

Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium

Volume 4

Article 8

12-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Moore, Cecilia and Flint-Hamilton, Kimberly (2010) "Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.: To Walk a Path, To Be Transformed, And To Transform," *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium*: Vol. 4, Article 8. Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/jbcts/vol4/iss1/8>

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Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.

To Walk a Path, To Be Transformed, And To Transform

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This essay is Part One in a BCTS archival project to record, preserve, and publish the life stories of the senior members of our organization.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)

On a warm summer morning we, Cecilia Moore, Kimberly Flint-Hamilton, and Steven Hamilton, sat down with Dom. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. in his office at St. Meinrad Archabbey.¹ Classes were not yet in session so the halls were quiet. The window was open to the intermittent breeze, the gentle rain, birdsong, and the occasional roar of a lawn tractor. Cyprian's welcoming manner, with his shy, boyish smile and easy laugh, seemed in some ways to contrast with

¹Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., interview by Kimberly Flint-Hamilton, Cecilia Moore, and Steven Hamilton, 5 August 2010, St. Meinrad Archabbey, Saint Meinrad, Indiana. On August 6, 2010, Father Cyprian welcomed us to the archives of the Archabbey where we got to see his profession charter and photographs chronicling his life as a Benedictine monk. This article is based on some of the important things we learned about Father Cyprian's life, work, and vocation of the course these two days of interviewing, visiting, and praying with him and the rest of the monks at Saint Meinrad. Ruth Eng's wonderful book, *Conversations in the Abbey* (St Meinrad, IN: St. Meinrad Archabbey Press, 2008) was also a valuable resource for the writing of this article.

his position as BCTS elder and patriarch. And yet in another way, his gentleness and modesty exemplify what we stand for as a scholarly community – the commitment to the fundamental humanity of all persons – and are the manifestation of a life lived according to the Rule of St. Benedict, with grace, humility, and obedience.

Numerous awards for Cyprian's contributions to various disciplines and honorary degrees lay on bookshelves or hung on the walls, testament to the profound influence he has had on Black Catholic scholarship. Also on the walls were paintings, sculpture, and other memorabilia from his trips to Africa. Cecilia and Kimberly walked around Cyprian's office looking at these as Steve performed sound checks and set up microphones. After Steve finished setting up the sound and video recording equipment, Cecilia began asking questions and Kimberly kept track of the video and interjected the occasional comment or query, while Steve mixed and balanced the audio. Laughter permeated our discussion as Cyprian reflected on his life and recalled his youth, his education, and his profound commitment to God, to Christ, and to his community at St. Meinrad.

Cyprian's life began in Washington, D.C. when he was born to Clarence W. Davis, Sr. and Evelyn Jackson Davis, on September 9, 1930 (figure 1). He was named after his father, Clarence William Davis, Jr. A few years later his sister, Evelyn, was born completing the Davis household. Clarence and his sister grew up in the Howard University neighborhood where his father taught physical education at Howard University and later at the University of the District of Columbia and his mother also taught physical education in elementary schools in the District. They grew up in a richly intellectual home and community where debate about all things was encouraged, including religion.



Figure 1: Mr. and Mrs. Davis (from the personal collection of Cyprian Davis O.S.B.)

“I was enthralled! I was in heaven!” – Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.

From the time he began reading medieval history, Clarence felt a strong attraction to the Roman Catholic Church. He loved its antiquity among other things. He wanted to know what church was like, especially the Mass. But his family was not Catholic and his parents were not particularly church-going. Though his mother was baptized a Catholic as an infant, her father had a falling-out with the parish priest when she was a small child. Her family left the Catholic Church and joined a prominent and upwardly mobile Presbyterian congregation in Washington, D.C. Clarence’s parents sent him to Sunday school at the Presbyterian Church but the family did not attend Sunday church services. His parents were fairly chagrined by Clarence’s campaign to go to Mass but, being open-minded and liberal parents, they finally relented. Mrs. Davis arranged for her older brother, who had remained a Catholic, to take Clarence to Mass when he was 12 or 13. Said Cyprian, “I knew then it had to be wonderful!” And, there Clarence fell in love.

Cyprian recalled his excitement over his first-ever Catholic Mass. “I was enthralled! I was in heaven!” From then on he continued to attend Mass even though he was not yet Catholic and he determined that he would become a priest. Over the next few years he befriended several Catholics, one of whom was a monk at

the English Benedictine Abbey, St. Anselm. He encouraged Clarence to contact various religious orders and request information, cautioning him also to reveal that he was a Negro in his letters since many monasteries were not open to blacks. One response encouraged Clarence to consider joining the Josephites,² an order dedicated to ministry in the black community. The respondent made it clear to Clarence that the order was not open to a black priest but this response did not kill Clarence's determination to become one. What this information-seeking phase did make clear to Clarence was that he needed to actually become a Catholic. Conversion to Catholicism was the next campaign he launched at home with his parents. He was not of the age yet where he could convert without parental consent. By this time, Clarence knew he wished to join a monastic order where he could both be a priest and a teacher. Becoming a Catholic was crucial to both of these things happening. So began Clarence's quest for conversion and ultimately the monastic life.

“If you are going to be a priest, be one like Thomas Verner Moore.” – Clarence W. Davis, Sr.

The path to conversion and priesthood was not easy for Clarence as a black teenager. His greatest challenge came from his father, who while respectful of people of faith, was not a religious man. Mr. Davis was a black intellectual. He enjoyed the life of the mind, debate, and questioning and wanted his children to do the same. It was difficult for Mr. Davis to imagine that opportunities that he worked so hard for might not be available to his son. But young Clarence was convinced that his conversion to Catholicism and priesthood and the monastic life was not going to cut off his intellectual development. Rather, it would allow him to flourish. He argued these points with his father. Mr. Davis had studied with the renowned Catholic psychologist, Fr. Dr. Thomas Verner Moore, O.S.B., at the Catholic University of America. Mr. Davis found

² See Stephen J. Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

Father Moore to be a great thinker and an excellent teacher as well as a man of faith. Ready to accept that Clarence was going to follow this path to Catholicism and priesthood, Mr. Davis relented, saying “If you are going to be a priest, be one like Thomas Verner Moore.” Although Clarence would not follow Father Moore in the field of psychology, he did join him as a Benedictine, dedicated to a life of prayer and work. With his father’s acceptance, Clarence cleared the first major hurdle on his journey and at age 15, Clarence was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church.

A true lover of the Mass and prayer, young Clarence learned that the Benedictines at St. Meinrad excelled at liturgy. Today reflecting on the significance of liturgy, Cyprian explains, “In the Rule of Benedict, *opus dei*’ means ‘the work of God’, and the work of God is the liturgy. ... Nothing is to be preferred to the work of God. ... You don’t lightly avoid going to choir, you come. And I’ve tried to live that way, you know, even if it meant that I didn’t get much sleep, I’m going to get up and go, because that’s what a monk should do. He should be there, at the liturgy. And it should be a major part of our life. ... A Benedictine is supposed to take part in the prayers, but it’s supposed to be done beautifully.” It is clear that his ardor remains strong.

This strong recommendation of the beautiful liturgies of St. Meinrad fueled Clarence’s determination to visit, but his parents were not as enthusiastic about St. Meinrad, at least not at first. This was the Jim Crow era, and St. Meinrad was located south of the Mason-Dixon line in Indiana, a place known to have active Klansmen. They feared for their son’s safety. Even though Washington, D.C. was also segregated at the time, segregation in the South was much more extreme. But again they relented, allowing their son to take the long train ride to Louisville, Kentucky on his own, where he would be met by a priest and escorted to St. Meinrad. It was during that first week-long visit that Clarence first saw “Blacks Only” and “Whites Only” signs. While this was troubling, the monks at St. Meinrad were kind, and by the end of the week Clarence had made friends with several. And there were already two black brothers there, so Clarence would not have been

the first (although he was the first to stay and the first Black to be ordained a monk at St. Meinrad, as both brothers left the monastery soon thereafter). At the end of that visit, Abbot Ignatius Esser asked Clarence if they would see him again at St. Meinrad. St. Meinrad was, indeed, open to blacks and would welcome him. That visit changed his life forever. Yes, the monks of St. Meinrad would definitely see Clarence again.

“I figure it was my mother.” – Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.

After spending his first year of college at Catholic University (figure 2), Clarence’s parents agreed to allow him to enter St. Meinrad in the fall of 1950. Cyprian laughed freely as he recalled those early years. “My novice master [Meinrad Hoffman] thought I didn’t know how to work,” said Cyprian with a grin. The young Washingtonian was in fact unaccustomed to hard manual labor although he did deliver newspapers to many Howard University professors who lived in his neighborhood. Working in the monastery gardens aggravated his asthma, “One more excuse [not to work]!” said Father Hoffman. Cyprian laughed as he remembered that story. Hoffman, according to Fr. Cyprian, “wanted a black, but he wanted a good one! And he wasn’t sure about me!” The novice master, however, got along well with Mrs. Davis, who took the blame for her son’s lack of skill with manual labor. “My mother said, ‘I explained to him that it was my fault, that I didn’t teach you how to work.’” When asked, “What convinced the novice master to allow you to continue?,” Cyprian laughingly replied, “I figure it was my mother!” (figure 3).



Figure 2: Young Clarence with a friend at Catholic University in Washington, D.C.
(printed with permission of St. Meinrad Archives)



Figure 3: Cyprian with picture of his mother, Evelyn Davis
(photo taken by Kimberly Flint-Hamilton)

Davis remembers that the second part of the novitiate was easier than the first. But there were still challenges. Novice master Hoffman believed in humility, repeatedly demanding of young Clarence, “What do you have to be proud of?” When we asked what behaviors Hoffman was interpreting as prideful, Davis’ smile saddened just a tiny bit. “I think, in a certain sense, [he] was dealing with me as a black. It was some of that, but I certainly was his first one. And I got through it. I wasn’t sure I was going to make it, but I did.”

Even though St. Meinrad was open to blacks, southern Indiana was a hard place for a young black man to be in the 1940s and 1950s. Despite the good intentions of the Abbot, it still would take a long time for the culture to change. When Clarence entered the monastery in 1950, the other seminarians were still bemoaning the fact that black minstrel shows had discontinued the year before. An elderly monk who had returned to St. Meinrad didn’t know what to make of his new young black brother. He kept asking Clarence “Who *are* you?” and Clarence would answer “I’m a novice” or “I’m going to be a priest.” Not getting to the kind of answer he was really seeking, the monk finally demanded, “What *ARE* you?” It was clear then what he wanted to know. Clarence answered “I’m a Negro.” To which the elderly monk answered “What will you *DO*?” Clarence insisted he would become a priest, and say Mass and all the other things priests do. Well, a Black monk and priest of St. Meinrad would be a first for this senior monk and many others as well. Cyprian with humor in his tone told us that after this frank conversation whenever the elderly monk would see Cyprian he would greet him saying, “*Nigra sum sed formosa!*” (I am black but beautiful!).³ Clarence took this and much more in stride keeping his focus on his dream to become a priest and live the monastic life ordered by liturgy. It was all worth it to him.

³ Song of Songs 1:5.

“You should remember that very few people have what you have, namely the ability to fulfill your dreams.” – Wife of a Howard University Professor

Clarence finally became Cyprian when he took he made his first vows at the end of his novitiate. Novices were allowed to submit a list of three names for the Abbot to consider but they knew it was possible that the Abbot might select a name that was not their list. Hoping his wish would be granted, Clarence purposefully put the name Cyprian on his list. It was of course the name of an African bishop, the martyr St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage ca. 248-258.⁴ He was very pleased to publically announce his new name, Cyprian, at his profession ceremony (figure 4).



Figure 4: Cyprian reading Profession Charter at end of novitiate. Note Cyprian's hairstyle in the distinctive monastic "corona."
(printed with permission of St. Meinrad Archives)

⁴ Kevin Knight (editor), "St. Cyprian of Carthage", *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia* (2009), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04583b.htm> (accessed 5 September 2010). It is important to note that the Abbot did not have to use a name that a novice submitted, but he almost always selected the candidate's first choice.

In 1954, Cyprian made his profession of solemn vows and in 1956, he was ordained a priest, the first black priest of the Archabbey of St. Meinrad in Indiana (figures 5-7).



Figure 5: Ordination
(printed with permission of St. Meinrad Archives)



Figure 6: Class of 1956
(photo taken by Steven Hamilton from wall photo)

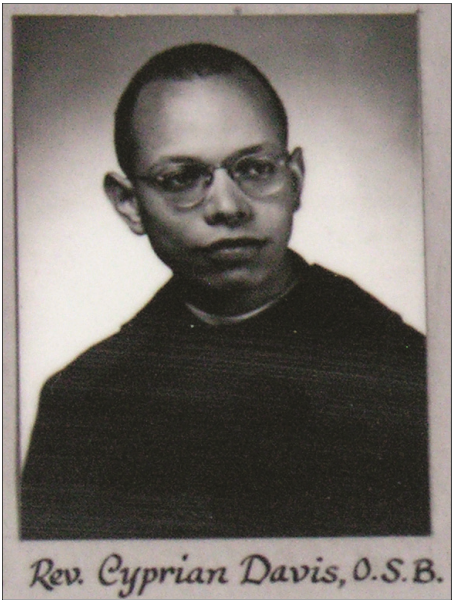


Figure 7: Rev. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.
(detail of Figure 6)

In reflecting on those years, Cyprian remarked with solemn gratitude, “I’ve never regretted living this vocation. There were times perhaps when I did think perhaps about leaving, but not really ... I remember when I was young, had just been ordained. The wife of one of the professors at Howard [University], she was not Catholic. She said, ‘You should remember that very few people have what you have, namely the ability to fulfill your dreams.’” Cyprian remembered his happiness at having been told that he would teach, and in the fall of 1956 he was sent to the Catholic University of America to earn his Licentiate in Sacred Theology (STL). Another of his dreams was coming to pass. In characteristic modesty he denied that he had any special skills saying, “I’m not nearly as intelligent as my father.” But his eyes lit up when he recalled his years at the University of Louvain in Belgium (1958-1963), the first monk from St. Meinrad selected to study at the premier institution. For five years he studied the *familia*, the non-monks, who lived and worked at the medieval Abbey of Cluny, for his master’s degree. Cyprian reflected “My work in the Middle Ages is the work of the little people.” The *familia* included all the people associated with monastery who were not monks, including serfs, various types of servants, and workers. Without them the monasteries could not exist but they rarely were the focus of historical attention. But, these “little people” and the significant roles they played fascinated Cyprian and ultimately would prepare him for his work on the history of Black Catholics. In many ways Black Catholics have historically been the *familia* of the Catholic Church in the United States.

The years at Louvain were happy ones for Cyprian. While there he served as chaplain for the Benedictine nuns at St. Gertrude and became great friends with them (figure 8). He recalled these sisters as especially kind and intellectually engaging. He also made friends among the diverse student body of Louvain and studied with great historians. When it came time to go home in 1963, he was happy and ready to return but the home he left would be radically different from the one he left in 1958. The United States was in the midst of the Civil Rights movement and the Roman Catholic Church in the middle of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II

began in 1962 and ended in 1965). Both church and society were undergoing profound changes and he would meet all these changes one way or another.



Figure 8: Cyprian with Abbess for the Benedictine nuns at St. Gertrude, Louvain
(printed with permission of St. Meinrad Archives)

Cyprian remembered, “I arrived back here in 1963, in August, in Washington, D.C., within a week of when Martin [Luther King, Jr.] made his famous speech, ‘I Have a Dream.’” Cardinal O’Boyle was there at the march, as was the Abbot of the English Benedictine Abbey. Cyprian marched with them. “What I realized was that, I left the United States a proper Negro, but came back with the change that had occurred, realizing it was the Civil Rights movement. ... [When I] got back to St. Meinrad, the change had come there too.” Cyprian laughingly called this period between 1963 and 1968 his “discovering that I am black” period. Parishes, particularly black

parishes, invited him to speak and to celebrate Mass (figure 9). He began to consider the question, “why should a black become a Catholic?” His decision to study Medieval Europe involved more than his love for the period. It was also in part to avoid the unpleasant realities of American slavery and historic racism, which he was now having to confront in this turbulent new era.



Figure 9: Celebrating Mass at St. John Church in Evansville, IN
(printed with permission of St. Meinrad Archives)

“We’re leaving tonight.” – Fr. Camillus Ellsperman, O.S.B.

For five years Cyprian continued to teach at St. Meinrad as the Civil Rights movement pressed on (figures 10-12). When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called on all clergy to join him at Selma, Alabama in 1965, Cyprian did not expect he would be one to answer this call. But he did when he agreed to join another monk, Fr. Camillus Ellspermann, O.S.B. on a trip South to join the

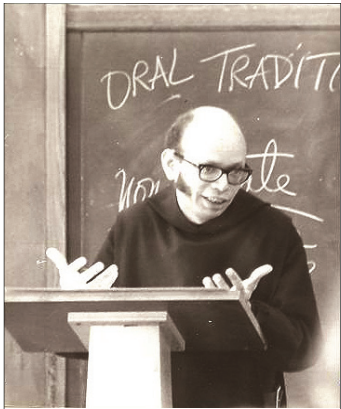
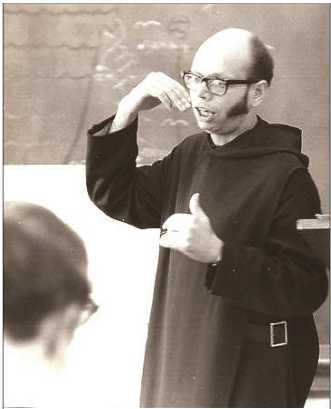
demonstrations in Selma. “He came up to me one day, and he says, ‘I’m going to Selma, I’ve gone to the Abbot, he’s given me permission, and I’ve got a car. We’re leaving tonight.’ Although reluctant at first, he thought, “How am I going to let him go alone? This white man?” Without any more thinking, Cyprian took his place in the car with Fr. Camillus, two other white monks, and a black Baptist minister from Evansville, Indiana. They arrived in Selma the same day the Unitarian minister was shot and killed.⁵ They stayed in the Black Catholic parish in Selma for almost a week, and were there when President Lyndon B. Johnson announced he would press on to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1965. This was a turning point in Davis’ life. He said, “I had become black.”

“Those who are really scholarly are always open and very generous.” – Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.

By 1968, Davis had convinced the Abbot to allow him to return to Louvain to begin working on his Ph.D. He wanted to continue his work on the Abbey of Cluny. But Cyprian’s new sense of blackness made him aware that the history of Black Catholics had been virtually ignored. For the Ph.D., Cyprian had to identify a secondary area in which to conduct research. He knew he had his secondary thesis when Brother David Spalding, CFX, author of “The Negro Catholic Congresses, 1889-1894” published in *The Catholic Historical Review* in 1967, gave him all of the research materials he had used to write this article.⁶ Regarding Spalding, Cyprian expressed admiration and gratitude. Spalding practiced what Cyprian believes and that is that “those who are really scholarly are always open and very generous.” Although Cyprian was not called upon to do the second thesis, this research cache served as his first

⁵ Reverend James J. Reeb was the Unitarian Universalist minister who assassinated that day while participating in a demonstration.

⁶ Later Brother David Spalding would return to his given name and was from then on known as Brother Thomas Spalding, CFX.



Figures 10-12: Cyprian teaching at St. Meinrad
(printed with permission of St. Meinrad Archives)

major lead in pursuing the history of Black Catholics in the United States.

“And this was one of those times!” – Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.

Before returning to Louvain, however, Cyprian experienced yet another life-shaping event. Shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the rioting that erupted in many major American cities as a response, the Midwest Catholic Clergy Conference met in Detroit. During this meeting black priests and brothers convened *en masse* for the first time ever and initiated what would become the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus. It was a radical move. Most of the priests there had serious complaints, some shared their personal trials as priests, some passionately and loudly, while others focused on the ill treatment of Blacks in the Catholic Church. Some believed that the non-violent way of King had failed and that it was time to begin thinking as Malcolm X. Cyprian’s face showed a troubled expression when he recalled this first meeting of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus in 1968. Acknowledging that many black priests and brothers had had bad experiences in the Church, his own life as a Catholic priest and monk had been quite good. The Benedictines at St. Meinrad had been supportive of Cyprian. He had been living his dream. “I couldn’t complain at St. Meinrad. They had sent me away to school, they’d given me an education I’d never have been able to get.” At the end of that first Caucus meeting the priests signed a manifesto that had ten points, the first of which was ‘The Catholic Church in America is a white racist institution.’ Cyprian recalled his thoughts at that pivotal moment. “How can the Spouse of Christ be a white racist institution? ... What was flashing in my mind was, this is just like the French Revolution! ... 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 Catholic Church historians normally will say that, at times that the Catholic Church in its history *was* corrupt, was even moribund! ... And this was one of those times!’” Then Cyprian laughed playfully, recalling that when he returned to St. Meinrad, the Abbot never mentioned the manifesto. “The Abbot had glaucoma, so he

didn't read much!" From that time on Cyprian became an active member of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus and he has rarely missed an annual meeting.

Recalling the years he spent working on his dissertation, Cyprian's expression grew pained when he told us about learning from a fellow student that one of the members of his committee didn't think he was a serious enough scholar. This experience is one that most if not all Black scholars have faced and we winced inwardly remembering our own similar battles with colleagues and committee members who failed to support us. This revelation caused Cyprian to begin to doubt himself. He said, "All of a sudden I thought, I'll never make it. I can never make it. If this guy is after me ... he could scuttle me right away. I've got to go back and do everything *again*." Davis spent years going through all the sources he had reviewed years earlier for his master's degree, making sure that no stone was left unturned. "I began to get depressed," he recalled. "I told the Abbot that I was a little bit depressed, but I did not want him to think I was really depressed, because he would say, 'well it's about time you came back.' ... I'd built it up so much that I thought if I don't make this, I'll have let down the race!" He also did not want to let his brother monks at St. Meinrad down as they had invested so much in him and his education. So he turned his doubts and fears into fuel to give everything he had to the dissertation and making it the best it could be. In 1977 he defended his dissertation in French in Louvain with friends in the audience encouraging him as faced the questions put forth by the jury. When he concluded his argument, the jury stood and applauded his work – not quite the *une grande distinction avec applaudissement* that would have marked the highest level of achievement, but a good-natured applause for all the hard years he had spent on the doctorate. At last, he had earned his doctorate in historical science from the University of Louvain, he had accomplished what the monks at St. Meinrad had supported him in doing, and he had not let down the race (figure 13).

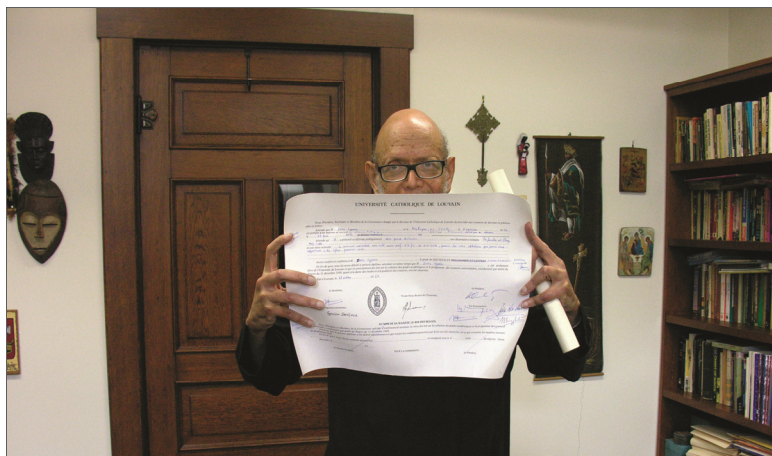


Figure 13: Cyprian holding Ph.D. diploma from University of Louvain
(photo taken by Kimberly Flint-Hamilton)

“If there are human beings, there are records.”
Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.

At Louvain Cyprian had learned to be a historian and to use the historical method expertly. Louvain’s philosophy was that “a historian is a historian” and consequently a historian should be able to study, research and write history from any period or culture and do a good job. This preparation and conviction served him well as he commenced the research and writing of *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, a project that C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya invited him take up as part of a major study on the Black Church funded by the Lilly Foundation in the 1980s. Cyprian told them he was interested but that he did not know if he could get the time to do the research and he would need the permission of his Abbot. Mamiya and Lincoln told him to write a proposal and a budget. In the meantime, the Abbot gave permission and support. When Cyprian heard back from Mamiya and Lincoln, they told him he had not asked for enough money. With a sabbatical and funding, Cyprian had a year to travel around the United States and to Rome to use archives and other sources to begin uncovering the lives, experiences, contributions and faith of

Black Catholics in the United States from the 16th century forward. To do this work that he knew so many Black Catholics desired to have, he used every skill he learned at Louvain. Now he was working in his “secondary” area, Black Catholic history, and his “primary” area, medieval monasticism, proved priceless. He knew how to dig for sources and how to scour them when found them. He knew how to place the subjects of history in their own times, places, and contexts. Cyprian remembered asking Monsignor John Tracy Ellis, the dean of American Catholic history, about where he should look to find historical records of Black Catholics, but Monsignor Ellis merely lamented how sad it was that no sources existed to write a proper history of Black Catholics. Cyprian knew this was not the case because he had also learned at Louvain, “If there are human beings there are records.”

Among the most important places his historical excavations took him were to use the sacramental records of St. Augustine, Florida and to the Vatican Archives. Cyprian was especially lucky to be able to use archives of the Apostolic Delegation in Washington, D.C. They had not been long deposited and were being processed when he arrived in the Vatican Archives. Though these papers were in process, the archivist told Cyprian he could look at anything up until 1922. There he found two thick folders filled with documents about the condition of Blacks in the United States.⁷

Cyprian’s transition into research and writing Black Catholic history was stoked by the questions that Black Catholics started asking him in the 1960s after he returned from his first years of study at Louvain. When he would visit Black parishes, fundamentally the people wanted to know “What is our history in the Church?” Their questions became his as well. He could not answer them at the time but his training as a historian made it possible for him to begin answering them. When *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* was published in 1990 by Crossroads, it offered what so many Black Catholics had been

⁷ Eng, *Conversations in the Abbey*, p. 18.

waiting for – the opportunity to understand from a historical point of view their ancestors' places in and contributions to the Catholic Church. And, the invitation that Cyprian gave for others to join in furthering the recovery of Black Catholic history in every chapter of the book helped to generate a new field in Catholic Studies, historical studies of Black Catholics in the United States. Currently, Cyprian is working on an updated edition of *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* that among several new things will include a deeper look at the participation and leadership of Black Catholics in the Civil Rights movement and the role of Black Catholics in the fine and creative arts and popular culture in America.

“I always had wanted to go to Africa and presumed I would never get there.” – Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.

Just as Cyprian did not anticipate how central writing and teaching Black Catholic history would become in life as a scholar and teacher, he also had no idea that another of his childhood dreams would come true in his later years. While he was a child reading histories of Europe he also read about Africa. He was fascinated by Africa and wanted to go there very much. However, because he had not joined a missionary order he thought he would never travel to Africa. In the 1990s Benedictine and Trappist communities in West Africa were seeking a monk/professor to come and teach the young monks the foundations of the Sacred Sciences. This is how another of Cyprian's dreams came true. Between 1990 and 2001, he made five trips to different West African Benedictine and Trappist communities to teach but also to learn. These experiences in the African monasteries had a tremendous positive effect on Cyprian. He said, “I learned a lot. They [the young monks] would come and talk.” They told him about life in Africa, about African customs, about their families. They also liked to listen about America. Cyprian taught the monks about the African roots of Christian monasticism about which they knew little. Cyprian was impressed by the “toughness” of monastic life in Africa and the happy devotion he felt in these monasteries. In Africa the monks knelt for prayers on stone floors and went without

the luxury of hot water for bathing. Yet and still, they were happy and seemed “carefree.” Cyprian remarked, “I appreciated it in the sense that everyone was happy.” He also deeply appreciated the great concern they showed for each other and for him. He felt at home in Africa and when he was given keys to libraries in the African monasteries, and he got to learn about Africa from African sources. Much like his first experience of the Catholic Mass, Cyprian fell in love with Africa and he hopes that he will get to visit there again. Reflecting on the time he spent driving alone, avoiding snakes, and getting used to the strange and wonderful environment, Cyprian commented, “There was danger as well as happiness, admiration. But it was living life at its fullest!”

“She was very Catholic – she suffered a lot.”

Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.

We ended the day discussing the history of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies (IBCS), which is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary this year. Both the IBCS and the BCTS grew out of those first meetings of the Black Catholic scholarly community at the Motherhouse of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in 1978 and 1979. Cyprian recalled the efforts of Frs. Joseph Nearon, Thaddeus Posey, and James Lyke (who would soon become Archbishop Lyke). He reflected on the illness and untimely death of Nearon, and on the efforts of Archbishop Lyke, who, as a black archbishop, was the most vocally and materially supportive of Black Catholics. Lyke was instrumental in the production of the African American hymnal, *Lead Me, Guide Me*.⁸ He was also supportive of Cyprian’s work on the history of Black Catholics. And Lyke strongly advocated for the formation of a scholarly group centered on the history, spirituality, and experiences of Black Catholics. That group would eventually become the BCTS, which began meeting regularly in 1990.

The IBCS, however, formed very soon after that first meeting at the Motherhouse. Cyprian recalled the efforts of Dr. Sr. Thea

⁸ *Lead Me, Guide Me: African American Catholic Hymnal* (Chicago, IL: G.I. A. Publications 1987)

Bowman, F.S.P.A., with the young Institute. He smiled as he recalled how the vibrant, joyful young woman would sometimes burst suddenly into song. “She was very Catholic – she suffered a lot.” Her passing in 1990 was a great loss to us all (figure 14).



Figure 14: Cyprian with Sr. Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A.
(printed with permission of St. Meinrad Archives)

The morning after our day interviewing, we met Cyprian the St. Meinrad library to visit the archives. There we hoped to find pictures of Cyprian as a novice and young monk. Cyprian had the keys to the archives so getting in was easy for us. But it makes perfect sense that he should have the keys because for the past forty-seven years he has been the Archabbey’s archivist. He is also the archivist for the Swiss-American Congregation of Benedictines, for the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, and for the Black Catholic Theological Symposium. The time in the archives was just plain fun. We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves there. There is nothing like being in the archives with an enthusiastic and dedicated archivist who takes pride in his or her place. This is definitely true of Cyprian.

Cyprian has a great collection of photographs that document his life at St. Meinrad from his novitiate to much more recent days. Cyprian's appearance has changed over the years – that's true for all of us! – but what remains consistent in his pictures from entering the St. Meinrad until today is his sincere smile. Whether you are looking at pictures of Cyprian as a novice, saying an Mass outdoors in the 1970s, on stage teaching with Sr. Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A., teaching at the IBCS or attending a BCTS meeting there is a sense of peace, happiness, and contentment comes through in the images.

The most important document Cyprian showed us that day was his profession charter (figures 15-16). Every monk must make a profession charter when he enters the monastery. Cyprian told us that no matter whether the man remains a monk or not, his profession charter is always kept forever in the archives of the monastery as permanent reminder that he was there. Cyprian also told us that when a monk dies, his profession charter is placed on his casket during the funeral. Before the burial that profession charter is removed and returned to the archives to mark for history that he was there. Each profession charter is exactly the same because the words of profession are the same for every profession charter. But, each is perfectly unique because they are they are all hand lettered and decorated, with the first letter of the profession charter *I* being illuminated. The variety of colors and symbols and lettering styles the monks choose makes each profession charter a unique work of art and prayer. Cyprian graciously allowed us to photograph his profession charter and to publish it with this article. It is a beautiful symbol of the life that Cyprian has happily lived now for more than 60 years since he entered St. Meinrad in 1950.

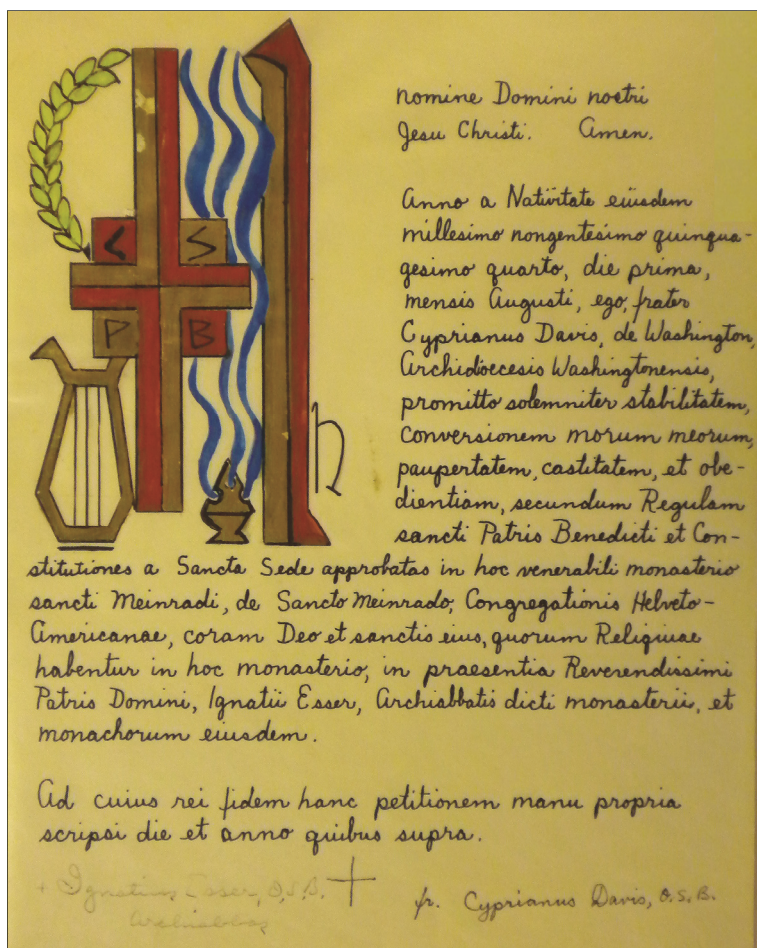


Figure 15: Profession Charter⁹ (printed with permission of St. Meinrad Archives)

⁹ Cyprian made the following comment on the language of the Rule of St. Benedict: "The Rule of St. Benedict is written in late Latin. Words are used in the Rule that are bad grammar for a classical scholar. This is the case of *conversatio* in the text of the profession. Later monks corrected what they thought was bad Latin. They considered *conversatio* as the same as *conversio*."

Benedictine scholars now insist that *conversatio* is the correct reading. But just what is the meaning of *conversatio*? Most consider that it means "way of life" Something that is stronger than conversion with the stress on perseverance. Because of this, since my profession, *conversio* has reverted to a more ancient

Translation of Profession Charter:

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

In the year one thousand nine hundred fifty four from his Nativity, on the first day of the month of August, I, brother Cyprian Davis, from Washington, of the Washington Archdiocese, solemnly promise stability, conversion of life (morals, character), poverty, chastity, and obedience, after the Rule of our Holy Father Benedict and the Constitutions approved by the Holy See in this venerable monastery of Saint Meinrad, from Saint Meinrad, of the Swedish American Congregation, before God and his saints, whose relics are held in this monastery, in the presence of the Most Reverend Father, Lord (Dom) Ignatius Esser, Archabbot of the aforesaid monastery, and his monks.

I have written this petition in my own hand in good faith, on which day and year (are noted) above.

Ignatius Esser, O.S.B.
Archabbot

Brother Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.

word. In fact, a few other Latin words have reverted back to an earlier text.” (personal communication, September 12, 2010).



Figure 16: Detail of Profession Charter
 The initials C, S, P, and B stand for: *crux sanctissimi Patris Benedicti* (trans: the cross of our most Holy Father Benedict)
 (printed with permission of St. Meinrad Archives)

After we had photographed and scanned some of the archival documents, Cyprian walked us to our cars and we said our goodbyes. It was nearly noon, time for the monks' midday prayer. Cyprian, however, spent a few minutes with us patiently, thanking us for the time we had spent with him and seeing us on our way. His smile was warm and the day was growing hot. It was already nearly 100° F, and we were eager to get back on the road to our respective homes in our air-conditioned cars. The heat of the day did not seem to affect Cyprian, however. As we drove away, he stood waving to us, smiling, with that twinkle in his eye that we have grown to love. His kindness, hospitality, modesty and grace stayed with us for a

long time as we drove away, eager to see him again in October (figure 17).



Figure 17: Cyprian receives honorary doctoral degree from the University of Notre Dame
Abbot Lambert, Sr. Jamie Phelps O.P., Cyprian Davis O.S.B., Evelyn Davis,
Shawn Copeland, Sr. Eva Regina Martin
(printed with permission of St. Meinrad Archives)