

in a

Word™

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“Certainly the establishment of a seminary for black students by the members of the Society of the Divine Word was one of the most important events in the history of black Catholics during the first part of the 20th century.”

-Fr. Cyprian Davis

***The History of Black Catholics
in the United States***

REJECTING THE WORD “NO”

*How the Divine Word Missionaries began the first seminary
100 years ago for African American men.*

100 years ago in September of 1920 one of the most important events in the history of African American Catholics took place. In the town of Greenville, Mississippi a seminary for African American Catholics was opened by the Society of the Divine Word. This seminary would later move to Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi 1923.

The events leading up to the beginnings in Greenville were the result of much discussion, hard work and determination of German Missionaries of the Society the Divine Word. Despite obstacles and skepticism from many in the Church the determination of these men was truly the stuff of legends. Much of the history of those men responsible can be read in the [February 2015](#) and [April 2015](#) editions of *IN A WORD*.

The Society of the Divine WORD (Divine Word Missionaries) was founded in 1875 by Saint Arnold Janssen. In 1895 they came to the United States. The missionaries began mission work in 1905 in Merigold, Mississippi and in a few years had established missions in Vicksburg, Jackson, Greenville and Meridian all in Mississippi. They were German speaking and from the beginning could not understand why there were no African American priests. As they had in other countries they believed that mission work would only work with men ordained priests who were from the local culture. The decision of those early Missionaries went against social fabric of the times.

Even though Rome had pushed the American Church to ordain African Americans the American Church resisted. After the Civil War a strong group of American Bishops were loathe to change the established social order. There was prejudice and explicit racism amongst a few and outright indifference from the majority.

Despite the racism and belief that the African American male did not have the intellect or morals for priesthood there were various priests and lay people who advocated that the American Bishops take seriously the evangelization of African Americans and that Black men be ordained in the Church. John Slattery, Albert Bell, SSJ, John Burke and lay people such as Thomas Wyatt Turner and the Association for Federated Catholics raised the issue often in public forums and correspondence.

The Vatican despite the segregation, outright racism, lynchings kept the pressure on the American Bishops to do more for African Americans. Rome kept asking why there was little being done in regards the evangelization of African Americans. Roman officials were concerned

about the Blacks who left the Church because they felt so little care. **“Why”, Rome asked, “when native clergy are found in other countries it is not being done in America”. The Bishops response can be summed up in the phrase “you, in Rome, do not understand America... we are different.”**



Participants of 1889 Black Congress

Rome, however, was not deterred in their persistence. At the 1889 Congress called by Daniel Rudd participants visited President Grover Cleveland at the White House. That first Congress also drew the attention of the Vatican. In fact the meeting at the White House was

surpassed by a cablegram from Pope Leo XIII, in which he sent them his apostolic blessing. Cyprian Davis says *“Less than a quarter of a century after the end of slavery, a Roman Pontiff had given his approbation and blessing to a nationwide assembly of black Catholic men. Thus a new age for the black community had emerged”* (p 164)

The Vatican continued to show interest in African American Catholics. Cardinal Lavigerie, founder of the Society of African Missions (White Fathers), was an ardent critic of the slave trade met with Rudd after inviting him and others to come to a conference on the slave trade in Lucerne, Switzerland in 1890. Rudd described his visit with the Cardinal. *“The reception extended to us was royal, for his Eminence kissed us like a father. So overjoyed was Africa’s great apostle when he read our letters and credentials that he said our very presence there would give him new life and new zeal for a race that was so full of gratitude.”*

At the 1893 Congress a committee of grievances made a report as to the treatment of Black Catholics in the American Church. The report cited practices of racism and segregation in the United States with such practices in some U.S. Catholic churches as well. That report surely found its way to Rome. So Rome continued to prod the American Bishops to treat African American Catholics with care. **The Bishops in turn said once again Rome did not understand the United States and the social problems it had with black priests being on equal footing with white priests.**

In 1904 Pope Pius X, like Leo XIII before him, followed the status of black Catholics in the United States. Rome pushed the American Bishops once again and in turn the bishops established the Catholic Board of Negro Missions. Father John Burke was put in charge and he was asked to provide Rome with a report concerning African American Catholics. Burke did so in much detail giving his opinion that to attract more to the Catholic church priority should be given to schools; separate parishes; and forcefully shared his belief that only with an indigenous clergy would African Americans enter the Church.

So it was no surprise that from the beginning these German priests talked about establishing a seminary. World War I slowed down any extension of missionary work. The Missionaries tried indirectly to prepare the United States for the founding of a seminary. In a meeting of the Southern missionaries in 1914 in Jackson they declared their support for their foundation of a seminary. They asked Bishop Gunn, Bishop of Natchez, for permission to establish a seminary for the training of African American men for the priesthood. Bishop Gunn thought the time was not yet ripe to start a seminary and explained that he could not give his consent. Despite the negative answer there was hope that one day he would give permission to open a seminary.

James Wendel used the press to further interest in the training of young men for the priesthood. He published the *Colored Messenger* and presented short stories about the southern missions. The magazine began to publish more and more discussions about a seminary. The following quote is from the 1918 *Colored Messenger*.

Our slogan: A colored priesthood for the Colored. The devil knows what is in store for him, that is why we have so much difficulty to get colored priests. Nevertheless, we shall have them.

At the same time Mathew Christmann put his efforts into developing a classical high school in Greenville, Mississippi. With the help of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Spirit the school met opposition but after a couple of years could compete with success any high school in the state. Christmann had the seminary in mind for Latin and later Greek were subjects taught.

Rome would in the meantime be in touch with meetings between Father Carl Friedrichs, of the Divine Word Missionaries and the possibility of creating a seminary. **These talks sent a message. The Pope himself gave his blessing to a seminary. He stated to Father Friedrichs that if anyone had a problem they should come to him!**

The talks with the the Divine Word Missionaries in retrospect pointed to what would be part of the *Maximum Illud* encyclical of Benedict XV. This encyclical would give formal approval to a seminary.

A pivotal emphasis of Maximum Illud is the development of the indigenous clergy. There must be "special concern to secure and train local candidates for the sacred ministry." Benedict XV asserts: "In this policy lies the greatest hope of the new churches." Why? "For the local priest, one with his people by birth, by nature, by his sympathies and his aspirations, is remarkably effective in appealing to their mentality and thus attracting them to the Faith." The local clergy are to be "well trained and well prepared." They are "not to be trained merely to perform the humbler duties of the ministry, acting as the assistants of foreign priests." Every effort must be taken to avoid having "a local clergy that is of inferior quality." Mission superiors should have the founding of seminaries as a main concern.

So the groundwork was set and Bishop Gunn now accepted the request of the Divine Word Missionaries. He was no doubt heeding the call of the Pope Benedict XV. He still had his concerns but when he realized that the men in the seminary would join a religious order and not request a Diocese to take them he gave his official approval in 1919.

The Sacred Heart Preparatory Seminary would begin in 1920 in Greenville. Students began to arrive and at Christmas there were 14 students. By the end of 1920 there were 16 students. The second year would begin with 26 students. In 1923 the Seminary would move to Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi because of lack of space to sustain a growing enrollment. The Seminary was off to a good start.

Yes, the early Missionaries would not take a NO. There is no doubt that without outsiders not part of the American social scene the seminary would have been delayed to who knows when. The Holy Spirit was at work!



in a word or two



Dr. Norman Francis

NEW ORLEANS (CNS)
-- The New Orleans City Council voted unanimously Aug. 20 to rename Jefferson Davis Parkway, which since 1911 had paid homage to the slaveholding president of the Confederacy during the Civil War, in honor of Norman C. Francis, who served for nearly a half-century as president of Xavier

University of Louisiana. The change to Norman C. Francis Parkway, which borders the campus of Xavier University of Louisiana, will take place Jan. 1. The university was founded by St. Katharine Drexel, the Philadelphia heiress who established the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in 1891 to educate and minister to African Americans and Native Americans throughout the U.S. Xavier is the only historically Black Catholic university in the Western Hemisphere. Francis, 89, served from 1968 to 2015 as the first lay president of Xavier -- he was appointed on the same day that Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis -- and he was universally acknowledged as the driving force behind an institution that outpaces all others in the number of African American students annually accepted into medical schools across the United States. Francis often remarked that Xavier was blessed not only by St. Katharine's early presence and fortune in establishing the university in 1925, but also by the saint's longevity. She died in 1955 at age 96, and one of the stipulations of her inheritance was that it would be dispersed after her death to specific causes established by her parents in their will.



Demonstrators in Washington gather at the Lincoln Memorial reflecting pool for the "Get Your Knee Off Our Necks" march Aug. 28, 2020. The event marked the 57th anniversary of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech that resonated from the same spot on the Lincoln Memorial. (CNS photo/Tom Brenner, Reuters)



(CNS photo/Andrew Biraj, Catholic Standard)

Celebrating an Aug. 28 Mass to mark the 57th anniversary of the Rev. Martin Luther King's historic March on Washington, Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory urged Catholics to continue the dream of the late civil rights leader and to work for reconciliation and unity building. "Ours is the task and the privilege of advancing the goals that were so eloquently expressed 57 years ago by such distinguished voices on that day," Archbishop Gregory said. "Men and women, young and old, people of every racial and ethnic background are needed in this effort." We are at a pivotal juncture in our country's struggle for racial justice and national harmony," he said. "Believers and nonbelievers, sports stars and corporate giants, small town residents and urban dwellers must all engage in the work of reconciliation and unity building so that our common future will be better and more secure than the past."

To that end, Archbishop Gregory announced during the Mass an archdiocesan initiative to "fight against racial injustice everywhere." The initiative was outlined on a scroll presented to the archbishop by archdiocesan Catholics, including Betty Wright, a parishioner at St. Martin of Tours Parish in Washington, who participated in the 1963 March on Washington.

The initiative will include a wide range of pastoral activities and outreach, including prayer, listening sessions, faith formation opportunities and social justice work.

For recommended reading on the history before the founding of the Greenville seminary please consult:

-*History of Black Catholics in the United States* by Father Cyprian Davis

-*Desegregating the Altar* by Stephen Ochs

-Matthias Christmann [History of Saint Augustine's Seminary](#).

This is a first hand telling of the story by one who should know. Paper was written in 1926.

Divine Word Missionaries is an international missionary community of over 7,000 brothers and priests. In 1905 the SVDs began working among African Americans in the Southern United States. Today, Divine Word Missionaries work in over 35 parishes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Florida and Arkansas.

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