

Exhibit highlights accomplishments of nuns' order

By Christine Bordelon
Clarion Herald

"A Celebration of Faith," an exhibit chronicling 165 years of service by the Sisters of the Holy Family, is open through Aug. 17 at the New Orleans African American Museum of Art, Culture and History.

The Sisters of the Holy Family, the second-oldest Catholic religious order for women of color in the United States, were founded in 1842 by Sister Henriette Delille and Sisters Josephine Charles and Juliette Gaudin to educate African-American youth and care for the elderly and poor in New Orleans.

The nuns' journey in New Orleans and throughout the state and world over the past century and a half is documented at the exhibit through photos by A.P. Bedou, P.H. Polk, Don Rutledge, Mark Young, Jim Thorns and other photographers. There are portraits of Mother Delille, yearbooks from St. Mary's Academy and brochures from Lafon Nursing Home and other Sisters of the Holy Family sites.

'Servants to the slave'

Their earliest days as "Servants to the Slave" and caretakers for adults during the yellow fever epidemic of 1853 and then the children left homeless from the epidemic are featured, as are more recent missions.



Photo by Christine Bordelon | CLARION HERALD
Nuns from the Sisters of the Holy Family order were in town recently for a congregational retreat and stopped by the museum to view the exhibit detailing the works they do.



Photo | COURTESY SHARI BROWN

St. Mary's Academy students Deonka Cryayon and Arielle Aubry recently visited "A Celebration of Faith," an exhibit at the New Orleans African American Museum of Art, Culture and History detailing the works of the Sisters of the Holy Family, the order of nuns who founded their school in 1867.

What's interesting about the timing of the exhibit is that Henriette Delille's cause for sainthood is under consideration by the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

"I think it's wonderful," said Sister of the Holy Family Francella Jackson, now teaching at Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament in Shreveport, as she viewed photos from a 1989 Sisters of the Holy Family Congress held at the motherhouse in Gentilly. "It looks like us from different places. This (exhibit) might help the public understand the kind of work we are doing. It also might help with the canonization of Mother Delille."

Sister Francella was among several nuns in town recently for a congregational retreat who toured the exhibit.

Highlighted among the order's accomplishments in New Orleans are St. Mary's Academy, founded in 1867, open today and expanding with the construction of a new high school complex on its campus in Gentilly; St. John Berchmans Orphanage (that the sisters built and ran from 1892-1970, then converted into child development center) in New Orleans; Lafon Boys Home (1893 until 1965); and Lafon Nursing Home (the oldest nursing home in operation in the United States until Hurricane Katrina hit).

Local Sister Charlotte Rubit cherishes the exhibit for its presentation of history and the continuity of Sisters of the Holy Family in the community. Nuns, past and present, have been following the call and spirit of Jesus, making the Eucharist the center of their lives, she said.

Ministry to poor

"Our mission and ministry has been going out to the poor, and in teaching in homes, to the elderly and in day care centers we had," Sister Charlotte said, "and meeting people and evangelizing as best we know how."

The exhibit came about at the suggestion of professional photographer Jim Thorns, who is a museum board member. Thorns had photographed the nuns' last jubilee and was impressed by what he learned of their work worldwide. He thought the exhibit would enlighten others about the Sisters of the Holy Family's body of work. The African American Museum board agreed.

"The mission of the NOAAM is to focus on the historical contributions of African Americans that have helped to shape New Orleans," Marsha Broussard, NOAAM board president, said. "The Sisters of the Holy Family were established in 1842. They have developed schools, nursing

homes, child care centers and provided many services that have impacted the lives of so many people. They do all of these things without the desire for recognition."

"The NOAAM board wanted to ensure that their story was told," Broussard added. "The imminent possibility that Mother Henriette Delille, their foundress, may be named as a saint would also be one of the most significant events in New Orleans history as well."

Planning and fund-raising for the exhibit began in July 2007. Most of objects are from the Sisters of the Holy Family archives, except for the self-portrait of Louisiana photographer A.P. Bedou who had photographed the sisters, said exhibition curator Mora Beauchamp-Byrd. The emphasis is placed on the early years of the order's history and its missions and ministries throughout its history.

Changing habits

Additions to the show have been made since it opened April 30. Habits from different eras reflecting changing styles and photographs of particular missions in the early 20th century have been added.

The exhibition has attracted schools, universities and Catholic church groups.

"We have had a steady stream of visitors," Broussard said. "Our guests are generally pleased and are very excited about this educational event and, for many, spiritual experience."

Beauchamp-Byrd said the exhibit has prompted visitors to share first-hand accounts of the sisters' impact on their lives or those of loved ones.

"So many people have come up to me who attended schools operated by the sisters or had relatives who were cared for over the years by the sisters," Beauchamp-Byrd said. "There are just all of these stories that continue. It documents one of the distinguishing things about being in this area - being a black Catholic, that whole history

NUNS' STORY

> **WHAT:** "A Celebration of Faith," an exhibit highlighting the Sisters of the Holy Family's 165 years of service to the community.

The order was founded by Henriette Delille, a free woman of color. The Sisters of the Holy Family are the second oldest Catholic religious order for women of color in the United States.



> **WHEN:** through Aug. 17. The museum is open Wednesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

> **WHERE:** the New Orleans African American Museum of Art, Culture and History, 1418 Governor Nicholls St. off Claiborne Avenue in Tremé.

> **ADMISSION:** \$2 for children (ages 6-12); \$3 for students and seniors (62 and older); and \$5 for adults. Details: call (504) 566-1136.

of African-American Catholicism in this area."

Mother Delille's contributions to New Orleans can be seen beyond the exhibit. In June, St. Louis Cathedral dedicated a prayer room in her honor. It includes stained glass windows depicting Mother Delille's ministry to children of color, the elderly and founding of the Sisters of the Holy Family. There also is an original bronze statue depicting Mother Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family.

Beauchamp-Byrd said plans are being made to make this a touring exhibit.

"We hope for the show to travel so more people can learn the history of what was done by the Sisters in the 19th century," Beauchamp-Byrd said. "(The order) was important because New Orleans, at that time, had a lot of problems. It was a struggle to establish the order."

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