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Thirty Years of Fellowship: A Retrospective

Kimberly Flint-Hamilton
Stetson University

2008 is an exciting year for the BCTS. The fact that we've survived as long as we have is nothing short of a miracle. In 1978 our organization included thirty-four members, thirty of whom were clerics. Several were graduate students trying to complete their PhD dissertations. Today, we are assistant, associate, and full professors, canon lawyers, and even bishops, although there are still a few graduate student associate members. Slightly more of us are lay members than clergy. We are theologians, historians, social scientists, natural scientists, classicists, philosophers, deans, liturgists, and campus ministers. Some of us are now the leading authorities in our fields. We've come a long way in these 30 years.

Our membership has been productive. Cyprian Davis O.S.B., our editor-in-chief, now boasts four books. Other members who have books to their credit include James Chukwuma Okoye, C.S.Sp., Jamie Phelps, O.P., Diana Hayes, Diane Batts Morrow, John Morrow, Jon Nilson, Cecilia Moore, Vanessa White, Paul Marshall, and M. Shawn Copeland. Several of our members' titles have won awards for distinguished scholarship. And I'm fairly certain that this list of authors is incomplete – our members are so

productive that it is difficult to keep up with their many accomplishments.

BCTS members now serve as accomplished leaders in their fields. Our soon-to-be convener, Bryan Massingale, is currently serving as president (2008-2009) of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA). Massingale is the third member of the BCTS to be elected to this esteemed position. M. Shawn Copeland, our past convener, served as president of the CTSA in 2003-2004, and Jon Nilson in 2002-2003. In addition, Jamie Phelps O.P. was the driving force behind the formation of the first CTSA Committee on Underrepresented Racial Ethnic Constituencies in the Professoriate. Several of the charter members have become bishops. Thirty years ago, few would have imagined that the nascent BCTS could boast such national distinction.

Relevant also for the BCTS are the political developments of the year 2008. This is the year that Illinois senator Barack Obama soared to national recognition, becoming the first African American nominee of a major political party in the United States. Regardless of one's political affiliation, the significance of this event is impossible to overstate. Not long ago, black men who rose to such prominence were shot in the streets, but as I write this letter today, Obama is ahead in the opinion polls. He may well be elected president of the United States. Several BCTS members are working actively on his campaign. In the midst of a depressed economy, rising unemployment, war, and general malaise over the state of the union, the success of someone like Obama – like ourselves in so many ways – brings us a feeling of hope.

By the same token, however, one cannot look back over the past thirty years without a feeling of melancholy. Of the thirty-four charter members who met at the Motherhouse of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in 1978, only twenty-four are still with us. Ten are among our ancestors now, still with us in heart and spirit, still guiding us perhaps, but physically gone, and we miss them.

The BCTS is more than just a scholarly organization. The camaraderie of the membership energizes us every year for the trials we face at our home institutions. The BCTS gives us the spiritual and intellectual momentum we need in our work, as several members affirm:

I look forward to coming to the BCTS meetings every year because it is the time and place and community that most sustains my work in the history of the Black Catholic experience in the United States. I count on my yearly experiences at the BCTS to fuel me intellectually and spirituality for the rest of the academic year and I am never disappointed.

(Cecilia Moore)

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the members of the BCTS whose professionalism and spiritual guidance has uplifted, inspired, and directed me in my research. For ten years this group has meant the world to me.

(Robert Bartlett)

The very first convener of the BCTS, Thaddeus Posey O.F.M. Cap., reflects on the hands-on approach to theology that drew the group together in 1978:

When we first met in 1978, we were focused on living the message of scripture. There are so many problems that we face today – family and parenting issues, health and education, AIDS, war, prisons. Back then we were trying to use our grounding in theology and our training as pastoral ministers to help people solve real-life problems. We wanted to connect with people, help them see and experience that process of care and healing, help create an atmosphere of peace in which people can function. We need to do more of that now and in the future through the BCTS and the Institute for Black Catholic Studies. We need to help people see how they can live the scriptures, and enjoy the energy, grace and peace that comes from that effort.

(Thaddeus Posey O.F.M. Cap.)

Past-convener M. Shawn Copeland reflects on the theoretical approaches to the study of theology that first energized and inspired charter members and continues to do so to this day:

More than forty years ago, two of the most outstanding theologians of the Roman Catholic Church, Jesuits Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner, insisted on the need for theologians to engage critically with philosophy and the human and social sciences and to collaborate with one another and scholars of other disciplines. This two-fold attention to the intellectual, cultural, historical, and social *horizon* within which we do theology and to *collaboration* with one another and scholars

from other disciplines stands as a hallmark of the BCTS. For me, the BCTS exemplifies not only praxially what Lonergan and Rahner encouraged, but also demonstrates the universality of the culturally specific pursuit to interpret the meaning of broad human existence before God. For me the BCTS remains a site of innovation—a necessary critical space for grappling with the theoretic, practical, ethical, and pastoral needs of the black Catholic community; for testing and revising and expanding in an interdisciplinary context our questions and insights; and, for enjoying and admiring the sheer beauty of the human mind and heart at work.

(M. Shawn Copeland)

We've come a long way in 30 years, but the road ahead of us is just as long. There are still goals to accomplish. Charter member and long-time convener Jamie Phelps O.P. reflects on that aspect of our organization:

As we celebrate our 30th anniversary, many Black Catholic theologians and scholars will admit that membership in the organization has nurtured and sustained them. In reality, however, after 30 years the BCTS is still a long way from maturity. The seed that was planted in 1978 has germinated and is growing, but it's still a young, vulnerable thing. We BCTS members, especially the younger generation of scholars, are called to nourish that seedling to its fullness of blossom.

(Jamie Phelps O.P.)

We are very proud of this year's *Journal*. Nearly 50% larger than Volume 1, the 2008 – 30th *Anniversary Edition* includes a new 'Review' section which we hope will expand in the coming years as our members' success continues. As the leadership, scholarship, and mentorship of our members grow, they continue to shape Catholic scholarship and ministry all over the world. In this, my final year as convener of the BCTS, I hand over the reins of the organization to Bryan Massingale knowing that we are an accomplished, resourceful, creative, and ingenious group of scholars. How much farther will we have come in 30 more years? I can hardly wait to find out.

Kimberly Flint-Hamilton
Convener, 2005-2008