

EARLY HISTORY OF ST. AUGUSTINE'S SEMINARY

PART I: The text of this history of St. Augustine's Seminary was written in 1926 by the founding rector, Fr. Matthew Christman, S.V.D. The documents referred to in the text are from the files of the Seminary. Photocopies of these letters and documents are located in Appendix A.

PART II: First vows of candidates at St. Augustine's and the death of Fr. Christman.

PART III: The Financial Struggles and Conditions of St. Augustine Mission House (1920-1928) by Fr. Matthew Christman, S.V.D.

PART I

ST. AUGUSTINE'S MISSION HOUSE

by

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St. Augustine's Mission House is only three years old, though the community it shelters had been in existence for five years. It seems therefore, a very simple and easy task to give the history of it. However this task becomes more interesting and also more complicated if that history is made to embrace the larger topic: the account of the efforts made to educate a Colored priesthood. In this article I shall confine myself to the endeavors which the Society of the Divine Word has made to give the Colored people of this country priests of their own Race.

The first serious discussion of this vital problem coincides with the firm conviction that ripened already early-after only four years' experience in that stony and thorn-strewn mission field among the non-Catholics of Mississippi among our missionaries, that in spite of high grade schools attended by many hundreds of Colored children, they would never be able to bring many into the Church. Full well did they realize that they could never reach the minds of grown people. There was no natural motive which could be expected to attract the Colored people to Catholicism: the Catholic church was looked upon as a "curiosity", as something "out-of-date" and "antiquated" which had done very little as yet for the uplift of the Race. On the other hand, non-Catholics, as well as the State, had spent already millions of dollars for their education. Besides, was not the Church declared most emphatically out of reach for them by the frequent, very frank, and extremely open declarations that the Colored Race was wholly unfit for the holy ministry? And this was in the face of the fact that they had successfully invaded all other professions, learned, civil and ecclesiastical in other denominations. The non-Catholic denominations were thriving with life. Almost every day saw a new church rising from the ground, which, in beauty and style of architecture, rivaled White churches, or a dozen new prayer-houses in the country. Besides, there was no dearth of ministers, for they numbered in the hundreds, to take charge of these churches.

We few priests in Mississippi represented the Catholic church, and so we were doubly strange to them, because we were foreigners and not men of their Race. On the other hand, the White priests in charge of the White parishes seemed to the Colored people as much prejudiced against their Race as the rest of the White people. The Catholic church, it is true, gave them high grade grammar-schools; they received this kind gift with gratitude, sent their children, and even permitted their little ones to join the Church. However, these young people could not long resist the mighty current which carried the masses of the people into the other churches.

In spite of all these things, if men who come from Colored homes and who think and feel as their people do should approach their own people as the authoritative representatives of the Church and Christ, and should perform among them all the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, would they not touch the hearts of their people? Penetrating into the inner circle of Colored homes, they would make father and mother and kin listen to their message, winning them for God and the true Church.

Let all that is changeable in the Church be transformed so that it will become also the CHURCH FOR THE COLORED MAN. This task can be effectively accomplished only by men of the Colored Race to whom is entrusted the dispensation of the mysteries of God, and who thus can speak and act independently and with authority, and the Catholic church will be reborn among them, becoming a living thing that can and will grow and prosper. Truly, however, is all this possible only as long as the religious opinion of the Colored Race as a people is yet pliable and changeable, not immutable or adamant as stone.

But even without rising to such idealistic heights, it must be clear to every one that it is surely a grave injustice to exclude a whole race from the priesthood, principally because prejudices will greatly hamper them in their religious activities, or a cordial cooperation with White priests may meet with great obstacles. Such an injustice is bound to work havoc and bring down heavy vengeance upon him who becomes guilty of it.

These considerations moved Father Heick in 1913, who was then superior of the S.V.D. Missions in the South, to give permission to Father Stein when this priest was sent to Greenville, Miss., to open a Mission School to establish a boarding school for boys. This was to develop later into a seminary. However, only the attic of the school and the cellar of the rectory could be spared to accommodate these boys. There were no funds to consider improvements; to feed the boys became a heavy financial burden for the already poor and very needy Mission. Thus, when Father Stein was removed to Techny, the department was practically discontinued. Yet eight years later, that same poor and ill-equipped attic was beautifully remodelled and used as a dormitory for the first seminary. Consequently, Greenville was, after all, chosen for the first home of the new community of Colored seminarians.

In 1914 the Colored seminary became already the principal topic of discussion at the Christmas conference of the priests in our Southern missions. The writer of this article read a paper on the subject and all the Fathers present voted in favor of the seminary. The Reverend Superior, Fr. Heick, was requested to write immediately to the Rt. Rev. Bishop of Natchez and to Father Provincial of the Society for permission to open the seminary. (SEE A-1). Father Hoenderop was charged to make the plans for temporary quarters. It was decided to build in Jackson for two reasons: Jackson, as the seat of the headquarters of the Southern Missions, was better able from the financial point of view to support the institution; it has two priests and one of these Father Christman, rather wished to devote himself to teaching.

In his answer, Father Provincial stated that he was not himself adverse to the idea of a Colored priesthood but wished to have more time to study thoroughly this mooted question.

The Right Reverend Bishop Gunn answered that he did not believe the time was yet ripe for such a tremendous undertaking and would, therefore, withhold his permission to open a Colored seminary. (SEE A-2). However, he placed before us, for our consideration, a very novel proposition, which Mission scientists will not consider as altogether too strange and novel a plan. He proposed that we open an apostolic school for Colored candidates to educate them as catechists. But they should be invested with regular offices and even raised to ecclesiastical dignities by letting them

pass through the minor ordinations to the two major orders of subdeacon and deacon. However, these candidates should, with the permission of the Holy See, be granted the extraordinary privilege to marry.

This proposition was received with all the reverence due to an ecclesiastical authority whom we not only respected but sincerely loved; but it was not accepted as very practical, because it was not thought very likely that Rome would grant such an extraordinary privilege. Furthermore, deprived of that privilege, the deaconship at the end of an ecclesiastical career would have no more much meaning. There was no longer a good reason why these Colored candidates should not be permitted to pass on to the last step of ecclesiastical ordinations, the crown of all others, that of holy priesthood. Yet the kindly letter of our Bishop showed us beyond all doubt that some day he would grant permission to open a regular seminary, even, though his personal opinion was opposed to the idea.

The following Easter, Father Provincial paid us his usual annual visit. At our urgent request he decided to go with Father Heick to a meeting of other prominent missionaries in the Colored Field which was being held at Richmond, Virginia. Our Fathers wished to hear the opinions of these men concerning a Colored priesthood. To our great surprise, it was quite unfavorable. They seemed to be able to produce an almost irresistible and a most formidable array of arguments against the Colored priesthood, the strongest one being that of past experience. This strong opposition produced two effects: it was considered inadvisable to make further efforts, at least for the present, to "force through" the opening of a seminary; it was decided to study the problem more thoroughly, especially the real reason why previous efforts failed.

The study was specially taken up by Father Wendel, who rose into great prominence as an ardent and even passionate advocate of a Colored priesthood. He developed his views and arguments in a quarterly magazine, which he founded, the "Colored Messenger", later it was published only as a "Year Book". First there appeared in his magazine only a few short articles on this subject, while the last number, which was published in 1918, was replete with long discussions and short, pointed notes on the great topic. It aroused much enthusiasm and even more bitter opposition, as he seemed to side too much with the so called "Colored Catholic insurgents".

Thus, for four years seemingly nothing more was done in furtherance of the project but to arouse public interest and nationwide discussion. Nevertheless, Divine Providence prepared the ground also in a more visible manner for the opening of the seminary. The writer was sent to Greenville to succeed Father Stein. He made immediate arrangements to open a high school which would comply with the highest requirements of a first class, up-to-date high school. The effort met with much bitter opposition and adverse comment. In spite of this tremendous wave of dissent, the high school had become, within a year's time, a fact and was equipped with a modern laboratory, second to none in Mississippi; the curriculum presented a four-year Latin course, and the branches of Algebra, and Geometry which were being taught from standard textbooks. The high school did not remain a mere dead fact but immediately became a great success, attracting hundreds of new students. It even forced the inefficient local public school to add a high school department of a standard similar to Sacred Heart's. As principal of the school, I took over the teaching of Latin, Physics, and Mathematics. The other mission schools of the S.V.D. missions soon introduced the same high school system, meeting everywhere with the same enthusiastic approval of their respective communities. This progress made the S.V.D. Fathers the zealous champions of higher Catholic education for Negroes in the South.

Our Right Reverend Bishop watched with kindly interest the progress and success of our institutions, though he himself had fostered an entirely different idea of the function of a Catholic school for Negroes. He developed his ideas in a memorable sermon which he preached before the Vicksburg congregation in 1914. He stated that these Catholic schools for Colored would not at all or in any manner touch the racial order of the South, neither were they intended to change Southern ideas about the Race; but, besides touching purely elementary branches, they have no other function except to inculcate the moral principles of the Church to those Colored children so as to make Colored more faithful servants; Colored labor more reliable labor. And, if beyond this, a higher goal should be set, it would be to help the South by making Colored labor more efficient and give the Colored youth an advanced industrial training.

In a word, the ideal of the Bishop was a Catholic Tuskegee for the South. (SEE A-3). Admitting the

absolute necessity of such a Catholic institution, which, we ardently pray, will soon materialize, the writer steadfastly advocated as principle for literary education and not the least we must, but the most can give, should be taught in our Catholic schools. The salutary effect of this was that when two years later thousands of Colored people migrated to the North, graduates of our schools captured quite lucrative positions of great responsibility. Besides they proved that Colored students are capable of higher literary education.

The writer's four years teaching in a high school gave him a sufficient experience in teaching and made him thoroughly familiar with the public high school and college system, which he later chose as standard for the preparatory seminary. Latin, however, was given a much more prominent place and Greek was introduced as a new branch.

Accordingly, when in 1919 Right Reverend Bishop Gunn was again approached, this time by Father Wendel, with the request to open a Colored seminary, the request was graciously granted. We were now much better prepared for the great work than when the first attempt was made. Though I was alone for the first year and occupied the place of both director and teacher of the seminary, yet, I was able every day to teach six lessons and, besides, still direct the affairs of the mission chapel and school.

I already mentioned that Right Reverend Bishop Gunn yielded to the pleas and strong appeals of Father Wendel for a Colored priesthood. It was in 1919 that he granted permission to open a seminary for Colored aspirants in his diocese, but he attached two conditions to his permission: first, that these future Colored priests form a religious community, and second, that the spiritual direction of the community and the education of the candidates to the priesthood be taken over completely and for all times by the Society of the Divine Word.

When, some months later, our Father Provincial together with Father Heick, the Superior of the South, approached His Lordship, in an official capacity, with the request for permission to open the seminary, he confirmed what he had granted Father Wendel. (SEE A-4 & A-5) Though this permission was never discussed publicly, our late Bishop would often tell me that he received quite a number of letters by which he was severely criticized for his having granted such a permission.

In the same year, Very Reverend Janser, the newly elected Father Provincial of the American Province of the S.V.D., asked the Fathers of the South, on the occasion of his first official visit to the Southern Missions, to discuss their plans for the future, and especially any new work which they would like to undertake. In the opinion of all the priests of the Southern Missions, there was no doubt that the opening of the Colored seminary should form the principal topic of their discussion. Little did we then dream that Father Janser would become, at this conference, the most enthusiastic and most able advocate of a Colored priesthood and would remain its staunchest supporter and most zealous defender, until he left this country for the Mission Field of China.

The result of the conference was that one copy of the paper in which the writer of this article discussed the problem was sent to the Provincial Council. Another was forwarded to Reverend Father General of the Society of the Divine Word for approval and permission to open immediately a preparatory seminary for Colored students.

It may be yet mentioned that Father Janser did not approve of the plan of some priests that we open, instead of a preparatory seminary, a general college. Afterwards, according to their plan, we should then select the best of the graduates for the seminary. On the contrary, he wished that the new preparatory seminary conform itself strictly to the other preparatory seminaries of the Society, in regard to admission of students, the plan of study, and the rules of conduct.

It was on the 24th of February, the very day on which Father Wendel died, that we learned of the whole-hearted approval of the project by the General Council of the Society. More than this, we received permission to form the new religious community of Colored priests into a province of the Society.

There was now before the Southern missionaries of the S.V.D. a very detailed plan of the first seminary for Colored students. It may be added here that Father Provincial suggested that first only temporary quarters be built until the seminary would have passed the experimental stage. Two more things were needed to execute the plans: money and students. I went to New York to see our dear friend, Mgr. Burke of the Board for Mission Work among the Colored people, for financial help.

Not only was I accorded the most cordial welcome but found out already on the first evening of my visit that Mgr Burke and his two assistants, the Fathers Bustin and Mulholland, would not be surpassed an inch by my own superiors in the whole-hearted approval and support of the new undertaking. They even pledged a very active cooperation to make it a success. Their frequent and warm appeals, published in their monthly magazine "Our Colored Missions", brought in sufficient funds to build and equip the temporary home of the seminary in Greenville and to support the students for two years. Mgr Burke, Mr. Murphy and Mother Katherine Drexel headed the list of donors with subscriptions of two thousand dollars each.

In answer to a circular letter which was sent out by Father Janswer, Provincial, more applications came pouring in from all parts of the country than we could have accepted for the first year. (SEE A-6) However, the most of these applications were the result of a first and fast-passing wave of enthusiasm. When they were informed of the strict requirements for admission, they even failed to answer.

It is true that two students came from New York even before the building was completed; but from the first, they showed signs that they would not persevere. In all this confusion there were some rays of Divine Hope. A Catholic student of Greenville high school entered the seminary. He, in spite of the vigorous opposition of his father and the discouragement and dissatisfaction of the two New York students, showed great firmness and earnest resolve to remain. Then a young boy of New Orleans was warmly recommended to me by Father Lally, then pastor of Holy Redeemer Church, and he persevered in his resolution to enter the seminary, despite the fact that he met with some difficulty at home. Recommending the cause to the Sacred Heart, I went to New Orleans to persuade the parents of the young lad to let him come with me, and perhaps to find some more vocations. I returned with three students; two of them are yet with us. In the same week, a very hopeful high school boy of Vicksburg Mission joined the community.

Now the number of students began to increase rapidly; Christmas 1920 saw already twelve students, and before the end of the year there were sixteen. Even then we had on hand a number of good applications for the second scholastic year.

The second year opened with twenty-six students, and two very able Fathers of the Society, Fathers Baltes and Schneider, were added to the faculty, which consisted in the first year only of a lay professor and myself. At the end of the second year, the body of students and the faculty were sufficiently strong to consider a permanent home for the institution. Improper accommodations made it an imperative need.

In this hour of need there came another prominent advocate of a colored priesthood to our assistance, Very Rev. Fr. E.R. Dyer, President of St. Mary's Seminary of Baltimore, Md., who promised a generous appropriation out of the funds for Indian and Negro Missions, which inspired us with courage to contemplate a spacious and beautiful brick structure for the new home of the seminary rather than a small and plain frame building as planned at first. (SEE A-7)

Indeed the grounds for it had already been purchased in Bay St. Louis, Miss., by Father Heick, who made his home on the new grounds with the object of opening a new parish school for the Colored Catholic children of the community. And in the summer of 1922 I was sent by Father Provincial to Bay St. Louis to lay the corner stone of the new home and supervise the work of the building. It was completed within a year and in June, 1923, the community was transferred from Greenville to its permanent home, St. Augustine's Mission House.

The solemn dedication of the seminary was honored with a personal letter of the Holy Father in which he extended his heartiest welcome to the opening of the seminary and called it the fulfillment of his dearest wishes as it provides for a long felt need. He closed the letter by bestowing his apostolic blessing upon the house and community. (SEE A-8)

The little community was, in addition to this, heartened, still more in its purpose, by the recent visit of the Most REverend Pietre Fumasoni-Biondi, Apostolic Delegate to the United States. For His Excellency's kind visitation was of greatest importance to the development of the new Mission House. As, on the one hand, his assurance, to all present, that he was thankful that the aspirants had heeded the call of God to this belated work, confirmed his pronouncements of deepest interest in the establishing of a native Colored clergy. And on the other, his expression of confidence in the future success of the undertaking, and his declaration, that he has more openings for Colored priests

than St. Augustine's can supply, suggest the conclusion that there are more bishops in favor of the project than can be reasonably expected. His message inspired the students with greater zeal; for all were made to realize fully, that their way to the ranks of priesthood will not be an act of coercion on their part, but that they are heartily welcome and encouraged by our Holy Father.