

“Retrieving a Mislaid Memory”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

This week concludes the “One Body, Many Voices” series. In this series we have encountered Christian writers from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America, and their voices have witnessed to a variety of Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. They have each in their own way discussed the dilemma of modernity and five centuries of Western colonial and technological advance. While this history has given the world great material wealth and progress, the church’s role within it has also had a share in the suffering and oppression that accompanied it in all parts of the globe. Yet these theologians, while often critical, have also been voices of hope within this history.

This is a history of massive scope and ongoing relevance for the world today. To borrow a phrase from Japanese intellectual history, the struggle to understand human identity in the modern world might be termed an attempt at “overcoming modernity.” To be Christian in the modern world is to be conscious of the riches of Christ, while also consciously overcoming the role that the church has played in modern systems of power - economic, political, and ecclesiastical - that have kept many voices in the world from being heard. Understanding history helps us understand who we are and why the world is the way it is, thereby allowing us the freedom to reimagine, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, Christ’s body in which all nations, peoples, and languages are one in Christ.

In the final week of this series we encounter the writings of Catholic historian, Dr. Cyprian Davis, of the Order of Saint Benedict (O.S.B). Fr. Cyprian Davis was the foremost Catholic historian of the history of Black Catholicism in the United States. Fr. Davis makes it clear that the Catholic church was African before it was European as Latin theology developed in North Africa during late antiquity. Further, what became the Roman Catholic Church in the United States was Black and Spanish-speaking for nearly a century before the first English-speaking Catholics arrived in the Americas. Using primary sources from parish, civil, and churchwide records, Fr. Davis worked to recover and retell a history of not only Black Catholics, but of the United States that had been largely lost and forgotten. This history continues to be relevant for today’s context and the challenges faced by humanity in the twenty-first century.

Fr. Davis told the story about the baptism of a young black teenager in the early church who had fallen ill. Though nameless, the memory of this youth survived in history because of the theological dilemma his illness posed for the church: Could someone be baptized who could no longer speak for themselves because of illness? Fr. Davis wrote,

We do not know the name of this black teenager who was initiated into the Christian Mysteries one Easter in the city of Carthage in the early sixth century. Although we do not know his name, this book is about him. Like so many blacks who appear in the early Christian sources, sometimes named and more often nameless, this young man of Carthage is a fleeting presence in a theological treatise, an anonymous person with a racial qualification, a passing reference in an ancient text – all reminding us that in the rich background of church history, there are images we have chosen not to see, figures that have been allowed to blur, characters passing through center stage for a brief moment with no supporting cast. Still, they have been there, and the church has been marked with their blackness. Yet, too often the presence of black Catholics through the centuries has been a muted one, a silent witness, an unspoken testimony. It is the historian’s task to make the past speak, to highlight what has been hidden and to retrieve a mislaid memory.

The “mislaidd memory” that Fr. Davis has retrieved is one about the contributions of Black Africans, and specifically African Americans for an understanding of the catholicity of the church. This perspective is extremely helpful and relevant as we continue to grapple with what it means to be part of the human race in the modern world. For Christians it is necessary, crucial even, to realize that Christ’s body represents the unity of our human diversity. This unity comes from Christ alone. Nothing can replace Christ in the formation of the body that is the church. Nation, ethnicity, gender, social and economic status, none of these can create unity in Christ’s body, the church – only baptism into Christ gives a new and liberating perspective upon what it means to be a human being. The church is and has been God’s new covenant that offers an alternative to all of the other competing allegiances, loyalties, and even memories that the world requires of human beings. Fr. Davis writes,

Of all the ethnic groups that make up American Catholicism today, Black Catholics have been here the longest, having antedated every other non-native American group with the exception of the Spaniards and Hispanics, they have been among the forgotten and the neglected children of this ancient church.

Retrieving a mislaidd memory helps us as the church not only understand the past with greater accuracy, but it also allows us to imagine the future with greater confidence knowing that we share history and its memory, as well as sharing a future, in Christ. Writing for the *Catholic News Service* in 2004 Fr. Davis wrote, “In another decade or so U.S. Catholics will learn that our church is more black, brown and in-between than Caucasian and more catholic than they dreamed. Will we be prepared for what that will mean?” Are we prepared for the new thing that Christ is doing in our midst as we see with greater clarity the catholicity and universality of the church? The many voices of Christ’s body, the church, are one and universal precisely because Christ assumed the fullness of humanity in the person of Jesus. Jesus became all of us to give us all a shared future.

To be a follower of Jesus – a member of the body – means being open to learning from the many other voices in the one body. In doing so, we begin to hear together a melody of praise, the new song of God’s kingdom. Fr. Davis writes,

Far too often Black Catholics found themselves singing the songs of Zion in a foreign land. With hesitation and with effort did we take down our harps to sing a new song. And then we realized that it was no longer a foreign land and no longer a strange song. The former things had passed away.

You changed my mourning into dancing;
You took off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness,
That my soul might sing praise to you without ceasing;
O Lord, my God, forever will I give you thanks. (Psalm 30:12-13)

The new song is Christ Jesus and the voices are ours. Overcoming our own modernity means retrieving our shared past in Christ, a past which will allow us to finally see ourselves, and others, as we are. We share a past, a world, communities, and a church. Five centuries of modernity and its divisions cannot be overcome quickly. However, Christ has been breathing life into his body the church for two millennia. Retrieving the mislaidd memory of our past and its tragedies highlights our ongoing need for research that will shift and broaden our understanding of history, while giving us direction and vision for a shared future.

Only the church can sing the new song that transcends our broken histories and partial memories. Only with many voices confessing the sins of the past and praising Christ for forgiveness in the present, will we be able to proclaim the nearness of God’s Kingdom for all. Amen.

Week 12 midweek meditation readings:

(Excerpt) “God of Our Weary Years” in *Taking Down Our Harps*

At the end of the twentieth century the African American Catholic community numbers close to two and a half million or more members. With a number that is about equal to the total membership of the Episcopal Church in the United States, Black Catholics are the fifth largest Black church in this country. Of all the ethnic groups that make up American Catholicism today, Black Catholics have been here the longest, having antedated every other non-native American group with the exception of the Spaniards and Hispanics, they have been among the forgotten and the neglected children of this ancient church. Still, if the history of Black Catholics has any validity for tomorrow, it is that as a community Black Catholics will continue to be as vocal and persistent within the church of the twenty-first century as they have been since the sixteenth. (p. 41)

(Excerpt) “Speaking the Truth” in *Taking Down Our Harps*

Over a dozen years ago James Cone published an essay on the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. Originally a talk given at the College of Notre Dame in Baltimore in 1988, it was a critique of the Catholic church in the United States from the viewpoint of an African American Protestant theologian and one of the foremost proponents of Black theology. Doctor Cone did not mince words. He remarked the willingness of Catholic liberals to espouse the cause of the poor in Latin America but to ignore totally the situation of American Blacks. As students of liberation theology and its theologians, they knew almost nothing about Black theologians and were unaware of African American history and culture.

As he pointed out, “There is one thing that most whites have in common; they act as if whites know everything, and they are therefore seldom open to learning anything from Black history and culture.” For Cone, “The Catholic Church is not what it claims to be: it is not a truly *universal* church, seeking to be accountable to the whole of humanity. It is a white *European* church, almost exclusively defined by issues and problems arising from that history and culture.”

Convinced that Catholicism was monolithic in theology, in culture, and in thought, Cone believed that it was almost impossible for a non-European, much less a Black, to do any creative theology. In his opinion any Blacks who were serious about their Catholic faith had to cut off all connection with their cultural roots. Somewhat condescendingly, he noted that Black Catholics were tolerated by the Catholic church, which “sometimes encourages their liturgical participation...Blacks are especially useful as singers, dancers, and preachers at the Mass and in other liturgical settings.”

Another important Black theologian, J. Deotis Roberts, wrote in the same vein some five years after Cone’s essay...Roberts noted that “black Catholics have long sensed a powerlessness in a powerful church”...Roberts too criticized the lack of Black Catholic theologians and what he considered to be the lack of leadership on the part of the Black Catholic bishops in the country.

The judgments of both James Cone and J. Deotis Roberts, though harsh, contained much with which many Roman Catholics, white and Black, would agree. Most Black Catholics would also agree that neither Cone nor Roberts seems to understand the deep commitment in faith that has made Black Catholics remain rooted in the Catholic church. (pp. 281-282)...

Far too often Black Catholics found themselves singing the songs of Zion in a foreign land. With hesitation and with effort did we take down our harps to sing a new song. And then we realized that it was no longer a foreign land and no longer a strange song. The former things had passed away.

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That my soul might sing praise to you without ceasing;

O Lord, my God, forever will I give you thanks. – Psalm 30:12-13 (p. 284)

(Excerpt) *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*

Some time around the first quarter of the sixth century in the North African city of Carthage, a wealthy landowner had an adolescent slave, a black youth from the interior of Africa. The slaveowner had him enrolled among the catechumens of the city so that he might receive baptism on the night before Easter. The young black man had gone partway through the various stages of the catechumenate when he fell ill. As his illness progressed, he became paralyzed and unable to speak. Nevertheless, he received the waters of baptism on the night before Easter with the other catechumens. Shortly thereafter he died.

Ferrandus, the archdeacon of Carthage, was troubled by the incident because the young African had not been able to respond to the questions preceding the baptism. Did he have the capability of making the intention to receive baptism? How could one presume that he wished to enter the church when he gave no sign? Ferrandus wrote down his questions in a letter to the leading theologian of the North African Catholic church of the time, St. Fulgentius (d. 527), the exiled bishop of Ruspe. Fulgentius answered the letter of Ferrandus from his see city of Ruspe in North Africa, where he had returned to live out his days. It was a time when much of North Africa was gripped by the harsh rule of the Vandals, a Germanic tribe that had conquered North Africa at the time of the death of St. Augustine a hundred years before, in 430.

The lengthy response of Fulgentius to the letter not only set forth a theological principle that we all find useful still today, but he immortalized in the pages of history this nameless black teenager. The letter of Ferrandus and the reply of Fulgentius bore the title throughout the Middle Ages “Concerning the Salvation of an Ethiopian on the Point of Dying.” (In the ancient world the word “Ethiopian” designated black skin color and not a nationality.) In his response Fulgentius spoke of the power of baptism and solidarity with the church. This young boy was rightly judged to have persevered in his desire for baptism. Once having made a right intention, its good purpose lasts – despite illness, loss of consciousness, or distraction of mind.

We do not know the name of this black teenager who was initiated into the Christian Mysteries one Easter in the city of Carthage in the early sixth century. Although we do not know his name, this book is about him. Like so many blacks who appear in the early Christian sources, sometimes named and more often nameless, this young man of Carthage is a fleeting presence in a theological treatise, an anonymous person with a racial qualification, a passing reference in an ancient text – all reminding us that in the rich background of church history, there are images we chosen not to see, figures that have been allowed to blur, characters passing through center stage for a brief moment with no supporting cast. Still, they have been there, and the church has been marked with their blackness. Yet, too often the presence of black Catholics through the centuries has been a muted one, a silent witness, an unspoken testimony. It is the historian’s task to make the past speak, to highlight what has been hidden and to retrieve a mislaid memory. (pp. ix-x)...

Augustine wrote about black Africans in a commentary on Psalm 73 (Psalm 74 [Hebrew numbering]), using the words of the old Latin translation “You have broken the head of the dragon. You have given it as food to the Ethiopian peoples.”

What is this? How do I understand the Ethiopian peoples? In what way, unless through them, all nations? And well it is through the blacks; for Ethiopians are black. They who have been black are called to faith; they precisely, as it is written: For you were at one time darkness but are now light in the Lord (Eph. 5:8). They are especially called black, but they shall not remain black; for from them is the church made, to whom it is said: Who is this who ascends all lightsome (Song of Songs 8:5)? What is made of the color black except that which is said: I am black and beautiful (Song of Songs 1:4 [1:5])? And how have they received this dragon as food? I think they have received Christ as food.

For Augustine, the Ethiopians – those who are black Africans – are the sign of the church, and in particular, of its universality. (pp. 12-13)...

Slavery has cast a long shadow over the history of the United States. It has led to civil strife, racial violence, and ethnic resentments that still fester. American Catholic history is covered by that same shadow. Whether in Spanish, French, or English Catholic areas, slavery was part of the religious scene. Not only laypersons but religious and priests availed themselves of slave labor. Catholics of the United States, beginning with the papacy and including both clerics and lay, had developed a moral consciousness that by the middle of the nineteenth century could no longer tolerate slavery. But the Catholic church in the United States found itself incapable of taking any decisive action or of enunciating clearly thought-out principles regarding slavery. This factor unfortunately prevented the American church from playing any serious role until the middle of the twentieth century in the most tragic debate that this nation had to face.

Serious research is still necessary regarding the Catholic reaction to slavery. A more thorough study of the documents of those religious congregations and secular priests who owned slaves may reveal insights into the question of racial feelings and sentiments that lay at the heart of proslavery or antislavery mentality. Did Protestants have a keener sense of social justice than Catholics in the United States? A closer look at the background and teachings of the abolitionists in contrast to the background and theological positions of American priests may reveal more about why American Catholics opposed the abolitionist movement. Was there a causal link between abolitionism and anti-Catholic prejudice? A more detailed look at abolitionists in this country, white and black, may reveal more about the manipulation of Catholic opinion than the anti-Catholicism of abolitionists. Finally, one may wonder why in the United States there was so little social consciousness among Catholics. Catholic social teaching was in its infancy in mid-nineteenth-century Europe. In the United States it was practically unknown. It is almost half a century since Madeleine Hooke Rice made her study of Catholic sentiment on the slavery controversy. The sources are now more abundant, the questions more relevant, and the interest in mentality and popular thought more important for historical understanding today. (pp. 65-66)

Reading recommendations:

Davis, Cyprian, O.S.B., *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990.

“Stamped With the Image of God” : African Americans As God's Image in Black. Edited by Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. and Jamie T. Phelps, O.P., Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003.

Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States. Edited by Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998.

Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. (1930-2015) was an African-American Benedictine priest and monk at Saint Meinrad Archabbey, and professor emeritus of Church History at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology, where he began teaching in 1963. Fr. Davis received a licentiate in sacred theology (S.T.L., 1957) from The Catholic University of America, and the licentiate (1963) and doctorate (1977) in historical sciences from the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. Fr. Davis wrote six books and was awarded the John Gilmary Shea Award (1990) and the Brother Joseph Davis Award (1991), and received honorary doctorates from the University of Notre Dame, Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, and St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. He contributed to “Brothers and Sisters to Us” (1979), the United States Catholic bishops’ pastoral letter on racism, and to “What We Have Seen and Heard” (1984), a pastoral letter published by the black Catholic bishops. He was also visiting professor at abbeys in Togo, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Nigeria, and also at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University, New Orleans.