In Memoriam: Father Thaddeus Posey, O.F.M. Cap.

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Saturday September 17th, 2011 – the day was windy and overcast, though the blustery pre-autumn weather did not stop people from strolling along the Daytona Beach seashore, playing ball, surfing, and otherwise enjoying the day. Fr. Thaddeus had flown in the previous evening from his home at the St. Fidelis Friary in Victoria, Kansas, a trip that can take upwards of 12 hours with at least two layovers. Though tired, and still suffering from the discomforts of recent surgery to treat his persistent cancer, Fr. Thaddeus hadn’t minded the trip. He told us that he loved to fly, and that the time spent in the air provided a space for quiet contemplation. His small hotel room faced the beach, which offered a stunning view of the Atlantic Ocean. Ironically, the beauty of the ocean view was a complicating factor for our interview, for it created lighting problems as we attempted to video-record our talk. All in all, however, our team of four – Thaddeus Posey, O.F.M. Cap, Cecilia Moore, Kimberly Flint-Hamilton, and Steve Hamilton – enjoyed a morning and afternoon of conversation, as Fr. Thaddeus recalled events from his life, both happy and sad, about his family, education, vocation, and life in the military. Fr. Thaddeus was the fourth person interviewed for the BCTS Oral History Project. His passing is a reminder of how critical this project is for us as a community of teachers and scholars. The chance to tell our own stories, in our own words, and to share those stories with others.
who strive for justice and equality is what the project is all about. What emerged from our nearly four-hour interview was a picture of Fr. Thaddeus in his diverse and complex roles – as son, as priest, as charter member of the BCTS and co-founder of the IBCS, as educator, and as army chaplain.

Although the Posey family has deep roots in Leonardtown, Maryland, Fr. Thaddeus – born John William Posey, Jr. – was born and raised in Washington, D.C. Thaddeus was the elder child of John William Posey, Sr. (1919-1989) and Teresa Braxton Posey (1922-2005) and their younger child was a daughter, Rita T. Posey Moore.

So we come from St. Mary’s County, [Maryland,] Leonardtown of course being a central point. It’s kind of funny when you think about it … I went to high school at Archbishop Carroll. … The majority of the blacks there were Southern Maryland rooted. The other joke of it is most of us were related in some ways to somebody there. … You can name the major families, you think about the Braxtons, the Procters, the Meriwethers, the Madisons, the Masons, all of those folks were people who, if you went back to Southern Maryland, lived down the street or down the road, or on the farm behind us, that kind of thing, so it was that kind of crowd. These folks had either moved to D.C. to old St. Augustine’s which was our original parish, or to St. Cyprian’s over on East Capital area.

Thaddeus’ parents were leaders in the Washington black Catholic community. One of their goals was parish integration. To that end, they started the Home Visit Program, inviting white couples into their home in an effort to begin breaking down cultural barriers. They welcomed open conversation, questions, and reflection. At its zenith more than 400 people were active in this program. As a result of this and other initiatives, Fr. Thaddeus’
parents were named Catholic Couple of the Year by the Archdiocese of Washington in 1965. They later received the highest honor awarded by the papacy to the laity, the Papal Award, *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*, in 1973.
Figure 2: John and Teresa Posey

Teresa Posey’s career with the DC public school system spanned 36 years. She started as an elementary school teacher, then advanced to the position of principal of Maury Elementary School, the laboratory school for the University of District of Columbia. Ultimately she was Regional Superintendent of Schools for the D.C. public school system. John William Posey, Sr. was a career military man, ultimately reaching the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army. Together, John and Teresa Posey created a home environment that made the life of the mind and nurturing of the soul its centerpiece, bolstered with a sense of commitment to parish community and self-discipline.
Fr. Thaddeus began his formal education at Maury Elementary School and transferred to St. Gabriel’s Elementary when his family moved in 1955. He attended Archbishop Carroll High School, and entered St. Fidelis College in 1961, ultimately completing his bachelor’s degree in philosophy. From there he earned a master's degree in religious education from Capuchin College in Washington in 1970. He was ordained in 1971.
Figure 4: John William Posey Jr., about age 6
Notice the tie monogrammed with the letter “J”

Thaddeus was the sixth religious in his family. He joined five older cousins whose communities included the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the Sisters of the Holy Family, and the Carmelites.
With joy and gratitude to God
Lt. Col. and Mrs. John W. Posey
and their daughter Rita
invite you to the ordination to the priesthood
of their son and brother
Thaddeus John Posey, O.F.M. Cap.
to be conferred by
His Eminence, Patrick Cardinal O’Boyle
Archbishop of Washington
on Saturday, the first of May
Nineteen hundred and seventy-one
at ten o’clock in the morning
in St. Gabriel’s Church
26 Grant Circle N.W.
Washington, D.C.

As you shared in the years of
preparation for the priesthood
by your friendship and love
we cordially invite you to join in offering
a Concelebrated Mass of Thanksgiving
on Sunday, the second of May
at one-fifteen o’clock in the afternoon
in St. Gabriel’s Church
26 Grant Circle N.W.
Washington, D.C.

A General Reception and
First Priestly Blessings
Immediately following Mass
St. Gabriel’s Parish Hall

Please accept my sincerest thanks
for your prayers, interest, and kindness shown me at the time of my
Ordination and First Mass.

May the Blessing of Almighty God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy
Spirit descend upon you and remain
with you forever.

Figure 5: Announcement of Reception for Thaddeus’ Ordination
Figure 6: Newly-ordained Fr. Thaddeus, his parents John and Teresa, and sister Rita

Figure 7: Fr. Thaddeus Celebrating First Mass
Following his ordination, Thaddeus was assigned as a counselor to his alma mater, Archbishop Carroll High School. He stayed for nearly three years. From there he was transferred to Denver, Colorado, as assistant pastor of Annunciation Church and teacher/counselor at Bishop Machebeuf High School and chaplain of the juvenile detention center.

Thaddeus was the first African American priest at Annunciation Church. The nearly all-white congregation found his presence so unusual that some mothers brought their children specifically to meet him.\textsuperscript{1} In a 1973 interview for The Denver Post, Thaddeus commented on the obstacles encountered by those who fight for social justice:

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\textsuperscript{1} Virginia Culver, “People Watch Black Priest,” The Denver Post, Friday December 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1973.
It seems anyone interested in social justice is branded a supermilitant nowadays. They’re considered just another radical. Maybe people are tired, or maybe they’re not aware of the situation. Some think that we’ve already been through the civil rights struggle and it’s all over. But it’s not. We have an obligation to continue the struggle for Chicanos, Indians and blacks.2

Thaddeus did most of the cooking for his Denver friary. It wasn’t uncommon, however, for the friars to offer food from their own pantries to the poor who lived in the neighborhood.

I did … all the cooking for our house. [One day] I made dirty rice. And I had worked on my dirty rice, you know, you boil those livers and guts and you chop them up and then you put in your onion, and you do all of this and then folded it into the rice. And I had it kind of sitting on the edge of the stove cooling. A lady from Louisiana three doors down came by the back and … it was summer so the back door was open. She smells dirty rice, came in, Ben said, right, take it if you want it. I was ready to kill him. I came home and my dirty rice was gone! And the lady, Emma came up to thank me … but on the other hand that gave them something for dinner.

While in Denver, Thaddeus rented space in a gymnasium for the youth he counseled. Not only did this help some children develop skills – even allowing some to earn certification in water safety to qualify for summer jobs as lifeguards – it also afforded him the opportunity to develop his own expertise in martial arts. As a child, he had begun learning martial arts with his father, and he

2 Ibid.
continued to practice through much of his adult life. The time Thaddeus spent with martial arts allowed him to focus and reflect on his life.

Well, for a lot of folks this gave them a chance, you know ... in this busy, busy world with everything running, to be quiet. .. Turn the noise off, everything, be quiet. [T]hey used put a rose in a vase in front of you [and say], study the rose. And well after three minutes, somebody [would start to talk] ... no, no, study the rose. And you move to it. It helps people to see and experience a different dimension of life than the hustle bustle that you can get into, plus you have a chance to develop physically, but you see that in the different light if you have a good person training you. That is not the external force to beat folks up. It’s a way of life, and therefore that makes a difference.

Thaddeus had a passion for airplanes and flying from the time he was a child. This passion eventually led him to the military. With encouragement from his father, he joined the U.S. Army Reserves Chaplaincy in 1977. He served for 29 years before retiring in 2007.

[Before I went to seminary I was accepted at the Air Force Academy, though I went to the seminary. But Air Force ... planes and all of that ... I used to make model planes and all, and that’s my world, I still love flying. Sitting on the plane yesterday coming in I was saying, gosh do I love this.

The opening of the Capuchin’s Mid-America province in 1977 prompted another move for Thaddeus, this time to Kansas City, Missouri. He served his religious community as Provincial Secretary and Treasurer while serving his country as Assistant Chaplain in the Readiness Command. He also taught at Cardinal Ritter College
Preparatory school in St. Louis. It was during this time that the first meeting of the BCTS at the Motherhouse of the Oblate Sisters of Providence took place in 1978, and the Institute for Black Catholic Studies (IBCS) began at Xavier University in New Orleans in 1980. Thaddeus was founding director of the IBCS, continued in this role until 1991. During this time he taught at St. Louis University and Cardinal Ritter Preparatory School in St. Louis. He also began doctoral studies, ultimately completing his Ph.D. in Historical Theology in 1993. He then joined the faculty of the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, and, in addition to his regular teaching duties, taught extension courses in Ghana on African Christianity. Thaddeus retired from the University of St. Thomas in 2006. He was eventually stationed at Walter Reed Army Medical Hospital in Washington, D.C., and earned the rank of Colonel before retiring in 2007.

Thaddeus reflected on the need for Catholic chaplains, especially during the turbulent years of the Iraq and Afghan wars.

*This is the first war people can talk about [the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan] that they were in and they didn’t get to see a priest, you know it used to be you could say 10 masses on a Sunday if you have that much time, but [now] people usually say three, four masses on a Sunday because you will move from one post to the next one to the next one, or you ended up saying mass all through the week in a different post, that’s the only time you could get there. There are guys who didn’t see [a priest at all], or maybe saw the priest once, the entire time, you know, the 12 to 18 months that they spent in Iraq. … We’re are lucky if there are 60 diocesan priests in the Army right now, 60 … Army logistics

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says we need 240 priests, there are not even 100. ... If you just send one from every diocese, do you realize you would fill that up. And I don’t care which, you know, Army, Navy, Air Force, I don’t care where you go. But just one would make a difference.

Upon his retirement from the military, Thaddeus was honored with the Legion of Merit Award. The certificate he received reads as follows:

The Legion of Merit Award is presented to Chaplain Colonel Thaddeus J. Posey for extraordinary meritorious service while serving in key leadership positions spanning over twenty-nine years, culminating as Chaplain, 88th Regional Readiness Command. His unwavering dedication, inspiring loyalty and consistently outstanding performance of duty were key to the successful completion of numerous critical missions during a time of ... national crisis. Chaplain Posey’s exceptional professionalism, compassionate Chaplain care and superior leadership skills were evident in all missions completed resulting in the increased readiness throughout the entire command. Upon retirement, Chaplain Posey is recognized for exemplary service in the finest traditions of the United States Army.4

Thaddeus was also presented with the Presidential Certificate of Appreciation:

For service in the Armed Forces of the United States, Chaplain Thaddeus J. Posey, I extend to you my personal thanks and sincere appreciation for your honorable service

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to our nation. You helped to maintain the security of the United States of America with a devotion to duty that is in keeping with the proud tradition of our Armed Forces. I honor your service and respect the commitment and loyalty you displayed over the years. My best wishes to you for happiness and success in the future. (signed) George W. Bush, Commander in Chief.5

Throughout our interview Thaddeus kept returning to the power of education to change lives. Thaddeus was inspired and motivated by the fact that our people fought and died to have an opportunity for education. He truly believed that education is our ticket to a better life, to freedom, and to justice.

*Education is opportunity. A hundred years ago that’s what our people were fighting for. We don’t give them [children] the opportunity, we don’t challenge them to know things. ... If they can get out here and memorize all these songs, and all this rap and everything else, why can’t they memorize their times table? We’ve got teachers who don’t want to ask them to do that.*

Committed to the notion that real education has the power to truly transform, Thaddeus passionately supported the liberal arts because of their power to humanize, to inspire, and to helping people to grow.

*A liberal arts education ... exposes the mind and the spirit to the creativity of the world. [Education] helps you to dream, to think, to look out and see.*

5 Ibid.
Thaddeus’ impact on Black Catholic life, scholarship and institutions was been profound. He was an active member of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus from its inception until 1989. He was a charter member of the BCTS and coordinated its first meeting in 1978, and was also the driving force for the creation of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies in 1980, serving as director and interim director for many years. Thaddeus was the visionary behind the groundbreaking publication *Theology: A Portrait in Black* (1980). He collected and edited the papers, then published and circulated the manuscript. Because of Thaddeus, the legendary ‘little green book’ represents an important turning point for black Catholic scholarship. Because of his influence on Black Catholic life, teaching, and scholarship, he arguably joins the ranks of Daniel Rudd (1854-1933), journalist and founder of the first National Black Catholic Congress, and Dr. Thomas Wyatt Turner (1877-1978), founder of the Federated Colored Catholics (FCC).

Thaddeus is remembered fondly by former students, university colleagues, and members of the BCTS. His students remember him as a caring and attentive teacher. BCTS member Dr. Paul Green remembers his days at Cardinal Ritter: “Father taught me and so many other students at Cardinal Ritter College Preparatory High School in St. Louis, MO. He was far more to us than an educator. He reminded us that we have been and remain God’s children. He made us feel and know that we could accomplish anything with God’s love and God’s grace.” Former student Lisa von Feldt writes: “Thanks, Fr. Thad, for the words of

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wisdom in high school. You were an inspiration to a lot of kids, me included. Godspeed, teacher.” BCTS member Claudine Pannell-Goodlett reflects on her time at the IBCS: “I was a student at the Institute when he was interim director. He provided invaluable guidance in pursuit of my studies of Black Catholic women.”

Thaddeus also made an impression on his colleagues at the University of St. Thomas. Drs. Catherine Cory and Anne King reflect on their interactions with him. Dr. Cory writes: “Thanks to Fr. Thaddeus' community and family, we had the pleasure of having him as our colleague at the University of St. Thomas for more than a decade. He was passionate about the success of each of his students and always ready to listen when someone needed counsel. I miss his infectious smile and his welcoming presence. Thaddeus, may the angels lead you into paradise!” And Dr. King remembers his kindness and generosity: “Thaddeus was a wonderful person and colleague. I have missed him greatly since he moved out of Minnesota, although we emailed back and forth now and then. He gave me my only upgrade to first class travel on the way to a conference once – and we laughed a lot all the time.”

BCTS members reflect on the significance of Thaddeus’ contributions. Dr. Fr. Bryan Massingale writes: “Former director of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies, Thaddeus has had a pivotal influence on the shape of Black Catholicism in the United States.” Dr. Shawn Copeland and Dr. Fr. Ed Branch comment on his heart and passion. Ed Branch writes: “An iconic member of the Clergy Caucus, he paid attention to what was happening to us personally and as an organization.” Shawn Copeland reflects: “In all that Thaddeus did, he always had the Black Catholic community in mind and heart. If it were not for his energy and savvy and poise, the two 'institutions' in which many of us are so invested would not exist. He was/is truly committed to us for the glory of God and the good of the Church.”
BCTS members Sr. Dr. Jamie Phelps and Fr. Dr. Charles Payne attended the wake and funeral for Fr. Thaddeus. Jamie Phelps writes of her impressions from the testimonials: “It became clear from the testimonies that Thaddeus embraced everyone from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds whom he met and deepened their consciousness of the cultural gifts with which African Americans have enriched our nation and church.”

The BCTS remembers Fr. Thaddeus Posey for his dedication to social justice, not just for Black Catholics but for African Americans of every faith, and for all those who suffer from injustice and oppression. We remember him for his passion and honor him for his leadership. Whatever successes we may have today, we owe in large part to Fr. Thaddeus who fought for us throughout his entire career.

Eternal rest, grant unto him O Lord
and let perpetual light shine upon him.

May he rest in peace. Amen.
Figure 9: Crest of the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps
Father Thaddeus Posey, O.F.M. Cap.

May 1944 ~ August 2013
WORKS CITED


