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Archdiocese posts trove of slave records

by Bruce Nolan by The Times Picayune

NEW ORLEANS -- The Archdiocese of New Orleans on Tuesday (Feb. 1) unveiled a new online database containing records of baptisms, marriages and deaths in colonial New Orleans, including those of African slaves.

The first batch of five registers to go online contains baptismal records of slaves and free persons of color, most of them bereft of family names. Until now, the records were largely beyond the reach of most genealogical researchers.

Archbishop Gregory Aymond acknowledged the records will also draw renewed attention to the uncomfortable fact that in colonial New Orleans the church and its religious orders were often slaveholders.

The publication of the records is offered with an apology, he said.

"I apologize in the name of the church because we allowed some of these things to continue," Aymond said. "This is sinful. Racism is sinful."

Emilie Leumas, the church's chief archivist, said the indexed records online now mostly contain only people who, because of their enslavement or low social status as free persons of color, were known only by first names.

Aymond suggested the database affords a measure of public dignity for lives lived in crushing anonymity. Bringing the name of a long lost person into public view "is a way of getting in touch with that person's spirit," he said.

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