

in a

Word

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Cardinal Peter Turkson
praises Sisters of the Holy Family
for continuing the 180 year old ministry
of Venerable Henriette Delille

(CNS photo/Peter Finney Jr., Clarion Herald)

In 1926 Father Matthew Christman wrote a history of how St. Augustine Seminary began with the Divine Word Missionaries.

We bring in this issue the first two pages of his history. More will follow in future issues of IN A WORD

PART I

ST. AUGUSTINE'S MISSION HOUSE

by

Rev. P. M. Christman, Rector

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to attract the Colored people to Catholicism: the Catholic church was looked upon as a "curiosity", as something "out-of-date" and "antiquated" which had done very little as yet for the uplift of the Race.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.

in a word or two

Front cover photo is of Cardinal Peter Turkson, chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, along with Sister Alicia Costa, congregational leader of the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans Sept. 28, 2022. He met with the sisters to discuss the sainthood cause for Mother Henriette Delille, the free woman of color who founded the congregation in 1842 to educate the enslaved and care for the elderly. Mother Delille was declared “venerable” by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010.

Cardinal Turkson praised the sisters for continuing the 180-year ministry of their foundress, who educated the enslaved at a time in pre-Civil War New Orleans when that was against the law. Mother Delille also opened up a home to care for elderly African Americans.

“Sisters, I just want to encourage you and assure you of the support of our prayers and make myself an apostle of your congregation,” Cardinal Turkson told the nuns.

“That means, when I get to situations when I talk about this -- in the Virgin Islands, in St. Thomas and St. Croix -- I can tell people who are still thinking about this way of life that, please God, here is where they can come and serve the Lord,” he said.

Cardinal Turkson was the first cardinal to visit the Sisters of the Holy Family. He was in New Orleans to address a Sept. 29-Oct. 1 symposium for Catholic business leaders held at Xavier University of Louisiana and Loyola University New Orleans.

“It’s not every day we get to have a cardinal visit our humble home,” Sister Costa told the Clarion Herald, New Orleans’ archdiocesan newspaper. “We are celebrating 180 years of existence this year, and that, in itself, is a miracle.” Mother Delille is one of six African American Catholics up for sainthood.



Ed Dwight and his wife, Barbara, stand in front of his sculpture of Mary and the Christ Child in the Our Mother of Africa Chapel at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington Sept. 17, 2022. Dwight was honored for his artwork at the 25th anniversary of the chapel. (CNS photo/Patrick Ryan for the National Black Catholic Congress via Catholic Standard)

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Placing his hands on the sculptures he made 25 years ago, Ed Dwight told visitors at the Our Mother of Africa Chapel what inspired his art. Dwight, along with other artists and community members, was honored at the chapel during its 25th anniversary at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington Sept. 17.

The National Black Catholic Congress hosted the pilgrimage celebration. The NBCC is an organization that represents about 3 million African American Catholics to address their spiritual needs within the church. The chapel was a gift to the national shrine on behalf of the congress. It recalls the history of slavery in the United States and provides a sense of hope.

Dwight shared his method of using bronze and molding faces when sculpting. The artist also talked about how his work was influenced by his Catholic faith and his mother, who made sure he went to church and Catholic school while he grew up in Kansas City, Kansas. Using church imagery and the people he grew up with made it easy to create sculptures for the chapel, he said. “It was a totally natural setting for me, and it’s one of the few sculptures I’ve ever done where it was more natural to do,” said Dwight, now 89.



Father Robert Boxie III, center right, Catholic chaplain of Howard University in Washington, is pictured with students at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington Sept. 17, 2022. The group attended the 25th anniversary pilgrimage for the Our Mother of the Africa Chapel at the basilica, which included lunch and a tour. (CNS photo/ Samantha Smith, The Georgia Bulletin via Catholic Standard)

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. IN A WORD is a publication of The Society of the Divine Word's Media Production Center. Rev. James Pawlicki, S.V.D., Director and Editor; Cathy Green-Miner, office manager; consultant.

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