

Davis, Cyprian. *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*. New York: Crossroad/Continuum, 1990. xv + 347 pp. \$24.95.

The history of black Catholics in the United States has never really been told. In the first part of this century John T. Gillard published two books on the American black Catholic community: *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* (1929) and *Colored Catholics in the United States* (1941). Both were learned studies but defended the relations of the Catholic Church with blacks in an apologetic way few find comfortable today.

Other carefully researched histories have appeared since then, dealing with specific dimensions of the history of American black Catholics, such as Albert Foley's biographical sketches of black priests in the last one hundred years (1955), Marilyn Nickel's excellent study on Thomas Wyatt Turner, the great black Catholic lay leader of the first half of this century (1988), and, even more recently, Stephen Och's study on blacks and the Roman Catholic priesthood, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (1990).

What has been lacking, however, is a historical overview of the African American *community* in the United States. Father Cyprian Davis, a black Benedictine monk and professor of church history at the St. Mainard School of Theology in Indiana, deserves credit for addressing this want and for treating black Catholics as a people with a history within the American Catholic Church. His book tells the gripping story of a people first crushed by slavery and later struggling to counteract indifference and racism within a church they insist on calling their own. In so doing his tenacious research (see, for instance, his 76 pages of endnotes and bibliography) unveils things both enlightening and intriguing.

Much of what appears in *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* does not make for pleasant reading, yet will help one understand why some contemporary black Catholics describe the Catholic Church as a white racist institution. From today's vantage point, it is depressing to encounter the names of bishops long considered stalwarts of the U.S. Catholic Church—John England, Francis Patrick Henrick, John Hughes—and see how widely in the pre-Civil War period, like many others, they missed the mark on racial issues or found themselves obligated to defend the status quo on the basis of traditional Catholic interpretation of the Scriptures.

Nor were the American bishops able, a few years later, to work out a practical and unified way to address the crisis caused by the emancipation of the slaves. In Davis' view, by passing up this chance to redeem past errors, they were responsible for a failure that was "one of the tragedies of American church history." As the author evidences, whatever

progress took place in the following century in making blacks part of the U.S. Catholic mainstream was due most of all to the renewed pressure of Rome and the persistent efforts of black Catholics themselves. It was mainly on their own initiative that blacks moved forward, even when the time came, to respond to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s protest.

Rather than a synthesis of carefully researched histories carried out on the local level, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* is an attempt to provide the larger framework within which further historical research can be developed. One might wish, for instance, to see further serious investigation regarding the Catholic reaction to slavery. Did Protestants have a keener sense of justice than Catholics in the United States? Would a more thorough study of the documents of those religious congregations and secular priests that owned slaves reveal insights into the question of racial feelings that lay at the heart of proslavery and anti-slavery mentalities?

As demonstrated by Davis, the history of black sisters in the 19th century is a pivotal chapter in the history of African American Catholicism. They witness to the existence of a vigorous black Catholic community even prior to the Civil War. The documentation of the history of the black religious communities needs to be developed and adequate biographies of their founders written. At the same time, a more detailed examination of the history as well as the spirituality and the type of education of the black Catholic sisterhoods should contribute to understanding the spiritual and cultural framework within the black community today, as Davis himself admits.

More recently, George Stallings, a black charismatic priest of the Washington, D.C. archdiocese, launched a call for separate, semi-autonomous status for black Catholics through the formation of an African American ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Stallings subsequently severed his ties with the Catholic hierarchy. His popular following—if it grows—may well present a challenge and an opportunity to the Catholic American Church that could mark another turning point in its history.

African American Catholics have traditionally been relegated, for the most part, to footnotes and afterthoughts. It is Davis' merit to have highlighted what had been hidden and to have retrieved a mislaid memory. He has convincingly shown that if one seeks a more complete picture of the Catholic Church in the United States, it will be necessary to know the accounts of the African American Catholics.