

PERSISTENCE AND DEDICATION

(Part 2 of the beginnings of St. Augustine's in Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi)

In our February issue of IN A WORD we presented the background story of how St. Augustine Seminary was realized. Through the efforts of Father John Peil, SVD and Aloysius Heick, SVD the Divine Word Missionaries committed themselves to the African American Apostolate. The other Missionaries who arrived concurred that the ordination of African American men to the priesthood was of utmost importance for evangelization.

*This issue looks at the two men who are noted for the eventual founding and success of the seminary. They are Father James Wendel and Matthias Christmann. Their stories were summed up well in the doctoral thesis dissertation, **Divine Word Missionaries' Black Apostolate in the Southern USA**, by Michael Meier, SVD published in 1961 in German. The following words come from that dissertation.*



Fr. James Wendel, SVD

Sources are lacking to say anything definite about Fr. Wendel. Where he appears, he shows himself to be a choleric person of a fighting nature. Self assured and determined, he insists on his demands which make him feared by friend and foe. One day, when he was informed that in the Baptist church, some hundred meters from the Catholic mission station, there was a White man preaching and slandering the Catholic Church, he immediately went over. Since there is freedom of speech in these sects, he demanded to be heard. A hearty discussion developed, for which the Protestant speaker was not prepared, As some men approached to remove the disturbing priest from the church, he proudly shouted at them: "I came freely and I'll leave God's house freely."

This fighting nature was something Bishop Gunn of Natchez, Mississippi would have to experience, even though he respected Fr. Wendel very much. Fr. Wendel was not put off by superficial excuses and unfounded reasons. If his concern was good and had to do with Blacks~ he repeated his requests and petitions with insistence until the bishop gave in. In this way he got a lot done which otherwise seemed impossible to accomplish. With the good results of his demands for a better Catholic education for Blacks, he opened the way to the seminary, even if he had to agree that there was still no foundation for beginning a seminary. For this reason, for a while, he held off in the fight, but he did not give up. By means of the magazine (The Colored Messenger) which he edited, he succeeded in changing Whites' attitudes towards Blacks and thus prepared a broader basis for the seminary for Blacks. But he almost did more damage than good to the undertaking through his simple, tough and undiplomatic ways. His writings gained many friends for Blacks, but through his tough demands, he also aroused strong opposition.

Even if Fr. Wendel never lived to see the building of the seminary for Blacks for which he had struggled (he died on 24 February 1920), he still died with the security that his efforts would be crowned with success, A few months before his death, Bishop Gunn of Natchez positively answered his renewed request for the founding of a seminary for Blacks in his diocese.



Father Christmann is pictured above standing on porch of Seminary building at Sacred Heart Church in Greenville, Mississippi.

Photo on right is Father Christmann in 1925 with African American Clerics who will later be ordained as the first class in 1934. (From left: Vincent Smith; Maurice Rousseve; Anthony Bourges; Francis Wade



Fr. Matthias Christmann, SVD



As a contrast to Fr. Wendel, Fr. Christmann worked more quietly and concretely, but was no less effective for the seminary for Black priests. As a born teacher and educator, he was especially gifted for this undertaking.

In his youth he raved to his brothers and sisters that he wanted to go to China to win this country for the

Christian faith. To realize his decision, he joined the Divine Word Missionaries' seminary of St. Wendel in the Saarland and finished his studies in St. Gabriel's Mission House, in Modling near Vienna, where he was ordained a priest on 29 September 1912. His youthful dream of going to China never came true, since his superiors sent him to the United States to teach philosophy at the newly erected mission seminary in Techny, Illinois.

He hardly had arrived in the country when he showed great interest to work in the Black apostolate in the South. Since Fr. Stein had to be taken out of the mission work because of sickness, Fr. Christmann could take his place in Greenville, Mississippi. His entire strength and activity were spent, according to his gifts, in the building up of the school. But his plans went over and above the school. His real life-time labor, planned by himself, was the education of a native clergy. Perfecting the school system was to be only a means to an end.

Thus, while Fr. Wendel fought literary battles for the seminary for Blacks, the development already had begun quietly. After overcoming many difficulties and countless concerns for the financing of the work, finally in the Fall of 1920 Fr. Christmann could begin classes with some students he himself had gathered together from New Orleans, Louisiana.

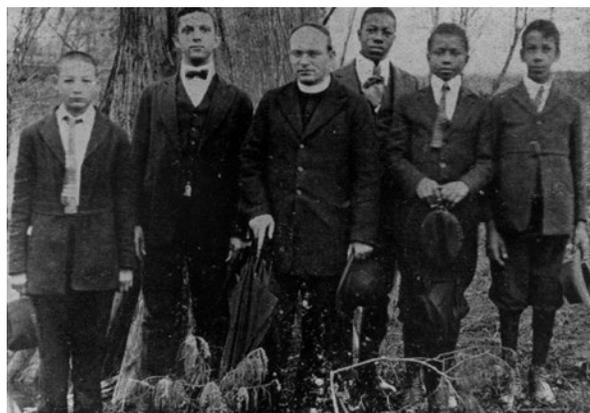
During this first year he must have realized an unbelievable amount of work. He was pastor in a community in Greenville, rector of the school and of the house, prefect of the students, procurator and teacher. The Sisters taught only a few classes for him. The efforts of this first year affected his health, and later he was constantly sick.

As rector of the new seminary, he also directed the new construction in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. This work made new demands on his already weakened health, since the financial questions caused him great concern. Along with this, he still gave classes and was always present for the students who came to him with their difficulties, big and small. In him the students always found fatherly advice. The

better part of his day during this period was spent corresponding with the many benefactors of the house. He had to write thank-you letters and try to get new benefactors. In 1925 he collapsed under the weight of his work load. A medical operation brought him almost to the edge of his grave. Since he recovered in only two months, he went back to work in the seminary where he was practically a broken man. Nevertheless, he once more took up the responsibility for the seminary and taught philosophy.

On Thursday after Ash Wednesday, he had to go to New Orleans on business and took the occasion to visit his doctor. The doctor was quite concerned about his patient's condition and wanted to put him in the hospital immediately, Fr. Christmann was very much against this, and went home that evening in the train. During the trip, he felt very sick, but was able to get to the seminary. He hardly got to his room when he collapsed and was dead in a few minutes, on 14 February 1929. Fr. Christmann worked with patience and perseverance, The many problems never discouraged him nor did little failures irritate him. He did not reflect long whether or not the time was ripe to educate American Blacks for the priesthood, he simply acted, and opened the seminary.

A large number of American bishops sent their condolences at the death of Fr. Christmann, whom they had come to respect because of his service to the Black Church in the United States. They expressed their interest in the work he had realized. Thus wrote Bishop Gerow of Natchez, Mississippi: "Father Christmann has always been a most earnest and prudent man in his work, and my acquaintance with him. made me look upon him as a true man of God; I feel that the seminary has suffered a great loss in his demise." Other letters came from Cardinal Dougherty of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from Archbishop Shaw of New Orleans, Louisiana, An ordinary layman, who was a good friend of Fr. Christmann, wrote: "His loss is a severe one to this section of the country and undoubtedly he will not be easy to replace. Many learned to appreciate and respect this quiet man who labored among the least of our population and accomplished much in bettering the existing conditions and lives of the colored people,"



Fr. Christmann with first students in Greenville - 1920.