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Tribute to Rev. Dr. Kortright Davis

Washington, DC*

Greetings,

First let me thank the Organizing Committee for the opportunity to speak on my behalf and also to some extent on behalf of the Holy Comforter family, thank Rev. Dr. Kortright Davis and recognize publicly the contribution he has made while he was with us. I am not sure that you do him and me a favor by having me speak after such a sumptuous lunch. This is the time niggeritis sets in, when it is said that blood is diverted from the brain to the gut and as Keats would say in different context:

*A drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains*

But there are well known techniques for dealing with this problem. You shock the audience at the beginning. The story is told of a very righteous preacher who was asked to speak after a similar lunch in the days before air conditioning. He began his speech thus “This place is so God damned hot” and as the audience sprang awake and jaws dropped, he went on quickly; “That is what I heard a man say a few minutes ago”.

But more seriously I value this opportunity more than most of you can imagine. Such is the nature of life and longevity that in recent times I have had to deliver eulogies after the deaths of good friends I have lost. So today it is an exquisite pleasure to eulogize my good friend-our good friend Kortright Davis while he is still upright and above ground.

I wish to eulogize him-to speak well of him and praise him and express our collective gratitude for how over these 27 years he has shown exemplary devotion to his chosen calling. I wish to laud and applaud him and his work and call attention to the extent to which he has exemplified consistency in the spiritual and sacramental leadership that are the hallmarks of a good pastor and have so endeared him to us.

One taxonomy of the characteristics of a good priest gives four main categories of action. He or she should

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- Build a community of faith
- Help the parishioners discern the part God has given them to play as actors in this real drama of life
- Transform the parish into a real community with strong and secure bonds of fellowship
- Be punctilious about the pastoral care that is so difficult in these modern times.

I would posit that Rev. Davis would merit an A grade in all these categories. No one who has met and heard him can fail to feel the strength and firmness of his own convictions and commitment to these areas of action. I should not single out any one as more important than the others, but I perhaps reflect my own bias when I say that no one who has had the pleasure and privilege to see and hear Rev. Davis in full hermeneutical flight could fail to give precedence to his brilliance in helping parishioners understand, learn and speak their lines in this play of life. But I wonder how many of you know more than what you see here at Holy Comforter. It is a truth that what you see is what you get, but I would wish briefly to expand that sight a little. At the risk of embarrassing him, let me tell you a bit more about Donald Henry Kortright Davis.

He was born in Antigua and Barbuda and I always add Redondo and attended the local Grammar School as a Maple Scholar. He attended Codrington College in Barbados and while there obtained the Bachelor of Divinity Degree from London University externally. I mention this specifically, as I believe that one of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's claims to fame is that he and Kortright Davis took and passed the same exam at the same time. He was the first person to obtain a postgraduate degree in History from the University of the West Indies at Cave Hill. He was the first West Indian to be awarded a Doctorate in Religious studies from Sussex University in the UK. He was Vice –Principal and acting Principal of his Alma mater Codrington College. A brilliant career!

But let the record show that little of this would have been possible had he not had the good fortune to marry Joan Thompson. She is described by my sister who was her classmate in school and by her boss when she worked in PAHO in Barbados as calmly competent and confident with a winning personality –traits which still remain with her.

But during these years he did not neglect his pristine profession. He was and always will be a priest. He paid his dues in the Caribbean-to use an expression from the Godfather; he made his theological bones in the small parishes of Antigua, St. Kitts, Montserrat and Barbados before coming to the USA. When I heard of him first he was pastor of St. Bartholomew's-one of the tiniest churches in Barbados.

He came to Howard University in 1983 and quickly ascended the academic ladder to be made full Professor of Theology in 1987-a tribute to the quality and quantity of his scholarship. He has acquired the accolades that come to those who distinguish themselves academically and I am proud that one of his accolades is the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa* from the University of the West Indies. As our Public Orator said very aptly in the citation:

“He is a man who has demonstrated an extraordinary ability to inhabit two worlds-academia and the church-combining profound scholarship with pastoral care and finding exhilarating synergies between them.”

Let me use another relevant taxonomy and say that there are three basic responsibilities of an academic-service, teaching and research. The functions of a good priest are similar service, teaching and I add prayer. As the Public orator averred, Kortright has managed to combine the requirements of both. In both we applaud service and I would invite you to reflect on the service Rev. Davis has given as our priest. I could cite several examples of how he has served and ministered to us, but one of the services that has been possible through his indomitable tenacity of purpose and tenacity of faith has been the erection of the Walker Center. He will tell you that it has been the result of the work of many but none would deny that it would not have been possible without the visionary leadership of Rev. Davis.

But finally, I wish to delve into another sphere to which Kortright has applied his prodigious talents and given service-it is to the Caribbean people as a whole. This is best seen through the numerous appointments and affiliations with Caribbean institutions such as the Caribbean Conference of Churches. But it is in through his writings and speeches that one sees the fierce pride in the place where he was born and had his infant nurture.

This year is 175 years since emancipation and for the past few decades Rev. Davis has focused a theological lens on the struggle of the Caribbean people for the self-actualization that should come with emancipation. His book “Emancipation still Comin” is a classic. If you should think I am biased, let me cite one of the reviewers.

“Emancipation Still Comin” is a fascinating exploration of the role of theology, particularly theories of liberation theology, in Caribbean socioeconomic development. A weighty subject indeed; and while a lesser talent may have been tempted to intimidate readers with bombast and didacticism, the Antiguan-born author captivates his audience with seasoned prose, borrowing liberally from popular Caribbean colloquialisms. He persuasively delivers the central theme of “Emancipation”: that religion, among the most powerful tools of subjugation employed by colonial masters, also contains the seeds for social and economic liberation of the oppressed. Already considered essential reading for the Caribbean progressive, “Emancipation” belongs in the global pantheon of theological literature. It is a masterpiece.”

I have always felt that it is his notion of emancipatory theology, perhaps the Caribbean version of liberation theology that shows Rev. Davis as a bona fide revolutionary in a great tradition. Perhaps not a revolutionary like Jean Bertrand Aristide or the Columbian Camilo Restrepo who was so sickened by the rampant injustice and corruption that made the poor even poorer made the famous statement “ If Christ were alive today he would be a guerilla”, but a revolutionary none the less. He would see theology not as an abstraction, but relevant to the existential reality of Caribbean lives and living. As he says, theology follows praxis and not the reverse. Let me end by quoting from one of his famous lectures “Two Caribbean Theologies of

Freedom” in which he debates another famous Caribbean theologian-Romney Moseley and envisions the change that it is needed to bring the majority of our people into the sun.

“Change is action: it is the radical transformation of oppressive structures; it is the overthrowing the tables of the money-changers in the temples; it is the singing of a new song in a new key that sounds cacophonous to those who think that music belongs to them; it is making the counterculture of the gospel come alive in a way that threatens the little kings but announces afresh the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.”

I can almost hear Marx from his grave in Highgate saying Amen, except of course to the last part.

Two Sundays ago, Hodge in announcing this function said that Rev. Davis would no longer be functional after August 31. I am sure he meant that he would no longer discharge the functions he has discharged at Holy Comforter for the past 27 years. We will miss him. We will miss the myriad manifestations of his ministry. We will miss his numerous nuggets of wisdom. We will miss the homespun homilies derived from his humility. But I would be sure that the Rev. Davis whom we have come to know will find other canvasses on which to paint and other fora in which to make patent his passion for the plight of his people, the firmness of his faith and his gratitude to his God.

Rev. Davis likes cars, so I wish for him and Joan that they should retyre and I use the English spelling of tyre with a Y-put on new tyres.

And now let me end with an old Irish blessing for them

*May the road rise up to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
And the rains fall soft upon your fields,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand
And never close his fist too tight.*

I thank you.