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Review – M. Shawn Copeland, LaReine-Marie Mosely, and Albert Raboteau, Eds., *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*

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UNCOMMON FAITHFULNESS: THE BLACK CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE, edited by *M. Shawn Copeland, with LaReine-Marie Mosely SND, and Albert Raboteau (with contributions by Diane Batts Morrow, Cyprian Davis OSB, Cecilia Moore, Katrina M. Samuels, Jamie T. Phelps OP, Diana L. Hayes, Bryan N. Massingale, Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory, Kevin P. Johnson, Paulinus I. Odozor CSSp, and Clarence Williams CPPS)*. Pp. xii + 221. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2009. \$26.00. ISBN: 978-1570758195 (paper).

From the time Christianity emerged nearly two millennia ago there have been peoples who, in the midst of oppression and injustice, have looked beyond their present realities toward the light of Christ and the message of the New Testament. *Uncommon Faithfulness* highlights the vision and accomplishments of African Americans who have done this very thing in the face of subjugation, racism, and other forms of oppression and neglect by exploring the ways in which their experiences have shaped and strengthened their faith.

Uncommon Faithfulness is an edited collection of papers delivered during the March 2004 conference of the same title hosted by The Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism of the University of Notre Dame. Divided into three major sections – History, Theological and Ethical Reflection, and Pastoral Concerns – this collection explores the faith of those whom society, and even the Church, had abandoned, or, at best, relegated to the position of second-class citizens. An important contribution to the scholarship of blacks in the Church, *Uncommon Faithfulness* features the

work of some of the most prominent theologians, historians, and pastoral ministers of our era, as well as a few relative newcomers to the academy. For those who desire a spotlight on modern black Catholic scholarship, *Uncommon Faithfulness* provides excellent insight into some of the most pressing issues facing African American Catholics today.

The *History* section explores the shaping forces of race and religion on the lives of African Americans. The work of Albert Raboteau opens this section with an analysis of African American religion based on religious narratives. From the slave narratives, to the Congresses led by Daniel Rudd, to the work of Howard Thurman and James Baldwin, Raboteau presents four models reflecting the major ways in which African Americans have – and continue to – view religion through the lens of race. Raboteau’s article is followed by two historical essays on the origins of two African American religious communities, the Oblate Sisters of Providence (Diane Batts Morrow) and the Sisters of the Holy Family (Cyprian Davis OSB). Batts Morrow describes the challenges faced by the Oblate Sisters of Providence as they struggled to form a religious community of black women despite “clerical disapproval of the concept of a black sisterhood” (p. 29). Suffering for nearly four years from the neglect of diocesan authorities after the death of their spiritual director, they survived as a community through devotion to God and to community life, and the hope that goodness would prevail over racism, indifference, and disdain. Next Davis presents a similar story of success against the odds, viewed through a look at the life of Henriette DeLille, founder of the Sisters of the Holy Family. This small group of black women dedicated

themselves to God and served the community by teaching young black girls and ministering to the sick and dying. Cecilia Moore's article on the desegregation of the Diocese of Raleigh, North Carolina, follows. Moore recounts the efforts of Bishop Vincent Waters to desegregate the churches and high schools of North Carolina while facing threats that many whites would withdraw financial support, leave their parishes or even the Catholic Church in general, and worst of all, provoke violence. For Waters, "Faith was the cure for racism" (p. 72), particularly faith expressed in the form of love for one's neighbor. Finally, the article of Katrina Sanders wraps up the *History* section with an analysis of the subtle ways in which black Catholic clergy supported the Civil Rights movement.

The next section, *Theological and Ethical Reflection*, features the work of M. Shawn Copeland, LaReine-Marie Mosely SND, Jamie T. Phelps OP, Diana Hayes, and Bryan Massingale. All five papers seek to answer these questions: How is the message of the Church articulated in the lived experiences of African Americans? How can the research and scholarship of the Church help guide Catholics toward the message of the New Testament? Copeland explores the message of Blues music and the way it captures the pain, sorrow, hope and faith of African Americans. She analyzes the imagery of the crossroads in Blues tradition and the ways it symbolizes the cross of Jesus. Mosely presents the ways in which Daniel Rudd's experience of *sensus fidelium* inspired and informed his leadership in the black Catholic community. Phelps discusses the Church's call to radical communion with "God, with all human beings, and with the universe" (p. 119).

She, like Gregory in the following section, discusses the problems of leadership and fragmentation in the black Catholic community, racism, women in ministry, evangelization, and building inclusive communities. A real highlight of this section is Hayes' "Faith of Our Mothers." In this paper Hayes challenges the biblical feminine ideal - meekness, subservience to men, lack of agency - and reveals biblical female strength. Hayes then describes the emergence of womanist theology and applies womanist readings of culture to the biblical representations of Eve, Mary Mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene. Finally, Massingale calls attention to the devastation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and its impact on the African American population, and uses the lens of the black spirituals to understand the impact of this disease on black peoples and the larger community's relative indifference to the suffering it causes.

The *Pastoral Concerns* section opens with an essay by the Most Reverend Wilton D. Gregory, former President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, who reminds us of how far African American Catholics have come, and points out several areas in which we must grow, such as leadership and youth ministry. Kevin Johnson's essay emphasizes the pivotal role that African American liturgical music plays in our ministries. Clarence Williams CPPS highlights the work of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus (NBCCC) in the development of a pan-African world view. Lastly, Paulinus Odozor CSSp describes the challenging experiences, even alienation, of African Catholic immigrants to the United States, jarringly reminiscent of those same challenges described in Jean K. Douglas' *Why I Left the*

Church, Why I Came Back, and Why I Just Might Leave Again (Fortuity Press 2006).

Uncommon Faithfulness is an essential work for Catholic theologians and scholars, no matter their cultural origins. As products of our cultures, it can be all too easy to become trapped in the prevailing prejudice and narrow-mindedness of our time. *Uncommon Faithfulness* reminds us that our opinions, beliefs, and habits shape our worlds, and presents the black Catholic experience as a model of faith, enlightenment, and perseverance in the face of injustice and oppression.

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