholics: “Down at the Cross: Afro-American Spirituality” by Albert Raboteau; “A Contemporary Pilgrimage: Personal Testimony of Blessed Katherine Drexel’s Spirituality” by Roland Lagarde, S.B.S.; and “Black Spirituality” by Cyprian Davis.

Cyprian opens his article with a narrative of the Holy Family Society whose purpose was to provide the “colored people an opportunity of attending more particularly to their salvation and spiritual concerns.” This quote comes from Father John F. Hickey,

the assistant priest at the Cathedral of Baltimore who kept a journal of the Holy Family Society's meetings. They met every Sunday in the basement of Calvert Hall School across from the Cathedral for twenty-two months, December of 1843 to October of 1845. The society, numbering between 150 to 250 people, recited traditional prayers and sang English hymns. Cyprian reported that "There was at times spontaneous prayer."

The core of the article, however, is an elaboration of what the black bishops stated in their pastoral letter titled *What We Have Seen and Heard*. "Black spirituality has four major characteristics: It is contemplative. It is holistic. It is joyful. It is communitarian." To quote further from this piece would detract from its inspirational character. He refers to spirituals, to African roots, to the emotional and joyful prayers of the Holy Family Society, and to many examples of the devotion to Black saints, "the saints of dark and beautiful skins and dancing eyes."

Our Winter 1994 issue titled, "African Americans and Their Church," was intended to generate new research among graduate students and seasoned historians. Cyprian urged study beyond the African identity of the early 19th century to further and deeper meanings of 'Black American Catholic thought.' He also urged research to develop prosopographical studies. Research in archives of women religious who served Black parishes could yield valuable material on parish devotional life. He wished to see more attention given beyond the extensive publications about priests, bishops and religious as slave owners and to focus on Catholic abolitionists, including those in Europe who deserve further study. Among African American artists warranting research he mentioned "Mary Lou Williams, convert, Jazz pianist, composer of religious music."

Our spring of 2004 issue titled, "African American Spirituality and Liturgical Renewal," advanced this notion of future studies. The Contents Cover reads:

“African American Spirituality: Scenes, Stories and Meanings” by Cyprian L. Rowe; “Some Reflections on African American Spirituality” by Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., “We Come This Far by Faith: Black Catholics and Their Church” by Diana L. Hayes; “The Emergence of African American Catholic Worship” by Mary E. McGann and Eva Marie Lumas; “*The African American Hymnal* and the African American Spiritual” by M. Shawn Copeland; “This is My Story, This My Song: The Historiography of Vatican II, Black Catholic Identity, Jazz and the Religious Compositions of Mary Lou Williams” by Tammy Lynn Kernodle; “Freeing the Spirit: Very Personal Reflections on One Man’s Search for Spirit in Worship” by Clarence Rufus J. Rivers.

Cyprian’s article on African American Spirituality opens and closes with a focus on Daniel Rudd’s columns in the *American Catholic Tribune*. He refers to Rudd’s sense of ‘mission’: Black Catholics should be the “leaven which would raise up their people not only before God but before men... like yeast...that makes the whole batch of dough leavened,” and “The number of Black Catholics might be small, but, like the Kingdom, they can transform the entire Black American community.” He also cites the work of Nwaka Egbulem, a noted Nigerian theologian who captures African spirituality and summarizes: “All things find their origin in God and His Presence permeates all things. The individual is incomplete without the extended family and the community. There is power in the oral tradition; there is power in the environment in which we live.”

In a lengthy narrative Cyprian notes the influence of the African values of the Nguzo Saba had upon African American Catholics and presents English translations of the Swahili names as unity, self-determination, collective work, cooperative economics, creativity and faith. After an exploration of the Seven Virtues he returns to cite again Daniel Rudd’s “call to be leaven among Black Americans.” In spite of slavery and years of excessive racial discriminations Black Catholics “helped build a church; as parishioners they were forced to the back of the same churches.

Still as Catholics they sang their own songs prayed in their own cadences and practiced their own virtues. They found their own spaces in a sometimes hostile bra of Catholicism, into which their own spirit was with God's grace and thereby enriched the spirituality of the Catholic Church today."

In the fall 2006 issue titled, "Catholics in the South," Cyprian Davis contributed the article "Black Catholics in the Civil Rights Movement in the Southern United States: A.P. Tureaud, Thomas Wyatt Turner and Earl Johnson." His 1990 book included an analysis of Turner and he takes on a new perspective within this comparative study. Readers of the revised book will be impressed with Tureaud (1899-1972) who was a native of New Orleans and a graduate of Howard University Law School. Between 1937 and 1947...he was the only Black lawyer practicing in Louisiana. Three of his cases involved removing inequalities between salaries of white and black public school teachers. After the 1954 Supreme Court decision to mandate desegregation of schools he worked to implement the decision and confronted excessive and bitter opponents who used delay among other tactics with the intention of maintaining segregation. Tureaud was so committed to the court system and to the "sanctity of the law, he did not agree to public demonstrations to promote change. However, when demonstrators were arrested he took on their cases to protect their rights. Cyprian concludes: "Quiet and unassuming he would become one of the most influential Catholics of the twentieth century Catholic Church today."

Cyprian's article on Thomas Wyatt Turner (1877-1978) reveals his admiration of him. He received his Ph.D. in Biology yet it was in his role as leader of the Committee for the Advancement of Colored Catholics and later of the Federated Colored Catholics that Turner achieved national recognition as the dominant voice against discrimination in Church and society. His early agenda included ordaining black priests and he organized the Federated Colored Catholics to struggle against racial discrimination in the Church. The organization grew to 100,000 members by 1932. Two white

Jesuit priests considered it a throwback to the Jim Crow Separatist era and they formed the Catholic Interracial Conference of New York; without vital new leadership the Federated disbanded in 1952. Cyprian concludes: “By this time the Civil Rights Movement had moved in a new direction with new leadership. Ironically, Turner’s ideal of direct action, self-motivation and non-clerical responsibility became the order of the day. Turner was ahead of his time. Had his proposals prevailed, there would have become a greater horizon and a richer racial understanding.”

Earl Johnson (1928-1988), a graduate of Howard University’s Law School in 1958, became what Cyprian termed a bridge builder. Settling in his wife’s hometown of Jacksonville, Florida he became president of the NAACP. He soon committed his practice to desegregating the schools of the Duval County school system; eleven years later they become fully integrated. Johnson, the first Black member of the Jacksonville Bar Association, defended young Black demonstrators engaging in sit-ins. When Klansmen and members of the White Citizen Councils attacked Blacks led by some young members of the NAACP riots ensued and only when met with armed resistance did the police bring an end to the violence. Johnson was recognized as a local hero and honest broker in the 1960 and 1964 riots. His leadership led to elections to political office; Cyprian calls Johnson, like Thomas More, “a man for all seasons.”

Thank you, dear Cyprian, for the many gifts you’ve given to the readers of the *USCH* and for your friendship over the years.

Since 1982, Dr. Christopher Kauffman has edited the U.S. Catholic Historian. He is retired from the School of Theology and Religious Studies of the Catholic University of America where he held the Catholic Daughters of the Americas Chair in American Catholic History.