

Pius XI

To His Son, William Gier, Superior General of the Society of the Divine Word

Beloved Son!

Greeting and Apostolic Blessing!

It is to Us a source of deep joy to learn that the college for the education of Negroes which you had established temporarily at Greenville, in the Diocese of Natchez, will shortly be transferred to Bay St. Louis, in the same diocese, and converted into a mission house for the training of negro boys according to the Rule of your Order.

You are determined to carry this plan through to success, because it accords perfectly with the ideals of your Society, with God's admonition to the Church to teach all nations, and with the precepts of this Apostolic See; Since it is our special task to follow in the footsteps of St. Paul, and carry the word and name of God to the pagan races, it is only natural that you must be imbued with the same spirit which inspired St. Paul. This Apostle declared himself a debtor to Greeks and barbarians, to the uneducated and educated, since between Jews and Greeks there is no distinction. For all there is the selfsame Lord, bountiful in His gifts to all who pray to Him.

In your new undertaking you are following the very principle which, in so far as circumstances allowed, has always guided the Catholic Church. To this mother has arisen, especially in recent times, a numerous progeny among the black races - a host of children who have frequently displayed virtues so splendid that they sealed their faith with their blood as in the most glorious epochs of Christian history. The Negroes occupy enormous areas of the earth, and it is undoubted that these races, which the Church takes so loving and maternal an interest in gladdening with. the knowledge of her joyful message, will in the course of time be trained in all branches of human civilization, and will thus arise. from their present lowly stage of culture, and attain a high level in their mode of life and moral training.

If, therefore, we wish to accomplish some useful and solid work in this field, it is indispensable that priests of the same race shall make it their life-task to lead these peoples to the Christian faith and to a higher cultural level. You, beloved son, regard it as a very practical step to admit into the Society of the Divine Word Negroes who give evidence of a vocation for the regular life. These candidates are later to be admitted to the priesthood, and eventually work as apostles among the members of their race, You have chosen this path because you are firmly convinced that the Negroes can thus be brought much more easily und rapidly into the Church, and also because, in the spirit of true filial obedience, you wish to follow the guidance of Our immediate Predecessor. In his Apostolic Brief of November 30, 1919, the latter gives a list of practical suggestions and precepts to which no reasonable man can take exception. For does it not indeed follow, as Our Predecessor points out, from the very nature of the Church as a Divine institution, that every tribe

or people should have priests who are one with it in race and character, in habit of thought and temperament? Aside from the fact that such priests will find a friendly welcome, will they not also prove far more effective in leading their brethren into, and confirming them in, the faith than any priests of a different race and from another country? Moreover, as experience has shown, the young Negro is not poorly gifted, mentally, so that he cannot assimilate higher education and the theological sciences and the latter, not in a superficial and abbreviated form, but, as Our Predecessor commanded, in the full courses as prescribed.

You have, therefore, undertaken a most laudable work, beloved son; in which to engage your zeal for the faith and for souls. In order that your success may be all the more gratifying, you will pray with Us to Our Divine Savior that the negro youth may hear and obey His divine injunction: "Go ye also into my vineyard."

The Negroes of the United States greatly exceed ten million' souls, for whom a capable mission and secular clergy of their own race must be created as soon as possible, We extend, therefore, Our best wishes for the seminary which you intend soon to dedicate solemnly in the town of Bay St. Louis.

May it prosper greatly under the care of the American episcopate, and may it attract a large attendance of negro pupils inspired with pure intention. May the Blessed Virgin, Queen of Apostles, take under her protection this undertaking in which We wish you, beloved son, and your whole Society success, from Our heart. By her words of encouragement and her intercession, Our Lady greatly aided the first bearers of the joyful tidings, who were sent forth to make the world subject to Christ the Lord. She will also pray unceasingly that your pupils may receive a strong impulse to piety and virtue.

May the Holy Doctor St. Augustine, under whose protection you have appropriately placed the seminary, also implore for the negro race that fulness of the light of Christian knowledge which, as history shows, once suffused the fields of Africa!

Finally, beloved son, in so far as We are concerned, rest assured that We are most anxious to do everything to promote this salutary undertaking. For the present, as a pledge of heavenly favors and in token of Our fatherly good-will, We lovingly extend the Apostolic Blessing in our Lord to you, beloved son, to the Society which you govern, and to the Negroes in whom you are interested.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Pius XI', with a large, stylized initial 'P'.

ROME, ST. PETER'S, April 5, 1923,
in the second year of Our Pontificate

*Pope Pius XI in this letter reaffirms Rome backing the opening
a seminary for African American men despite the many
obstacles Divine Word Missionaries faced through the years from
American Bishops and others in the Church.*