News



A large group poses during Xavier University of Louisiana's Centennial Homecoming, Saturday, Nov. 8, 2025, in New Orleans, Louisiana. (Mark Landry)

Adelle M. Banks

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Once a week the Rev. Mitchell Stevens, a Baptist minister and the interfaith chaplain at Xavier University of Louisiana, hosts an intimate gathering for students at the New Orleans school's University Center to discuss campus life over coffee and donuts.

"We have Muslims that will come, Christians, different denominational groups," said Stevens, who used the most recent session to guide participants in talking about what was good and challenging about their fall semester and what they will do differently in the spring. "It is, across the board, to make sure that all of our students are feeling welcomed in our space of faith."

What makes Stevens' weekly sessions rare for a Catholic school such as Xavier is less the range of faiths represented and more that most of the students in attendance are Black.

Xavier, the nation's only Catholic historically Black university, has fostered inclusion as a core value since it was founded 100 years ago by now-Saint Katharine Drexel of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, who left behind the life of a Philadelphia socialite to minister to Native Americans and African Americans. For decades it has been recognized for producing Black students who go on to graduate from medical school.

Today, the share of the school's student body that is Black, at about 80%, is slightly higher than other historically Black colleges and universities and vastly surpasses that of other Catholic higher education institutions.

The average Black or African American fall enrollment at HBCUs overall was 74.8% of students from 2018 through 2023, according to the United Negro College Fund's Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute. By comparison, Black undergraduate enrollment has remained relatively steady at Catholic institutions, fluctuating between 9.6% and 9.7% from the 2018-19 academic year to 2023-24.

Black students' graduate enrollment at Catholic schools decreased from 10.4% to 9.7% during that time, according to U.S. Department of Education statistics.

But Xavier's Catholic population hovers around 5%, according to 2024-25 statistics posted on its website.

Xavier's centennial year, which has featured pomp and ceremony, has been marked by significant financial ups and downs. On Oct. 31, the school announced it was cutting 46 employees, comprising 5.8% of its full-time staff, including, according to alumni familiar with the cuts, a decades-long director of campus ministry.

"In an effort to ensure the institution's long-term financial health, continued support of student success, and ongoing commitment to our mission, the university has made the difficult but necessary decision to adjust staffing levels," the administration said.

Weeks later, the school received a significant monetary boost: a $38 million gift from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott.

"These funds will enable us to expand our affordability initiatives, which directly support talented students from diverse backgrounds," Xavier President Reynold Verret said in a statement. "Ms. Scott's belief in Xavier's mission strengthens our resolve to carry forward the legacy of Saint Katharine Drexel and prepare future generations to lead with truth, justice, and service."

Stevens, the interfaith chaplain, who is Black, is a two-time alumnus of the university, having earned his bachelor's in music in 1992 and doctorate in educational leadership in 2024. On some Sundays, after ministering at the two local Baptist churches that he pastors, he heads to 12:30 Mass at Xavier's St. Katharine Drexel Chapel.

He's hardly the only non-Catholic at the worship service, where the gospel choir sings traditional and contemporary gospel music — Richard Smallwood's "Total Praise" was recently featured — along with piano, organ, percussion and liturgical dancers. Kente cloth often accents the altar linens.

"Some students that are in Gospel Choir, all of them are not Catholic," he told Religion News Service. "We're for all students and so we encourage all students to become involved in Mass, or even if I have an interfaith service."

A Finals Prayer Service, held in the chapel on Monday (Dec. 1), drew hundreds, more than typically attend Sunday Mass. At the end of the service — led by Christian and Muslim students with a guest speaker from a local Baptist church — Stevens distributed a leaflet offering "Prayer Before Exams," encouraging attendees to place it on their microwave or refrigerator and refer to it during the week.

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Stevens and Fr. Victor Laroche, the Catholic priest who serves as university chaplain and special assistant to the president for Catholic identity, often pray at other campus events. At Xavier's centennial Founders' Day convocation in October, Laroche spoke of Drexel's humility and dropped her name into his slight adaption of the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi that he used to open the occasion: "For it is in giving, like St. Katharine Drexel, that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

In the benediction, he returned to the lectern, prayed that "Xavierites" would continue to follow her example of working for the poor and oppressed and called students to cheer for her as he shook a small tambourine.

Though religion may not be regularly addressed in some of the specialties for which the university is known — such as pharmaceutical studies and biomedical sciences — students are required to take at least one faith and society course among their core curriculum options. Sr. Mary Ann Stachow, who died in 2024, was the last Xavier faculty member who belonged to the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and is remembered for teaching theology courses.

She was very passionate about teaching us," recalled Amare Landry, who earned her B.A. at Xavier and is now a graduate student there in public health.

"She made sure that we weren't only taking in the information from a standpoint of, 'Oh, this is a class that we have to take,' but that we were actually appreciating the information that she was teaching and wanted to incorporate that into our daily lives."

Landry, who follows other Xavier alums in her family — one a data analyst and another in pharmacy school — was raised in the Baptist church and is now a nondenominational Christian. She continues to read the Bible each morning, a

practice she developed after being inspired as an undergraduate by Stachow.

Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, a theology professor at Xavier and a Black Catholic from birth, said her goal is to help introduce Black Catholic theology to her students, teaching some for the first time about the creation story in the Book of Genesis and the Gospel of Luke's Christmas story. She is also often the first to inform her students that Black Catholic culture has African roots and did not begin with contact with white Americans in the days of slavery.

"Very few of my students are Catholic, but I tell them, you chose to come to a Catholic university, and you also chose to come to an HBCU. So it's important that you leave here having a better understanding of yourself as a Black person, or as a person who is not Black, but is here studying in Black space," she said. "And then for you to also understand the Catholic roots of Xavier University and what Catholicism has to offer you, particularly in the area of Catholic social teaching, which is very universal."

Bellow also is the director of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies, founded in 1980, which drew about 75 students of different races and ethnicities — about 20% non-Black — to the campus for three weeks over the summer to take courses in a master of theology degree program or for continuing education on topics such as ethics and spirituality from a Black Catholic perspective.

Some Xavier alumni have been excited about news that Pope Leo XIV's lineage includes Creoles of color. "We think of Leo as our brother," said Nadrea Njoku, an educational research consultant and founder of the 1925 Society, which has worked to reinvigorate Xavier's homecoming activities. "We're excited to have him in the group. But being a Creole myself, we can recognize that. We can recognize people, and so I don't think I was surprised to find out Leo's roots."

Njoku, who said she was raised as a Black Catholic in an eight-generation New Orleans family but doesn't practice Catholicism anymore, recalled the everyday influence of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament on the diverse population when she was a student there — where prayers were often said before class, and Mass attendance was encouraged.

"The majority of our students weren't Catholic when I went to Xavier in the early 2000s," she said. "They were Baptist, nondenominational, Muslim, agnostic. But their parents felt comfortable sending them to that space, and they got to experience

Catholicism in a way that they maybe would have not had they not attended Xavier."

At the fall convocation ceremony, Sr. Stephanie Henry, who was elected the second African American president of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in 2022, gave the keynote address.

"Katharine Drexel, as a woman of faith, was rooted in faith," she said. "And being rooted in faith is what leads us to be resilient."

Drexel and the sisters in her order, Bellow said, are models of perseverance for those who support and study and work at the school today. Two decades after rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina, Bellow said she expects the school to keep going beyond any current obstacles.

"God has blessed this community with grace and with strength and with unity," she said. "So that whenever there is a problem, that we've been able to come together and find a solution, and we've been able to pick up and move on. Even after these layoffs, we have to do the work of picking ourselves back up, finding a resolution and moving forward to the next day."