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The Future of New Orleans

-- James B. Bennett

Religious institutions will play an important role in New Orleans' move from recovery to rebuilding, as a recent *New York Times* article describing the reopening of the St. Joan of Arc parish school reminds us. In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, national and regional religious agencies provided crucial assistance to both evacuees and those stranded in the city (their success all the more noteworthy in light of the horrifying inadequacy of federal efforts). While these agencies will continue to provide significant resources, local churches will be an increasingly determinant factor in shaping New Orleans' recovery. That influence will extend to the crux of the social divisions that outsiders learned about when Katrina exposed them for the nation and the world to see.

Churches and schools, and the relationships between them, have long been part of the complex racial and residential patterns in New Orleans. When New Orleans briefly experimented with interracial public schools during Reconstruction, racially exclusive parochial schools were a common retreat for white parents trying to keep their children out of an integrated environment. Soon, the interracial public schools disbanded, and the city's black communities were left with few educational options for their children.

Thirty-five years later, the school featured in the *Times* article was opened. In a city where racially mixed parishes had been the norm for nearly two centuries, St. Joan of Arc (originally named St. Dominic's) would become the city's second parish created exclusively for black Catholics. In 1909, the then-integrated congregation had completed a magnificent new church at a nearby but more prominent location. On the Sunday before the move, however, the parish priest announced that only the white members would relocate; the black members would remain behind to form a new separate black parish in the old building.

As was typical, a school also opened. Church leaders hoped that black families who would otherwise reject segregated congregations might compromise to secure an education for their children. At St. Joan of Arc, the hand-me-down building was destroyed by a hurricane in 1916, while the new white church a few blocks away escaped unscathed.

Over the next few decades a pattern emerged, as numerous separate black Catholic churches and schools opened throughout the city, leading to a thoroughly segregated Christian population. (Most Protestants had separated decades earlier). In some cases, the separate facilities opened in predominantly black neighborhoods; other times the reliance on buildings cast off by white congregations led to a black religious presence in mixed or even predominantly white neighborhoods -- but not for long: residential patterns followed religious ones, creating increasingly homogeneous communities in a city long characterized by its racially mixed neighborhoods.

In this context, parish schools played an increasingly important role in expanding the limited educational options for black children, even though these classrooms could not overcome the

pervasive segregation in religious and public institutions alike. At the same time, religiously affiliated colleges (the predecessors to the now heavily damaged Dillard and Xavier Universities), offered the best opportunities for higher education, training nearly all of the region's black professionals, including teachers, doctors, lawyers, and pharmacists.

And now a new opportunity arises. The religious dynamics that once contributed to separation can help restore a devastated city. With the future of most of the city's public schools still unknown, religious institutions that a century earlier had reinforced divisions may now present a key reason for families to return and create a renewed sense of communality. The determination of parish schools like St. Joan of Arc will be an important element in the effort of Mayor Ray Nagin and his recently appointed commission to "bring back New Orleans."

The city's racial dynamics have changed considerably in the century since St. Joan of Arc opened. Hispanic and Vietnamese immigrants, among many others, have swelled church ranks alongside longstanding communities of African Americans and Creoles of Color. As churches and the Archdiocese continue the cutbacks already under way, they face difficult decisions as to which churches and schools will remain, which will close, and which resources might be consolidated or relocated.

The lessons of the past are instructive; religious institutions will once again make choices that shape New Orleans for the century to come. May they choose wisely.

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