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Cecilia Moore

University of Dayton, cmoore1@udayton.edu

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Three Centuries of Black Catholic Faith, Culture and Activism in New Orleans

Cecilia Moore
University of Dayton

Abstract: This paper provides an overview of three centuries of black Catholic faith, culture and activism in New Orleans. In particular, it looks at how Catholicism helped antebellum black New Orleanians to build and maintain family ties, how black Catholics as individuals and collectives used their material and spiritual resources to create a religious community, schools, and parishes, and how black Catholic New Orleanians used their faith in conjunction with their religious institutions to fight for social justice and civil rights from the era of Reconstruction through the 1960s.

Keywords: New Orleans, black, Catholic, Catholicism, slavery, free people of color, placage, Widow Couvent, St. Augustine Catholic Church, Tremé, Mother Henriette Delille, Sisters of the Holy Family, civil rights, Homer Plessy, *Comité des Citoyens*, Mother Katherine Drexel, A.P. Tureaud, , Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel, Xavier University of Louisiana, Norman C. Francis

In 1718, the same year as the founding of the city of New Orleans, a great, great grandfather of one of New Orleans' most consequential black Catholics arrived in the Louisiana colony from France. He was Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil. Within six years, he had a plantation that ran on the labor of enslaved Africans, one of whom was a woman named Nannette. In the same year, 1724, the French modified the *Code Noir*, which had been created for the French Caribbean colonies, for use in Louisiana. It mandated that slaves be baptized, instructed in religion, free from work on Sundays, and treated humanely.¹ The only religion the *Code Noir* recognized as legitimate was Roman Catholicism. In fact, its first law ordered the expulsion of all Jews from the colony. It was fully the intent that Louisiana be a Catholic colony and that all its subjects whether they be free or enslaved be members of Catholic Church. While the *Code Noir* meted severe and even deadly

¹ Charles Nolan, *A History of the Archdiocese of New Orleans* (France: Editions Du Signe, 2000), 10. When the Spanish took over New Orleans in 1763, they enacted the *Siete Partidas*. Like the *Code Noir* it was based on Roman law, but it gave enslaved persons more rights than either the *Code Noir* or the American law. During Spanish rule, the number of free persons of color grew rapidly in New Orleans.

punishments for enslaved persons who transgressed it, it did provide ways for enslaved persons to become free. Because of this, the *Code Noir* in many ways set the terms for black Catholic life in New Orleans for generations.

Dubreuil made his mark on the city. An engineer, he oversaw the digging of the first canals and the building of the early dykes and levees for the city. He also designed and built what is commonly called the Old Ursuline Convent on Chartres Street.² At the same time, Nanette, Dubreuil's slave, was making her own mark on New Orleans and paving the way for future generations of blacks in the city to have an acute sense of family and faith. However, Nanette's way was not one that anyone of the day would have thought remarkable or powerful. She marked her existence and set the foundation for her family by becoming a mother of a child fathered by her master. This was the lot of so many daughters of Africa trapped in the slave trade that brought them to places like New Orleans. Nanette's daughter was named Cécile. Cécile in turn would bear Henriette and Narcisse. Nanette managed to buy the freedom of her daughter and grandchildren who entered the ranks of those who came to be called the free people of color. In accordance with the law of the colony, Nanette and her children were Catholics. They passed the faith on to the many generations that followed them. In fact, one of Nanette's great, great granddaughters established the second community of black Catholic religious women in the United States. She was Henriette Delille and the religious community was the Sisters of the Holy Family.³ Nanette, an African woman held in bondage in Louisiana, used rules created by others to carve a new potential for her descendants, to secure the unity of her family, and to endow them with a faith that endured. Similar stories could be told about many other black Catholic families in New Orleans.

Just shy of the tenth anniversary of the founding of the city, French Ursuline Sisters arrived in New Orleans to staff a hospital and to begin teaching the daughters of French and Canadian colonists as well as to catechize African and Native American girls.⁴ They also taught free girls of color alongside white girls in their boarding school. According to Ursuline historian, Emily Clark, "the Ursuline's first duty, as they understood it in the context of their order's mission, was to establish the

² This is the oldest extant building in the Mississippi River Valley.

³ Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. *Henriette Delille: Servant of Slaves, Witness to the Poor* (Chelsea, Michigan: Sheridan Books, 2004), 2-3.

⁴ Nolan, 10.

program of female education that they believed would transform the colony into a Christian society."⁵ Central to creating said "Christian society," was the religious formation of the enslaved. To address this part of their mission in the 1740s, the Ursulines organized a sodality for women that had as its primary purpose the work of evangelizing the enslaved. This sodality included women from all classes and races of New Orleans society including enslaved women.⁶ Among the ministries of the members of the sodality was serving as baptismal sponsors to enslaved infants, children, and adults.

To finance and facilitate their ministries in New Orleans, the Ursulines became slaveholders and at times they sold slaves, too. Clark has explained that, "they bought and owned human property from the start. They never hesitated about taking up the practice and never spoke against it, either in their private records or public correspondence."⁷ Yet, being enslaved to the Ursulines did make life qualitatively different than those lives lived by persons enslaved to others in New Orleans. This qualitative difference was due to certain Catholic principles the Ursulines regarded as sacrosanct. Clark has defined the Ursuline approach to slavery as being "pro-marriage and family."⁸ This meant that the Ursulines believed that enslaved persons had the right to sacramental marriage and that it was immoral to do anything to break the family ties of the enslaved. The reality of their commitment is documented in their records which show "family groupings and networks during the last four decades of colonial rule" with nine families of Ursuline slaves connected to one another through marriage. Convincingly, Clark has argued, "the Catholic sacrament of marriage and baptism offered the Ursuline bondspeople ways to fashion a framework of supportive, intergenerational ties. The nuns' insistence on marriage and their protection of family groups, which survived long after law and custom withdrew support for these practices, promoted the continued stability of the community that began to form around family groups in the 1760s."⁹ Families enslaved to the Ursulines could rely on the fact that despite their situation as slaves, they would be allowed to choose partners in marriage, that they would receive the sacrament of marriage in the Catholic Church, that their children would

⁵ Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727 - 1834*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 56.

⁶ Nolan, 12.

⁷ Clark, 187.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁹ Clark, 183.

be baptized, catechized, and not be sold away from them. They also regularly attended Mass and had access to the sacraments of the Eucharist, penance, last rites, and Christian burial. All of these made it possible for Catholicism to become a part of the enslaved as persons unto themselves but most importantly as families.

For example, according to Charles Nolan, of the 724 adults baptized at St. Louis Cathedral in 1800, 52% were enslaved blacks, 31% were whites, and 17% were free people of color.¹⁰ At this time, New Orleans was home to the largest number of free persons of African descent in America. The rates of enslaved and free blacks being baptized and receiving other sacraments of the Catholic Church would remain quite high throughout the antebellum period. Enslaved blacks, free people of color and whites worshipped and received the sacraments in the same parishes albeit in segregated fashion with pews reserved for whites and for free people of color and the side aisles and back pews designated for enslaved Catholics. Blacks, free and enslaved, proved to be among the most engaged Catholics in terms of church attendance, sponsors for baptism and witnesses of marriages, church artisans and builders, and financial supporters of Catholic institutions in antebellum New Orleans.¹¹ While black Catholics had a central place in the Catholic Church of antebellum New Orleans and the church depended on them for its support, security, and growth, a practice common among free people of color that related to the creation and stability of their families was a sore point between them and the church.

The *Code Noir* prohibited free persons of color from marrying either enslaved persons or free white persons. Between the law and the limited pool of marriageable free men of color, free women of color had few options available to them other than to contract relationships with European men. This practice was called *placage* and for many black Catholic families who engaged in it, even though the colonial government and Catholic Church publicly condemned it, it was matter of

¹⁰ Nolan, 20.

¹¹ There are several excellent sources that document the high level of religious engagement and the material and financial support that persons of African descent gave to the Catholic Church in New Orleans before the Civil War. See Eva Regina Martin's dissertation, "From Sun-Up to Sun-Down: African Symbol in the Works of Black Ironworkers in New Orleans (1800-1863)", Temple University, 1995, Donna Porche Frlot's dissertation, "Propelled by Faith: Henriette Delille and the Literacy Practices of Black Women Religious in Antebellum New Orleans, Louisiana State University, 2006, Virginia Meacham Gould's *Henriette Delille*, Cyprian Davis's *Henriette Delille: Servant of Slaves, Witness to the Poor*, and Emily Clark's *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834*.

survival.¹² Among free people of color, *placage* was another way that enduring black family ties were formed in antebellum New Orleans. According to Joan Martin:

Placage was the practice that existed in Louisiana (and other French and Spanish slaveholding territories) whereby women of color – the option of legal marriage denied them – entered into longstanding, formalized relationships with white European men. This practice was so common that laws were written in an effort to prevent it. The laws had no impact, nor did the futile public indignation.¹³

Placage was a formal relationship that was usually contracted by the mother of a young free woman of color and a white man. These contracts included agreements about housing, financial support and sexual relations.¹⁴ In most agreements, sexual consummation was not to happen until the man either built or bought a home for the woman in which to raise their family. Martin says “it was also understood that he would care for her completely during their life together, provide totally for any children they might have, and present her with a proper settlement in the event of their separation. Some of the relationships terminated when the man married; others lasted for life.”¹⁵ By acknowledging his children with a free woman of color, a white father could make children born of *placage* his heirs. According to Cyprian Davis, “they were called natural children, and they were allowed a certain percentage of the inheritance but not in the same measure as legitimate heirs.”¹⁶

While *placage* was not recognized by the Catholic Church as a valid form of marriage, in actual practice, the church tolerated it. Children born of these relationships were baptized and reared in Catholic

¹² Ibid., 64-65. Martin cites the work of the late womanist theologian, Katie G. Cannon, who argued that because of the extreme oppression black women faced during the long period of American slavery that these women should not be held to the ethical codes this same oppressive society used to define a virtuous person. Such codes could not apply to people who were robbed of their freedom. That these women found a way to survive and to take care of their families and others in the communities should be viewed as courageous acts and not as immoral.

¹³ Joan Martin “*Placage and the Louisiana Gens de Couleur Libre: How Race and Sex Defined the Lifestyles of Free Women of Color*” in *Creole: The Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color* edited by Sybil Kein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 57-58.

¹⁴ Davis, 5.

¹⁵ Martin, 67.

¹⁶ Davis, 5.

churches in New Orleans.¹⁷ Placage was part of the experience of most free families of color. The practice assisted free black families in New Orleans in acquiring property and a certain degree of power in this society that meant its members did not have to fear losing their freedom nor the resources to make freedom possible for more members of their family. Children born to these relationships often enjoyed social and educational advantages that other blacks were denied. Placage allowed for many families of free people of color to become financially secure and for some to even become wealthy. It was not uncommon for free people of color to own people. Some free families of color engaged in the practice of slavery because it was financially rewarding, but in many cases the lives they owned belonged to members of their own family or those of a friend. "When manumission was difficult for financial or legal reasons, many blacks bought a certain slave for sake of marriage or because of relationship...or out of friendship and mutual aid."¹⁸ The maintenance of family ties through the sacramental marriages experienced by bondspeople of the Ursulines, the practice of placage, and the fictive kin relationships fostered among and between enslaved black Catholics and free people of color all helped Catholicism to grow deep roots in black New Orleans and to establish Catholic institutions that have survived to the present day.

The Widow Couvent

In 1837, Marie Couvent wrote her final will. She and her husband, Bernard, a free black man amassed great wealth in New Orleans. He was a builder and together they owned property and slaves, three for whom they petitioned for emancipation.¹⁹ At the end of her days, Couvent was a widow and had no children of her own. In her will, she recalled being taken from her home in Guinea and being enslaved in St. Domingue when she was around seven years old.²⁰ She also stated that she could not remember her father or her mother. Perhaps, through her will she was seeking to provide for poor black children in New Orleans what she lacked access to during her own childhood. In the will, Couvent, who was often referred to as the "Widow Couvent," bequeathed land in Faubourg Marginy, just outside of the French

¹⁷ The Archdiocese of New Orleans has digitized its sacramental records from this period of time. It is an exceptional resource for understanding the place of Catholicism in the lives of free people of color and enslaved blacks.

¹⁸ Davis, 15.

¹⁹ Kevin Weldon Medley, *Black Life in Old New Orleans* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2013), 67.

²⁰Ibid., 66.

Quarter, for the building of a “free school for colored orphans” in perpetuity.²¹

While Couvent died in 1837, it took more than ten years before the school that she intended was built. According to historian, Keith Weldon Medley, prominent and wealthy antebellum black Catholic laypersons such as Aristide Mary and Thomy Lafon became benefactors of the school that originally was called the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute. In 1848 a group of black Catholic men opened the school which provided education, discipline and religious formation.²² Though it was a Catholic school, it was open to children of all faiths. Orphans paid no tuition, children with one parent paid half the tuition rate, and children with both parents paid the full tuition. The first staff of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute was comprised of a lay black Catholic faculty that had been educated primarily in France or Haiti.²³ This was all in keeping with the original intention of Couvent. Medley’s research shows that long after her death, the children who attended her school remembered her every year with a Mass and religious presentation. On the Feast of All Souls they processed to her grave in St. Louis Cemetery No. 2 to decorate her grave and to express thankfulness for her benefaction. Medley also says that over time November 1, the Feast of All Saints, became an important day for fundraising for the school. Other school fundraisers included festivals, firework displays, balls, and raffles of both sacred and secular items.²⁴ Over the years the original Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute had several different names and locations but its mission to educate and care for the wellbeing of black children in the city of New Orleans endured.²⁵

St. Augustine’s Catholic Church, Faubourg Tremè, and Black Catholic Leadership

Another manifestation of the faith of antebellum Black Catholics in New Orleans was St. Augustine Catholic Church. Before the Civil War, New Orleans was the home to the largest free black community in the

²¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

²² *Ibid.*, 68.

²³ *Ibid.*, 69. Among the faculty was Paul Trevigne, a black Catholic social justice activist, newspaper publisher, and member of St. Augustine Catholic Church.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 75. Holy Redeemer School, Bishop Perry Middle School, and Saint Gerard Mejella Alternative School are some of the other incarnations of the original Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute. According to Medley, the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute formally dissolved in 1945 and the school was formally transferred to Holy Redeemer Church that was staffed by the Josephites. Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament took over as the teachers and administrators of the school.

United States, the majority of whom lived in the Faubourg Tremè, one of America's oldest black neighborhoods. In 1841, free people of color in New Orleans obtained permission from Bishop Antoine Blanc to build a church in Tremè. The Ursuline sisters who donated the land requested that the church be named for St. Augustine, whom they regarded as a patron. According to Medley, St. Augustine was "carved" out of the parish of St. Louis Cathedral and became an incubator of "religious expression and devotion as well as social activism" from the time of its foundation.²⁶ Regarding its original supporters, Cyprian Davis noted that "St. Augustine was built with funds gathered from Creoles, both black and white, the foreign French, and slaves."²⁷ Within a year, St. Augustine Church was dedicated and began serving the spiritual needs of all people living in Tremè, free Creoles of color, enslaved persons, and whites.

According to the tradition of the Sisters of the Holy Family, the origins of their religious community are also rooted in St. Augustine, with Henriette Delille making her first religious vows there in November 1842 and commencing her ministry to enslaved blacks with Father Etienne Rousselon. Soon Juliette Gaudin and Josephine Charles joined Delille there to minister to infants and children throughout the parish and to serve as baptismal sponsors for enslaved children.²⁸

Born in 1813, Delille was a free woman of color. Her mother and her sister had been involved in *placage* and Henriette, herself, likely was, as well.²⁹ As a young woman, Delille devoted herself to social work in New Orleans which made her acutely aware of the terrible costs of slavery and poverty and that revealed her own vocation to religious life. She wanted to live as a sister and to serve the black community in New Orleans that was enslaved and poor. Beginning in 1842, the Sisters of the Holy Family dedicated themselves to service to the poor and to education. Before her death in 1862, the Sisters of the Holy Family were conducting a school, an orphanage, and a home for the aged. They also catechized free children of color and enslaved children.³⁰ Following the

²⁶ Medley, *Black Life in Old New Orleans*, 24.

²⁷ Davis, 46.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁹ Virginia Meacham Gould, *Henriette Delille* (Strasbourg, France: Editions du Signe, 2012), 41-43. There is evidence in sacramental records from the Archdiocese of New Orleans document that Henriette Delille had two children who died. This suggests that she likely, too, as a young woman was also involved in a *placage* relationship.

³⁰ Cecilia A. Moore, "African American Catholic Women" in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* edited by Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Marie Cantlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 165.

Civil War, their ministries expanded beyond New Orleans (throughout the Gulf Coast and to Belize), they accepted women who had formerly been slaves as members of the community, they established St. Mary's Academy for girls, and they became the largest of the order of black Catholic women religious in the United States.³¹

Black Catholic New Orleanians during the Civil War and Reconstruction

Paul Trevigne was a Tremé resident, a member of St. Augustine Church, a teacher at the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute, and the publisher of the first daily black newspaper in the United States. Through *l'Union*, which Trevigne began publishing during the Civil War, black New Orleanians expressed their determination for the full extension of civil rights for black people and for equality for all Americans. Trevigne advocated for abolition, for the admission of black men into the Union army, for full citizenship of blacks, and for land and education for newly freed blacks. He represented the thinking of many from his community when he envisioned and was prepared to help create a "race blind democracy" after the war was over. On the pages of *l'Union*, Trevigne appealed to all Americans to add "their grain of sand for the construction of the Temple of Liberty."³² But, not all free people of color in New Orleans initially shared this view.

When the war began, some free people of color initially volunteered to serve in the Confederate Army in the 1st Louisiana Native Guard. One of those men, also a member of St. Augustine Parish, was André Cailloux. He was given the rank of lieutenant, but this all black Confederate regiment was short-lived as whites did not want blacks in their ranks. The 1st Louisiana Native Guard, CSA, was disbanded, but when the Union took the city of New Orleans in 1862, many free men of color who had enlisted as Confederates, including Cailloux, offered their services to the Union. Thus was formed the 1st Louisiana Native Guard, USA/Corps d'Afrique. Eventually over 4000 black men served in this regiment, including free men of color and escaped and former slaves.

³¹ Mother Henriette Delille is one of five black Americans whose causes have been introduced for canonization. The others are Mother Mary Lange, founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first order of African American sisters in the United States, Pierre Toussaint, a Haitian American former slave and philanthropist, Father Augustus Tolton, the first recognized black priest in the United States, and Julia Greeley, a former slave and an African American laywoman from Colorado known for good works in late the 19th century and early 20th century. In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI declare Henriette Delille venerable.

³² Lois Eric Elie and Dawn Logsdon, *Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans* (New Orleans: Serendipity Films, 2008).

When Cailloux was killed in battle in 1863, he was one of the first black officers to die serving the Union in the Civil War.³³

Following the Civil War, black New Orleanians achieved many of the goals Trevigne had advanced in *l'Union*. During Reconstruction, federal troops deployed in the South facilitated the desegregation of New Orleans street cars, the integration of its public schools, and the ability of blacks to win seats in local and state government.³⁴ During this time, Louisiana even had a black governor. However, Reconstruction was fleeting and Southern whites unleashed a vicious backlash that pushed blacks out of political offices, that disenfranchised them, and that used racial segregation laws and customs to radically circumscribe the lives of blacks politically, socially, culturally, economically, and educationally. This happened all throughout the South as well as in some parts of the Midwest and North. Not even New Orleans was spared.

Unwilling to give up what they had gained nor what they were accustomed to having before the war when they were considered free people of color, Tremè residents organized the *Comitè des Citoyens* (Committee of Citizens). Paul Trevigne was among the leaders of this new civil rights group that also counted many other parishioners of St. Augustine in its membership.³⁵ The *Comitè des Citoyens* decided to use a Louisiana law that had passed in 1890 as the rallying point to fight for their civil rights. That law, the Louisiana Separate Car Act, mandated separate railcars for blacks and whites. The person they chose to fight it was Homer Plessy.

Homer Plessy was born in 1859 in New Orleans. He was free born, a Creole of color, and a member of St. Augustine's Catholic Church in Tremè. Creoles of color were French in language, Catholic in religion, and because of their mixed heritage (African, French, Spanish, and Native American) they ranged in skin color from white to black and every shade in between. Before the Civil War, most blacks in New Orleans who were free were Creoles of color. Though they were not regarded in custom or in law as equal to white people, they did occupy a place in that culture between white and black. They had much more freedom and privilege than blacks but never as much as whites. The

³³ See Stephen J. Ochs, *A Black Patriot and a White Priest: André Cailloux and Claude Maistre in Civil War New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

³⁴The dates typically given for Reconstruction are 1867 to 1877.

³⁵ Jerome G. LeDoux, S.V.D., *War of the Pews: A Personal Account of St. Augustine Church in New Orleans* (Donaldsonville, LA: Margaret Media, 2011), 229.

end of Reconstruction hit all people of African descent in America hard, but for Creoles of color it was particularly devastating because freedoms they had enjoyed before the War were taken from them as they came to be regarded as part of the black community rather than as a class apart. When Jim Crow laws began to be enacted in Louisiana, the Creoles of color stood ready to fight any attempts to codify racial segregation. Laws such as the Louisiana Separate Car Act were particularly odious to the Creoles of color. Homer Plessy seemed to be just the right person to represent the interests of the *Comité des Citoyens*, because while Homer Plessy looked like a white man, he identified as colored.

On June 7, 1892, Plessy purchased a first-class rail ticket from New Orleans to Covington, Louisiana and boarded the car reserved for whites.³⁶ Being alerted that a colored man was riding in the whites only car, the conductor came to the white car, found Plessy and asked him if he was colored. Plessy answered, "Yes."³⁷ The conductor then told him he would have to go sit in the black car but Plessy refused saying he was an American citizen and that the only way he would leave the car was by force. Plessy was arrested and fined, and the *Comité de Citoyens* had what it needed to challenge the constitutionality of this law all the way to the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court ruled on *Plessy v. Ferguson* on May 18, 1896. With Justice John Marshall Harlan as the lone dissenter, the majority of the Court ruled that the Louisiana Separate Car Act was constitutional provided that the railroads provided "separate but equal" cars for white and black passengers.³⁸ The majority contended that the act of separating blacks and whites did not mean that blacks were inferior. The ruling had a profound effect as it was used to justify legal and customary racial segregation throughout the South and much of the rest of the country in everything from separate water fountains, to separate seating in public places like movie theatres, to separate schools. The effect on black voting in Louisiana was particularly chilling. In 1897 over 130,000 black men could vote in the state, but by 1900 only little more than 5,000 could still vote.³⁹ The Plessy decision was used for the next 58 years to legally and culturally sanction racial discrimination in the United States until May 17, 1954 when the Supreme Court declared

³⁶ Keith Weldon Medley, *We As Freeman: Plessy v. Ferguson* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2015), 140-141.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 203-204.

³⁹ Dolores Eggers Labbe, *Jim Crow Comes to Church: The Establishment of Segregated Catholic Parishes in South Louisiana* Reprint Edition (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 34.

unconstitutional the principle of "separate but equal" in its ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The Creation of Black Parishes in New Orleans

Around the same time that the *Comité de Citoyens* was engaged in this important civil rights battle against segregation, it was because of these laws and white animosity towards blacks that Archbishop Francis Janssens of New Orleans decided it was in the pastoral interest of blacks in the archdiocese for them to have parishes of their own. Janssen, who was one of the few bishops in the South who thought it was possible for black men to make good priests, thought that if blacks had to remain in churches with whites that blacks would never be able to fully participate in the life of the parish.⁴⁰ According to historian Dolores Eggers Labbe, "Although many parishes provided schools for black children, parishes generally did not allow blacks to assist officially in church ceremonies, to join the parish choir or other parish societies, or to sit where they wished in church. Janssens believed that the desire to participate in religious functions was driving many blacks to Protestant churches."⁴¹ In creating parishes especially for blacks, the archdiocese would not require blacks to join them. If they wished to continue attending the parishes they already belonged to then they were free to do so. However, Janssens was convinced that the freedom and acceptance that the blacks would feel at parishes created especially for them would make most black Catholics in the city want to join them.⁴² Labbe says that Janssens was further motivated to make this move to create parishes for blacks by the availability of religious orders like the Josephites and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People whose missions were to serve the black community. He also knew that Mother Katharine Drexel, founder of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, was willing to make financial resources available for the building of churches and schools for blacks as was the Commission for Catholic Missions.⁴³

What Janssens was not prepared to face was the anger from Creoles of color. Creole Catholics were incensed by this plan. They regarded the plan to create black parishes in New Orleans as the

⁴⁰ Dolores Eggers Labbe, *Jim Crow Comes to Church: The Establishment of Segregated Catholic Parishes in South Louisiana* Reprint Edition (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 30-33.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 39.

Catholic Church allowing itself to be coopted by Jim Crow. But, their ire did not deter Janssens.

In 1895, the first parish especially created for blacks in New Orleans opened. Janssens named the parish St. Katherine's in honor of the patron saint of Mother Drexel who provided the majority of the funding for the parish. St. Katherine's also had a parochial school. Members of the *Comitè de Citoyens* considered this parish to be unchristian and called on black Catholics in the city to protest it.⁴⁴ But, such a protest did not materialize. A large crowd attended St. Katherine's dedication mass on May 19, 1895. White priests, who opposed the plan for special parishes for blacks, not because they opposed segregation but because they did not want to lose the generous donations of black parishioners, and those who feared that whites might want to start attending the black parishes, were placated by the archbishop who said that priests serving in the black parishes could not administer sacraments to whites, except for penance and communion and that whites would not be allowed to rent pews in black parishes.⁴⁵

Soon St. Katherine's became a very popular parish. Black Catholics liked worshipping there and it also became a place to enjoy the arts and culture. Labbe found that "all New Orleans blacks were invited to St. Katherine's for plays, dances, and music festivals."⁴⁶ By the middle of the twentieth-century more parishes for blacks had been established in New Orleans, and parishes like St. Augustine that had always been integrated effectively became white parishes because blacks were made to feel so unwelcome at them.⁴⁷

A.P. Tureaud and the Fight to Kill Jim Crow

Three years following the *Plessy* decision, Alexander Pierre Tureaud was born in Tremé and baptized at St. Augustine Catholic Church in February 1899. One of eleven children, Tureaud's father was a carpenter and his mother was a housekeeper.⁴⁸ His formal education began in segregated parochial schools, but there was no Catholic or public high school education available at the time for blacks in New

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁷ Among the other parishes established for blacks in New Orleans was Blessed Sacrament, Corpus Christi, St. Dominic, and Holy Ghost.

⁴⁸ Cyprian Davis, "Black Catholics in the Civil Rights Movement in the Southern United States: A.P. Tureaud, Thomas Wyatt Turner, and Earl Johnson," *U.S. Catholic Historian*, vol. 23, no.4, Fall 2006: 69.

Orleans.⁴⁹ His determination for more education lead him away from home. Ultimately, he landed in Washington, D.C. where he earned a law degree from Howard University in the 1920s. During his studies at Howard, Charles Hamilton Houston became Dean of Howard University's School of Law.⁵⁰ A graduate of Harvard Law School, Charles Houston was one of the most powerful and skilled black lawyers of the day. It was Houston who constructed the legal strategy that would be employed by the NAACP legal team led by Thurgood Marshall that ultimately resulted in the overturning of *Plessy* in 1954.⁵¹ While at Howard, Tureaud got to know Dean Houston, he joined the NAACP, and upon returning to New Orleans in 1926 to practice law he dedicated himself to the cause of civil rights, taking his post in Houston's legal army that spanned the country. Serving on the board of the New Orleans NAACP, Tureaud helped make the New Orleans branch "the movement's most effective and active organization in Louisiana."⁵²

When Tureaud was admitted to the Louisiana Bar in 1927, there were only four black attorneys in the state and between 1937 and 1947, he was the only black attorney in the state.⁵³ Tureaud made his most important contributions to the civil rights movement when in the 1940s he introduced a series of law suits against Louisiana parish school boards. Public schools in Louisiana were segregated by race, but they were far from equal. They were unequal in terms of school buildings and textbooks and in terms of teacher compensation, with black teachers making demonstrably less than white teachers. Tureaud won his first victory in demonstrating the inequity of segregated public school education with *McKelpin v. Orleans Parish School Board* in 1943. This win was followed by other victories, all of which added weight to the case the NAACP was building to kill Jim Crow. Tureaud focused particularly on the issue of the equalization of school teacher salaries. According to Cyprian Davis, "Tureaud worked from his own resources in his own small office, concerning himself with all kinds of cases related to

⁴⁹ St. Mary's Academy began before the civil war but it was for girls. Xavier University Preparatory School, which was originally co-educational did not open until 1915 and St. Augustine High School for black boys did not open until 1951. The first public school in New Orleans for African Americans was McDonogh No. 35. It opened in 1917.

⁵⁰ Rachel L. Emanuel and Alexander P. Tureaud, Jr., *A More Noble Cause: A.P. Tureaud and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Louisiana: A Personal Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 50.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Davis, "Black Catholics in the Civil Rights Movement," 71.

⁵³ Emanuel and Tureaud, 62.

race, police brutality, and allegations against juveniles. He often worked without a fee.”⁵⁴

Tureaud spent the 1950s and 1960s on the civil rights battlefield working to desegregate the public schools in New Orleans and throughout Louisiana. His commitment subjected him to “vitriolic anger and attacks as white segregationists used every stratagem possible to stop racial desegregation in the schools,” but at the same time his efforts and successes in Louisiana helped build the foundation on which Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP would stand to argue and to win *Brown v. Board* in 1954.⁵⁵ As a black Catholic from New Orleans and St. Augustine led the charge for civil rights at the end of the 19th century, another black Catholic New Orleanian, born in Tremé connected to of St. Augustine in the middle of the 20th century contributed greatly to vanquishing nearly 60 years of constitutionally sanctioned “separate but equal” Jim Crowism in America.

Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel and Black Catholic New Orleanians

A little less than ten years after A.P. Tureaud returned home to practice civil rights law in New Orleans, Joseph Rummel was installed as New Orleans’s new archbishop in 1935. Archbishop Rummel served the people of New Orleans until his death in 1964 at age 88. Born in Germany, reared in New York City, educated at St. Anselm College, and a bishop in America’s heartland, Omaha, Nebraska, one might think it odd that Rummel was chosen to lead the largest Catholic diocese south of the Mason-Dixon. However, upon closer examination there were things in his previous sites of service that suited him well to this place and time. First of all, he was an immigrant who came to live in the United States when he was just six years old and who grew up in one of the most diverse cities in the United States. His education at St. Anselm formed him in the Benedictine traditions of prayer, work, study, and hospitality. Among his assignments as a young priest of the Archdiocese of New York, Rummel pastored a church in Harlem as it was transitioning during the Great Migration from being a predominately white parish to being predominately African American parish. And, then from this ethnically and racially diverse world of New York, he found himself on the Great Plains ministering to a host of Catholics from various European ethnicities as well as Native American Catholics. All

⁵⁴ Davis, “Black Catholics in the Civil Rights Movement,” 72.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

these people that Archbishop Rummel had the chance to meet and work among before coming to New Orleans were also all present in New Orleans. What was certainly new to his experience though was the density, the pride, and the self-determination of the black Catholics of New Orleans who made up a very significant number of his flock and who were focused on the goal of civil rights and integration of their society and their church.

When Rummel arrived in 1935 the Catholic institutions of the archdiocese had been formally segregated since the late 19th century. There were separate parishes and schools for blacks and whites and though blacks and whites could attend each other churches, in the white churches there were pews reserved in the back and in the galleries for blacks. For the first third of his tenure as Archbishop of New Orleans, Rummel did little to disturb the practices that were in place, but he did oversee the expansion of the diocese which was increasing in terms of its black and white membership. Dozens of new churches and schools were created during this time that served Catholics of both races.

It was not until Archbishop Rummel faced direct challenges coming from two lay Catholic organizations in the city that he cautiously but deliberately began to use his authority to help kill Jim Crow in New Orleans. These organizations were the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and the Southeastern Regional Interracial Commission (SERINCO). The CHR was established in 1949 as a group of Catholic laypeople (black and white- AP Tureaud was a prominent member) that was determined to remove all vestiges of Jim Crow from their churches in New Orleans.⁵⁶ They attended integrated masses, sponsored a Speaker's Bureau that brought Catholic speakers on racial justice to the city, and they also lobbied Archbishop Rummel to end segregation in New Orleans parishes. SERINCO was founded a year earlier in 1948 and its purpose was to bring black and white Catholic college students together to dialogue and to build an interracial alliance to work to end racial segregation in all Catholic institutions in the archdiocese, particularly in the colleges.⁵⁷ These two organizations had Archbishop Rummel's attention, and though he did not go as far as either wished he would in terms of integration in the diocese, they did see under his

⁵⁶ R. Bentley Anderson, *Black, White and Catholics: New Orleans Interracialism, 1947-1956* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), 14-25.

⁵⁷Ibid. Loyola University and Xavier University of Louisiana made up the majority of the members of SERINCO, but there were also member from the Catholic women's colleges in the area, too. The women's colleges were Dominican College, Ursuline College, and Sacred Heart College.

administration significant progress. In 1948, Rummel admitted the first black seminarians to the archdiocesan Notre Dame Seminary and in 1951 he ordered the removal of the "white" and "colored" signs from the churches of New Orleans. In 1953, he published his first pastoral letter on the issue of race and segregation, "Blessed Are the Peacemakers." Here he announced that racial segregation would end in Catholic institutions in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Rummel took a gradualist approach to integration. It would not be until 1962 that the Catholic schools of New Orleans would be integrated and when he did finally implement the plan of integration for the schools he faced massive backlash from white Catholic segregationists in New Orleans. Nevertheless, he persisted.

Rummel's ability to persist on the issue of integrations and civil rights was directly related to the foundation for these noble quests that were set in place and maintained by black Catholic lay people in New Orleans. This foundation began in antebellum New Orleans with people like Paul Trevigne and was carried forward in the activism of Homer Plessy, the *Comité des Citoyens*, and A. P. Tureaud, but another Catholic institution in New Orleans was a crucial factor as well and that was Xavier University of Louisiana.

Mother Katherine Drexel regarded New Orleans as a prime site for the development of black Catholic leadership. Keenly aware that New Orleans had one of the largest black Catholic populations in the United States, she opened a Catholic high school and normal school to prepare black teachers for Louisiana schools in 1915. These schools led to the foundation of Xavier University of Louisiana in 1925.⁵⁸ Drexel was convinced that without the opportunity for Catholic college education, black Catholics would never reach their potential in America. Xavier University of Louisiana opened as a four-year college in 1925 and in 1927 added its School of Pharmacy. This school would be and still is the U.S.'s only black and Catholic university. As the Tremé and St. Augustine Catholic Church had been central to developing black Catholic leaders in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Xavier would become the training ground of even more such leaders in the 20th century. Among them was a future president of the school.

Norman Francis became active in civil rights work while studying at Xavier University of Louisiana when he joined the Southeastern Regional

⁵⁸ Nolan, 53.

Interracial Commission (SERINCO) during his freshman year.⁵⁹ By his senior year he was SERINCO's vice chairman. SERINCO members met regularly, usually on the campuses of Xavier or Loyola, to discuss race and justice and to work on strategies for integrating Catholic institutions in the city of New Orleans, starting with their own schools, parishes, and events. These students conversed regularly, attended lectures by Catholic leaders on racial justice issues, and went to Mass together and had breakfast following Mass.⁶⁰ At the time, these were transgressive, powerful and deeply Christian acts. Regarding this time, historian, R. Bentley Anderson asserted, "the walls of racial separation within the Catholic Church in New Orleans began to crumble when black and white Catholics sat down together as equals."⁶¹ One of the major victories that came out of this Catholic interracial work that Francis and his peers engaged in was the integration of Loyola's School of Law in 1952.⁶² Norman Francis and Ben Johnson, also a Xavier alumnus, were the first African Americans to attend Loyola of New Orleans School of Law.

After practicing law for a few years, Francis was invited back to Xavier to work in development and to be Dean of Students. He continued to do some legal work for the law firm of Collins, Douglass and Elie, a black law firm that represented the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a U.S. civil rights organization.⁶³ Xavier students, Rudy Lombard and Vincent Roux, were student leaders in CORE and had been very involved in organizing the Freedom Ride from Washington to New Orleans in 1961.⁶⁴ Lombard and Roux came to see Francis to seek Xavier's assistance when the Freedom Riders arrived in New Orleans. At the time, Francis doubted that students would even make it to the city. "The men [Francis, Lombard, and Roux] made a bet. If the bus arrived in New Orleans, Francis owed them each a hamburger. If it didn't, they owed him a chocolate malt."⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Norman Francis was a native of Lafayette, Louisiana and attended Xavier from 1948-1952. In 1968 he became President of Xavier and served in that role until 2015, making him one of the United States longest serving college presidents.

⁶⁰ R. Bentley Anderson's study *Black, White, and Catholic: New Orleans Interracialism, 1947-1956* is a compelling account of the work of black and white New Orleans Catholics for the integration of Catholic institutions.

⁶¹ Anderson, 41.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 102-105.

⁶³ Jed Lipinski, "On His Last Day at Xavier, Norman Francis is Remembered for Providing Refuge to Freedom Riders," *The Times-Picayune*, 30 June 2015. https://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2015/06/norman_francis_leaves_xavier.html Accessed 26 August 2018.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Rudy Lombard and Vincent Roux were seniors at Xavier. Lombard was the president of his class.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

On May 15, Lombard and Roux visited Francis again. This time they were seeking Xavier's support for the Freedom Riders who had been attacked the previous day by white supremacists. They were coming to New Orleans and they needed a place to stay. They requested that Xavier extend hospitality by allowing them to stay in St. Michael's Dormitory. Francis could not make that decision without consulting with Xavier's president, Sr. Mary Josephina.⁶⁶ Sr. Mary Josephina agreed that they would do this, but she insisted that there be no press releases. This had to be done discreetly. Francis recalled the arrival of the beaten up Freedom Riders as "a sad and triumphant sight."⁶⁷ In a quiet but powerful way, once again black Catholics were using their resources, relationships, institutions, and convictions in the interest of civil rights.

Seven years later, on April 4, 1968, Francis was named the first male, the first black and the first lay president of Xavier University of Louisiana. The school's original mission, to develop black Catholic leaders, had a very tangible result. Leadership of the university now was in the hands of a black Catholic. This day was full of celebration for Xavier and the rest of the black Catholic community in New Orleans, but was also filled with sadness and trauma for it was also the day that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Now more than ever the country needed leaders like those black Catholic New Orleanians whose faith, history, culture, and works spanned three centuries. There was not time to rest. They had to return their shoulders to the wheel and continue the difficult and slow work of justice in the church and in the world.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid

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