

Georgetown University apologizes for its role in historical slave trade

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue

The leader of the Catholic religious order that helped found Georgetown University sought forgiveness from descendants of slaves whose sale bolstered the school financially.

“Today the Society of Jesus, which helped to establish Georgetown University and whose leaders enslaved and mercilessly sold your ancestors, stands before you to say, We have greatly sinned, in our thoughts and in our words, in what we have done and in what we have failed to do,” said Timothy Kesicki, president of the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States.

Georgetown recently acknowledged it benefited from the sale of more than 250 slaves in 1838 to pay off its debts. On April 18, it apologized for its role in the slave trade during a “liturgy of remembrance, contrition, and hope.”

More than 100 descendants of those slaves attended the ceremony, jointly hosted by the school, the Jesuit order, and the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. One of the families’ representatives said penance is required, even as forgiveness is sought.

“Penance is very important,” said Sandra Green Thomas, president of the GU272 Descendants Association. “Penance is required when you have violated God’s law.”

In 1838, the school was involved in the sale of 272 slaves who worked on Jesuit plantations in southern Maryland. The sale benefited that state’s Jesuits and paid off debts at the nation’s oldest Catholic university.

The liturgy was steeped in symbolism. It was held two days after Easter, which this year coincided with Emancipation Day, a holiday that marks the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia on April 16, 1862.

The day’s events, which also included the rededication of two buildings, were sparked by a 104-page report from a working group of students and faculty looking at this part of the school’s history. The school decided to name one building Isaac Hawkins Hall, in honor of a slave who was 65 years old when he was sold in 1838.

His name was the first of the slaves listed on the sale documents, and most of his children and grandchildren were also sold to Louisiana businessmen.

Hawkins's labor helped build Georgetown and rescue it from financial crisis, according to the working group report.

A second building became Anne Marie Becraft Hall in honor of a free African-American woman who founded a school for Catholic black girls in the Georgetown neighborhood and later joined the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the oldest group of nuns started by women of African descent.

Previously, those buildings were named for Thomas Mulledy and William McSherry, respectively, former university presidents who were priests and supporters of the slave trade.

Isaac Hawkins Hall is part of a residential complex that houses more than 140 students and a chaplain. Anne Marie Becraft Hall, the oldest building on campus, is a meditation center for students, staff, and faculty.

The school announced previously it would give preferential status in the admissions process to descendants of the enslaved.

In its report, the working group recommended that university and Jesuit officials apologize for its history related to slavery, calling it "a precondition for reconciliation" and an action that can lead to more debate and discussion.

Although Kesicki said he sought forgiveness from the slave descendants, he noted, "we have no right to it."

Some of the descendants were ready to offer forgiveness, including Jeremy Alexander, a university employee who recently learned he was related to some of the slaves who were sold.

"I am willing to forgive," said Alexander, who works in the school's Office of Technology and Commercialization. "That was a lot for them to take those steps to say that they were sorry publicly."

But even with that willingness to "move forward with this healing process," he said, "it's not over," and society's inequalities still need to be addressed.

Two descendants of Isaac Hawkins, Delores Williams Johnson of Union Park, Illinois, and her great-niece Denise Neal of San Diego, weren't ready to forgive.

"It has taken a lot of effort on the descendants' parts to push Georgetown and the Jesuits to acknowledge us and not dictate to us," Williams Johnson said. "There has to be ongoing, meaningful conversation."

The working group recommended that university officials meet with descendants and work toward greater diversity on the campus.

Georgetown president John J. DeGioia, who also apologized during the ceremony, began visiting descendants in the summer, and the school created a department of African-American studies in June. In March, the university hosted a consortium of two dozen U.S. and Canadian universities that are examining the history of slavery at their schools.

A booklet distributed for the liturgy and dedication events stated, "Outreach and collaboration with the descendant community will continue over the months, years, and decades to come." —Religion News Service

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