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The campus of Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans (CNS/Courtesy of Xavier University of Louisiana)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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On the first day of Black History Month, 13 historically Black colleges and universities received bomb threats, including New Orleans' Xavier University.

Xavier University of Louisiana, founded in 1915, is the only historically Black university in the United States that is also Catholic. This is the second bomb threat the school has received this year. These bomb threats horrify us as both Catholics and Americans.

These bomb threats are part of a longstanding pattern in America. White supremacists, from the days of Reconstruction through today, have historically used bomb threats/violence to intimidate Black Americans.

When the Ku Klux Klan was started on the morrow of the Civil War, its aim was to intimidate newly freed Black Americans so as to keep them from political and social participation, and to undermine the Reconstruction governments in the states of the former and failed Confederacy. Vigilante violence, especially lynching, was its preferred method of intimidation.

In the post-Reconstruction years, state-sanctioned violence was deployed, too, but vigilante violence was never abandoned. Sometimes, it was impossible to know where the one started and the other left off. The 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, shocked the nation, in part because the aftermath was televised. For White supremacists, the bombing was an extension of their standard operating procedures of intimidation, a difference in target but not in method.

The goal is always the same: intimidate Black women, men and children by using violence to destabilize the intimate and communal parts of their daily lives, including schools and worship spaces.

As Catholics, we are called to demonstrate our solidarity by denouncing any assault that threatens the dignity of any person. This is what it means to be a pro-life church, and it is imperative the church leaders and local church authorities condemn this violence.

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If churches, schools, being with friends have all been deemed unsafe, where do Black women, men and children go to be in communion?

For those who are Black and Catholic, the assaults at Xavier and other HBCUs are also spiritual attacks. The attacks occur at a time when church leaders, including the president of the U.S. bishops' conference, Archbishop José Gomez, are denouncing the Black Lives Matter movement and critical race theory, movements and theories many Catholics have found useful in learning what it means to stand against such racial violence. Our bishops need to show themselves to be shepherds to a flock that is vulnerable because it is hurting, and hurting because it is vulnerable.

Last month, Gomez evoked the memory of Martin Luther King Jr., stating that Catholics must continue to "carry on his work for equality and justice."

Gomez added: "Let us continue to learn from him and imitate his example and prophetic witness."

We agree, and so we look forward to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops not only explicitly condemning this violence but also offering whatever support it can to Xavier and other schools afflicted by this. The bishops must authentically pick up the baton of spiritual and moral and civic leadership that King carried.

Pope Francis, when he addressed the U.S. Congress, cited the example of only four Americans, and one of them was King. Francis urged the country to heal the wounds of racial division that have persisted. The U.S. bishops must take up the King legacy and the challenge Francis delivered. They must urgently, and consistently, condemn any and all assaults against the Black community.

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