To Be Both Black and Catholic

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Marianist Award Lecture/2006

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THE UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON
Dom Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. was born and raised in Washington, D.C. He graduated from the historic Dunbar High School in 1948 and soon thereafter entered the Monastery of Saint Meinrad in southern Indiana. In 1951, he was professed and in 1956 he was ordained to the priesthood. A year later, he earned the STL from the Catholic University of America and the doctorate in history from the University of Louvain in Belgium in 1977.

Fr. Davis is most well known for his groundbreaking and inspiring study, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, published in 1990. In recognition of the seminal quality of his research and writing, Fr. Davis was awarded the John Gilmary Shea Award from the American Catholic Historical Association in 1991. An even greater testament to the significance of *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* is that it has inspired a multitude of master’s theses, dissertations, documentaries, and historical monographs.

Fr. Davis’ contributions to the U.S. Bishops’ 1979 pastoral letter “Brothers and Sisters to Us” and to the Black U.S. Bishops’ pastoral letter “What We Have Seen and Heard” in 1984 are also ways in which he has offered his intellect and his faith in service to the everyday lives of Catholics around the country.

Most recently, Fr. Davis has lent his scholarly attention to the history of Mother Henriette Delille, founder of the Sisters of the Holy Family, by writing the postitio for her canonization. In 2004, Father Davis published *Henriette Delille: Servant of Slaves*. He also co-edited with Sr. Jamie Phelps, O.P. *Stamped With the Image of God: African Americans as God’s Image in Black*, an anthology of primary source materials related to the history of Black Catholics in the United States in 2003. To celebrate the 150th anniversary of the foundation of St. Meinrad Archabbey, Fr. Davis edited *To Prefer Nothing to Christ: Saint Meinrad Archabbey, 1854-2004*.

Fr. Davis is professor of Church History at the St. Meinrad School of Theology and professor of history at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies of Xavier University of Louisiana. Fr. Davis has also taught at the Monastic Studium established in West Africa at the Abbey of Dzogbegan in Togo and the Abbey of Koubri in Burkina Faso in 1994. And, more locally, Fr. Davis lectures widely on the topic of Black Catholic history at colleges, universities, seminaries, and parishes all over the United States.
The following lecture was given at the University of Dayton on the occasion of the presentation of the 2006 Marianist Award to Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., February 1, 2007.
Words cannot convey my profound gratitude to the University of Dayton for presenting me with the Marianist Award. I am never at ease when talking about scholarly accomplishments, because whatever I have done has been and will be done better. I am happy, however, to be able to talk about my faith as a Catholic and to reveal the opportunities given me through scholarship and study. When I looked down the list of recipients of the Marianist Award, I came to 1960 where the recipient was Father Eamon Carroll, O.Carm. I knew Father Eamon before I became a Catholic, and when I talk about being a Catholic, it is with him that I can begin.

Growing up in the District of Columbia

I was born in Washington, D.C., in 1930. It was a Southern city; a city divided between whites and blacks. Even before the Civil War, blacks outnumbered whites. My mother's family moved to Washington from Virginia right after the Civil War. My father's family was also from Virginia and partly from Connecticut. I came from a Protestant family, but my maternal grandfather was a Catholic whose roots were in southern Maryland, where the Jesuits had baptized their slaves and the slaves of the landholders. My grandfather quarreled with the priest and left the Church. I never could find out what the priest did that caused him to leave. My grandfather returned to Catholicism shortly before his death. His eldest son, my uncle, was about twelve when my grandfather left the Church. My uncle had remained a Catholic. He took me to Mass for the first time. The church was St. Augustine's Church in the nation's capital, one of the oldest black parishes in the United States and truly one of the most beautiful. I was about 11 years old. The Mass was in Latin....it was during the Second World War....the church was crowded....it was a black parish but because of the war many whites were crowded into the congregation.

I had become interested in Catholicism because as a boy I devoured books, especially history books. When I read about the Middle Ages, I was enthralled by all the external aspects of the Catholic Church. I was
a hopeless romantic. It was all superficial. I do not know exactly when this historical interest changed from an adolescent transitory fad to a serious faith. My father had something to do with it. He was a professor first at Howard University and then at the University of the District of Columbia. He was an excellent athlete, but even more an intellectual and a voracious reader, the first one in his family to go to college. He had grown up with Catholic youths in Hartford, Connecticut. To him, Catholicism was not a foreign reality; but it was an ethnic reality. My father was on the Howard University faculty at the same time as soon-to-be civil rights leaders. Professors like Thurgood Marshall, who would lead the fight for desegregating the public schools and become the first black Supreme Court justice...Ralph Bunche, who would later be part of the United Nations Secretariat and was to be the 1950 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize (his family lived on the same street as ours)...Howard Thurman, dean of the chapel, a Protestant mystic and spiritual writer, to whom I delivered the daily newspaper.

My father and I argued about Catholic teaching. I was always trying to convert him. We did it every day at the dinner table, to the consternation of my sister. My father did not see Catholicism as evil. Like most African American intellectuals, he saw the Church as hypocritical. Many white Protestant leaders understood racial segregation as something mandated by the Bible. The KKK and other white supremacists found in the Bible support for lynching and racial intimidation against blacks, and religious intimidation against Catholics. On the other hand, in Washington and in many other cities both in the North and in the South, black Catholics were prevented from entering a designated white church or were relegated to a segregated section of many churches. Some pastors stood at the doors to tell black Catholics that "they were to go to their own churches." There were practically no black priests. Most private schools and universities were closed to blacks including well-known black Catholic institutions of higher learning. During the football season, all black football fans celebrated the defeat of the Notre Dame "Fighting Irish," because for the average black man in the street, the University of Notre Dame was the epitome of Catholicism. My father forced me to consider the inconsistencies of Catholicism in the United States. As in all African American schools, Washington, D.C. observed Negro History Week, which later became Negro History Month. All of us were to learn about the contributions of black Americans to the history of the United States. My father had a tremendous pride in black American history. He wanted me to have
the same pride. Between fathers and sons, the son is not always at the same place as the father. The seeds my father planted in me did not blossom until much later.

Catholic University had admitted black students in the early 1900s, and then the Jim Crow laws were introduced in Washington under the Woodrow Wilson Administration, which began in 1912. Universities, government agencies, entertainment, daily life in the District became segregated. There were no signs, only the establishment of a hard and fast Jim Crow Law that blanketed the city. Catholic University only began to readmit black students in about 1938. My father wished to study for a doctorate. He never finished, but one of his professors was a Benedictine monk, Dom Thomas Verner Moore, professor of psychology and psychiatry. My father considered him to have been the best teacher he had ever had. Although not easily impressed, my father developed a real admiration for him. He told me that if I had to become a priest, I should be one like him. My father was prophetic. I did become both a Benedictine monk and a teacher.

Conversion

My parents finally allowed me to be baptized a Catholic in 1946 when I was fifteen. I received instructions in the Catholic faith at Whitefriars' Hall, the Carmelite college at Catholic University. It was there that I met Father Eamon Carroll, who helped me become a Catholic. The friars gave me instructions, and I was baptized at the black parish of Holy Redeemer. It was understood that I was to become a Carmelite. Father Eamon introduced me to the growing literature about and by black Catholics. There was Elizabeth Laura Adams, there was the Interracial Review, there was the Baroness Catherine de Hueck and Friendship House. I came to understand the universality of Catholicism, the Catholic Church transcended all races, colors, and cultures. I realized that when a Catholic institution refused entrance to blacks as, for example, when Georgetown University refused entrance to black students, theirs was a flawed Catholicism—despite the

fact that Healy Hall was named for a black man. It was, as a friend of mine, black and Catholic like me, said, “I did not become a Catholic to waste my time looking at those prejudiced Catholics.” By that time, I had learned that the holiness of the Church did not depend on the holiness of its members.

**Vocation**

Despite the kindness and encouragement of the Carmelites, I became a Benedictine. I would say that the Benedictines were for me an affair of the heart. I could not be happy doing otherwise. During my high school, I had come to know a Sulpician priest, Carleton Sage, S.S.S., a professor of Church history at Catholic University. He was a convert. He had studied at Cambridge in England. He loved the monastic ideal and had made two attempts to enter the monastic life. One was at St. Meinrad and second was with the Carthusians. In the end, neither attempt was successful. I visited him regularly. He lent me books on the Medieval Church and on monastic life. An authentic scholar, he and I were from two different worlds. I am grateful to him for two things: first, he showed me what historical scholarship was, and then what the monastery that I should enter. It was he who gently nudged me in the direction of St. Meinrad. This was the 1940s, a time when many Benedictine abbeys had not faced the issue of race. Everyone had told me that since St. Meinrad was situated in southern Indiana, it was impossible that they would accept an African American into their community. Still, what was unlikely became the reality. When I visited the community for the first time, there were already two African Americans in the monastery. I was not the first to enter, but the first to stay.

**Studies**

I have never regretted becoming a Catholic, nor have I ever regretted becoming a monk. After ordination, I was sent to the University of Louvain to study history. It was for me the gateway to an entirely new world. I was taught what being an historian really was. I learned to

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dig for the evidence; to sift through the evidence in the most unlikely places; to critique and to distrust what we cannot verify; but to be above all painstaking and thorough in one's method. We learned that the good historian begins always with the question not with the answer. We were taught to have a broad view of history and then to specialize. The historian was a craftsman who could set up shop on any terrain. I chose medieval history because I was interested in medieval monasticism. In fact, my dissertation was about the medieval abbey of Cluny. 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. What I did not know then was that medieval study was a preparation for what was to be my main task, the story of black Catholics.

I had arrived in Belgium in the fall of 1958. Pope Pius XII died October 9th and Cardinal Roncalli became Pope John XXIII. No one realized then what the result would be for the Church and for the World. John XXIII was himself a Church historian, and this played a role in his outlook and perception. The Second Vatican Council brought us a new perspective on Church and a new perspective on the Church in the World. All of this coincided with the earlier movement in historical studies that had changed our way in asking questions both on the American and the European scene. This was the movement in historical studies that began after the Second World War with a medievalist like the famous Marc Bloch of the French School of *les Annales*. There was also Gabriel LeBra.S and my professors, Roger Aubert, and Léopold Génicot. We were taught that there is more to history than the political activities of statesmen, popes, and kings. We were 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. My interest was in the monks of Cluny, but my study centered on the people in the abbey who were not monks. I researched the “familia” at Cluny over a period of four centuries. The “familia” were the servants, the serfs, the pensioners, the pilgrims. These were the overlooked, the forgotten, the marginal. One had to search document by document to see if names were given, if the laborious tasks were described. What I found out was that this was the same method for studying black Catholics.

Return

I finished my first term at the University of Louvain in 1963. I received a licence in historical sciences. I returned to the States just in
time for the march on Washington with Martin Luther King delivering his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. So many things had changed in my five-year absence. Catholic priests were marching with their parishioners. The abbot of St. Anselm’s Abbey in Brookland, D.C. marched with his monks. I marched with them. Cardinal O’Boyle, the archbishop of Washington, was there. The Catholic Church was well represented in the cause of justice and in support of African Americans. It was a new day.

I began teaching in the St. Meinrad School of Theology in 1963. It was understood that as soon as possible I was to return to Louvain, write the dissertation, and receive the doctorate. The sixties changed me like it changed many others. I had gone to Europe as a rather prim and proper young man, somewhat conservative and conventional; I returned as a black man, part of “a new breed,” with a whole new understanding of Church history and a totally different understanding of the role of monasticism in contemporary society. With three other monks of St. Meinrad, we went to Selma, Alabama in response to Martin Luther King’s invitation that the clergy should come to Selma to place their lives on the line on behalf of the black population who were looking for the right to vote. It was the largest participation by Catholic clergy and sisters—in full habit—demonstrating for Civil Rights. We were there for almost a week.

Whether I wanted to or not I was engaged in the Civil Rights Activity. It was a time when I had to give talks in parishes about racial justice and desegregation. On the other hand, when talking in black Catholic parishes, I had to answer questions about the Catholic Church and Civil Rights. Most of all I had to answer the question about where was the place of black Catholics in the Catholic Church. Many black Catholics had been taught that to become a Catholic was to shed one’s history, one’s culture, one’s feelings, and one’s mentality. We are to leave all that black stuff at the church door. This was especially the case for those who were entering seminaries and novitiates.

**Black Catholic History**

John Tracy Ellis was deservedly referred to as the dean of American Catholic Church historians. His research and his publications were thorough and beautifully written. I had never studied under him nor had I ever been introduced to him, but I seized the opportunity at a meeting to ask him about historical research and the black Catho-
lic community. He pointed out that there was very little material on blacks and the Catholic Church because regrettably there are simply no documents. Still, this was a challenge not a defeat. I had learned at Louvain that there are always documents, although all are not written on parchment or paper, and all are not easily accessible; we must often use ingenuity and even possess a certain flair to dig them up or unlock their existence. But they are there. Unlike modern history students, who often have armloads of documents, medievalists often have a paucity of records. This has forced medievalists to do research in the most unlikely places. This is what happened to me.

Thanks to an article, in the Catholic Historical Review, for 1969, I came across an article by Thomas (David) Spalding on the five Congresses of black Lay Catholics, 1889-1894, organized by a black newspaper journalist, Daniel Rudd, born in Bardstown, KY in 1854. Daniel Rudd eventually came to Springfield, Ohio, and then to Cincinnati where he began the publication of the first and longest running black Catholic weekly newspaper, the American Catholic Tribune. Rudd's major theme was that the Catholic Church was the one great hope for African Americans. He was convinced that there would be an immense conversion into the Catholic Church by black Americans. The first congress was held in Washington, D.C. in 1889 and the second in Cincinnati in 1890. Then, in order, Philadelphia, Chicago, and last in 1894 in Baltimore. Once I had read this article, I realized that I had just what I needed. Writing Brother Thomas Spalding, he told me that he did not intend to do any further research on Rudd or on the black congresses. He very generously passed on to me all of his notes.

At this time in the history faculty in Louvain, the candidate had to be prepared to defend his or her dissertation and then the candidate had to be prepared to defend orally another thesis as far removed from the original dissertation as possible. My dissertation was on a medieval monastic center, Cluny, which I defended in French. But I had this supplementary dissertation on a movement of black Catholics and their publications. The fact was that I was not asked to talk about this supplementary thesis. The fact was also that despite my love for the Middle Ages, this thesis that literally fell into my lap would guide me into an entirely new direction. I now had the beginning of the story of black Catholics, their activities, their opinions, their mentality. I had names of people, I had correspondence. I had learned that Ellis had been mistaken, and Louvain training had once again helped me.
About 1982-83, I was invited to participate in a program on the Black Church and its history. The Lilly Endowment was granting funds for historical studies on the black American churches. Someone asked about the Catholic Church. Bishop Moses Anderson, at that time auxiliary bishop of Detroit, submitted my name. In short, I was asked to write a history of black Catholics. I was also given a grant. My abbot and the rector gave me time, combining a sabbatical semester and a leave of absence in 1984. In some respects, it was remarkable that a junior instructor received a leave to write about black Catholics. Benedictines have a sense of the past. Benedictines have not forgotten that historical scholarship is our heritage. My lifelong study of the history of black Catholics has been always supported by my community.

Archives

When I received the grant, I knew that I could do a little traveling like going to the Vatican Archives and the Propaganda Archives in Rome, as well as visiting the diocesan archives in the States. I remembered that one of my professors reminded us that one of the sources so commonly overlooked were the sacramental registers. From the 15th century onwards, every parish was obliged by law to keep a register of all those baptized. Baptismal registers were one of the most precious documents in researching information about the ordinary folk, the every day people. When I called the archivist for the diocese of St. Augustine/Jacksonville, I explained that I was working on the history of black Catholics and that I thought that there should be some information on black Catholics in St. Augustine—the archivist practically leapt through the telephone wire—Of course there is. I was on my way down.

The baptismal registers were precious because the names of the infant were given in the margin. If the person was black or mulatto, quarteroon, or in some way of mixed parentage, this was indicated. They gave the place of birth, the names of parents, and above all the names of sponsors. In each case, the racial origin of each person was given if not white. For the historian they were and still are a gold mine. The black inhabitants were both slave and free. The U.S. census (after Florida was made part of the Union in 1845) indicated the number of slaves by sex and age. The slaves were anonymous; on the other hand, baptismal registers and later the marriage and death registers, give us the names, the age, and the social condition. These registers are the
building blocks of social history. In St. Augustine, the death register of blacks and whites were in different registers. The presence of soldiers in the death register for blacks lets us know that after a certain period black soldiers were garrisoned in St. Augustine; and that some black soldiers were born in Guinea, West Africa. We learn right away, unlike the English, that the Spaniards had little problem in maintaining a company of black soldiers quartered on this white Spanish town. The presence of black Catholics in this country marks the beginning of the Catholic Church in North America in the sixteenth century.

Black and Catholic

What does it mean to be a Catholic and what does it mean to be black? On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. The entire nation erupted into violence and anger. In many large cities, the black population rioted. For most African Americans, the death of King was the final indignity. Violence was the only remedy. I had received permission to attend the annual meeting of the Catholic Clergy Conference on the Interracial Apostolate. The meeting was held in Detroit almost two weeks after a terrible riot. Herman Porter, an African American priest for the diocese of Rockford, Illinois, who was vice-president of the clergy conference, wrote a letter to all black priests urging them to come to a meeting one day before the opening meeting of the Clergy Conference. Referring to the call of Mayor Daly of Chicago summoning the police “to shoot to kill,” Herman Porter considered that all black priests should respond to this call to kill rioters, many of whom were young black youths. And so we were to meet as a caucus on April 16th.

This meeting, which was held at the Sheraton-Cadillac Hotel, was the first time that black Catholic priests had assembled as a national group. The meeting which began as a planning strategy to face the situation at that time quickly became a concerted effort to share their experiences and their feelings as black men in that institution that was then seen to be a very white organization. They spoke of their disappointments, their hurt, their bitterness. 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 to publish a manifesto. The statement began: “The Catholic Church in the United States, primarily a white racist institution, has addressed itself primarily to white society and is definitely a
part of that society.” How could any Catholic priests call the Church a “white racist institution”? But the statement, despite many hesitations and much discussion, was more or less accepted by the group which had stayed, for some had already left.

The situation was tense. At one point, Harold Perry, the auxiliary bishop of New Orleans and the second black Catholic bishop in American history screamed at one of the more militant priests. The bishop then left; it was very late in the evening. Then the announcement was made that everyone was to sign his name to the statement. All of a sudden, I began to panic. I had questions which I did not express. Are we going to withdraw from the Catholic faith? Even if this was not the case, what would my abbot say when he saw my name attached to this document? How am I going to explain my signature? I was given permission to attend the meeting of those in the interracial apostolate. The abbot knew nothing of a caucus of black priests.

When one is an historian with a vivid imagination like myself, present-day happenings are immediately transported back to some dramatic historical scene—my life is filled with “You were there” scenarios. This time it was 1789, Versailles, the meeting of the National Constituent Assembly, on the eve of the French Revolution. I could not get this picture out of my mind. I kept saying to myself that it was too late now. There was no other recourse. I was already in the line for signatures. I was truly aware than I did not know what was going to happen. And then Church history saved me. I know what I would tell the abbot and even more how I would allay my conscience.

Every Church historian knows that there were places and times when the Church was corrupt—the eighteenth-century clergy in France was an example. It was the Age of Reason. Most of the bishops were aristocrats, some were rationalists and free-thinkers, some were more at home in the royal court than in the cathedral. Also, there was Rome at the time of the Renaissance. In this country was the case of the Church’s implication in slavery…the silence of bishops in the face of segregation…the support given to racist institutions by the Church. In so many ways, the local Church in this country was a sign of injustice and division. I signed the document. My abbot never mentioned it to me. One of the other monks mentioned it, but it was never brought up for discussion.
Conclusion

I shall always be grateful that God called me to serve him in the monastic way of life. To be a Benedictine monk is to live a great tradition. Each day I bless God who has called me to live in this tradition. The liturgical celebration and scholarship are for me the two poles of Benédictiné monasticism. When I was still a young monk, I learned about Dom Jean·Mabillon (1632-1707) and the Maurist Benedictine Congregation of scholars in eighteenth-century France. In his treatise on monastic studies, he pointed out how monastic scholarship, especially in the historical studies, contributed to the welfare and well being of society. For this reason, he said that there is a duty for the monk to publish the results of one’s labors. For him, the monastic scholar must not publish anything that will not be useful for the Church or society. For him the goal of monastic learning is the knowledge of truth and justice. In fact, as he said, the monastic scholar must make one’s own the quest for truth and the devotion to justice.

Through no merit of my own, I was given the inestimable gift to use my research and scholarship in the service of the Church and for the advancement of truth and justice. And I give thanks to God that I have been able to contribute to the building up of the Catholic Church. Daniel Rudd, who spent much of his lifetime in this archdiocese, 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 part of that.
THE MARIANIST AWARD

Each year the University of Dayton presents the Marianist Award to a Roman Catholic distinguished for achievement in scholarship and the intellectual life.

Established in 1950, the award was originally presented to individuals who made outstanding contributions to Mariology. In 1967, the concept for the award was broadened to honor those people who had made outstanding contributions to humanity. The award, as currently given, was reactivated in 1986.

The Marianist Award is named for the founding religious order of the University of Dayton, the Society of Mary (Marianists). The award carries with it a stipend of $5,000.
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THE MARIANIST AWARD

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