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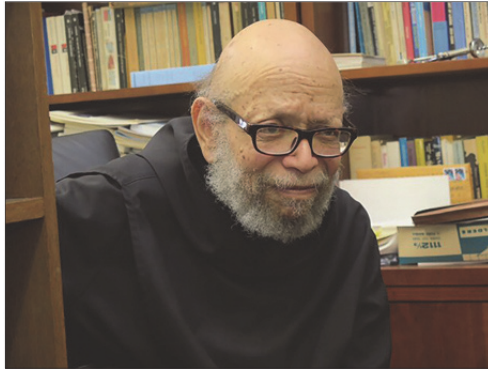
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Farewell, Fr. Cyprian

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Dom. Cyprian Davis, OSB
 September 9, 1930 - May 18, 2015

These past two years have been difficult for the BCTS. On May 18th, 2015, we lost our beloved friend, colleague, mentor, and role model, Fr. Cyprian Davis, OSB, at the age of 84. Six years ago, in 2010, Cecilia Moore, Steve Hamilton and I spent two days with Fr. Cyprian and recorded his reflections on his life. Volume IV of the *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* features the essay that resulted from that interview.¹

*Very few people have what you have – namely, the ability to fulfill your dreams.*²

Fr. Cyprian lived his life doing the things he most cared about – living as a Benedictine monk, researching and dedicating his work to supporting black Catholics. Raised in the Presbyterian Church, Fr. Cyprian was attracted to the antiquity and ceremony of the Catholic Church from the time he began reading Medieval history as a child. At the age of 12 or 13, he persuaded his parents to allow him to attend a Catholic mass with his uncle. That was when he fell in love. “I was

¹ Parts of this letter are drawn from the Cecilia Moore and Kimberly Flint-Hamilton, “Cyprian Davis, O.S.B.: To Walk a Path, To Be Transformed, and To Transform,” *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium IV* (2010): 29-56.

² Moore and Flint-Hamilton 2010, p. 37.

enthralled! I was in heaven!,"³ he recalled during his oral history interview. After a long search for an order that would admit an African American during the Jim Crow era, he settled on the Benedictine monastery at St. Meinrad Archabbey. Fr. Cyprian professed his monastic vows on August 1, 1951, and was ordained to the priesthood on May 3, 1956.

Parable of the Talents

To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one; to each according to his ability. Then he went away. Immediately the one who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and made another five. Likewise, the who had the two talents made another two. But the man who received one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money. (Matthew 24:15-18)

As a young man, Fr. Cyprian studied sacred theology at The Catholic University of America in Washington, and received his licentiate in 1957. In 1964, he earned a license in the historical sciences from the Catholic University of Louvain. The obstacles he faced while working on his PhD dissertation at Louvain included a doctoral committee member who did not believe he was a serious scholar, depression, a sense that he was inadequate for the monumental task of completing the dissertation, the fear that he would let down both his monastic community, and even the thought that, "if I don't make this, I'll have let down the race!"⁴ Fr. Cyprian persevered, however, and in 1977 he completed the doctorate, which focused on the *familia* (mostly the servants) at the Benedictine monastery in Cluny, Saone-et-Loire, France. He developed his talents unwaveringly, in the face of barriers that would have stopped many of us.

Parable of the Sower

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the

³ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴ Ibid., p. 46.

thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. (Matthew 13:3-8)

A generous and kind spirit, Fr. Cyprian shared his vast wealth of knowledge, casting much of it on “good soil.” In his own words, “Those who are really scholarly are always open and very generous.”⁵ He taught Church History at St. Meinrad and was a key faculty member at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies in New Orleans. He wrote six books, chief among them, the groundbreaking *History of Black Catholics in the United States* (Crossroad, 1990). In a real and tangible way, Fr. Cyprian founded the discipline of Black Catholic history. He inspired hundreds, even thousands of people, including Andrew Prevot from Boston College whose reflection echoes what so many of us feel:

Fr. Cyprian's book The History of Black Catholics in the United States opened my eyes when I read it the first time roughly ten years ago in a course taught at the University of Notre Dame by Sr. Jamie Phelps. At that time, I understood myself to be a black Catholic but knew almost nothing about my history. I read each page voraciously. I couldn't get enough of the rich details and stories of my community that had been hidden from me for my entire life and were in this text finally being revealed. I never took the opportunity to communicate to Fr. Cyprian how much his book meant to me, but I trust that he knows now how much it has touched so many hearts, including my own. Thank you Fr. Cyprian for taking me on a journey through a history which was so closely tied to the fundamental questions of my life but which I might otherwise have never known!

*Andrew L. Prevot, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Boston College*

Psalm 137:1-4

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat mourning and weeping, when we remembered Zion. On the poplars of that land we hung up our harps. For there our captors demanded of us songs, our tormentors for a joyful song:

⁵ Ibid., p. 43.

"Sing us one of the songs of Zion." But how could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?

Fr. Cyprian spent his career working to transform what for African Americans was a "foreign land" into a place we could call home. To advance the cause of social justice, Fr. Cyprian participated in the demonstrations in Selma. The experience was moving for him. In his words, as a result of this event, he says: "I had become black."⁶ He was one of the signatories on the manifesto of the NBCCC in 1968, he was a contributor to the 1979 pastoral letter, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*; a contributor to the 1984 pastoral letter on evangelization, *What We Have Seen and Heard*; a charter member of our own organization, The Black Catholic Theological Symposium, and the editor-in-chief of our *Journal*, which he worked hard to establish; charter member of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus (NBCCC); archivist for St. Meinrad Archabbey of the NBCCC, and of the Swiss-American Benedictine Congregation. The book he co-edited with Diana Hayes, *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States* (Orbis 1998), was named for Psalm 137 which laments the loss of home. Diana Hayes comments on the sojourner status of African American Catholics in her introduction to the book:

Strangers and sojourners no more, African American Catholics will no longer be required, in the words of the psalmist, to "sing the Lord's song in a foreign land" (ps 137, NRSV). Instead, we are taking down our harps and converting that "foreign land" into a homeland, one rich with the woven tapestries of our voices, lifted in praise and song.⁷

Volume IV of *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* is dedicated to Fr. Cyprian. Half the contributions were made to honor Fr. Cyprian's memory. Bryan Massingale's essay, *The Inspiring and Challenging Legacy of Cyprian Davis, OSB*, offers a reflection on Fr. Cyprian's works and their "ground-breaking," "essential," and "indispensable" nature, but most importantly, with the sense of hope by which he lived his life and modeled for others. Kathleen Dorsey Bellow's article, *Securing the Legacy of Black Catholics through Archival Donations: Dom Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. (1930-2015)*, A

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁷ Diana Hayes and Cyprian Davis, *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States* (Orbis 1998), p. 2.

Case in Point, highlights some of the important points in Fr. Cyprian's life and work, particularly his archival work, and she recommends guidelines to the membership of the BCTS for archival donation. C. Vanessa White offers a poem "Dom Cyprian Davis - In Gratitude and Praise" composed in Fr. Cyprian's honor. In my article, *Theology, A Portrait in Black: Product of Vatican II and the Civil Rights Movement; Catalyst for Future Black Catholic Scholarship*, I explore the context in which this seminal volume, to which Fr. Cyprian contributed, emerged and the way that the book and its contributors, inspired a generation of black Catholics, helped move the American Church on a path toward inclusion. M. Shawn Copeland offers a theological reflection on memory, forgetting, forgiveness, and reconciliation in her article, *The Risk of Memory, The Cost of Forgetting*. Joseph Flipper's article, *Theological Anthropology in the Theology of Marriage and Family*, explores the institution of marriage and recommends that familial and marital situations outside of what the Church has considered the norm—often seen as problems illustrative of the breakdown of marriage in contemporary society—may be regarded through a different, anthropological lens which contributes to a new understanding of marriage and family. Steve Hamilton's poem, "Just Enough", captures the current climate of racial divisiveness in our nation and power of love to heal. Finally, we feature five book reviews: *Black Practical Theology*, edited by Dale P. Andrews and Robert London Smith Jr. (reviewed by C. Vanessa White); *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* by Kelly Brown Douglas (reviewed by Kathleen Dorsey Bellow); *Democracy in Black. How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* by Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (reviewed by Jon Nilson); *Morality Truly Christian Truly African Foundational, Methodological, and Theological Considerations* by Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, C.S.Sp. (reviewed by Alex Mikulich); and *Racism and the Image of God* by Karen Teel (reviewed by Simonmary Asele Ahiokhai).



Photo by Kathleen Dorsey Bellow

