

# Nuns, 'Sweetheart' return to New Orleans

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has a fairy godmother's beaming round face and fluff of cotton-candy white hair.

All the nuns have served in Ursuline convents across America as well as more distant spots, including Cameroon and Mexico. But many have deep roots and a special devotion to this city.

Among them is Sister Damian, who has a quick laugh and playful manner — "Where'd you blow in from?" she asks an out-of-town visitor — but a serious message about resilience.

"See," she confides, "New Orleans has a soul. It's not something that will come and go."

And the Ursulines?

"I think our presence makes a difference — both as history and as a symbol," she says. "It speaks to endurance, perseverance, support. ... We're a bond between the past and the future. Our job now is to listen and help people get their lives back together."

That's already beginning. The Ursuline Academy — believed to be the oldest, continuously running all-girls school in the nation — has resumed elementary and high school classes along with its toddler program. Some 585 of 740 students are back. Over the centuries, the nuns have prided themselves on teaching the rich and poor, free

women of color, slaves and American Indians.

The nuns celebrated their return in January with a feast day for their patroness, Our Lady of Prompt Succor, or quick help. For centuries, people have flocked to this shrine to pray before a gilded statue of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus.

On this occasion, both figures wore special crowns crafted with jewels — including wedding rings and family heirlooms — donated by community members in the 1890s.

Hundreds gathered beneath the iron chandeliers for prayers and hymns in the annual Mass of thanksgiving

that marks the anniversary of the U.S. triumph over the British in the Battle of New Orleans.

Our Lady of Prompt Succor's origins date back to France in the early 1800s.

That's when an Ursuline nun in New Orleans, short of teachers, wrote a cousin who was at an Ursuline convent in France, seeking reinforcements. When the French nun was told she needed approval from the pope, it seemed unlikely since he was imprisoned by Napoleon.

Yet, amazingly, within weeks, she had permission.

She carried with her the wooden statue that generations of Ursuline students have prayed before with these words: "Our Lady of Prompt Succor, hasten to help us."

A smaller statue of the Virgin Mary is an even older part of the Ursuline tradition.

This one was rescued from a convent attic in France in the 1780s and brought to New Orleans. Decades later, it received an enduring nickname after some Ursuline students and devotees reported that their prayers to the Virgin Mary before the statue had been answered. A nun,

Mother St. Benoit, responded by saying: "Oh, she's a sweetheart!"

"Sweetheart" is credited with saving the Ursulines' former convent when fire swept through the French Quarter — some say in 1812, others think earlier.

According to legend, when the statue was placed in the window, the wind changed direction and the building was spared.

Last September, as the nuns prepared to evacuate their current home, Sister Carolyn Brockland, the prioress, rolled "Sweetheart" in bubble wrap, cushioned it in a box.

## Baptists split over church's views

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in the North.

The different groups subscribe to many of the same beliefs. They only baptize adults, and consider the Bible their sole source of authority. Their churches are autonomous.

But they differ widely on a host of social and political views. Southern Baptists ban women from serving as pastors and, in their Baptist Faith & Message, say a wife should "submit" to her husband's leadership. Most American Baptists tend to be moderate to liberal.

Conservative Baptist positions can be a turnoff for churchgoers in progressive Providence, a city run by an openly gay mayor, said Evan Howard, pastor of Community Church of Providence, formerly Central Baptist Church.

Howard's 200-year-old American Baptist congregation changed its name two years ago — in part because the pastor realized his neighborhood could no longer support a traditional Baptist church, and because church members feared the term "Baptist" would deter newcomers who associate it with Southern Baptists — who hold views they dislike.

"We're not comfortable with that sort of black and white feeling. We're more comfortable saying, 'All welcome,'" he said.

But he recognizes that other Baptists would spurn his teachings, such as that parts of the Bible should be read metaphorically, rather than literally. Southern Baptists believe the Bible is the inerrant word of God.

"The Southerners would say, 'This guy's not Christian,

how could he even be a minister?'" he said.

Some Baptists lament that conservatives are considered the main representatives of the tradition. Walter Shurden, executive director of the Center for Baptist Studies at Mercer University in Macon, Ga., left the Southern Baptist Convention because he felt it strayed too far from Williams' beliefs.

"Do we follow the vision of Roger Williams that affirms this role of freedom, or do we become Baptists who try to conform everyone into our image?" Shurden asked.

Andy Haynes, pastor of the Southern Baptist Grace Harbor church, says he does not want to create division.

"We have our differences," Haynes said.

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