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## A Thirty Year Collaboration in Uniquely Black and Catholic Mission

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## **Thirty Years and Counting! The Institute for Black Catholic Studies – 1980-2010**

*The Institute for Black Catholic Studies arose out of a passion for authentically Black and truly Catholic theology and ministry in 1980. It continues to inspire its students, its faculty, and all those who are touched by its unique approach and identity. Kathleen Dorsey Bellow and C. Vanessa White reflect on the history and mission of the IBCS.*

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### **A Thirty Year Collaboration in Uniquely Black and Catholic Mission**

**Kathleen Dorsey Bellow**  
**Xavier University of New Orleans, Louisiana**

Xavier University of Louisiana (XULA) is a relatively small institution with a sizeable reputation. The XULA website publicizes many of its claims to fame. Established in 1925 by St. Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, Xavier is the only historically Black and Catholic university in the United States. From this unique identity flows the stated mission of the school to “contribute to the promotion of a more just and humane society by preparing its students to assume roles of leadership and service in a global society.”<sup>1</sup>

Its president, Dr. Norman C. Francis (Class of '52) has the longest-running tenure of any president of an American university. When U.S. President Barack Obama visited New Orleans last month to mark the 5-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina that devastated coastal Mississippi and Louisiana, he spoke from Xavier University, partly in tribute to the determined leadership of President Francis who spearheaded the school's amazing rebound in the aftermath of the storm.

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<sup>1</sup>“Catholic Mission and Ministry”. Xavier University of Louisiana.

< <http://www.xula.edu/catholic/index.php>> (Accessed 6 September 2011).

Xavier continues to recover. Fall 2010 student enrollment is at a new post-Katrina high. New construction projects dot the campus and a long-awaited chapel is on the drawing board. Amid the distractions of recovery and new growth, the university has maintained its standard of preparing students for life. From the XULA website:

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Xavier continues to rank first nationally in the number of African American students earning undergraduate degrees in biology, chemistry and physics.

The College of Pharmacy, one of only two pharmacy schools in Louisiana, is among the nation's top three producers of African American Doctor of Pharmacy degree recipients.

Xavier ranks first in the nation in placing African American students into medical schools and has held that rank since 1993.<sup>2</sup>

Through these aspects of vocation and life at Xavier, one can see faith actively expressed in Christian discipleship.

Faith sustains another less heralded work in progress at Xavier University. The Institute for Black Catholic Studies took up residence at Xavier University thirty years ago as a graduate theology program to cultivate scholarship that is Black and Catholic. The project grew out of an idea proposed by Fr. August Taylor to the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus (NBCCC) in 1969 that was tested in the first Black Catholic Theological Symposium that convened in 1978 at the Motherhouse of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore. In 1979, a committee of African American women and men religious drafted a plan that was refined in numerous consultations. Jamie T. Phelps, O.P. was a key consultant. Thaddeus Posey, O.F.M., Cap. shaped a final proposal

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<sup>2</sup> "Quick Facts University and Media Relations." Xavier University of Louisiana. 28 May 2010. <http://www.xula.edu/mediarelations/quickfacts.php> (6 September 2011).

that he presented to the NBCCC. With NBCCC support, Fr. Posey and Dr. Norman Francis championed the cause with the Xavier administration and the local bishops. In 1980, the Institute for Black Catholic Studies became a resident graduate theology program on the Xavier University campus that has met every summer since (except 2006, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when the Institute was hosted at the University of Notre Dame).

The IBCS was born out of the community's contention that U.S. Black Catholics have a right and responsibility to participate in humanity's ongoing dialogue about who God is and how we are to live as God's children. Over the years this discussion has broadened the church's self-understanding by adding African and African American dimension to the study and practice of the Catholic faith. The disciplines of church history, ethics, theology, scripture, aesthetics, liturgy, spirituality and catechetics have been enriched by the Institute's rigorous academic tradition that immerses students and faculty in the Black Catholic cultures of New Orleans and Xavier.

The mission of the IBCS is to form lay persons, religious and clergy for more effective ministry in the Black community and in the church at-large. The IBCS message is the gospel of Christ proclaimed through Black life. Responding to the critical needs and building on the indomitable strengths of its constituent communities, the structure of the Institute is unapologetically intense. In the Masters of Theology, Certificate and Enrichment programs members learn and teach Catholic Christian discipleship in classroom and out, working grace-fully through the challenges and joys of community life. From Morning Prayer through daily classes to evening African drumming and dance enrichments, the community grows together in a healthy sense of Godliness - intellectually, spiritually, culturally and socially. The benefits flow out from the IBCS and Xavier University of Louisiana to community and Church.

In these thirty years, the Institute for Black Catholic Studies of Xavier University has produced some 68 Masters of Theology

graduates, at least nine of whom have earned doctoral degrees in theology or related fields. A total roster of Certificate and Enrichment program attendees has yet to be tallied, but what is remarkable is that a number who began or advanced their church studies in the summer in New Orleans have continued theological pursuits.

Unlike the sciences, it is difficult to quantify Xavier University of Louisiana's theological contributions to the Church. Given the student accomplishment of both its undergraduate Theology Department and the Institute for Black Catholic Studies, Xavier University is serious about Catholic mission.

Following through in its departmental mission to form more effective, healthy and culturally- competent ministers, the IBCS has potential to stretch Xavier University, the Black Catholic community and the Church at-large to more intentionally use the gifts of Black culture in teaching and evangelizing God's people. Lessons in Christian community learned during the IBCS summer are useful for challenging and inspiring us all year-long and all life-long.

At this 30 year juncture, let us celebrate the enduring faithfulness of Xavier University and the evolving vocation of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies. Thank God, our ancestors in faith, and steadfast leadership for a holy collaboration that "contribute(s) to the promotion of a more just and humane society by preparing its students to assume roles of leadership and service in a global society."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>"Catholic Mission and Ministry". Xavier University of Louisiana. <  
<http://www.xula.edu/catholic/index.php>> (Accessed 6 September 2011).