A visionary with a mission

By Peter Finney Jr.
Clarion Herald

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Katrina doesn’t get last word

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Dr. Norman Francis is a man of faith and integrity

On the Web: www.arch-no.org

P.S. families and friends are invited to the Archdiocese of New Orleans, 535 St. Charles, and the Archdiocese of New Orleans, 5141 Florida Avenue, to mail a letter of support for any of his many causes.

Ripple effect resonates across many generations

Dr. Norman Francis, the executive vice president of Xavier University in Louisiana, was in the Trenton, New Jersey, train station on April 4, 1968, preparing to take a short ride to Bensalem, Pennsylvania, where the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament had their motherhouse.

After 11 years as a key administrator of Xavier, Francis knew the meeting to which he was headed would make history. For the first time since St. Katharine Drexel founded Xavier in 1925, the sisters had decided to appoint a layperson as president.

And he was that person. Then, he called home to New Orleans.

"Dad, Martin Luther King has just been shot," Francis' son Michael told him.

That chilling moment merely conformed for Francis what he had long known growing up as the son of a Lafayette barber and a loving mother, neither of whom had graduated from high school.

His life was not his own. He was being called to make a difference.

Francis' father had yeared for his son to become a big-time lawyer.

"My daddy went to his grave never forgiving me for not practicing law," Francis said.

"I was a law student," Francis said. "I was in the last year of law school, and I was going to be a lawyer." Francis said last week as he announced his intention to retire next June as president of Xavier, tying a bow on a nearly 47-year career as the nation's longest-serving university president.

"This was in the separate-but-equal days," Francis recalled. "I was a law school graduate. He knew I was going to be offering cases before judges who went to the same law school. My dad would tell me, 'If you stand before the judge, the judge can't tell you what you're talking about because you got your degree in the same place he got it.' That's why he thought. He just knew I was going to be a millionaire lawyer.

Dr. Francis has been able to use for the good whenever he's a long-distance runner, winning personality. And, he's a articulate and has a very close friend. "He is bright, articulate and has a winning personality. And, he's a leader, a leader, a leader," said Jesuit Father James Carter.

Francis has been available time after time to negotiate seemingly intractable disputes whenever they have come up. He has the personal integrity that true leaders use for the good whenever the community is faced with difficult challenges. I don't know where New Orleans would have been for the last 50 years without Norman Francis.

He's also carrying a difficult family cross right now.

Norman's wife Blanche is a beautiful wife and mother who has been at his side for 59 years. A few years ago she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease, and Norman has been by her side every step of the way – all while continuing to function in his very pressurized role as president of Xavier. We all see the public Norman Francis. But it's very inspiring to witness the family man that Norman Francis has been all of his life. He is a man of faith who cares for his family, believes in God and practices his Catholic faith.

When did you first meet him?

It was many years ago when I was teaching at St. CBS.

See AYP. AYMOND page 9

Dr. Norman Francis has a reputation for sustained commitment to his family – his wife Blanche and his six children – you get the true picture of who Dr. Francis is. Xavier University is known throughout the world and has a reputation for sustained excellence. Dr. Francis has not only built Xavier University over the last 47 years, but he also rebuilt it after Katrina. We owe a great debt of gratitude to him for all he has done not only for Xavier but for the entire community. It means so much to me that Xavier University is known throughout the country and is so well respected.

How do you put into perspective what Dr. Francis has done for race relations in New Orleans?

There was a historic announcement last week when Dr. Norman Francis decided he would step down next June after nearly 47 years as president of Xavier University. How can you put into words what Dr. Francis has meant to the New Orleans community?

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How do you put into perspective what Dr. Francis has done for race relations in New Orleans?
In 2000, Francis led a delegation of Xavier alumni and students to St. Peter's Square in Rome for the canonization of St. Katharine Drexel, who founded Xavier University in 1925. Above, Francis looks over architect Cesar Pelli's model for the St. Katharine Drexel Chapel, which was dedicated in 2012. Photos by Peter Finney Jr. and Frank J. Methe | CLARION HERALD

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Humble beginnings

Francis, the son of a Lafayette barber and homemaker, graduated from Xavier in 1952 and became the first African American to be accepted and graduate from Loyola Law School in New Orleans. His older brother Joseph was the fourth black Catholic bishop in the U.S., serving as auxiliary bishop of Newark.

After serving in the Army, Francis worked with the U.S. attorney's office to help desegregate federal agencies in the South. He returned to Xavier in 1957 as dean of men and became the first lay president of Xavier in 1968, getting the appointment from the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament on the same day civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis.

"His assassination was like blowing up the dream," Francis said. "I think it dulled our senses. We were in shock."

Francis often reflected on the many "miracles" produced by Xavier, but the biggest miracle of all, he said, is that it existed in the first place. Xavier was founded by St. Katharine Drexel, a Philadelphia heiress who entered religious life, formed the Blessed Sacrament Sisters and then used her family inheritance to educate blacks and native Americans throughout the U.S.

St. Katharine opened Xavier in 1925, building an impressive administration and classroom building out of Indiana limestone. Xavier's initial focus was to prepare African Americans, who could not get a private school education in Louisiana, for future careers as teachers.

Parents were his first teachers

Francis said he was motivated by the example and discipline imparted by his parents, neither of whom graduated from high school.

"But they were as smart as anyone who had completed college," Francis said. "I was full of dreams and more than a little bit of fear. Quickly, my fears were allayed and my dreams began to be nurtured by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, the rest of the caring faculty and staff, as well as my fellow students, who shared many of the same dreams and fears.

"My experience as a student shaped my personal ambitions and ideas for what my role could be in changing the world. My faith guided me to apply the gifts that God had blessed me with to serve others."

Francis said he had fleeting thoughts about retiring after Katrina devastated the Xavier campus and flooded 80 percent of the city of New Orleans. But those notions quickly vanished as he pulled together a small core of administrators, faculty and staff in temporary headquarters in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, not far from Lafayette, where he had grown up.

"I thought about it, but not for long," Francis said. "I couldn't leave, not just because of who I was, but because I knew that Xavier wasn't ready to give up to a hurricane. We had 80 people who brought us back in 4 1/2 months, and 75 percent of them had lost their homes. That was not easy. There's something about adrenaline. There's something about knowing when it's time to make a decision."

Francis had lost his home, as well, but even in the midst...
In the 1980s, Dr. Norman Francis showed off yet another building project – the Norman C. Francis Academic/Science Complex – to then-Archbishop Philip Hannan. The complex opened in 1988.

From PAGE 4

FRANCIS

One builder meets another

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Student: Dr. Francis’ legacy will live on

Leah Labat is a junior art and psychology major at Xavier University, and she’s also minoring in biology. She said Dr. Norman Francis’ retirement came as a bombshell.

“My first reaction was, ‘No, no, no. This can’t be happening to him. This man has done so much for Xavier University and for the city of New Orleans.’ But as time went on, I realized that he’s a human being, just like the rest of us. He’s not immune to retirement.

“Knowing the kind of gentlemen who came from his era, they hold a sense of honor, dignity and integrity about them that is really not seen in this era,” Labat said. “To see a man like that hold this torch unwaveringly for so long is like an epic. It’s very moving, but it’s almost heartbreaking to know that – wait a minute – he’s actually retiring!

“We know all the trials and tribulations and obstacles that he had to go through. Just seeing what Xavier is now is incredible. We’re actually a part of this legacy that is going to continue.”

“...and he’s still leading the way. He’s still a servant leader. And he’s still a man of integrity.”

Michael Rue, chairman of the Xavier University board of trustees, said there is no true way to measure Francis’ impact on thousands of students and on the New Orleans community.

“There’s not a lot of servant leaders in this world,” Rue said. “This man could have been a politician, a successful businessman, a very successful lawyer. A lot of doors would have opened for him. But Xavier needed him and the nuns needed him.”

Rue said the board hopes to have a new president in place by July 1, 2015, but finding someone to replace a legend will be a tall task.

“I can assure you that we will never be able to replicate Dr. Francis,” Rue said. “The board can seek to identify someone with similar values, principles, energy and faith to lead us into the future.”

Peter Finney Jr. can be reached at pfinney@clarionherald.org.

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Pope: Iraq’s persecuted Christians are true, bold witnesses of Christ

Iraqi Christians are true and courageous witnesses of Christ’s message of hope, forgiveness and love, Pope Francis said.

“The church suffers with you and is proud of you, proud to have children like you,” he said Sept. 3, in a greeting to Arabic-speaking pilgrims, especially those from Iraq.

The pope spoke in Italian, with Arabic translation, at the end of his weekly general audience in St. Peter’s Square.

He told the pilgrims that the church is a mother who knows how to help her children most in need, “pick up the child who falls, heal the sick, seek the lost, wake up the sleeping, and also defend her defenseless and persecuted children.”

The pope said he wanted to assure Iraqis, and all those helpless and persecuted, of his closeness.

“You are in the church’s heart,” he said, as he asked God to bless and protect them.

The church is proud of those who persevere through such hardship, he said, because “you are the strength and real and authentic witness of her message of salvation, forgiveness and love. I embrace you all, all of you!”

The pope’s words came after a catechesis on the maternal nature of the church.

“We are not orphans! We have a mom, a mother” in the church and in Mary, he said.

“The birth of Jesus from the womb of Mary, in fact, is the prelude to the rebirth of every Christian in the womb of the church,” he said.

“That is why a person never becomes a Christian on his or her own, through his or her own efforts, but is “born and raised in the faith inside that great body that is the church,” said the pope.

“From the moment of Baptism, when a child is reborn a son or daughter of the church, the church, “just like a devoted mother, offers her children the spiritual nourishment that fortifies and makes bountiful the Christian life,” he said.

“We are all called to welcome with an open mind and heart the Word of God that the church offers every day because this Word has the ability to change us from within. Only the Word of God can do this,” he said.

“...mother that has in her heart, the well-being of her children and is willing to give her life for them.”

Christians, however, are not only children of the church, they, too are called to have the same maternal instinct and approach, he said.

“How often we are wimps!” he said, when Christians avoid the duty to share the Gospel and “this maternal courage of the church” with others and help generate a new life in Christ for them.

“The church isn’t just priests and us bishops. No, it’s all of us” and everyone is called to have the same maternal spirit “with the sincere capacity to welcome, forgive, give strength and instill trust and hope. This is what a mother does.”

Later, when greeting newlyweds attending the general audience, the pope told them to stay close to God so their love would be “true and longstanding.”

“You are courageous, I’m saying that because you have to have courage to get married today! You are the brave ones!” he said to smiles and applause from the young couples.

— VATICAN CITY (CNS)

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Upcoming departures from New Orleans!

ABP, AYMOND

From PAGE 2

John Prep, which was the archdiocesan high school for boys who had thoughts about pursuing a vocation to the priesthood. I taught his sons David and w, so I’ve known the family for many years and have a great love and affection for both Norman and Blanche.

Did you also know his brother, Bishop Joseph Francis?

Yes. He was a man like Norman – very smart, very kind and a man filled with faith, and he was very willing to share that faith and wisdom with others.

What do you think of when you drive past Xavier University every day?

Xavier University would not be the beacon of light that it is today and would not have been the success story that it has become without Norman Francis. I truly believe that. He has a way of bringing people together and has a way of explaining the purpose of the university. After Katrina, it was a tough time and he could have simply said, “I’m going to do something else.”

But he transformed the dev- astation into an even more beautiful campus. Every time I pass by there, I see another green roof and a beautiful chapel. I look at all that and I say, “That is Norman Francis at his best – a man of faith, performing miracles.”

Questions for Archbishop Aymond may be sent to clarionherald@clarionherald.org.

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CATHOLIC JOURNEYS.COM
2 o’clock – they were sent there,” Francis said. “The waitresses had been told to serve them, and that was it.”

Desegregating the New Orleans Public Service buses also was done below the radar. Under the old system, blacks were required to sit to the rear of a movable sign that read: “Colored only.” The bus driver determined if a person sat in front of or behind the sign.

Francis came up with the solution. His group told the officials: “When the buses go to the barn at midnight, take the buses and don’t allow anyone to ride them. If they ride them, send the word for people to go to the barn at midnight.”

“Colored only.”

“He didn’t know what it was going to do,” Francis said. “The bus drivers to say nothing, they didn’t know what it was going to do. They were looking over at the next student who’s standing on top of the steps, knowing that I’ve got their diploma. The look on their faces – oh my God. They’ve worked four or five years of sacrifice, and here in the next 30 seconds, they’re going to get that diploma. That, for me, has kept me going.”

Real miracle was Xavier

Francis has been called a miracle worker, but he always has insisted that it was St. Katharine Drexel’s faith and God’s providence that provided the miracle that is Xavier University.

Drexel’s story is rich, overflowing and mind-boggling, and it goes beyond the millions of dollars she invested in establishing and supporting 65 schools, churches and centers in 21 states through her religious order.

When her father Francis died in 1885, the high-powered banker left behind a $15.5 million estate that was divided among his three daughters: Elizabeth, Catherine (Katharine’s birth name) and Louise. About $1.5 million went to several charities, leaving the girls to share in the income produced by $14 million – about $1,000 a day for each woman. In current dollars, the estate would be worth about $250 million.

Over the course of 60 years – up to her death in 1955 at age 96 – Mother Katharine spent about $20 million in support of her work, building schools and churches and paying the salaries of teachers in rural schools for blacks and Indians.

Louise Drexel Morell, her younger sister, contributed millions more to similar causes. Elizabeth, the eldest, died in 1890 in premature childbirth, one year before Catherine formed the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Negroes in Salem.

Drexel also has a mission. And for any mission to thrive, it needs a leader with missionary zeal, not a lawyer. Meet Norman Francis, missionary.

“My greatest moments are on commencement day,” Francis said. “I can’t tell you the pride and joy I have with a diploma in my hand, looking over at the next student who’s standing on top of the steps, knowing that I’ve got their diploma. The look on their faces – oh my God. They’ve worked four or five years of sacrifice, and here in the next 30 seconds, they’re going to get that diploma. That, for me, has kept me going.”

Francis also has been a devoted husband and father. His wife Blanche, after 59 years of marriage, has Alzheimer’s Disease and requires constant care.

“Xavier is a miracle, not just for all it has done, but for the mere fact that it has survived and thrived. Under normal circumstances, that shouldn’t have been the case. If she had died at the normal age of 70, which at that time would have been a big age, Xavier would have struggled. God allowed her to live until she was 96, and we had that interest available for many more years. It’s still a struggle every day, but people know we have a meaning.”

Man on a mission

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