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Theology: A Portrait in Black — Product of Vatican II and the Civil Rights Movement; Catalyst for Future Black Catholic Scholarship

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Abstract: This paper explores the context in which the manuscript, Theology, A Portrait in Black, emerged and set the stage for those who were then and have continued to evolve as leaders in the Black Catholic Movement, among them, Dom. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. Its contributors continued on to become scholars, teachers, and leaders in the U.S. Church. The book, and its contributors, inspired a generation of black Catholics and helped move the American Church on a path toward inclusion. It was both a product of its time and a beacon of hope.

Keywords: Black Catholic, Vatican II, Civil Rights, segregation

The year 2015 marked the 35th anniversary of one of the most influential publications in black Catholic history. *Theology: A Portrait in Black* was the culmination of more than a decade of engagement by black Catholics against racial injustice. Inspired by Vatican II and the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, this volume changed the world of black Catholic scholarship. It was a first of its kind – in a tradition of black Catholic publications that includes Daniel Rudd's *American Catholic Tribune*,[1] Thomas Wyatt Turner's *The Chronicle*,[2] and the *Cardinal's Notebook* of Victor and Constance Daniels,[3]*Theology: A Portrait A Portrait in Black* was the first publication by black Catholic scholars, about black Catholics, and concerned with the role of blacks in the Church. This small green volume transformed the way black Catholics thought about themselves in the Church, and, even more importantly, inspired the next two generations of black Catholic scholars.

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[1] Joseph Lackner, "Dan A. Rudd, Editor of the American Catholic Tribune, From Bardstown to Cincinnati," *Catholic Historical Review* 80, No. 2 (1994): 258-281.
[2] Albert Raboteau, "Relating Race and Religion, Four Historical Models*,"* in *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, ed. M. Shawn Copeland (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 9-25.
[3] Cecilia Moore, "Victor and Constance Daniel and Emancipatory Education at the Cardinal Gibbons Institute," *Journal of Catholic Education* 4[3] (2001): 396-404.

This article explores the factors which contributed to the production of the collection, *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, and the profound influence of this volume on black Catholic scholarship in the generations since its publication.

Theology: A Portrait in Black emerged from the chaos of a world in transition. The atomic bomb had only recently destroyed two cities effectively ending World War II; radio had given way to television as the primary news and entertainment medium; new medicines were being developed, including penicillin and oral contraception; the space race was changing the way we thought about our place in our world and in the universe; while civil strife and the threat of world war raged on. Civil rights struggles were coming to a head all over the world. In the words of Charles Dickens, for many, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."[4]

The Catholic Church was experiencing change too. In October 1958, a new pope was elected. Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli became Pope John XXIII (now Saint John XXIII). In January 1959, within months of his election as pontiff, Pope John XXIII (now "Saint" Pope John) announced the convening of the Second Vatican Council. In many ways John XXIII was an unconventional pope. He visited children with polio, prisoners, and the juvenile inmates of a reformatory in Rome. He developed the habit of walking the streets of Rome at night, which earned him the nickname, "Johnny Walker."[5] Having come from modest beginnings – his parents were sharecroppers and John was the eldest son of thirteen children – it should have come as no surprise that John believed that the Church of the 1950s was in need of self-evaluation.

Catholics were changing along with the rest of the world. The way they interacted with one another was changing. Inevitably, relationships between blacks and whites in the U.S. were changing too.

> The signs of the times in the mid-20th century pointed to
> an astounding cultural revolution that threatened to turn
> the world community on its axis. … To varying degrees,
> institutions, communities and families found everyday life
> turned upside down and inside out. The clash between

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[4] Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1999).

[5] David Kerr, "Pilgrims Crowd Bl. John XXIII's Grave On Day He Died," *Catholic News Agency*, June 3, 2011, From Catholic News Agency web site, http://www.catholicnewsagency.com (accessed October 24, 2014). See also, "Look Ahead, Pontiff Advises Young Inmates," *St. Petersburg Times*, *Associated Press*, November 12, 1962, accessed January 2, 2014.

cultural and counter-cultural ideas and values raised new questions about life with no easy answers. The people of God had become a sign of the times.[6]

The time had come for the Church to think critically about the way the Magisterium interacted with the faithful and to start contemplating difference, as indicated in John XXIII's opening speech, in which he stated, "[E]verything, even human difference, leads to the greater good of the Church."[7] The faithful were urged to contemplate the stars in this address, which later became known as "the speech to the moon."[8]

Vatican II would last from 1962 until 1965. Pope John opened the Council, but would succumb to stomach cancer in 1963, so Pope Paul VI would ultimately be responsible for promulgating the Council documents. For the most part, the laity would interpret the purpose of the Council as extending a hand of welcome to Christians outside of the Catholic faith, as indicated in this excerpt from the New York Times: "The convocation of the ecumenical council … is intended also as an invitation to the separated communities in quest of unity."[9] This theme of welcome is touched upon in several of the Council documents. But Vatican II did much more than that. Vatican II changed the way Catholics viewed their place in the world and with the "other." Among the documents from Vatican II was *Lumen Gentium* (Light of the Nations), promulgated in November 1964, in which the following two statements appear:

- There is, therefore, in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex, because "there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all 'one' in Christ Jesus;

- Thus in their diversity all bear witness to the wonderful unity in the Body of Christ. This very diversity of graces, ministries and works gathers the children of God into one,

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[6] Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, "The Black Community and the Call for Vatican Council II (1962-1965),"*The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* VIII (2014): 21-53, quote from page 24.

[7] Pope John XXIII, "Opening Speech for Council of Vatican II," October 11, 1962, The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council , Vatican II, Papal Encyclicals Online, accessed October 20, 2014, http://www.papalencyclicals.net/vatican2.htm .

[8] "John XXIII: The Speech to the Moon Above … ", News.VA, Official Vatican Network, accessed December 14, 2013, http://www.news.va/en/news/john-xxiii-the-speech-to-the-moon-above.

[9] *The New York Times*, January 26, 1959, 3.

because all these things are the work of one and the same Spirit.[10]

These words, and these concepts, would have been very powerful to African Americans in the 1960s. As the '60s raged on in the United States, with the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, and many others, America endured the turmoil born of centuries-long oppression. African American Catholics, who had long been suffering the sting of inequality, began to find their voices. Inspired by Vatican II, the Black Power movement, and the fight for Civil Rights, they began to ask the critical question – why? Why did the American Catholic Church seem so oblivious to the suffering of black Catholics?

The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 and the riots that sparked and blazed in the aftermath – including Chicago Mayor Daley's "shoot to kill … shoot to maim" order[11] – prompted Illinois priest Herman Porter to urge all black priests to gather a day in advance of the meeting of the Catholic Clergy Conference on the Interracial Apostolate at the Sheridan-Cadillac hotel in Detroit. The priests who responded formed a caucus. Black priests had never before come together as a body in the Church's history. That act changed the landscape of the Church. These black priests demanded that attention be paid to the plight of African Americans. Historian Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., who participated at that 1968 meeting, reflected on that historic gathering:

> 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

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[10] Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964. From the Vatican Archives web site, accessed December 30, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm.
[11] James Coates, "Riots Follow Killing of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Chicago Tribune*, December 19, 2007, accessed October 10, 2014.

decision emerged to challenge the American bishops and to publish a manifesto.[12]

These black priests became the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus (NBCCC). At the conclusion of that historic gathering, they issued a manifesto which opened with this statement: "The Catholic Church in the United States is primarily a white racist institution, has addressed itself primarily to white society and is definitely part of that society."[13]

This was a courageous statement for a group of priests who would have had to answer to their respective bishops, abbots, and provincials. Davis elaborated on his feelings at that charged meeting. Standing in line to sign the document but still uncertain, he recalled:

> 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 the Catholic Church in its history *was* corrupt, was even moribund! … And this was one of those times!'[14]

The manifesto continued on to describe the condition of blacks in the Church and to make recommendations regarding the recruitment and use of black priests and deacons, and training for white priests serving predominantly black parishes. It also called for the creation of a department that would assist blacks in their struggle for liberation.[15]

Later that same year, black sisters gathered in Pittsburgh, PA and formed the National Black Sisters Conference. And in 1969, the sisters drew up a position paper in which they stated their goal to work for the liberation of blacks. Shortly thereafter, the National Office for Black Catholics (NOBC) was created in 1970, with Joseph Davis, S.M. as its director.[16]

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[12] Cyprian Davis, OSB, "To Be Both Black and Catholic," *Marianist Award Lecture 2006* (The University of Dayton, 2007), 15.

[13] Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. and Jamie Phelps, O.P., *Stamped in the Image of God, African Americans as God's Image in Black* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books) 111.

[14] Moore and 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*, vol. IV (2010): 29-56, esp. p. 45 (emphasis in original).

[15] Davis and Phelps, *Stamped in the Image*, 111-114.

[16] Davis and Phelps, *Stamped in the Image*, 118-119.

At the center of this swirl of activity, which has been called the Black Catholic Movement, was Thaddeus Posey O.F.M. Cap. Posey was a Capuchin Franciscan friar from Washington, D.C. He and his family were active in civil rights struggles in Washington, DC. A seminarian in 1968, Posey was present at that groundbreaking first meeting of the NBCCC. He was appointed secretary of the organization and held this office for over a decade. Posey was ordained in 1971. Like most black priests, he was assigned to predominantly white parishes. While stationed at a parish in Denver, he made this statement to the *Denver Post*:

> It seems anyone interested in social justice is branded a supermilitant nowadays. They're considered just another radical. Maybe people are tired, or maybe they're not aware of the situation. Some think that we've already been through the civil rights struggle and it's all over. But it's not. We have an obligation to continue the struggle for Chicanos, Indians and blacks.[17]

In the *Denver Post* interview, Posey stated that he felt obligated to fight for justice, particularly since the Church had not been attuned to the needs of minorities. Three years later, in 1976, realizing that the Church had not changed nearly enough since that fateful 1968 summer, it occurred to him that, even though there had been black Catholic lay congresses at the end of the 19th century,[18] there had never before been a meeting of Black Catholic scholars and theologians, the black intellectual leaders of the Catholic faith. He set out to make arrangements for such a meeting at the Oblate Sisters of Providence Motherhouse in Baltimore Maryland. With three cousins who were Oblates,[19] the Baltimore motherhouse was both accessible and convenient. After nearly two years of preparation, on October 12, 1978, the dream became a reality. Thirty-three Black Catholic scholars and theologians convened at the Oblate Motherhouse in Baltimore. The meetings took place over a four-day period. At the adjournment on October 15, Posey announced plans to publish the papers that had been delivered and discussed so intensely into a volume, entitled *Theology: A Portrait in Black*. The NBCCC held the copyright and the Capuchin Press in Pittsburgh published it. He envisioned this volume as the first in a series, as indicated from the words "Number One" printed at the bottom

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[17] Virginia Culver, "People Watch Black Priest," *The Denver Post*, December 21, 1973.
[18] Albert Raboteau, "Relating Race and Religion," 15-16.
[19] Personal communication, September 11, 2011.

of the front cover. A second meeting was convened shortly thereafter, and papers were collected from that meeting but were never published. The book, therefore, became a stand-alone volume, and its contents show the status and form of inquiry into black Catholic consciousness at the end of the 1970s.

Theology: A Portrait in Black bears the stamp of the dialogues, struggles and conflict of the previous decades. Several of the papers were clearly influenced by the many voices of social activism of the 1960s and 1970s. Some papers were emotional, even angry at the blatant racism of so many parishes and communities. Others were more reflective, hopeful for a better world that would be inclusive of the diversity of voices of the Church. Still others were more dispassionate, aiming to evaluate the condition of the American Church through a lens of quiet intellectualism.

In the introduction to the volume, Joseph Nearon, S.S.S. set the tone by positing two goals for black theology. Citing a paper that he had delivered three years earlier at the 1975 CTSA conference,[20] he wrote:

> Black Theology has a two-fold task. First, it may seek to give *a black articulation* of the Christian faith. Secondly, it may strive to give a *Christian interpretation* of the black experience. Obviously these two approaches are closely related. Yet they are not identical and the correct interpretation of any given black theologian must begin by ascertaining which of these two approaches he is taking.

Nearon raised the following questions, which formed the scaffolding along which the remaining twelve papers built their theses: (1) Can one be a Christian if one is black?; and (2) Can one strive for black identity and black power if one is to be a faithful Christian?

The volume was divided into six sections: (1) Black Values; (2) Black Self-Concept; (3) Concept of Celebration; (4) Spirituality; (5) Pastoral Theology; and (6) Catechetics. Each section contained two papers that outlined either a gap in the Church with regard to the spiritual needs of black Catholics, or articulated the way that the black Catholic experience enhanced the teachings of Mother Church.

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[20] Joseph Nearon, S.S.S., "A Challenge to Theology: The Situation of American Blacks*," Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 30 (1975): 177-202, esp. page 183; Joseph Nearon, "Introduction," *Theology, A Portrait in Black*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Capuchin Press, 1980), 5-6, quote from page 5 (emphasis added).

In the section on Black Values, Edward Braxton[21] raised questions about the meaning of black culture. Are there common threads in the black Catholic experience? What constitutes "blackness"? These are difficult questions to answer, since there are black people in nearly early every walk of life.

> The Black Catholic community, for example, is not one world. It is many worlds - the wealthy, the poor; the educated, the less educated; the simple, the sophisticated; the activist, the indifferent; the pious and the doubtful. Conflicts develop in a supposedly homogeneous group because of different horizons of the known, the *known-unknown* [i.e., the things you realize you don't understand], and the *unknown-unknown* [i.e., the things you don't realize you don't understand].[22]

Later in his essay, Braxton reflected on the need and potential for a black Catholic theology:

> Aesthetically, liturgically, and theologically, there could emerge reflections, expressions, and styles of the Black Catholic experience in a hybrid, in the profoundest sense of that term. Such a penetration and reinterpretation of the Black experience could well produce classic expressions that will penetrate the particularity experience in such a way that it illuminates the universal with a telling urgency and enriches the larger Church community with a much needed vitality. While this is a very real possibility, it can be lost by lack of diligence, lack of consistency, lack of collaboration, and lack of sensitivity to the complexities that are involved. In the fact of the present ferment in theology in general, there can be little doubt that the systematic formulation of an authentic Black Theology, for example, will be a slow process, with false starts and misguided condemnations. But the results may well be worth it. [23]

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[21] Now Bishop of Belleville, Illinois.
[22] Edward Braxton, "Religion, Values, Ethnicity, and the Black Experience," *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Capuchin Press, 1980), 15-30, quote from p. 24. (emphasis added).
[23] Braxton, "Religion, Values," 30.

In his concluding remarks on black values, Braxton remarked that we all are "living human documents" with our own distinctive histories and interpretations, all of which are of vital importance to the Church. Black Catholics must be prepared to face conflict arising from different interpretations based on differing points of view, yet remain attentive to their critical role in the "shape of the Church to come."[24]

The essay of Jamie Phelps, O.P. on Black Self Concept drew on social science research and the documents of Vatican II. She began by discussing studies of the damage done to the self-image of children who grow up in a society permeated by racism, and points out that a Church that embraces the Vatican II messages of inclusion would support the growth and development of black Catholics and therefore be strengthened.

Phelps' essay calls to mind the experiments of psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark who studied the self-concept of black children by giving them two dolls that were identical in every way except their skin color. One doll was white while the other was black. The children were asked to comment on which doll they felt was prettier, nicer, smarter, and the like. The Clark experiments were meant to determine whether there was a link between educational segregation of black and white children and the self-concept of blacks. They concluded that segregation is one of the primary factors eroding the self-image of black children, so much so that the majority of children tested considered the white dolls more attractive, more "good", nicer, and were preferred as playmates, while the black dolls were uglier, "bad", and thought to be less friendly. The Clarks' study was used as evidence in Brown vs. the Board of Education decision of 1954, arguably one of the most significant, if not the most significant, Supreme Court decisions in the twentieth century.[25]

> [A]s minority group children learn the inferior status to which they are assigned – as they observe the fact that they are almost always segregated and kept apart from others who are treated with more respect by the society as a whole – they often react with feelings of inferiority and a sense of personal humiliation. Many of them

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[24] Braxton, "Religion, Values," 30.

[25] V.P. Franklin, "Introduction: Brown v. Board of Education: Fifty Years of Educational Change in the United States," *The Journal of African American History* 90, *No. 1/2, Brown v. Board of Education: Fifty Years of Educational Change in the United States, 1954-2004*, (2005): 1-8, quote from page 4.

> become confused about their own personal worth. … The
> report indicates that minority group children of all social
> and economic classes often react with a generally
> defeatist attitude and a lowering of personal ambitions.[26]

In fact, the results of the Clark study were confirmed by personal
testimony, e.g., by Ethel Belton, who had tried to find transportation to
and from school for her tenth-grade daughter Louise. During the trial
that followed in 1951, she replied to a question about the effects of
school segregation on her daughter:

> To my understanding and my knowledge we are all born
> Americans, and when the State sets up separate schools
> for certain people of a separate color, then I and others
> are made to feel ashamed and embarrassed, because
> such separations humiliate us and make us feel that we
> are not as good Americans as other Americans, and I
> don't want my child growing up feeling that she is not as
> good an American as any other American, so much that
> the school she goes to, she has to be separated or set
> apart to attend a separate, special school.[27]

This sentiment is consistent with that of Carter G. Woodson, expressed
in 1933:

> The same educational process which inspires and
> stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is
> everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile,
> depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of
> genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does
> not amount to much and never will measure up to the
> standards of other peoples. … The difficulty is that the

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[26] Kenneth B. Clark, Isidor Chein, and Stuart W. Cook, "The Effects of Segregation and the Consequences of Desegregation, A {September 1952} Social Science Statement in the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Supreme Court Case," reprinted in *American Psychologist* 59 (September 2004): 495-501, quote from pp. 495-496.

[27] Brett Gadsden, "'He Said He Wouldn't Help Me Get a Jim Crow Bus': The Shifting Terms of the Challenge to Segregated Public Education, 1950-1954", *The Journal of African American History, vol. 90, No. 1/2, Brown v. Board of Education: Fifty Years of Educational Change in the United States, 1954-2004* (2005): 9-28, quote from page 14.

"educated Negro" is compelled to live and move among his own people whom he has been taught to despise.[28]

Yet, in her essay, Phelps elaborated on the Clarks' findings by pointing out the number of black children who managed to form positive self-concepts because of positive black role models.

Children nurtured in the milieu of positive self-affirmation within his/her Black family and Black community, can attain a positive self-concept. Such children attain a sense of competence because they begin to view the Black world around themselves as a realm within which they can cope. Their perception is strengthened when they are permitted to have some power over their destiny. Successful experiences in coping well in their nurturing community assures one of the ability to satisfactorily meet the new challenges which arise and result in achievement in the spheres of both the Black and White worlds.[29]

Phelps developed her thesis on self-concept through the lens of two papal encyclicals. In Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, racial discrimination is challenged: "The conviction that all men [women] are equal by reason of their natural dignity, has been generally accepted. Hence racial discrimination can no longer be justified"[30] And in Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progresso*, racism is identified as a divisive agent: "Racism is still an obstacle to collaboration among disadvantaged nations and causes a division and hatred within countries whenever individuals and families see the inviolable rights of the human person held in scorn, as they themselves are unjustly subjected to a regime of discrimination because of their skin color."[31] Finally, Phelps cited the Vatican II decree, *Ad Gentes:*

For the Church is more firmly rooted in a people when the different communities of the faithful have members of salvation who are drawn from their own members –

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[28] Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, (New York: Dover edition, 2005 [1933]), ix-x.

[29] Jamie Phelps, O.P., "Black Self-Concept," *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Capuchin Press, 1980),52-65, quote from page 55.

[30] Pope John XXIII. *Pacem in Terris*, as quoted *in Social Justice: The Catholic Position*, ed. Vincent P. Mainelli (Washington, D.C.: Consortium Press, 1975), #309.

[31] Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progresso*, as quoted in *Social Justice: The Catholic Position*, ed. Vincent P. Mainelli (Washington, D.C.: Consortium Press, 1967), #866, 867, 868.

bishops, priests, deacons, serving their own brothers (sisters) so that these young churches gradually acquire a diocesan structure of their own clergy.[32]

Phelps made the point that, in order to bring Blacks into authentic communion with the Church, local churches need to foster the development of a positive black self-concept. This would allow blacks, "to discover for themselves in full fidelity to their own proper genius the means for their spiritual, physical, and psychological progress," but it would require significant re-structuring of the American Church which, in her words, "tends to identify with the racist aspects of this nation's institutions."[33]

In the section on Celebration, liturgist and composer Clarence Rivers wrote about double standards, the tragedy of forced assimilation, and the oppressive nature of the Jim Crow South where he was born. Blackness is something that should be celebrated, he maintained. Black churches have the power to foster a positive self-concept. To paint the portrait of a black theology, one needs the right tools, and for Rivers, liturgy was the answer. He wrote:

> Up until now all that has been achieved in bringing together black culture and Catholic worship in the U.S. has been achieved by individuals and individual parishes. There has been no ongoing official Church program except the attempts of NOBC's [National Office of Black Catholics] department of culture and worship, to promote the integration of black culture and Catholic worship. In fact most of what has been done has been done in spite of the official Church rather than because of it.[34]

Rivers believed that there was need for an authentic black expression of worship within the Church. And this was a change that only blacks had the capacity to effect. Consistent with the theme of *Lumen Gentium,* Rivers believed that black Catholics should be able to partake of full membership in the Church by contributing their own distinctive graces and ministries. Rivers' efforts bore fruit. He inspired

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[32] Decree *Ad Gentes* on the Mission Activity of the Church, From the Vatican Archives web site, accessed January 2, 2014,
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm.

[33] Phelps, "Black Self Concept," 60.

[34] Clarence Rivers, ""Thank God We Ain't What We Was: The State of the Liturgy in the Black Catholic Community," *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Capuchin Press, 1980), 66-74, quote from page 72.

the hymnal, *Lead Me, Guide Me,* which the NBCCC published and dedicated to him in 1987.

The strong influence of the Black Power Movement, Black Liberation Theology, the Nation of Islam, and the Pan-African values system of Ron Maulana Karenga are evident in the paper by Al McKnight, C.S.Sp., entitled "A Black Christian Perspective of Spirituality." McKnight opened with an emotional commentary on the devaluation of black life in the United States and the frightening degree to which blacks are affected by drugs, violence, depression, and mental illness. Citing the work of Albert Cleage,[35] he denounced the "declaration of black inferiority" and the way the term "nigger" had been ascribed to black men.

> The task of Black Spirituality must be the task of transforming niggers into persons. Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam understood this and succeeded in developing self-respecting human beings out of niggers despite his erroneous doctrine. Why have we, who proclaim to have the true doctrine, failed so miserably in the Black community? I think we failed to develop a truly Black practice of the Christian Faith because we have failed to develop our Black authenticity, our Black goodness, our Black truth.[36]

McKnight acknowledged the debt he owed to the Black Power Movement in the South. He urged careful planning and discipline to correct the deep problems that plague black society. McKnight advocated:

> Finally, this will be a plan to which we can emotionally commit our lives. We need a one-year, five-year and fifty-year plan for human development. We will be realistic and rational and "wholistic" by working and struggling under a plan. It is not enough for us to say that we are committed to our own spiritual development if we do not have the capability (the ability and the will) to effectively and

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[35] Albert Cleage*, Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church* (New York: W. Morrow, 1972), xxv –xxvi.
[36] A. M. McKnight, "A Black Christian Perspective on Spirituality," *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Capuchin Press, 1980), 103-112, quote from p. 104.

efficiently struggle for our own development. In order to
be capable, we must be strong African people.[37]

The paper of Elbert Harris, S.S.J. who, after submitting his paper,
passed away days before the symposium, and to whom *Theology: A
Portrait in Black* is dedicated, cautioned against allowing this important
meeting to degenerate into a myopic airing of grievances without
forming concrete corrective strategies that will benefit not just African
Americans, but the whole Church.

> We have confidence that we may offer a significant
> contribution to the advancement and enhancement of the
> integrity of the entire Church. Our desire is to make the
> Mystical Body of Christ as perfect in reality as it is in
> theory. We are not meeting solely for our own personal,
> individual, or even collective advancement as Black
> Catholics. Increased self-esteem may result as an
> extrinsically logical consequence and by-product of our
> conference. Yet it will be only a more insightful recognition
> of what we really are, secure and worthy of God's love.[38]

Harris continued with a long series of questions designed to
evaluate the degree to which Church was or was not working to
eliminate racism in individual parishes and in the community, as well as
the level of support for the black Apostolate. He concluded by writing:
"Our focus on the Black Community and Black institutions is not an end
in itself. The end is neither 'separation,' as we know it, nor 'integration,'
as we know it, but congregation, which the unifying Spirit of God will
show is."[39]

In the section on Spirituality, Cyprian Davis set out to take the
canonical model of spirituality which was highly abstract, and make it
more tangible. Davis laid out four Black models of spirituality in the
Catholic tradition, and added a fifth, the life of Sojourner Truth. The
narratives of St. Moses the Black, St. Benedict the Black, and Sojourner
Truth have in common the thread of humility. St. Moses the Black lived
in the late 4th or early 5th century. According to the sources, Moses had
been somewhat of a brigand. He had been a slave to a government

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[37] McKnight, "A Black Christian Perspective," 111-112.
[38] Elbert Harris, S.S.J., "Issues Concerning the Development of the Catholic Church
in the Black Community," *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Capuchin
Press, 1980), 126-131, quote from p. 126.
[39] Harris, "Issues Concerning", 131.

official in Egypt, had been accused of theft and murder, and as a result, had been dismissed from servitude – an unusual way of dealing with a recalcitrant slave. Davis interpreted this as a sign of just how fearful Moses' owner had been of him – he was, according to sources, a large, imposing man who inspired real fear. Moses then went into the desert, at the time, the home of society's rejects, including tax-evaders, bandits, and the like. But Moses converted to Christianity and became a monk. He gained a reputation for his humility rather than his fearsomeness. Davis related several stories about St. Moses that are found among the 16th century Apophthegmata, or the Sayings of the Fathers. The narrative about Moses is especially informative:

> Another day when a council was being held in Scete, the Fathers treated Moses with contempt in order to test him, saying, 'Why does this black man come among us?' When [Moses] heard this he kept silence. When the council was dismissed, they said to him, 'Abba, did that not grieve you at all?' He said to them, 'I was grieved, but I kept silent.' … It was said of Abba Moses that when he was ordained and the ephod was placed upon him the archbishop said to him, 'See Abba Moses, now you are entirely white.' The old man said to him, 'It is true of the outside, lord and father, but what about Him who sees the inside?'[40]

Davis pointed out that the stories about St. Moses the Black emphasize his humility. And Moses' humility rests heavily on the fact that his skin is black.

The second narrative is that of St. Benedict the Black. Benedict lived in 16th century Sicily. He was the son of two African slaves, and was free when he was 18. His humility in the face of taunts about his blackness and his slave origins attracted the attention of Jerome Lanza, the leader of a group of hermits. Benedict joined the hermits, and upon Lanza's death, became leader of the group. When Pope Pius IV invited the hermits to join the established orders, Benedict became a lay brother of the Friars Minor at Palermo. He eventually became superior of his group and novice master – a highly unusual position for a former slave who had never been ordained a priest and who was probably illiterate. Like Moses the Black, Davis noted that the stories about Benedict emphasize his humility.

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[40] Cyprian Davis, "Spirituality," *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Capuchin Press, 1980), 91-102, quote from p. 93.

Davis demonstrated how Sojourner Truth's narrative exemplified key aspects of the spiritual tradition, even though she was not Catholic. Truth was born into slavery but emancipated in 1827 when slavery was abolished in New York. Sixteen years later, at the age of 46, she felt called to a spiritual mission. It was then that she changed her given name (Isabelle) to one more fitting of a "sojourner of the truth." Sojourner Truth developed a habit of praying everywhere, all the time. She became a contemplative and practiced unceasing prayer. Her name change, her life as a wandering pilgrim, and her contemplative nature, in Davis' analysis, place her firmly among the holy men and women of the Church.

In Davis' analysis, these five black people were similar in many ways, but it is their humility that makes them most distinctive. He compared true humility, as compared with false, ascribed humility.

> Humility is the favorite virtue that a dominant group wishes to ascribe to saintly representatives of the oppressed. … 'Humility' insures that the oppressed remember their subordinate position. This kind of humility – a travesty of the true virtue – never seems to be attested to by the sources nearest to the saint. Humility is the result of one's encounter with God. Only in His presence are we conscious of our nothingness. But for the Christian this is never the whole reality – for it is the Word Incarnate that makes this mortal dust something glorious.[41]

The five black men and woman that Davis described have at their core an aspect of quiet contemplation. In his recent book, *The Sovereignty of Quiet – Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, Kevin Quashie contrasts the power of quiet contemplation with the more common trend to see blackness through a more public sociocultural lens of resistance.

> The praying subject explores the inner life, encounters and tries to give name to desires and vulnerabilities. One waits, waits to see one's own self revealed, to feel the range of sentiments that manifest when one sits and

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[41] Davis, "Spirituality," 99-100.

> waits. This waiting is tingly and it can momentarily liberate the self from the strictures of its social identity.[42]

The conflict described by Quashie is the same conflict that Davis described – true interiority as opposed to the ascription of a resistance that must be controlled.

Edward Braxton was offered the distinction of summing up the key points of the meeting in a concluding essay. He made a series of remarks that seem almost prescient for the time. He called for ongoing collaboration, and noted the skilled work done by women scholars at the meeting, writing that "Black Catholic women doing scholarship on questions specifically related to the Catholic community is of great value and great urgency."[43] He insisted that the work done during that historic meeting in 1978 needed to be chronicled. Braxton insisted:

> Some of us must do something. I would suggest that some of us or each of us, in our own way and style and with whatever degree of time and energy we have is to [sic] chronicle what we are about. Aware that we are at a peculiar juncture in history we must record it! Whatever the context of our ministry, we should chronicle it. This will be a valuable account of a turning point in American culture and the Church.

> Unless we start chronicling what we are doing, something valuable will be lost. Ten or fifteen years from now someone will say, "Oh, yes, remember when we first met, who was at that meeting?" "Who first began to adapt the Catholic liturgy to various black contexts?" "What were the issues? Areas of consensus and conflict?"[44]

Finally, he pointed out that the work of changing the culture of the American Church would be difficult. It would require serious, challenging dialogue – dialogue that allows all those who are serious about change to grow in "a collective process."[45]

The 1978 meeting of Black Catholic scholars and the subsequent publication of *Theology: A Portrait in Black* was historic and

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[42] Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet – Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 113.
[43] Edward Braxton, "Concluding Reflections," *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Capuchin Press, 1980), 161-167, quote from page 161.
[44] Braxton, "Concluding Reflections", 164.
[45] Braxton, "Concluding Reflections," 167.

foundational. The seeds that were planted then germinated and have borne rich fruit. Following the second meeting of the group, there was a decade-long hiatus of the scholarly symposium. During that time, Thaddeus Posey turned his attention toward the creation of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University. He served as co-director for the next decade. In the 35 years since its inception, the Institute graduated more than 68 men and women with masters' degrees in theology.[46] *Theology: A Portrait in Black* was used for that first decade as a source book for the students, and continues to inform their ministry to this day.

Of the thirty-three charter members who met in Baltimore in 1978, many went on to earn doctoral degrees and have been actively engaging in scholarship, teaching, and ministry. Four have been appointed bishops – Moses Anderson, S.S.E., Edward Braxton, Terry Steib, S.V.D., and Joseph Perry. The scholarly group re-convened in 1991 as the Black Catholic Theological Symposium under the leadership of Jamie Phelps and Shawn Copeland, and in 2007 established its own scholarly peer-reviewed journal, published annually – *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium.* In the thirty-five years since its publication, *Theology: A Portrait in Black* inspired hundreds of individuals, thereby helping set the American Church on a path toward inclusion. In many ways, it was both a product of its time and a beacon of hope for all those with a passion for brotherhood, sisterhood, and justice.

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[46]Vanessa White, "Thirty Years of Impact: The Institute for Black Catholic Studies," *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* IV (2010):17-19, esp. page 17.

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