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## **Securing the Legacy of Black Catholics through Archival Donations: Dom Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. (1930-2015), A Case in Point**

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When a man is wise to his own advantage,  
the fruits of his knowledge are seen in his own person;  
When a man is wise to his people's advantage,  
the fruits of his knowledge are enduring.  
(Sirach 37:21-22)

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**Abstract:** Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., was a lifelong scholar of church history and a prolific archivist. This article recaps his development as a Catholic historian whose struggle with black consciousness and commitment to serve God's people placed him in a unique position to chronicle the growth of the U.S. Black Catholic church. In late 2014, he made a plan with colleagues to finally organize and dispose of the substantial collection of documents, files, photos, correspondence, and articles related to the history of Black Catholics in the United States that he had accumulated during the course of his career and ministry. Fr. Davis' death, just a few months later, required a drastic change of those plans. His colleagues were left with the task of researching institutional archives, making key decisions, discerning and advocating with his religious community for the disposition of the invaluable paper trail of Fr. Cyprian's life work according to his unwritten plans. As a result of this experience, the author advises Black Catholic scholars to evaluate the historical significance of their personal and professional papers for future researchers, put in writing their intentions to make an archival donation and share their written plans with others.

**Keywords:** Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., Black Catholic History, and Archival Donations.

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Clarence John Davis was born September 9, 1930 in Washington, D.C. to Clarence W. and Evelyn Jackson Davis. Through his great love of history, he encountered the Catholic Church and, as a teen, was initiated into the faith. He attended public schools in the District and graduated

from Dunbar High in 1948. By 1949, Clarence John had transitioned from middle-class Negro life in the nation's capital to Benedictine formation at St. Meinrad Seminary in Indiana.<sup>1</sup> Clarence received the name Cyprian when he professed vows as a Benedictine monk in 1951. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1956 and began a long teaching career at St. Meinrad. He returned to D.C. in 1957 as Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. to study Sacred Theology at the Catholic University of America.

Advanced study in church history led Cyprian to the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. There he received the license in historical sciences in 1963 and upon return to the United States in August of that year, found himself in the March on Washington alongside other Benedictine confreres, captivated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. He was interested in Black history and participated in one of the 1965 Selma to Montgomery Marches for voting rights; however, Davis did not actively engage in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. The ugliness of its history and the turbulence of the struggle played out on a daily basis in the news was perhaps too personally complex and spiritually demanding for the young priest.

At St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology, Cyprian specialized in church history but became increasingly drawn into the contemporary struggle for racial equality through the inquiries of Black Americans encountered in pastoral settings, retreats and speaking engagements who wondered where the Catholic Church stood on the question of the day. "All those times were in ferment, especially in regard to civil rights, and that's when I began to realize its importance. People began to come and ask me about being black and Catholic: 'What is my place in the church?', he recalled. "That's when I began to realize that this is important. ... That's when I began to do my own research."<sup>2</sup>

In 1968, Cyprian helped found a Catholic fraternity – the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus (NBCCC) – in whose trusted company and solidarity he would prayerfully deliberate, confer and ultimately challenge the paradoxical position of the Church given the teachings of

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<sup>1</sup> For information about Fr. Cyprian and his life journey, see 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* 4 (2010), 29-56.

<sup>2</sup> "Benedictine Fr. Cyprian Davis, Top Chronicler of Black Catholic History, Dies." *Catholic News Service*, 20 May 2015, <<http://ncronline.org/news/people/benedictine-fr-cyprian-davis-top-chronicler-black-catholic-history-dies>> (5/19/16).

Jesus Christ that it preached<sup>3</sup>. Davis resumed his studies with a concentration on the Middle Ages at the Catholic University of Louvain, receiving the doctorate in Historical Sciences in 1977. Through his post-doctoral research, writings, teaching, preaching and presentations, Cyprian grew in knowledge and understanding of church history. In the context of church history and monastic life, he formally established Black Catholic History as a category of academic study and exploration that helps authenticate the full, conscious and active participation of African peoples through the ages in the development of the Church, the universal Body of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Responding to the needs of the people, Davis moved with a big and generous heart through seemingly disparate worlds. He lived the vocation of a Benedictine monk at St. Meinrad Archabbey and taught in the Seminary and School of Theology. Archival listings of the *Jasper Herald*, an Indiana newspaper (1964 through the 70s), highlight many of Fr. Cyprian's excursions into the local communities of Jasper County and beyond to preside and preach at Masses, speak on monastic life and other spiritual topics, lead retreats, and teach in other seminary programs. He was on the 1980 inaugural faculty of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies (IBCS) at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans and taught there many summers. As his reputation grew, he crisscrossed the United States at the invitation of many faith communities bringing the Good News. Black Catholic parishes, in particular wanted to hear the stories that verified beyond all doubt the long-standing presence of African and African American faithful, religious and clergy in the life of the Catholic Church. Fr. Cyprian also traveled to Africa on several occasions as a visiting professor of church history.

Davis' evangelizing mission, supported by numerous articles and textbooks, inspired a first generation of Black Catholic theologians, historians and pastoral ministers. He assisted the U.S. Bishops in thinking out and writing two key documents: "Brothers and Sisters to Us", the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Racism (1979) and "What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization

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<sup>3</sup> "A Statement of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus" in *"Stamped with the Image of God": African Americans as God's Image in Black*, Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. and Jamie Phelps, O.P., eds. (*Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003*), 111-14.

<sup>4</sup> The biographical information for this article was drawn from several published obituaries and articles that reported the death of Fr. Cyprian Davis. Volume IV of the *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium*, in Part One of an Archival Project more completely chronicles the life of Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. on the occasion of his eightieth birthday.

from the Black Bishops of the United States” promulgated in 1984. His classic and prize-winning text, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, published in 1990, was a culmination of his decades of historical research. Cyprian collaborated with Diana Hayes, a professor of Catholic theology at Georgetown University on *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States*, a collection of theological essays and with Jamie T. Phelps, O.P., a long-time colleague in the movement and systematic theologian, he co-edited *Stamped in the Image of God: African Americans as God’s Image in Black*. His *Henriette DeLille, Servant of Slaves, Witness to the Poor*, tells the story of the foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Family of New Orleans.

In addition to Davis’ commitment to tell the story of Black Catholics in the context of world affairs and church history, he worked diligently to preserve the legacy. He served as archivist for several groups, including his Archabbey, the Swiss-American Congregation of Benedictine abbeys, as well as the NBCCC and the Black Catholic Theological Symposium (BCTS), of which he was a member and editor-in-chief of its journal.

In 2012, Davis was named St. Meinrad’s first professor emeritus, the same year that he retired from teaching at the IBCS. Two years later, Cecilia More and I, BCTS members and IBCS faculty members, visited with Fr. Cyprian at the Archabbey. It became evident that the BCTS should collaborate more closely with Fr. Cyprian to secure his years of archiving on behalf of Black Catholics by helping him prepare the materials in his custody for archival donation at appropriate institutions. This essay will outline the process undertaken to honorably dispose of the African American collections held by Dom Cyprian Davis, including his substantial body of personal papers, that are invaluable to future studies related to Black Catholics and urge others to consider the issues involved in making plans for their own important papers.

The topic of the BCTS archives was raised at the Symposium’s 2014 Annual Meeting and the membership requested that the Executive Committee research the options available to provide Fr. Cyprian the assistance required to transfer its years of files to a proper depository<sup>5</sup>. Moore and I were dispatched to meet with the archivist, which we did in December 2014. We found Cyprian in great spirits, working on the

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<sup>5</sup> In October 2014, the BCTS Executive Committee consisted of Timone Davis, Treasurer; Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, Secretary; Maurice Nutt, CSsR, Associate Convener; Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, Convener and C. Vanessa White, Past Convener.

update of his book, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* and looking forward to attending a January 2015 historical conference in New York. He reported that since the summer, he was more attentive to his diet and exercising with a trainer. Father introduced us to St. Meinrad seminarians and students from Togo: David N'Djam, O.S.B. and Phillippe Tchalou, O.S.B. One evening after the community's Night Prayer, we all gathered in Fr. Cyprian's office to share Benedictine hospitality and good conversation. Professor Harry Hogan, O.S.B., whose office was next door, joined the company – a break from the labors of the day.

Touring the St. Meinrad archives and the library, Dr. Moore and I discovered the extent of Davis' recordkeeping on behalf of the Benedictines of St. Meinrad, the Swiss-American Congregation of Benedictine abbeys, and the NBCCC, whose files he had been collecting since its inception in 1968. Besides an extensive collection of Clergy Caucus papers, Fr. Cyprian had accumulated a trove of personal Black Catholic historical documents that were stored in a space on the lower floor of the St. Meinrad library. The library director welcomed us as Cyprian's BCTS associates, urging us to provide much needed assistance in organizing and transferring the archived materials as soon as possible.

So, with Fr. Cyprian we devised a general plan for the BCTS files that involved 1) researching potential archive sites; 2) identifying assistants to help catalogue the collection; 3) collaborating with NBCCC leadership as they relocated their documents; and 4) completing the project by Summer 2015. Moore, also a church historian, and Davis discussed at considerable length which Catholic archives would potentially have the interest, space and resources to manage this unique collection. It was decided that a letter would be drafted to each site under consideration to inquire about key issues such as archival requirements, associated costs, copyright transfers and terms of access for future researchers. The list of potential archives identified included: Xavier University of Louisiana (XULA) in New Orleans, Louisiana; University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana; Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, D.C.; the Josephite Archives in Baltimore, Maryland; Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and St. Meinrad Archabbey, St. Meinrad, Indiana. The Catholic Theological Union's archives was subsequently added to this list at the request of C. Vanessa White.

In an ensuing conversation, Dr. Moore suggested to Fr. Cyprian that, in addition to the BCTS and NBCCC files, he should consider how he might want to dispose of his personal papers, a collection that would be of great use to current and future scholars who will study the history and experience of Black Catholics in the United States, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. They discussed several interesting options and Davis decided that he would await the results of the archival search to determine how he would proceed.

The plan was launched. Of course, undertaking such an ambitious course of action required substantial institutional support. St. Meinrad pledged a dedicated library workspace, some volunteer summer help and a reasonable time allowance to complete the task of relocating Davis' collections. The BCTS Executive Committee was approached in early 2015 to 1) commit funds for needed supplies and 2) recruit rotating volunteer teams to work onsite under Fr. Cyprian's supervision during the summer of 2015. Fr. Kenneth Taylor, president of the NBCCC, a priest of the Diocese of Indianapolis and an alumnus of St. Meinrad, was advised in February 2015 of the pressing situation regarding the files in Fr. Cyprian's custody. Taylor disclosed that the NBCCC board had been in a three-year conversation about its collection and, in consultation with Fr. Cyprian, were close to choosing a site. Understanding well the scope of the task, Fr. Cyprian had requested NBCCC help to organize and catalogue their files before relocation. Taylor was happy to be included in the summer 2015 plan and promised the cooperation of the Caucus.

Dr. Moore drafted and I dispatched letters on behalf of the BCTS, NBCCC and Fr. Cyprian to the directors of the seven archives identified as potential sites. The gist of the message was: "Would you please advise us of what an archive, such as yours, would require of us should we decide to offer these archives to your institution and what might we expect of your institution in return?" Among the specific questions posed were:

- Under what conditions would you accept these archives?
- Would you prefer that we send the materials to you as they are or would you prefer that we do some preliminary organizing of the documents?

- What rights would the BCTS, the NBCCC, and Fr. Davis and his community have to these collections and their potential uses after they are deposited in your archives?
- Do we need to draw up a contract for the deposit of the archives?
- Is there any cost associated with depositing collections in your archives that we would be expected to cover? If so, what are they?"

Responses from the various archives began arriving in the spring. Father Cyprian was updated on the progress of the search when he attended an April 2015 celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* hosted by the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans. Dr. Moore delivered a lecture in Father's honor on that occasion. In the following weeks, the three of us - Bellow, Moore and Taylor - finalized travel and lodging plans for the appointed work week in August at St. Meinrad. I mailed a note to confirm the dates; Cecilia visited the Archabbey at Fr. Cyprian's request. A week later on Monday, May 18, 2015, the sad word of Fr. Cyprian Davis' death crisscrossed the country. Many of his colleagues, former students and friends joined the Davis family and the Benedictine community for the funeral services at the monastery. Abbot Justin Duvall, O.S.B. reiterated the invitation for the team, now absent Fr. Cyprian, to follow through with their August plans. He promised whatever material support would be needed to organize the Black Catholic collections in library storage and prepare them for shipping to the designated archives.

In early August, Cecilia Moore wrote to apprise the BCTS Executive board of developments regarding the archives. She reported that all but one of the Catholic archives were very interested in receiving Father Cyprian's collections and that one archive declined due to lack of adequate space to store and care for the files. Another of the interested archives indicated that the BCTS was expected to contribute financially to the maintenance of the collection if entrusted to their care. The other archives were excited at the prospect of receiving Davis' papers and had the resources to collate the large collection. No special organization of the documents was required.



Dr. Moore also described her recent professional experience of the Xavier University Archives and Special Collections when she taught history during the summer 2015 session of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies. She used the services of the archives on a daily basis while teaching and in doing her own research. She spoke of a staff that worked well with students and was very knowledgeable of Black Catholic history. She noted that Xavier University is the only Black and Catholic institution of higher learning in the United States and the BCTS is the parent organization from which the IBCS proceeds. And importantly, she projected that the Xavier archives had the space to house the BCTS materials. Based on her assessment and recommendation, the Executive Board voted to deposit the BCTS archives at Xavier University of Louisiana.

The reality of Fr. Cyprian's absence was heartfelt as the team of Moore, Taylor and Bellow assembled at St. Meinrad Archabbey to undertake the voluminous and important task of organizing his years of recordkeeping on behalf of the Black Catholic community. There were numerous boxes stacked on the floor and shelves of the library storage area in which Father had collected correspondence, articles, photos and research files. Each carton had to be unpacked, its contents examined individually and sorted in one of several different piles of documents. These were rearranged in fresh boxes and labelled for delivery to the next archival destination.

The oldest, most ordered set of files were those belonging to the NBCCC. Among the key finds in the general collection were research files related to Davis' work on the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB)/United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) documents "Brothers and Sisters to Us" and "What We Have Seen and Heard" as well as the *Lead Me, Guide Me Hymnal* produced in 1987 under the auspices of the NBCCC. In addition, there were concept papers and proposals for key institutions such as the Institute for Black Catholic Studies and the NCCB/USCCB Black Catholic Secretariat, established in 1986. These documents reflected Cyprian Davis' unreserved commitment to and involvement in the development of Black Catholic leadership and the evangelizing mission of the Church. He was not only recording the history of God's people in the twentieth century, he was wholeheartedly in the flow of history being made.

The correspondence in the archives included personal family letters and cards, postcards, communications from colleagues, former students,

brother clergy and sister religious and general fan club members – young and old. There were a number of thank you notes from young people who had experienced Father Cyprian in a confirmation retreat, First Communion Mass or historical talk. Although there was precious little time to explore in depth, we discovered many historic treasures that renewed memories or revealed new insights into the remarkable life of the Benedictine monk and Black Catholic historian. Fr. Timothy Sweeney, O.S.B., the St. Meinrad archivist and a long-time brother monk of Fr. Cyprian – as graduate students, they often traveled together through Europe – made frequent stops by the library workspace and shared personal recollections of their Paris adventures. As we moved across the St. Meinrad campus during the week for meals and prayer, to relax in the evenings on the guesthouse porch, we were greeted by members of the community. So although Fr. Cyprian was physically absent from the project, his spirit guided the collaboration that was formed to preserve his valuable and significant archives.

After just a couple days of work on the archives, Dr. Moore requested a meeting with the Abbott to suggest that Fr. Cyprian's personal papers be donated by the Benedictine community to the archives of the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. During their talks in December 2014, Moore had made the suggestion and Davis seemed intrigued by the idea. After all, Washington, D.C. was his hometown. He had earned a graduate degree from the Catholic University and spent many hours throughout his career conducting research in the CUA archives. Very graciously, in the name of his religious community, the Abbot accepted Cecilia's thoughtful recommendation. With that assurance, we resumed our work, packing up 1) 20+ boxes of Black Catholic History papers and a large, framed Ernie Barnes print of a Black Church service belonging to Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. for donation to The Catholic University of America; 2) a large collection of NBCCC archives - a full thirty-two boxes of documents for transport to Indianapolis with Father Taylor where a select team of Caucus members would process the collection before transferring it to their archives of choice; 3) a set of papers for the archives of the National Black Catholic Sisters housed at Marquette University; 4) a small set of documents for the National Office of Black Catholics (NOBC) forwarded to its archives at St. Thomas University in FL; 5) some IBCS documentation and a modest collection of BCTS files all directed to the XULA Library.

Terms of the Deed of Gift Agreement between the BCTS and the XULA Library, University Archives and Special Collections Division that covers the archival donation are as follows:

1. *Access:* This property shall be open to the research public.
2. *Duplication:* The Xavier Archives may duplicate or reproduce this material for purposes of preservation, security, or dissemination for research purposes. Single copy reproduction may be made available to researchers to be used in the pursuit of scholarship.
3. *Property Rights:* Upon transfer to Xavier Archives, ownership of the above described property is conveyed to Xavier Archives.
4. *Copyrights:* It is the responsibility of Xavier Archives to give proper care to protect copyrights in the property.
5. *Additions:* Additions to this property shall be subject to the terms of this deed of gift.<sup>6</sup>

It took several months for the Benedictine community to close Fr. Cyprian's seminary faculty office and transfer the boxes of papers and other items related to his ministry with the Black Catholic community to the St. Meinrad library storage space. In mid-February 2016, they welcomed Cecilia and me back to the Archabbey to process this set of materials. Here we found the bulk of the BCTS archives, notes and research for the updating of the *History of Black Catholics in the United States*, and his work towards the cause for canonization of Henriette DeLille. Over the course of three days, we sifted through this treasure trove of documents, packing up another 20+ boxes of Fr. Cyprian's collection for shipment to the CUA archives, 2 sizeable boxes of BCTS files and 1 carton of IBCS documentation headed to the XULA archives. Specific collections were returned respectively to the Sisters of the Holy Family, the USCCB Subcommittee on African American Affairs, the

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<sup>6</sup> Irwin Lachoff, Xavier University of Louisiana Library and Special Collections, Deed of Gift Agreement, August 2015.

NBCCC, care of Fr. Taylor, and to academic advisees of Fr. Cyprian Davis. We were again encouraged in our extraordinary task by Benedictines Fr. Sweeney and Brother David N'Djam who attended Fr. Cyprian in his final days. Their narratives of life in community with Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., Father Taylor's remembrances of him in relationship with the Black Clergy brotherhood, and our own shared memories of him as teacher, colleague and traveling partner gave a sense of humanity and holiness to the rows of sealed and addressed boxes that contained mostly paper, lined up and awaiting shipping by the St. Meinrad Benedictines to various archives across the country. With our task of unpacking, processing and transferring this invaluable corpus of work dating back to the late 1960s essentially completed, it occurred to us that the true legacy of a child of God is reflected in the integrity of his/her relationships and the faithfulness with which they go about the work that God has given. Cyprian Davis has lovingly and wisely secured the fruits of his knowledge, his labors, and divine inspiration for generations of scholars to come.

### **Guidelines for BCTS Scholars for Archival Donation**

- a. Determine whether you have documents related to your own work or that of the Black Catholic community that can help a scholar of today or the future to produce good historical work on Black Catholics.
- b. If the answer is "yes," take some time to review your holdings and determine what you want to donate (correspondence, reports, minutes, research notes, ephemera related to Black Catholics such as posters, bookmarks, calendars, cards, anniversary books, special documents, material culture such as statues, medals, dolls, paintings, awards, citations, and so on).
- c. Research possible archives and special collections where you might donate your papers and materials. You might want to consider places that already have significant holdings related to Black Catholics or you might want to donate to your alma mater or to an institution with which you have a significant relationship. If you are a religious or a diocesan clergy

member, you may also consider donating to the archives of your community or diocese.

- d. Decide if you will begin donating right now or if you wish to donate your papers and materials upon your death. If you wish to make a posthumous donation, it is recommended that you put your wishes in your will and/or trust and that you inform your family and friends of your wishes. You can also make arrangements with the institution to which you wish to donate by signing "Deed of Gift" form. Most archives have those readily available. If you are donating posthumously, we recommend that you provide for the packing and shipping of your donation in your will or trust. For example, you may wish to put aside a fixed dollar amount for shipping and handling, say \$500.00, or you may simply say that you wish for the shipping and handling of your donation to come from the proceeds of your estate.
- e. You have the right to set the terms of how and when your donation may be used by scholars. For example, you could stipulate that 50 years must pass before your papers are open to scholars.
- f. Finally, inform the BCTS of your plans for archival donation. We ask that you do this so that the BCTS will know what your wishes are and may help you with the process should you require assistance. We also want to know so we can direct scholars as to where they may find your papers and materials that may help them to do their work in the future.









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