

BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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[How did Black Catholics at certain historical moments understand the implications of the Catholic faith and how did they live this faith? How is this faith a testimony of liberation? The scriptural basis for Black Catholic theology is found in the Joseph Story, Ebed-Melech and Jeremiah, and the Ethiopian Eunuch, as well as in the climax of Philippians 2:7–8. The implications of this faith have been articulated by Black Catholic laymen at the Black Catholic congresses of the 19th century and in the lives of Black saints.]

THE NOTION OF BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY is for some an oxymoron. For others, it is a paradox. For both White American Catholics and those who are theologians in the discipline of Black theology, it is almost an affront. For the latter, Catholicism is quintessentially White and Euro-American; for the former, theology is considered to be simply Catholic, without qualification, despite the fact that we talk about monastic theology, Alexandrian theology, Scholastic theology, Eastern theology, positive theology, etc. Within the Catholic tradition, discourse about God has always been done within a cultural environment and within a temporal space. Still, we shall always be indebted to James Cone, for making it clear that “theology is always done for particular times and places and addressed to a specific audience.”¹ Cone had the insight to insist that “theology . . . cannot

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¹ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986) xxi.

be separated from the community which it represents. It assumes that *truth* has been given to the community at the moment of its birth. Its task is to analyze the implications of that truth. . . .”²

My task here is to look at certain historical moments of the Black Catholic community and to show how this community understood the implications of Catholic belief and, most particularly, how the living out of that faith can be seen as a testimony of liberation. For Cone, the Black Church, that Church of the slave religion, the Church of the spirituals, the Church under the oppression of White slave owners, the Church of exhorters, the Church of Sojourner Truth, of Frederick Douglass, and of Harriet Tubman, is the Church that is the repository of the Black tradition. I wish to suggest that there is another Black religious tradition, found in the Catholic tradition of Africa and the United States. Africans and African Americans have always been part of the Catholic tradition. They have not been either passive or dumb. They have articulated an understanding of blackness and a sense of self-identity within a Catholic tradition that antedated Protestantism. To do this, let us look first at the Scriptures and then at the historical moments of those whose lives articulated their theology.

BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY: THE BIBLICAL SOURCE

James Cone sees the Exodus event as the defining moment when God identified God’s very self with the people of Israel and led them out of slavery into freedom.³ The Exodus theme is important for understanding liberation. But before we look at the liberation theme, we should look at the theme of slavery itself. Before we are freed, we were enslaved. I would suggest that our biblical understanding should begin with Genesis 37:25–28, the moment when Judah and the brothers of Joseph sell him to the Ishmaelites for 20 shekels of silver. The truth of our oppression is that brothers and sisters have enslaved their own brothers and sisters. Slavery is a social sin in which brothers and sisters implicate each other. This text, moreover, when read in relation to the Gospels, prefigures Jesus who can be seen as the Brother who was sold for only 30 pieces of silver (Matthew 27:3–4). In the final analysis, our liberation is the result of our redemption through conformity to Christ.

Orlando Patterson has defined slavery as social death and has defined the slave as the “institutionalized outsider.”⁴ In the ancient world, how-

² Ibid. 8.

³ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 63–66.

⁴ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1982) 1–14.

ever, the institution of slavery was found in varied forms throughout most societies. On the other hand, freedom as a social condition is less evident. Although not essential to an understanding of liberation in the context of Black theology, it is good to remember that freedom in the historical context is not a univocal term either in the ancient world or in the Middle Ages. Only the kings and their nobles were truly in a condition of freedom.

However, Joseph can be a model for our notions of slavery. If the slave is the outsider forcibly subjected to the control of society, Joseph is a reminder that the slave not only confronts an alien culture but the slave also assimilates that culture up to a point and even imprints his or her mark upon it. Parenthetically, one does not need to be reminded of the fact that African slavery did exactly that throughout the Western hemisphere. A slaveholding society is always affected by its slaves. In the Old Testament, the other model for our notions of slavery is Ebed-Melech, the Cushite, a royal slave, a palace official, an influential man, who saves the life of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:7–13). This Black slave is the figure of redemptive service. Raising Jeremiah from the cistern is a prefigurement of the Resurrection. Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254) wrote in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* that Ebed-Melech “represents the people of the Gentiles, which believes in the resurrection, . . . he drew forth the prophet from the pit—by his faith in the resurrection of Christ from the dead . . . he drew [Christ] forth from the pit.”⁵

Passing over the possibility that Simon of Cyrene (Luke 23:26), forced to carry the cross of Christ, may have been a man of color from Cyrenaica in Roman Africa or even a North African Jew, there is one Black man who rides into Acts as a man of power, prestige, and wealth. Along the Gaza Road, headed for the desert, this Black man rides in a carriage reading aloud the prophet Isaiah (Acts 8:26–39) from his own personal scroll. He is reading in Greek one of the Suffering Servant Songs (Isaiah 53:7–8). This unnamed courtier was a Nubian, treasurer of the *Kandake*, the queen-mother, a man of wealth with his own chariot and his personal scroll of Isaiah.⁶ A eunuch and therefore a slave—a noble would not have been castrated—he was a believer but never a member of the Jewish community. The conversion of the Nubian royal chamberlain has a threefold consequence for the way Black theologians read Scripture: first, the baptism of the Nubian leader takes place two chapters before the baptism of Cornelius

⁵ Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. and annotated by R. P. Lawson (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957) 103–4.

⁶ William Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1984) 260. See also G. Mokhtar, ed. *General History of Africa* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981) 2. 302–4.

the Centurion (Acts 10). Many count Cornelius, the Roman military officer, as the first of the Gentile Christians when in fact it is a wealthy Black court official who is the first of the Gentile Christians. Ancient writers often spoke of the Ethiopians and the Scythians as the extreme poles of humankind. The black-skinned man and the blond, blue-eyed Scythian represented the totality of the human race. Second, the Scripture text of the Suffering Servant is at the center of the entire event. Does it presage the suffering of the children of Africa? Finally, the last words of the encounter ends with the Nubian official's exclamation of joy. Joy is the counterpoint of sorrow in the spiritual experience of Blacks. Our general conclusion from a look at the scriptural basis for Black Catholic theology is that our slavery is the foundation of our liberation. Sin has brought about our need for redemption. Those who have sold each other into slavery are brothers and sisters.

The second chapter of Paul's Letter to the Philippians brings us to the climax of what can be termed a Black Catholic theology. We have been liberated for one purpose—to be conformed to Christ. Paul asks that we be of one mind with Christ. "Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus." Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance, he humbled himself becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7–8). Just as James Cone pointed out that God identified himself with the people of Israel,⁷ so Christ became one with us and became a slave. Inasmuch as Black people in Africa and in the Western hemisphere have a shared history of suffering the depredations of slavery, so we share in the privileged position of slavery with Christ. Because of Christ, however, our blackness is no longer a cloak of degradation and misery, it is a color of glory because God has exalted Christ and with Christ each one of us and has given us a new name—a name we share with Christ—and every knee shall bow in adoration. The Philippians hymn is one of redemption and resurrection. Black theology reaches its zenith with the paschal mystery. The mystery of Christ's suffering and death has been lived by us as a people, but by sharing in this mystery we share also in his glorification.

THE CHURCH OF OUR LOVE, THE CHURCH OF OUR FAITH

The first Roman Catholics to walk on American shores were Spanish speaking, and they were White and Black. The Spanish arrived in Florida

⁷ Cone, *Black Theology* 2–3.

in 1565. Many of the Blacks were slaves; others were free. Thanks to the sacramental registers which always indicated those who were Black, mulattos, or some other racial mixture, one is able to identify and describe this first African American community which was also a Catholic community. Sacramental registers have been kept in Catholic parishes since at least the 15th century. Throughout the South and in parts of the North of the U.S., those Blacks who were baptized, confirmed, and buried were identified by race in the registers of the Colonial period and most of the 19th century. As a result we have a display of the Black Catholic community more detailed in many instances than the official census. Because most entries indicated parentage or lack of it, birthplace, and sponsors (in the marriage registers the witnesses are listed), one has the means to identify a community. In a society where the census never listed the slaves by name, all Black Catholics were identified. They were a community, bonded with each other in many ways. They too must be considered as part of the Black Church and yet anchored most assuredly within the Catholic Church. Traditional sites for the Black Catholic presence were the Gulf Coast, including southern Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida; along with Baltimore, Washington, and southern Maryland, parts of the Atlantic coast, and Kentucky as well as the Southwest. This population was both slave and free. It was French-speaking and Spanish-speaking as well as English-speaking. In some areas the administration of the sacraments was regularly available. In other places the slaves were simply baptized and often spiritually neglected.

The Catholic Church in the U.S. had made its peace with slavery. Despite a fundamental sense that the Church was by nature universal and open to all, racial indifference and even racial hostility toward Blacks and other non-White communities were very much in evidence. There was, on the other hand, enough of a cohesive Black Catholic community to produce two congregations of Black sisters founded for the education and the service of both free Blacks and slaves. This community, however, has left us little verbal witness of its belief and mentality. It was a community that was mute in terms of declarations but active in terms of religious practice. In 1886, an ex-slave, born in the Black Catholic region of Kentucky, a newspaperman named Daniel Rudd began a Black Catholic weekly newspaper, *The American Catholic Tribune*, in which Rudd expressed his profound belief that Catholicism was the great hope for Blacks in this country. He believed that it was the teaching of the Catholic Church that made it “absolutely impartial in recognizing [Blacks] as the equals of all and any of the other nations and races of men before her altars. . . .”⁸ Rudd was

⁸ *American Catholic Tribune*, March 4, 1887.

responsible for establishing the African American Catholic congresses. Modeled after the lay Catholic congresses held in Belgium and Germany, Rudd called a meeting of delegates from Black parishes and Black Catholic organizations to come together for a national meeting. This first meeting was held in January 1889 in Washington, D.C. Later there were four other Black Catholic lay congresses in Cincinnati (1890), Philadelphia (1892), Chicago (1893), and Baltimore (1894).⁹ Rudd wrote in his newspaper that some “fancy even, that because a Negro is a Catholic, he is nigh a renegade to his race . . . every Colored Catholic must, at times, feel that his Colored brethren look upon him as an alien.”¹⁰ But Rudd saw that Black Catholics had a particular role to play, “the Catholics of the Colored race should be the leaven, which would raise up their people not only in the eye of God but before men.”¹¹ Black Catholics were to come together to discuss how as a body they could further the cause of African American peoples everywhere.

These congresses ended in most instances with an address to their fellow Catholics. These congresses were all Catholic, and, with the exception of one Black priest, all Black Catholic laymen. Although White members of the hierarchy addressed them, the closing address and most of the discourses were the result of Black Catholic laymen discussing together. The address at the Fourth Black Catholic Lay Congress in Chicago (1893) at the Columbian Exposition was exceptionally eloquent. The message was simple and direct but for the members it expressed their loyalty and love for the Church, their pride in their faith, and their determination to demand their rights within the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church, guided by the spirit of truth, must always preserve inviolate the deposit of faith. . . . From the days of Christ it has been her mission to inculcate the doctrine of love, and not of hate, to raise up the downtrodden, and to rebuke the proud. It has been her mission to proclaim to the ends of the earth that we all have stamped on our immortal souls the image of God, that by baptism we have become the brethren of Jesus Christ, and made heirs of one blessed home of everlasting happiness. For ages the Church has labored to break down the walls of race prejudice, to teach the world the doctrine of the meek and humble Christ, that man should be gauged by his moral worth; that virtue alone, springing from grace, truly elevates a man, and that vice alone . . . degrades him.

The congress members pointed out that after a thorough investigation of the situation of Black Catholics in the various dioceses of the U.S. they

⁹ Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., *History of Black Catholics* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 165, 171–94. See also *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States*, ed. Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998).

¹⁰ *American Catholic Tribune*, May 4, 1888.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

have seen that many Catholics had “departed from the teaching of the Church in the treatment of the Colored Catholics and yielded right to the popular prejudice.”¹² They added that “owing to the frailty of human nature if we would have our rights, we must demand them.”

The congress members, however, set forth a very profound understanding of ecclesiology.

We know that the Roman Church, as she is One and Apostolic, is also Catholic and Holy. With thorough confidence in the rectitude of our course in the enduring love of Mother Church, and the consciousness of our priesthood, we show our devotion to the Church, our jealousy of her glory and our love for her history in that we respectfully call the attention of the Catholic world, and in particular of the clergy, to those wrong practices which mark the conduct of those of the clergy who have yielded to the popular prejudice. . . . Those who have departed from the teachings of the Church we would see reclaimed, and those of our own people who have not yet had their eyes opened to the light of God we would see converted.”¹³

The congress members defined the Catholic Church in terms of service to the poor and downtrodden. To engage in racial hatred or racial discrimination is to set oneself outside of the Church. The members saw themselves having the duty as Catholics to denounce actions of racial discrimination. It is surprising that the congress members would mention “consciousness of our priesthood” in that the priesthood of the laity was rarely referred to among 19th-century Catholics. The congress members made a clear distinction between the Church as a reality in itself and the members who do not live up to the meaning of that reality. To use the terminology of the post-Vatican II Church: the Church is both sinful and holy, but it is also a mystery and a witness to the Incarnation of Christ in the world. These Black Catholics at the end of the 19th century had set forth the outline of a Black Catholic theology. One aspect in particular is that sense of being conformed to Christ—we have become brothers and sisters with Jesus Christ.

¹² The members of the Fourth Congress had made their own this last statement from a sermon by Archbishop John Ireland, the archbishop of St. Paul. John Ireland was the one bishop at this time who championed the rights of African Americans and vigorously condemned racial segregation. The congress members gathered their information by sending a questionnaire to all of the Catholic bishops in the country, asking if there were specific areas in which Black Catholics were placed in an inferior position. Surprisingly, the committee of grievances which had sent the questionnaire reported 67 replies out of 86 sent (Davis, *History of Black Catholics* 190).

¹³ The complete text of this address of the Fourth African American Catholic Congress appears in Cyprian Davis, “Two Sides of a Coin: The Black Presence in the History of the Catholic Church in America,” in *Many Rains Ago: A Historical and Theological Reflection on the Role of the Episcopate in the Evangelization of African American Catholics* (Washington: Secretariat for Black Catholics, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1990) 49–62, at 57–58.

Black Catholics revealed their sense of rootedness in the Catholic Church of that time in the following passage: “we rejoice that our Church, the Church of our love, the Church of our faith, has not failed to stand by its historic record. For did not the Holy Church canonize Augustine and Monica, Benedict the Moor, Cyprian and Cyril, Perpetua and Felicity. . . .”¹⁴ American Catholics at the end of the 19th century thought of themselves in terms of their ethnic origins. Their Catholicism was rooted in their ethnic traditions; their saints were the saints of their national history. Undeterred, African American Catholics found their home in the early Church of Africa and in the African saints. Roman Catholics, they sought their roots in the early martyrs Saints Perpetua and Felicity; they identified with the African theologian, St. Augustine and his mother; they knew of St. Cyril of Alexandria in Egypt; and they mention St. Benedict the Moor, not a saint of the early Church but a son of African slaves in Sicily, a contemporary of Martin Luther. The congress members have been able to find their home in a Church that was at home in the hot sands of North Africa before it was planted in the bogs of northern Europe.

THE BLACK SAINTS: THEOLOGY IN GLORY

To understand the contours of Black Catholic theology, we should look at the tradition of holiness in the history of African and of African Americans. Sainthood is a theological reality that embraces notions of anthropology, ecclesiology, spirituality, and ethics. Sainthood, as every historian knows, cannot be separated from the sociopolitical realities of this world any more than it can exist outside of the cultural ethos of its time. The saint is not only a witness to God’s power but a reflection of a society’s ideals. The saint is a theologian in the deepest sense of the term. The life of the saint bespeaks the reality of God. The saint also expresses the deepest spiritual longings of his or her society. In turn, society attributes to the saint its own deepest ideals of holiness in its legends, liturgy, and hagiography.”¹⁵ Without claiming to be exhaustive, I would like to present several African and African American saints who bespeak the reality of God in a world where they met racial oppression.

Saint Moses the Black

Moses the Black is among the first of the Black saints, important for both the Copts and the Ethiopians. The major source for his life is the collection of monastic lives compiled by Palladius (ca. 365–425) as the *Lausiac His-*

¹⁴ *Many Rains Ago* 58.

¹⁵ See Lawrence Cunningham, “Saints and Martyrs, Some Contemporary Considerations,” *Theological Studies* 60 (1999) 529–37.

tory at the beginning of the fifth century.¹⁶ Little is known about Moses' early life. He was known because of his powerful physique and his black skin. He was most likely a Nubian and he had been a slave. He had a bad reputation because he had been both an outlaw and possibly a murderer. In the desert he had become the chief of a robber band. No information is available about the circumstances of his conversion. As men and women ascetics had begun to flock to the Egyptian Desert by the middle of the third century, they shared the living space with outlaws, fugitives from military duty, and tax evaders who had fled the crushing demands of the Roman imperial tax laws. The monks and nuns in the desert, however, living as hermits, were consumed with a desire for a disciplined life and an experience of God.

St. Moses the Black belonged to that first generation of desert ascetics who came after the death of St. Antony of Egypt in 356.¹⁷ Ordained a priest at a time when most monks were not ordained, he became the spiritual leader of hermits living in the desert of Scete, about a hundred miles to the south of Alexandria. He and his monks were martyred by pagan bands around 407. Recent scholarship has suggested that Moses the Black is the personage who figures in the *Conferences* of Cassian as the author of the first two conferences. If this is correct, then it can be admitted that a Black African wrote one of the foundational texts of Christian spirituality. As it is, Moses the Black figures in some 40 or more *Apophthegmata* or "sayings" that quote the saint or relate an anecdote about him.¹⁸

Blessed Cyprian Tansi, O.C.S.O.

The most recent Black to be beatified was also a monk. In March 1998, Pope John Paul II beatified Cyprian Tansi, a Trappist monk from Nigeria. Born in 1903, Michael Iwene Tansi became in 1937 one of the first Nigerians to be ordained a priest. He served as a diocesan priest for 23 years. He was hard working, zealous, and serious. He began to ask his bishop if he might enter a contemplative order. At that time there were no monastic orders in Nigeria. Finally, the bishop gave permission to him and to a

¹⁶ Palladius, *The Lausiaca History*, ed. and trans. Robert T. Meyer (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1965) 67–70. Palladius, who died as bishop of Helenopolis in Asia Minor, had visited the sites in the Egyptian Desert. He dedicated the account of his visit to Lausus the eunuch, chamberlain to Emperor Theodosius II (401–450).

¹⁷ The life of St. Antony written by St. Athanasius, patriarch of Alexandria, is the earliest Christian text on monasticism. St. Antony is considered to be the "Father of those living the monastic way of life."

¹⁸ *Les Apophthegmes des Pères. Collection Systématique. Chapitres I–IX*, trans. and ed. Jean-Claude Guy, S.J., Sources chrétiennes 387 (Paris: Cerf, 1993) 68–70. The *Apophthegmata* reveal that Moses' black skin sometimes prompted derogatory remarks.

second Nigerian priest to enter the Trappist Abbey of Mount St. Bernard in England in 1950. He received the name Cyprian. Never having visited a monastery before and never having visited England, Father Cyprian had to adapt to a totally different environment and way of life. This was not done without some pain and suffering. The plan had always been that the two Nigerians would return to Nigeria and establish a Trappist monastery there. A foundation was eventually made at Bamenda, Cameroon, in 1963, but Cyprian Tansi was not among the founding monks. Just as the first group of monks were slated to go to Africa, it was discovered that he was critically ill. He died on January 20, 1964.

Cyprian Tansi had been both a zealous parish priest and a prayerful and faithful monk. African students in England found help and guidance from visits to him in the monastery. Others in Africa kept in contact with him. Slowly his fellow monks began to see the gentleness, simplicity, and deep love of prayer that characterized him. Cyprian was beatified by Pope John Paul II at Onitsha, Nigeria, on March 22, 1998. Enthusiasm for the cause of Cyprian came especially from the Nigerian people. He was the first Nigerian to be beatified and perhaps will be the first to be declared a saint. In a sermon on the occasion of the beatification of Blessed Cyprian, the abbot of Mount St. Bernard remarked that Cyprian had much to teach us about race relations and harmonious living between those different races, creeds, and cultures. He is a saint for our times.

St. Benedict the Moor

St. Benedict the Moor or St. Benedict the Black was a contemporary of Martin Luther. He was born Benedetto Manassari in 1526 at San Fratello in the northeastern part of Sicily. His father and mother, Diana Larcari and Cristoforo Manassari, were descendents of African slaves who had been brought to Sicily in the preceding century, a reminder that the African population of southern Europe is as much a part of European history as it is of American history.

A shepherd freed by his owner when he became 21, Benedetto was drawn to the contemplative life so he joined a group of hermits who followed the Rule of St. Francis. Benedetto or Benedict was eventually chosen as superior. The hermits, including Benedict, were all laymen. Benedict never became a priest. At the request of Pope Pius IV (1559–65), the hermits were incorporated into the Order of Friars Minor under the leadership of Benedict. He served both as guardian or superior and as cook at the friary of Santa Maria di Gesù in Palermo. Benedict became renowned as a counselor or spiritual guide for the citizens of Palermo. He died in 1589. Almost immediately he became the object of popular devotion throughout many of the Latin countries in Europe and even in the Ameri-

cas. Especially honored in Sicily, he became the protector of the Black race and patron of the city of Palermo.¹⁹ Pope Pius VII canonized him in 1807. There was a political aspect to this canonization. Great Britain, which was at the forefront in the efforts to outlaw the slave trade, sought the help of Pius VII to banish the slave trade from the high seas. This canonization of an African saint, a former slave, was to be the Holy See's repudiation of the slave trade. St. Benedict the Moor has been a popular saint for both Whites and Blacks. Interestingly Benedict has been venerated by people who did not readily admit the notion of racial equality. Perhaps some believe that God will heed the intercession of a lowly saintly figure because especially the poor and the despised are God's friends. St. Benedict as an Afro-Sicilian is a reminder that the notion of the Black Church in a Catholic tradition embraces a large family. Black Catholics have been part of the Latin landscape of the Mediterranean world since the 15th century. Renaissance Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Sicily had its Black population even before the settlement of the Americans.

St. Martin de Porres

Devotion to St. Martin de Porres is widespread among both Hispanics and Blacks, both in South America and North America. Despite his reputation for holiness during his lifetime, Martin, who died in 1639, was canonized by Pope John XXIII only in 1962 at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.

Born in 1579 to Anna Vasquez, a freed slave from Panama, Martin and his younger sister were eventually recognized by their father, Juan de Porras, a nobleman, who later became governor of Panama. Martin was trained as a "barber surgeon" (a nurse) who became a *donatus* or a domestic with private vows in the Dominican Order at the age of 15. Spanish law at the time forbade the ordination or the religious profession of anyone who was Black, Indian, or of mixed racial ancestry. While he was infirmarian and porter at the Dominican convent of Our Lady of the Rosary, he became a one-man charity agency for all of Lima. His compassion was boundless, nursing the sick and caring for the needs of the poor and abandoned. He was considered a miracle worker who spent his nights in prayer. He was seen to experience ecstasy and other mystical phenomena. Although wonders were attributed to him, perhaps the most extraordinary fact is that this Black man in 16th-century Lima, was an effective healer, a mystic, a figure of kindness in a harsh society, who disbursed enormous sums of money in alms and assistance, and who did it all with humor and grace for some 40 years. This was the miracle.

¹⁹ *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, s.v. "Benedetto il Moro."

Blessed Victoria Rasoamanarivo

In recent years several Black women have been beatified. One was a member of the royal family of Madagascar, another was a sister in modern Italy, and a third was the victim of a revolutionary movement. All were witness to the status of Africa and Africans in modern times. Blessed Victoria Rasoamanarivo was born in 1848 in the capital city of Antananarivo, Madagascar. Antananarivo, located in the center of the island, is capital of the kingdom of the Merina people. From 1828 to 1861, this area in Madagascar was ruled by Ranavalona I, the widow of Radama I, an astute and powerful queen not unlike Elizabeth I of England. Her powerful prime minister was Rainiharo, the grandfather of Blessed Victoria. Her brother also served a prime minister for almost 30 years. At the age of 15, Victoria was baptized a Catholic. She remained a Catholic even when under Protestant influence French Catholic missionaries were expelled. Victoria withstood the pressure to become a Protestant. From her position as a relative of the royal family, she became the protector of the Catholics. She managed to keep open the Catholic schools and the churches; she encouraged Catholics in the countryside through messengers; she appealed directly to the queen and the prime minister on their behalf. In 1886 the Catholic missionaries were allowed to return to a Catholic community that had survived because of Blessed Victoria. She spent six or seven hours daily in prayer and performed works of charity for the poor and abandoned, for prisoners, and for lepers. In 1894, she died at the age of 46. Pope John Paul II beatified her in 1989.²⁰

Saint Josephine Bakhita

Saint Josephine Bakhita was born about the year 1868 in a village of the Daju people in the Darfur region in the western part of the Sudan. About the age of ten, she was kidnapped by Arab slave traders and taken to the provincial city of El Obeid where she was sold. Arab kidnappers gave her the name "Bakhita," meaning "Lucky One." Sold to a Turkish official, she was badly treated and ended up as a slave of Signora Michieli, the wife of a Venetian businessman, to serve as a maid for her infant daughter. Bakhita lived with the Michielis in Genoa for four years. She accompanied the Michieli daughter to a convent of Canossian Sisters in Venice to receive religious instruction. Bakhita had never received any religious formation nor had she been baptized. When the Michielis arrived to bring their daughter and Bakhita home, Bakhita refused to go. Legal authorities pointed out that slavery was illegal in Italy and that Bakhita was a free

²⁰ *Bibliotheca Sanctorum, Prima Appendice, s.v. "Rasoamanarivo, Vittoria."*

person. In 1893, Josephine (the name she received at baptism) entered the Institute of the Daughters of Charity, known as the Canossian Sisters.

Saint Josephine Bakhita's life as a sister was a simple one. She never returned to Africa. She often gave public lectures in various places in Italy to further the work of the Canossian Sisters. She acted as cook, sacristan, and later as porter. Josephine Bakhita affected the lives of all who came in contact with her. She served as porter and as sacristan. This brought her into contact with guests, boarders, and visiting priests. All were moved by her kindness and her quiet serenity of spirit. The lay people including even children of the village of Schio near Venice came to know and respect her as a saint. She died on February 8, 1947, and she was beatified in 1992 and was canonized a saint on October 1, 2000.²¹

Blessed Anwarite Nengapeta

Anwarite Nengapeta was born about the year 1941 in the north of what was then the Belgian Congo into a family that observed the traditional religion. In 1943, Anwarite, along with her mother and two older sisters, was baptized in the Catholic Church. After education in the mission schools, she joined a diocesan religious community, the Sisters of the Holy Family. She made her final vows in 1959, taking the name Marie Clementine, and she began a career of teacher and served as catechist in various villages.

The movement for independence in the Belgian Congo resulted in violence and sporadic uprisings. Such an uprising among the Simba brought about the capture of the religious women at Bafwabaka, among whom was Anwarite. She was singled out and threatened if she did not submit to the sexual advances of the officer in charge. She replied very simply that she would accept death rather than submit. On December 1, 1964, in the early morning, while the other sisters sang the *Magnificat*, she was put to death after stating that she forgave her killer because he did not know what he was doing.²² When Pope John Paul II beatified Anwarite in 1985 in the Republic of the Congo, he called her "a witness of hope."²³

Blessed Isidore Bakanja

In 1884 the Conference of Berlin awarded Leopold II King of the Belgians the territory in central Africa to be known as the Congo Free State. Leopold governed the vast country as his personal empire. It was exploited

²¹ Maria Luisa Dagnino, *Bakhita Tells Her Story*, 2nd ed. (Rome: General House, Canossian Daughters of Charity, 1992).

²² *Notitiae: Congregatio pro Cultu Divino* 21 (1985) 558–60.

²³ *L'Osservatore Romano*, September 9, 1985, 7–8.

by his companies, and the inhabitants were reduced to slavery in working the mines, the rubber plantations, and commercial trading posts. This forced labor was often brutal and cruel.²⁴

Blessed Isidore Bakanja was born between 1880 and 1890 among the Mongo people in the rain forest region of present-day Republic of the Congo. Working at first as a bricklayer for a Belgian firm, he came into contact with Catholic missionaries, was baptized, and became a devout Catholic. He acted as a domestic for a Belgian agent who was a violent anticlerical. Speaking about his faith to the workmen at the trading post, Isidore aroused the ire of his employer who forbade him to display his religion. Enraged that Isidore continued to wear a scapular and to practice his faith openly, his employer tortured and imprisoned Isidore bound with a heavy chain in solitary confinement. After six months of cruel treatment by the chief of the agency, he died as a result of flogging by a whip studded with nails.²⁵

Three African Americans

Today the cause for beatification of three African Americans, two women and one man, has been introduced in Rome. The Venerable Pierre Toussaint, born a slave in Haiti in 1766, came to New York in 1787 with his owner Jean Bérard and his wife. Like most urban slaves, Pierre was trained to work at a trade in order to provide money for his owner. Toussaint was trained to become a hairdresser, a highly lucrative position since the aristocratic women of that time wore elaborate coiffures demanding a hairdresser's skill. In this way, Toussaint was able to support Madame Bérard after the death of her husband without disclosing to her that she would have been practically penniless without his labor. Shortly before her death in 1807, Toussaint was manumitted. In turn, Toussaint bought the freedom of his sister and his future wife. Thanks to his occupation, he became a fairly prosperous man, and owned his own home. In antebellum New York he reached out to those who needed his help. His almsgiving, his money lending to both Whites and Blacks, his nursing of the sick, his sheltering of homeless Black boys, and his teaching them to play the violin, all witness to his charity and consideration for others. According to his first biographer, Hannah Sawyer Lee, who knew him personally, Toussaint was tall, very dark, always cheerful, a mimic who wore small ear rings. She described his piety, his good sense, but above all else his authentic charity and

²⁴ See Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

²⁵ *Bibliotheca Sanctorum, Prima Appendice*, s.v. "Bakanja, Isidoro." See also, "Zaire. Prophetic Stance Against Injustice," [London] *Tablet* 248 (April 3, 1994) 502.

his genuine love for his wife and his niece who died so young.²⁶ In a period where Blacks were so much devalued, where he personally experienced prejudice in the Church, he was able to live a life of total forgetfulness of self and still maintained his humor and his great love for others. He died in 1853. Almost immediately, he was spoken of by his contemporaries as a saint. He was declared venerable in 1996.

Elizabeth Lange was born in Cuba of Haitian parents. She came to the U.S. about 1817, part of the many refugees, both Black and White, who fled Haiti after the revolution. In 1829, Elizabeth Lange and three other Black women, two from Haiti and one American, were formed into a religious congregation called the Oblate Sisters of Providence. A French priest, Jacques Joubert, and Archbishop Whitfield of Baltimore, took the bold step of beginning a community of Black sisters. From the beginning, these women established a school for young Black girls. In 1830, they received approbation from Rome. The life of this community of Black sisters was not easy and their story is one of heroism. They persevered and still work in Baltimore and many other places as teaching sisters. Elizabeth Lange provided the direction and the inspiration for this community of Black sisters. She died in 1882.²⁷

The second community of Black sisters in the U.S. is the Sisters of the Holy Family. This community was founded by Henriette Delille, a free woman of color, born in New Orleans in 1812 and who died there in 1862. Henriette Delille, with two other free women of color, Juliette Gaudin and Josephine Charles, began to serve the needs of aged and abandoned slaves and other poor Blacks and also began to teach catechism to the slaves and free girls of color. The community gradually evolved into a community of religious sisters during the 1840s and the 1850s. They made private vows about the year 1851. Despite her frail health, Henriette was the guiding force in the work of charity and service. Henriette encouraged the baptism of Black children, both slaves and free. She and her companions frequently assisted the members of the Black community in the reception of the sacraments. At the beginning of the Civil War, shortly after the fall of New

²⁶ [Hannah Sawyer Lee], *Memoir of Pierre Toussaint, Born a Slave in St. Domingo* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, 1854). Hannah Lee was connected with the Schuyler Family one of the group of aristocratic New York families, who knew Toussaint very well. She saved the Pierre Toussaint papers—over 1100 documents—now conserved in the manuscript division of the New York City Public Library. See also T. J. Shelley, “Black and Catholic in Nineteenth Century New York City: The Case of Pierre Toussaint,” *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 102 (1991) 1–17.

²⁷ Davis, *History* 99–104.

Orleans to Union troops, Henriette Delille died in November 1862 at the age of 50 years.²⁸ Her cause for beatification has already begun.

IN ALL TIMES AND ALL SEASONS

When James Cone introduced the notion of Black theology, the African American community in the U.S. was faced with an emergency situation. This situation is no longer present. In the situation today, indifference has overcome many of us, positions have hardened for some of us, and a hard core has become a menace for all of us. Black Catholic theology can bring to theological understanding today an historical perspective that finds its roots in a Church that has always been and continues to be rooted in African soil. Such a theological perspective takes liberation one step further into the fullness

²⁸ At the present time I am completing a biography of Henriette Delille.