



# 300 years of sacramental records reveal uncomfortable truths

By Mark Lombard  
Clarion Herald

Joseph William, a slave born on Dec. 23, 1828, of a mulatress mother and slave, is baptized five months later as a parishioner of St. Louis Cathedral. At that same time, it is declared that he is to be freed of enslavement when he reaches 21 years because he is thought, by his master, to be “too white to be a slave for life.”

Five years before, 3-year-

old Marie, a mulatress and daughter of her black mother, Nina, is baptized at the cathedral and simultaneously declared freed by her master, Madame Victoire Braquemare.

Sixty-five years earlier, Philippe serves as a godfather of a slave boy born in July 1757. While he could write his own name and was instructed in the Catholic faith and confirmed, as was required to be a godparent, he himself was a Negro slave

of the Capuchin order, the property of the Catholic Church.

All of these records, found in the archival records of the Archdiocese of New Orleans and St. Louis Cathedral, represent “uncomfortable” but valuable sacred records that demonstrate real impact in the faith life and future temporal lives of those affected, according to archdiocesan archivist Dr. Emilie Leumas.

“Sacramental records are among the most important resources available to scholars researching the lives of slaves and free persons of color,” said Leumas, a leading expert among U.S. diocesan archivists on the issue of slave records. “These records detail the life history of the local community over time.”

## Priests baptized slaves

While its history of French, Spanish and American control and the presence of the Code Noir – a set of laws dating back to the 1720s governing how slaves were to be treated, including being baptized as Catholics – made New Orleans unique, Leumas stressed that “enslaved people receiving the sacraments is not just a southern-states’ phenomenon,” but existed in Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York. As well, missionary priests baptized enslaved Africans and native Americans throughout the country, she added.

Yet, she noted, that the opening up of church records detailing slavery is surrounded by fear that the Church “will look bad” if its role is discussed.

“Around the country there are many archives that have sacramental records of those who were enslaved,” Leumas said. “There are a lot of questions of what to do with them and how to make them accessible, and what are the rules and what do we need to know.”

The Archdiocese of New Orleans has opened its records “so all may have the benefit of researching these records,” she said, adding that some of those records are available online.

“If you just look at the last 30 years, the Church is trying to be transparent to not repeat mistakes. We need to be able to make sure that these records are available.”

## Added notations have value

Unlike many dioceses, there is a “richness of the records” here, Leumas said. She added that the sacramental records were recognized by the civil courts, so parishioners used those records to include annotated information about, for instance, patrimony and legitimacy, which tied directly to future inheritances and their freedom.

“We’ve seen” in the records, she said, “fathers declare that ‘that’s my child.’ We’ve seen women who own children saying that ‘I’m freeing them.’ We’ve seen them coming back and amending records and freeing a child at 12 or freeing a child at baptism or freeing a child at the age of 21, and they give you a reason why.”

“There is a lot of information: You get the mother’s name; sometimes you’re getting who the father is; you’re getting godparents; you’re getting how they are related; you’re getting that the godmother is free or not free. You are getting all of this information.”

Leumas noted that the inclusion of designations of race, of whether communicants were enslaved or of being fathered out of wedlock, for example, makes the sacramental records uncomfortable.

“By today’s standards, we would not write this in a register,” she said. “Yet, this is what historically people would write.”

She also pointed to the fact that records documenting “that the church owned someone enslaved is uncomfortable.”

“To look and to know that the Capuchins owned slaves, that the Jesuits owned slaves, the Ursulines owned slaves, and that that is in those records” is disturbing, she said. So, too, are notations and amendments written by a layperson – not the priest conferring the sacrament – declaring that “their child is ‘too white’ to be a slave all their life.”

Leumas noted that the Church “can’t sanitize” the records because to do so would be “a tremendous disservice to those who are descendants of those who were enslaved or free people of color” and “forever not allowing that light to shine and not allowing people to tell that story.”

## Community truths

The trove of sacramental records, she stressed, “tells a community story, it tells about people gaining their freedom, how they got their freedom.”

At a time when there was great disparity between people based upon race, these records form one place where there was a leveling of society.

“At that moment at the baptismal font,” Leumas said, “there is no discrimination. There may have been a whole lot of other stuff going on about where you can sit in church, and who you were and where you were and what your status was and whether you were enslaved or a free person of color that was caught in the middle or whether you were white or Native American or any of those other things. But at that baptismal font, there was no discrimination.”

Mark Lombard can be reached at [mlombard@clarionherald.org](mailto:mlombard@clarionherald.org).

**URSULINE ACADEMY**

Since 1727,  
proud to be the  
**oldest Catholic school**  
in the United States.

Also, the oldest, continuously-operating school for girls in the United States, Ursuline Academy is a treasured piece of Catholic history in New Orleans. Serving Toddler 2 through 12th grade, today's Ursuline combines tradition with innovation to foster spiritual formation, academic excellence, and a life-long commitment to service.

**UAnola.org**

All qualified students admitted regardless of race, color, creed, national or ethnic origin.