

New Orleans' Xavier University President: 'Don't Take Anything For Granted'

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(KSDK) - Xavier University President Dr. Norman C. Francis came to St. Louis with a message.

"Don't take anything for granted," said Francis.

The keynote speaker at Monday night's Urban League dinner, Francis has been the President of Xavier University in New Orleans for the last 39 years.

Like many others, he's trying to recover after losing his home to Hurricane Katrina.

"When people ask me, 'Isn't this going too slow?' and I ask, 'Compared to what?'

"This is the greatest tragedy on American soil," said Francis.

More than 75,000 college students in the New Orleans area were forced to flee in Katrina's aftermath.

Universities like Xavier and Dillard were hit especially hard, yet as soon as it was possible, many of the students returned even when their classrooms had to be moved to hotel ballrooms.

"These kids are not only resilient, they're heroic. They are going to finish what they started," said Francis.

Recently named the chair of the Louisiana recovery authority, Francis said it would take five to ten years for New Orleans to get past Katrina. But he said the sequel has to be better than the original.

"To say that we comeback to pre-Katrina is not good enough," said Francis.

According to Francis, there was no manual on how to recover from a disaster like Katrina but there are plenty of lessons to be learned.

"Understand and appreciate everything that you have," said Francis. Because, he said, everything can be gone tomorrow.

Francis is the longest-serving university president in the United States. He began his tenure as Xavier's president in 1968.

He was awarded the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, by President George W. Bush in December.