

# ANSWERING THE CALL

## Part 1 - The story of the Divine Word Missionaries and St. Augustine's Seminary

The establishment of the Seminary for African American Catholic men in Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi is historically important for African American Catholics. Yet, little is known about the factors that set such an historical event into motion. What were the forces that shaped the opening of the seminary in Greenville, Mississippi in 1920 and the subsequent move to Bay Saint Louis in 1923?

First of all we must remember that the Bay Saint Louis success happened because of the efforts of many people. There were earlier efforts even in the 1890's to begin a seminary for the ordination of African American men.

Cyprian Davis in his monumental work *THE HISTORY OF BLACK CATHOLICS* points to the Healy brothers and of course Augustus Tolton. The Josephites ordained Father Charles Uncles, John Dorsey and a few other men but in the end for various reasons that are best discussed in a longer article efforts failed in the establishment of a seminary.

After the Civil War 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.

However a strong group of American Bishops were loathe to change the established social order. There was prejudice and outright racism amongst a few and outright indifference from the majority. Interestingly, it was the Vatican that 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.** Rome was 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."

Yet, the Vatican continued to push. All the correspondence between Rome and the Bishops in regards to evangelization for Blacks is best discovered in the previously mentioned book by Cyprian Davis. Also noteworthy is the Stephen Ochs book "DESEGREGATING THE ALTAR". To read the stories are fascinating but sad.

**Archbishop J.E. Quigley of Chicago gave the first suggestion for the members of the Society of the Divine Word to work with Blacks.** He made this suggestion to Father John Peil, SVD who at that time was the superior of the new foundation in North America. The Society of the Divine Word (popularly known as the Divine Word Missionaries) was founded by St. Arnold Janssen in Steyl, Holland in 1875.



Father John Peil, SVD



Brother Wendelin Meyer, SVD

After training and sending numerous missionaries to Argentina, Africa, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia and India to spread the Word of God, Saint Arnold, sent the first missionary to the United States. He sent Brother Wendelin Meyer SVD in 1895 to seek financial support for the Society through sales of Divine Word publications. Brother Wendelin was an able person and met many people among whom was St. Katharine Drexel. Already in 1896 he wrote Janssen to call his attention to work among Negroes by Divine Word Missionaries in America.

*"The way I see it, we will have to work among the Indians and Negroes which will enable us to do much for the church over here. If we take on this work, we will have to establish a base in the South."*

-Brother Wendelin Meyer, SVD  
April 5, 1897 letter to Saint Arnold Janssen

In the Fall of 1903, Father Superior Peil, presented to Archbishop Quigley, two confreres' who had recently arrived from Europe. The Archbishop used this as an opportunity to mention the sad and difficult situation of Blacks in North America... their number of nine million could be deceptive and no one really took care of them.

In the Spring of 1904, the invitation was given in a more concrete fashion, when a prominent Catholic gentlemen by the name of Mr. Bremner, owner of a business in Chicago, had acquired extensive holdings in Merigold, Mississippi. When he saw the unfortunate situation of his Black workers who had no educational possibilities and who

were neglected socially and religiously, he presented a proposal to the Chicago Archbishop to have members of a religious community take care of the religious and cultural development of Blacks on his own property and those in the neighboring area. Upon hearing this the Archbishop remembered the Society of the Divine Word.

On Wednesday, July 4, 1904, Archbishop Quigley, contacted Mr. Bremner in Shermerville. After a brief conversation, Mr. Bremner shared with the Archbishop, some of the plans and intentions, he had for the construction of a house and the usage of the land. The Archbishop was excited and very happy with what he had heard. Mr. Bremner was prepared to donate three hundred and twenty acres of forest land, erect the buildings needed by the missionaries and also contribute otherwise to the maintenance of the station. The land was very productive and the settlement was not far from the big city of Memphis. Bremner would be satisfied with such a small beginning. It would be enough also, if Blacks were to learn only reading and writing, and be instructed in religion. As he explained, he could guarantee thirty school children for a beginning. In his opinion, the number would increase since a growth in the population was expected.

The Archbishop shared Mr. Bremner's plans with Father Peil, who in turn forwarded them to his superiors, but made no commitments for the present. However, he did make arrangements to visit the area in order to make a more informed decision. He thus planned a trip South in the Fall of 1904. On that trip he met with many people who worked in the evangelization of Blacks. Amongst them was St. Katharine Drexel who encouraged and supported the Divine Word Missionaries.

**To his credit it was Father John Peil who pushed hard to have the Society of the Divine Word begin work in the Black Apostolate.** Through numerous letters between himself and the founder of the order St. Arnold Janssen one sees how he worked passionately to involve the Divine Word Missionaries in the evangelization of Blacks. There was concern on the part of advisors to St. Arnold Janssen that such a venture was warranted but it is to the credit of St. Arnold that he went along with the plan to involve Divine Word Missionaries in working amongst Blacks.

**After much discussion the Divine Word Missionaries took on the mission in Merigold, Mississippi. Father Aloysius Heick was to be pastor. On July 15, 1905 he went and began the mission. However, it was not easy. There were no Catholic Blacks in the area and opposition from Protestants and the White population was intense. It is said that Father Heick was threatened many times and told to leave. Or...he would be killed. There was no way he could continue. In fact the stories of how he left Merigold are shrouded in legend. Some accounts say he had to flee for his life after stopping the flogging of a young boy by a white man. It is said he had to hide in a coffin or piano box and be taken away before the KKK could find him.**

This unfortunate beginning, however, did not stop Father Peil. He was persistent and believed that the Divine Word Missionaries must be involved in evangelization efforts amongst Blacks. After more correspondence between



Saint Arnold Janssen  
Founder of Society of Divine Word



Rev. Aloysius Heick, SVD  
First SVD Missionary to  
the Southern USA.

himself and St. Arnold the opportunity to start another place in either Memphis or Vicksburg came up. St. Arnold wanted to go to Memphis but at the last minute the Bishop announced that the parish was no longer available for the Josephite priest who had lingered in coming had finally arrived. There was no place for the Society of the Divine Word in Memphis.

So it was that Father Heick went and established a parish in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1905. From that initial mission other parishes would be staffed in Meridian, Greenville and Jackson. Eventually the Bishop of Natchez gave the entire Northern part of Mississippi to the care of the Divine Word Missionaries.

With SVD now established in the work amongst Blacks a swell of support developed for the ordination of Black men to serve as priests for the Blacks amongst the German Divine Word Missionaries. The fascinating story of faith and courage of Fathers James Wendel and Matthew Christman and the Papacy will be examined in the next issue of **IN A WORD**.

**To his everlasting credit St. Arnold Janssen believed it was God's will that the young order of priests and brothers give of themselves to the Black Apostolate. In numerous letters one sees his interest in the work. He communicated with St. Katharine Drexel and the Bishops. He offered support and care for Father Heick and was patient with the strong willed Father Peil. Surely God was the foundation for the wonderful work that led to St. Augustine's Seminary in Bay Saint Louis.**

NOTE:

This article can only highlight important facts about the early beginnings of St. Augustine Seminary. Much of our information comes from a doctoral dissertation, *Divine Word Missionaries' Black Apostolate in the Southern USA*, by Michael Meier, SVD published in 1961 in German. We have an English translation. Also of value was a collection of letters written by Saint Arnold to Divine Word Missionaries in North America. Other information is found in a book by Ernest Brandewie. Brandewie's informative book on the Society of the Divine Word and its beginnings in North America provides much more detail specifically about Father Peil and the beginnings of the African American Apostolate. Titled *IN THE LIGHT OF THE WORD: DIVINE WORD MISSIONARIES OF NORTH AMERICA*. The book was published by Orbis Press on May 1, 2000. It can be found on Amazon Books.