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Delivered Remarks on Reception of the John Courtney Murray Award

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**Delivered Remarks on Reception of
The John Courtney Murray Award
Saturday, June 9, 2018
Presented to M. Shawn Copeland by
The Catholic Theological Society of America**

With the John Courtney Murray Award, the Catholic Theological Society of America does me a great honor. I am humbled and very grateful. This Award honors my Ancestors, my family—especially, Barbara for the grace of her love and patience, my mother, and my late grandmother. It honors my friends, my schools, my teachers—especially Sister Mary Rosalie and Professor Frederick Lawrence; my faculty colleagues from St. Norbert College, Yale, Marquette, and Boston College. Bob Daly, S.J., who was our chair when I began my theological studies at BC is here tonight and our current chair, Richard Gaillardetz flew in from Rome yesterday to be here. And, the Award honors my students. *Thank you.*

This Award is not just about me, it is about us. This is our story. 45 years ago, at the 1973 CTSA convention, Preston Williams, Houghton Professor of Theology and Contemporary Change at Harvard Divinity School, addressed the Society on the angular relationship of the Catholic Church in the United States to black people and black culture. He challenged us as “doctors of the Church” to assume responsibility to further racial and social justice “for the [sake] of the whole life of faith in America” and to “seize” intellectual leadership in the education of black Catholic scholars and theologians.¹ Let me note as well that the Secretary’s Report of that annual meeting records that black Catholic Franciscan priest Bede Abram led a Discussion Seminar on “Black Theology.” And Bernard Lonergan received the John Courtney Murray Award.²

At the close of that 1973 meeting, Richard McBrien asked CTSA member black Edmundite priest Joseph Nearon to chair a research team on black theology. In recounting their conversation, Nearon recalled that he said to McBrien: “the field is fairly limited,” and McBrien is to have quipped: “To my knowledge you *are* the field.” At the 1974 meeting, Nearon began his “Preliminary Report” to the Society with these words, “as I look around at this convention I note that I am the field this

¹ Preston Williams, “Religious and Social Aspects of Roman Catholic and Black American Relationships,” *CTSA Proceedings* 28 (1973): 15-30 at 16, 29, 24.

² Agnes Cunningham, “Secretary’s Report,” *CTSA Proceedings* 28 (1973), 297.

morning.”³ Because of grace gifting our small corner of God’s wide world—McBrien’s intervention, Nearon’s work, and the scholarship, advocacy, and generosity of so many of you here—this evening I can report: “I **am not** the field.”

Honoring me opens us *all* in gratitude for the faith, intellectual courage, scholarship, and fortitude of Jamie Phelps, Thaddeus Posey, Bede Abram, Edward Braxton, Cyprian Davis, Diana Hayes, Bryan Massingale, C. Vanessa White, Kathleen Dorsey-Bellow, Maurice Nutt, Shawnee-Marie Daniels-Sykes, La Reine-Marie Mosely, Andrew Prevot, Steven Battin, and Joseph Flipper. This evening I can report to the Society that the field reflects the work of women and men, who are lay, religious, and clerics; that the field is creative and interdisciplinary, diverse in method, hermeneutics, specialization, questions, and style. In other words, there *is* black Catholic theology and it *is* “authentically black and truly Catholic” *and catholic!* And as Bryan Massingale would have it—“radically black and authentically Catholic.”⁴

I would sin gravely against theology and piety, against love, if on this evening I did not say aloud three names: Black Catholic theology is *unthinkable* without the intellectual integrity and rigor, deep and audacious Christian faith of James Hal Cone. His passionate and searing critique of Christianity’s demeaning of the Gospel challenged us black Catholics to find and speak our *own* word and dared white theologians—Protestant and Catholic—to confront the enduring effects of the nation’s original sins of genocide and racist chattel slavery. Rosemary Ferguson, former Prioress of the Adrian Dominican Sisters, was grace to me during a most crucial moment of my young adult life: She took me in, and by doing so helped to make my childhood desire to become a theologian a reality. Quite likely, I would not be here tonight, if it were not for Rosemary; and quite likely, I would not be doing the theology I am doing if it were not for James Cone and—for Bernard Lonergan.

Honoring me must call our attention to the theological scholarship of our colleagues of Indigenous, African, Asian, Caribbean, Latinx, and Mexican heritage. We *all* must collaborate to confront the existential,

³ Joseph R. Nearon, “Preliminary Report: Research Committee for Black Theology,” *CTSA Proceedings* 29 (1974): 413-417, at 413; see also, Nearon, “A Challenge to Theology: The Situation of American Blacks,” *CTSA Proceedings* 30 (1975): 177-202.

⁴ See Bryan N. Massingale, “Beyond ‘Authentically Black and Truly Catholic:’ Black Catholic Identity for a New Time,” *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium X* (2017): 41-61. Massingale quite rightly pushes us forward in this ‘new’ old time to an appropriation of religio-cultural identity that is “radically Black and authentically Catholic.”

psychic, intellectual, and moral burden that white racist supremacy *has imposed upon the Gospel of Jesus, our faith, our church, our scholarship—upon all of us.*

Honoring me also calls us to engage the work of scholars who, in response to the Incarnation of our God, have placed the life, dignity, and flourishing of God’s human creatures at the center of their intellectual *praxis*: Theologians who insist that *women’s lives, differently-abled lives, migrant lives, refugee lives, queer lives, trafficked lives, persecuted lives, brown-and-red-and-yellow-and white-and, yes—black lives—all matter.* We must be grateful to Barbara Hilkert-Andolsen, who long ago alerted us to the corrosive racism infecting feminist analysis; to Anne Patrick, SNJM, and Jon Nilson, who used the CTSA’s presidential platform to call us to confession, conversion, and action; to Michael Fahey, David Schultenover, James Keenan, and Paul Crowley who opened the pages of *Theological Studies* to black Catholic scholarship; to publishers and editors who risked on our work, especially Orbis, Crossroads, Fortress, Paulist, and Liturgical Press. We must be grateful for the work of Thea Bowman, Al Raboteau, Cecilia Moore, Kimberly Flint-Hamilton, Diane Batts Morrow, Shannen Dee Williams, and Michael Cressler; the work of Laurie Cassidy, Margie Pfiel, and Alex Mikulich; the work of Bill O’Neill, Chris Pramuck, Maureen O’Connell, Karen Teel, Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Jeremy Blackwood, and Katie Grimes; the work of Dennis Doyle, Dawn Nothwehr, Kristin Heyer, Tobias Winwright, Gerald Beyer, Joseph Drexler-Dries, John Slattery, Jessica Coblenz, Kim Humphrey, and Craig Ford. I am deeply grateful for the work, care, and love of Michele Saracino and Robert Rivera.

Yet, the urgent challenge for us as Catholic theologians, scholars, and teachers *remains* the same as it was 45 years ago—the recruitment and training of black Catholic scholars for theological studies. We must “seize” leadership in this endeavor for the good of our country, for the good of our church, and for the greater honor and glory of God. *Thank you so very much!*

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