



Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican presidential candidate and a Catholic, delivers remarks at the annual Christians United for Israel Summit, at the Crystal Gateway Marriott in Arlington, Virginia, U.S., July 17. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Wurm)

Nate Tinner-Williams

[View Author Profile](#)

Black Catholic Messenger

[View Author Profile](#)

### **[Join the Conversation](#)**

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

July 28, 2023

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The [Knights of Peter Claver and Ladies Auxiliary](#), the largest Black Catholic organization in the U.S., has spoken out against the [new Black history standards](#) in the state of Florida, which have caused an international stir since their approval on July 19.

The Knights and Ladies, who have long been outspoken on matters of racism, homed in on Florida Gov. [Ron Desantis](#)' defense of the public education curriculum's claim that enslaved African Americans "developed skills" that could be used for "personal benefit."

"Slavery was a non-Christ-like practice that only provided earthly benefit to the false masters who used false interpretations of the Bible and religion to justify their sinful greed, and complete devaluation of the sanctity of human life — God's greatest gift," the organization said in [a statement](#) on July 26.

"What Governor DeSantis missed is that despite the sins of man, God will always continue to speak and bless his children. It was not slavery that provided any benefit to the enslaved, but rather God's unfiltered and unconditional love and reach."

## Advertisement

DeSantis, who is himself a Catholic, has faced widespread, bipartisan scrutiny for his remarks — which he made on [multiple occasions](#) this month — amid his controversial bid for the 2024 presidency.

Though he claimed during a July 21 campaign stop in Utah that he "wasn't involved" in formulating the new public education standards in his state, the African American History Standards Workgroup (AHSW) behind the most polarizing changes is comprised of nominees from [Manny Díaz Jr.](#), DeSantis' hand-picked Education Commissioner.

The content in question reportedly comes from educational material provided by [PragerU](#), a notably conservative nonprofit known for opposing viewpoints it deems as "woke."

On July 20, the Florida Department of Education's communications director doubled down on Twitter concerning the criticism, [posting](#) a statement from two Black AHSW members that defends the new curriculum — including the specific claim about "personal benefit."

"The intent of this particular benchmark clarification is to show that some slaves developed highly specialized trades from which they benefited," wrote [William B. Allen](#) and [Frances Presley Rice](#), echoing common far-right talking points on U.S. slavery.

"Any attempt to reduce slaves to just victims of oppression fails to recognize their strength, courage and resiliency during a difficult time in American history."

As DeSantis nears a breaking point in his presidential campaign — laying off a third of his staff earlier this week — critics have noted the irony of his administration's bold attempt to recolor Black history in the very state where slavery began in earnest within what would become the United States.

Well before the arrival of the British to Virginia at Jamestown in 1619, the Spanish explorer [Juan Ponce de León](#) traveled to Florida from the island of Puerto Rico in 1513, covering a coastline span from modern-day St. Augustine, Florida, to near the city of Naples. The Black Catholic slave [Esteban](#) would arrive in Florida with [Pánfilo de Narváez](#) in 1528, and slavery would continue as a steady practice in the colony of St. Augustine beginning in 1565.

The new standards in Florida were [addressed](#) last week at the 2023 [National Black Catholic Congress](#), where intercultural scholar Dr. [Omékongo Dibinga](#) delivered a keynote on July 22 that referenced GOP legislators' recent attempts to censor Black history in the public education space — including in Florida.

"What do we expect to happen in a school system that already doesn't acknowledge us? In a school system that already doesn't want us there?" he said during his address.



Priests concelebrate the Mass for the Knights of Peter Claver and Ladies Auxiliary convention in New Orleans, July 16. For the first time in the historically Black Catholic fraternal organization's history, the Knights of Peter Claver convened its six divisions at the same convention. (OSV News/Clarion Herald/Christine Bordelon)

Given the historical evidence contradicting his administration's claims, DeSantis has received blowback even from his GOP colleagues, including Rep. [Byron Donalds](#), who heads a district covering much of Southwest Florida. He noted his support for the larger program of new standards in the state but said certain aspects are flawed.

"The attempt to feature the personal benefits of slavery is wrong & needs to be adjusted. That obviously wasn't the goal & I have faith that FLDOE will correct this," he [posted](#) on social media, linking to [an interview](#) with further comments.

"If you read what is in there now, it's crystal clear to me that slavery was one of the darkest stains on our country, no doubt. There's no way to get around that."