

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS MAGAZINE

loyyno

SUMMER 2021

A Test of Faith

Loyola's Desegregation Pioneers

2021 COMMENCEMENT CELEBRATION

MEET THE PROVOST

Loyola Welcomes Dr. Tanuja Singh

loyno



16
COVER STORY

A Test of Faith

African-American students at Loyola in the era of segregation

A Test of Faith

**BY JUSTIN NYSTROM, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF HISTORY
AND DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF NEW ORLEANS**

African-American students at Loyola in the era of segregation

Most Loyola alumni possess a general awareness of the university's role during the civil rights movement.

The story of Norman C. Francis becoming the first African-American graduate of Loyola's College of Law in 1955 and the national attention garnered by Fr. Joseph Fichter's work against racial injustice often serve as highlights to what otherwise remained in many ways a far more conservative campus than we know today.

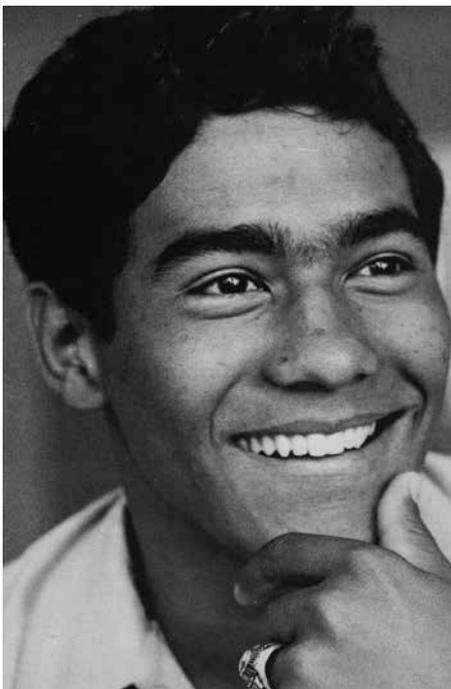


For a number of years, Loyola's first undergraduates of color were believed to be four male students who graduated in 1966.

Noteworthy for the institution, but otherwise ordinary in the experience of southern universities whose acceptance rates of minorities remained low. Yet this last tidbit fell into question late in 2019 when Percy Pierre reached out to Loyola because he believed that, in fact, his sister, Sr. Clare of Assisi Pierre, and a fellow nun, Sr. Agnes Marie Sampia, became Loyola's first African-American undergraduates when they both earned their bachelor of arts degrees in education in 1963.

That date immediately caught everyone's attention. It was believed that like most

regional universities, Loyola began admitting students of color in 1962, as more contentious challenges to segregated campuses unfolded elsewhere in the South. If Pierre was right, this pushed an admission timeline to the late 1950s, when far fewer institutions risked drawing the ire of their segregated communities. It was clear that we needed to revisit this timeline, and that meant a trip to visit with the sisters and listen to their unique Loyola story.



Sisters of the Holy Family

Turning off of Chef Menteur Highway onto the long driveway leading to the motherhouse of the Sisters of the Holy Family, one is immediately taken by the quiet beauty of the place—its shady oaks and expansive lawn greeting visitors to that particular form of tranquility one often finds at Catholic retreats. In this way, seated in a room just off the lobby of the sisters' midcentury motherhouse with audio gear running, began the process of recovering this important chapter in our university and city's history. It is unusual to grow up Catholic and not come away imbued with a mixture of admiration and awe for nuns, so often the faith's frontline in its mission of social justice. Both in their 80s, Sisters Clare of Assisi Pierre and Agnes Marie Sampia embody this ideal, and they generously shared stories from their remarkable lives.



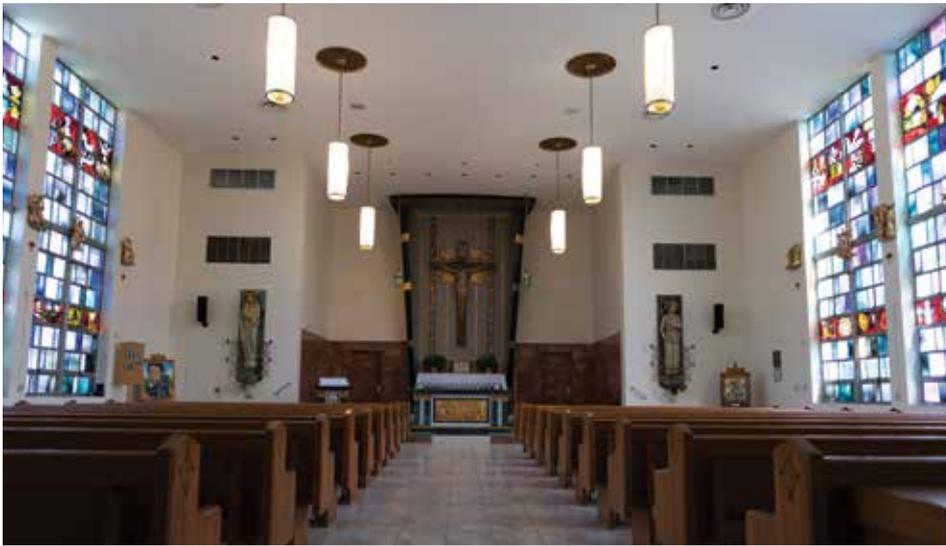
Sr. Agnes Marie Sampia

A native of Carencro, Louisiana, Sr. Agnes Marie Sampia grew up in Lafayette, where she lived with her grandmother, a woman who said the rosary every day and who played a crucial role in her decision to devote her life to God. Despite nightly prayers during which she vowed to “say yes” to the call, it wasn’t until the Sisters of the Holy Family visited Lafayette’s Holy Rosary Institute in her senior year when she learned that the sisters believed she had a calling. “Well, I was angry, really. So I went to the chapel and I start fussing at God. I say, ‘All these years I’ve been praying, you never asked me. You told the sisters before me?’” Sr. Agnes Marie shares with a laugh. “Well, to my knowledge, that wasn’t fair. But then I caught myself. I say, ‘Who am I talking to God like this?’”



Sr. Clare of Assisi Pierre

Sr. Clare of Assisi Pierre grew up in Uptown New Orleans surrounded by immediate and extended family with enormous reverence for those in the religious life. “They were the fourth person of the Blessed Trinity,” explains Sr. Clare. As a little girl, she attended regular benedictions at the Blessed Sacrament Church in the city’s Black Pearl neighborhood with her great aunt, and on one of these trips she saw what she believes to be a miraculous appearance of the host in the monstrance. But unlike Sr. Agnes Marie, Sr. Clare’s was not a childhood of waiting for the call. She spent her adolescence as a popular student at St. Mary’s Academy high school in the French Quarter and “having boyfriends,” so Sr. Clare’s family did not anticipate her decision to enter the convent. “I think they were shocked,” she laughs. “They weren’t just surprised.”



Srs. Clare and Agnes Marie met for the first time in 1956, two of the 13 young women who came to the Sisters of the Holy Family at the end of that summer. The order had famously operated on Orleans Avenue in the heart of the French Quarter since the middle of the 19th century, but had only the year before moved to a modern “million-dollar” facility located on Chef Menteur Highway in Eastern New Orleans, a part of the city that had only begun to develop at that time. “As we drove up,” Sr. Agnes Marie remembers thinking, “Boy, if we live in a building like that, I know I’m going to persevere.” The gleaming new motherhouse may have embodied the modernizing vision of Mayor Chep Morrison’s New Orleans, but retrograde legacies of the past remained in force. An advertisement for “Beautiful Rosemont Place,” for instance, located just down the road from the convent, boasted of being “New Orleans’ most exclusive colored subdivision.”

It was customary for the young women pursuing religious life at the Sisters of the Holy Family to attend a university to further their studies, often in the field of education.

This normally meant either traveling to out-of-state universities or attending locally at Xavier University in the summer while working missions during the rest of the year. This predictable pattern abruptly changed for

Srs. Clare and Agnes Marie, though, when they learned that they would be **enrolled at Loyola University full-time in the fall of 1959.**

“When Mother called us in to tell us we weren’t going to Xavier anymore, I said, ‘Oh, well. Here come obedience.’ That’s what it was,” remembers Sr. Agnes Marie. “We had to go.”

Whether they were enthusiastic or not, such was their lot. “We were trained in that way of thinking,” notes Sr. Clare. “Not that the Superior was holier than anyone else, but it was called grace of office. Because you held a certain position, then you could appeal to God in terms of that position or pray for inspiration. You pray for inspiration, I’m sure, in decision-making, and so it’s essentially the same thing.”

The internal mechanics of the decision to send them to Loyola at this particular moment in time remains unclear, but it was most likely influenced in part by Fr. Joseph J. Fichter, S.J., who taught sociology at Loyola and who, by the late 1950s, had achieved a national reputation as a racial progressive. Part of the decision also rested with Sr. Marie Anselm Duffel, who was the Superior at the motherhouse, and whose discernment led to the selection of Srs. Clare and Agnes Marie—two professed junior sisters with strong characters and excellent academic records.

As it turns out, this was not, in fact, the first time that a sister from the Holy Family had attended Loyola. According to Sr. Clare, there was another nun at Loyola when she and Sr. Agnes Marie enrolled there. Sr. Letitia Senegal (1920-2018), who had graduated from high school in 1945, began, like most members of the order, attending part-time

at Xavier University in the summer term of 1946. She worked toward an education degree a class or two at a time until enrolling in the summer session of 1957 at Loyola, eventually graduating in August 1959 with a bachelor of science in education degree and thus becoming what we believe to be the first person of color to receive an undergraduate degree from Loyola.

When they learned that these two young colleagues of theirs had been selected, the sisters confessed that not all members of their cohort were happy. “We were junior professed at the time, and ordinarily, the junior professed were not sent away to university,” explains Sr. Clare. But it was also the fact that they were to be full-time college students that was perhaps most out of the ordinary. This detail indicated that individuals may have made conscious decisions to bring about change.

Simply getting to Loyola at that time was a battle in its own right for the sisters. Even today, when one might take Interstate 10 at a reasonably high speed to cover the ground between Loyola’s Uptown campus and the motherhouse in Eastern New Orleans, it still represents a journey completely across town. When asked about the car ride to Loyola, Sr. Agnes Marie laughs, “Car? Bus. We didn’t have a car. The bus, the bus!”

“It took quite long then, too, because we had other schools along the way, and it seemed as though we all went to school at the same time and were dismissed at the same time, so we always had these crowded, crowded buses and streetcars, because we rode the bus and streetcar from this bus stop out here to Loyola University four years in a row, including some summers,” notes Sr. Clare.

Going to School by Bus

In 1959, those busses were segregated. There was a long narrow piece of wood that fitted into a rail on the bus seat—creating a screen that read “For Colored Only.” Black riders had to sit behind that screen. “So sometimes we wouldn’t bother, because it was a big group of us coming from St. Mary’s downtown and the French Quarter.

We would get on the bus, and if there were no seats behind the screen where we could sit, we would sit in front of the screen,” explains Sr. Clare. “So scripture tells us we should honor our father and our mother, so when we sat in front, for me, I honored my mother, and when I sat in the back, I honored my father. I was very

obedient to the scripture. ‘Honor your father and your mother.’”

As Sr. Clare’s brother Percy points out, their mother was fair and could pass for white, while their father could not. “I didn’t know you were breaking the law,” muses Percy when discussing this particular story.

“I wasn’t breaking the law,” says Sr. Clare in response. “I wasn’t breaking the law—I was keeping the commandment!”

“Petrieved.” That was how Sr. Clare described her feelings about the first day at Loyola.

For Sr. Agnes Marie, it was “enemy territory.” Though with the passage of time, perhaps, both thought, it was not the place of enemies but simply those with a different mindset. Sr. Agnes Marie remembered the words of her grandmother on that first day: “Don’t worry. God will always protect you. And I felt protected by her and [the] remembrance of her.”

Duty also propelled them forward. Their duty was to attend Loyola and do their best to learn and to achieve good grades. “I don’t think I ever thought too, too much about the color difference, the kinds of things that might happen because we were not of the same color as the rest of the world around there, except some of the people in the kitchen,” notes Sr. Clare. “Of course, we didn’t eat in the cafeteria.” Instead, every day the young sisters would eat their packed lunch in the shade of Marquette Hall’s colonnade.

Student Life at Loyola

“I don’t recall anyone being overtly unwelcoming,” Sr. Clare explains when discussing student life at Loyola, “But I don’t recall any being casually welcoming either.” Some of this social distance may have been because the sisters wore a habit. “I think nuns were less among the general population than now,” continues Sr. Clare. “Like when I went back to graduate school [at Loyola], it was a totally different kind of situation.”

Two figures that the sisters singled out as making their stay more welcoming were sociology professor Fr. Fichter and Fr. Louis Poché, S.J., who taught theology. That only these two men stood apart was a reflection of the fact that the overall culture of the university, both students and faculty alike, had yet to embrace change.



Their presence did not go unnoticed by white students and faculty. "There was a math professor, a man, and I was in that class," remembers Sr. Agnes Marie. "In high school, I had not had graphing. They didn't teach us that where I [went to school], and he was explaining something on the board about the graphing of the line and the slant of the line, and he was just going on at a rate, and I didn't know what he was talking about." Working up the nerve to interrupt, but knowing that God would protect her, she asked, "How can you tell even from the equation if the line is going to go upward or slant?" The professor stopped. "And he laughed and the whole class laughed, and as if to say, 'You don't know that? You didn't have that in high school?' I said, 'No, they didn't teach us that in high school, but if you explain it to me, I'm sure I could learn it.' And he laughed and the whole student body laughed. He says, 'This is the way you do it.' You know, kind of like making fun."

The professor continued working, but then stopped, realizing that he had in fact made a mistake. "You're right," he says to Sr. Agnes Marie.

"And then he told [the rest of the class], 'How did she get that and didn't have it in high school? And none of y'all got it?' And he says, 'Here's where I made the mistake. Thank you for showing me.' And it changed their whole attitude. They stopped laughing," explains Sr. Agnes Marie.

The isolation at Loyola was part of a broader system of segregation in New Orleans society that seemed to touch every aspect of their lives and governed their movement on campus as surely as it did anywhere else.

"We did our student teaching at St. Mary's in the French Quarter, and the whole reason is, I didn't know then, because we couldn't go to any other school. The schools that they got for Loyola's students to go to, because they were the white schools," remembers Sr. Clare.

The underlying separation was fundamentally social. Learning that their favorite singer was going to be playing near campus, Sr. Agnes Marie was excited and hoped they could go. "Oh, my god. We love Johnny Mathis. Johnny Mathis was going to sing." When she first learned this news in class, Sr. Agnes Marie exclaimed, "Johnny Mathis is coming here!" The whole class turned and looked at her. It was then the creeping realization hit the room. The show was for whites only.

Graduation

Graduation day for the sisters finally came on May 28, 1963. After that, mission work soon replaced the daily bus journeys from New Orleans East to Loyola's campus and brought new and greater challenges than

they had known before. Sr. Agnes Marie left for Opelousas and later Lafayette to teach in high schools through the era of desegregation. Eventually she would serve the order as far away as Nigeria, where she helped young women form an independent religious community. Sr. Clare, meanwhile, headed to a mission in Compton, California, right in time to bear witness to the Watts Riots. Like Sr. Agnes Marie, Sr. Clare would return to Louisiana and the front lines of Catholic school desegregation in the early 1970s.

"My experience at Loyola University," reflects Sr. Clare, "I'm very sure, contributed vastly to the person that I've become. There are things that you can't see or know, except you see them and know them best in perspective, and when I look back at my life in preparation for this little conference, I can see how blessed I've been, and I'm sure other people reflect and see their blessings. You see them in perspective. And then I see also the opportunities that I had, and they were not ordinary opportunities at the time."

It is within this perspective of a life of faith that service takes shape. In a roundabout way, the everyday obstacles of receiving their education at Loyola certainly prepared these women for the much greater challenges they later faced. But it was the university itself that received the greatest benefit in being host to women of such grace, for their example supplied the community with an opportunity to better understand the change of heart required for us to truly live up to our Ignatian ideals.

