



Dear St. Francis Xavier (College) Church parishioners and Friends,

It has been said racism is the “Original Sin” of our country. The Catholic Church and the Society of Jesus have not been immune. The Jesuits of the Central and Southern Province have been researching and documenting the sad history of slave-holding among the early Jesuits in Missouri. Recently, we made public the initial findings of this project. I recommend highly that you visit the province archives website to gain a sense of the progress of this work. The link is: <http://jesuitscentralsouthern.org/historyresearch>

Given the importance of the topic, I want to share some excerpts. The summary states,

*Historians have long known that when Jesuits established missions in St. Louis, southern Louisiana and beyond, they relied on the labor of enslaved people to help those missions survive. This history is a source of shame for Jesuits today. We deeply regret Jesuits’ participation in this evil institution. No one today can reconcile these actions with the current teaching of the Church or with our commitments as Jesuits, but they are an undeniable part of our history. We are called now to an intentional response, one made in collaboration with those members of our community who continue to suffer from the consequences of slavery.*

*We are motivated by a desire to uncover the truth of people’s stories, to honor their memories and heal relationships. There is no clear path for us to follow. We hope this project will be a positive contribution to the national conversations on race, prejudice and social justice. It must begin with our own conversations with descendants of the people held in slavery by our predecessors. No one knows where these conversations may lead us. As successors of those who held others in slavery, this process will challenge us, but it is a necessary first step to effect change, to create a new way of being together. We look forward to beginning the journey with our brothers and sisters in God’s family.*

I want to draw your attention as well to the best-documented story we have collected so far. Mrs. Matilda Tyler, her husband George, and her family were owned by the Jesuits. They were also parishioners of College Church.

*Mrs. Tyler labored at Saint Louis College (now University) as a slave. According to Missouri law at the time, enslaved people were allowed to purchase their freedom, and Mrs. Tyler made*

*arrangements with the Jesuits to purchase her own freedom, and later, that of her sons. An 1847 entry in the Province Treasury ledgers, under the heading "Matilda, colored servant" reads, "She is to have her freedom, if she pay \$300 to be appropriated to St. Fr. Xavier Church." The records indicate that she had indeed successfully purchased her freedom, and that of her youngest son, by Aug. 1, 1848, through four deposits totaling \$300 (about \$9,000 in 2018 dollars). The money went to St. Francis Xavier Church, where one year later, she would receive the Catholic sacrament of Confirmation.*

*The Tylers subsequently purchased the freedom of their four remaining sons. This simple statement of fact cannot convey the heroism behind their actions. Mr. Tyler was freed in 1847 and Mrs. Tyler the following year. She washed clothes for a living and he drove a wagon. We do not know how they managed to earn and save such a large sum of money, although their sons probably contributed. We do know that Mrs. Tyler continued to maintain an account with Saint Louis University as she made payments for the freedom of her sons.*

It is shocking to know that not only Jesuits owned human beings but that her heroic efforts to liberate herself and family benefitted College Church. And a year later she received Confirmation as a free woman and parishioner. I am horrified by the cruelty of Jesuit slave-holding, and in awe of the courage of Mrs. Tyler.

The long tradition of the Church tells us reconciliation can only take place when the truth is acknowledged and sinfulness brought to light. This on-going work of the Province is intended to do just that. The life of Mrs. Matilda Tyler reminds us this is part of our legacy at St. Francis Xavier.

I ask that you reflect, pray and discuss what this means for our parish community. As the province states, this is a conversation without a known destination. Clearly, we are called join this effort. I ask that you keep this important work in your prayers, and consider how God is calling us as a faith community.