the New Orleans Sisters of the Holy Family

African American Missionaries to the Garifuna of Belize

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University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

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In the mid-1980s, my wife and I decided to write a book on U.S. missionaries who had been murdered in the 1970s and 1980s in Central America. Aside from a few short magazine and newspaper articles, we had never before written about modern-day missionaries, so, like any reputable historian would do, we began a search to uncover and read everything we could find that dealt with the history of U.S. Catholic missions and missionaries in Latin America. The one work that proved to be of immense value to us was Gerald Costello’s *Mission to Latin America: The Successes and Failures of a Twentieth-Century Crusade*. It greatly influenced our approach in composing our book and has influenced my scholarship ever since. Aside from Costello’s study, however, there were not many other books that we found on U.S. Catholic missions that could be termed serious, professional history. Granted, there were some histories of specific religious congregations’ mission enterprises, but they were usually in-house productions printed by small publishers who charge a fee for their services. They were often hagiographical in tone and usually devoid of meaningful analysis. To put it bluntly, they were amateurish, usually replete with historical misconceptions and of little worth to a serious historian.

When my wife and I consulted the standard books on U.S. Catholic history, we were again disappointed. Although they included some
information on European missionaries who came to work in what would become the United States, they contained almost nothing on U.S. Catholic foreign mission enterprises.\textsuperscript{2} To make matters worse, the archives of religious congregations were often poorly organized. They contained valuable information on Catholic mission history, but the researcher had to have patience and plenty of time to track down what he or she needed.\textsuperscript{3} Nevertheless, despite these problems we were eventually able to complete our book.\textsuperscript{4} From our research efforts, however, I had come to believe that American missionaries had played a significant role, especially in the twentieth century, in shaping U.S. Catholic perceptions of other cultures. Furthermore, I came to realize that American missionaries had influenced how their fellow U.S. Catholics—both clergy and laity—viewed the foreign policy of their own government.\textsuperscript{5} Even more important, I was convinced that the American Catholic missionary movement had had an important role in the overall history of the U.S. Catholic Church, yet historians had given little attention to this field of study.

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on the Church in Latin America took a step in remedying this situation when it commissioned Sister Mary McGlone to draw up a study of the relationship between the North American and Latin American Catholic churches, with special emphasis on how that relationship has impacted the United States. The book that resulted from her efforts, \textit{Sharing Faith across the Hemisphere},\textsuperscript{6} which appeared in 1997, also includes valuable appendices on the involvement in Latin America of U.S. dioceses, parishes, religious orders, and congregations as well as Catholic colleges and universities.

The year 1997 also saw the publication of \textit{American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice}, by historian Dana Robert. This innovative work not only highlighted the contributions made by female missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, to U.S. mission history, but it also showed convincingly that women missionaries were far more than mere auxiliaries to their male counterparts. They provided services to indigenous people that could not be offered by men due to cultural mores and other reasons, and, in so doing, they often developed a closer relationship with the common people, especially with women, than did the male missionaries.\textsuperscript{7}
The publication in 1998 of Sister Angelyn Dries’s *The Missionary Movement in American Catholic History* represented a major advance in U.S. Catholic mission studies. In this important work, Dries lists virtually every American mission enterprise—those conducted by male and female religious congregations, those directed by dioceses, and those that were lay-oriented—and provides basic information on their history. Moreover, she convincingly shows that Catholic missionaries had a profound influence on the development of a distinct U.S. Catholic identity and, as a consequence, that U.S. mission history is an intricate subset of American Catholic history in general and therefore needs to be thoroughly investigated by scholars of American religion and culture. She states emphatically that U.S. Catholic mission history is a new, under-researched field that needs further exploration, and she expresses the hope that her book might encourage other historians to make use of hitherto largely ignored U.S. Catholic missionary archives.

I was searching for a research project when I read Dries’s seminal study. My interest was aroused when I came across two brief paragraphs on the missionary work in Belize of the Sisters of the Holy Family. These sisters, based in my former hometown of New Orleans, are an African American congregation who in 1898 agreed to staff a school for “black Carib” children in the Stann Creek District of what was then British Honduras. In 1998, after a hundred years, their mission still flourished. I had read of Protestant African American missionaries and their work in Africa and the Caribbean, but this was the first time I had ever come across any reference to African American Catholic missionaries. I knew of several white U.S. congregations of sisters who had taught black children in underdeveloped countries and who thought that their work had been somewhat impeded as a result of racial differences. Here was an opportunity to study black sisters teaching black children. Would their encounter with their black students differ from that of the white missionary sisters? I was intrigued and thought that perhaps this was a research topic worth pursuing. A study of African American Catholic missionary nuns ministering to “black Caribs” in Central America could make a unique contribution to the history of the U.S. Catholic missionary movement. I next wrote to Charles Nolan, the archivist of the Archdiocese

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of New Orleans and a fellow historian whom I had known years earlier when I still lived in southern Louisiana. He informed me that the sisters had considerable archival sources on their Belize mission at their motherhouse in New Orleans. Through my contact with Nolan, who had coauthored a book and several pamphlets on the Holy Family Congregation, the sisters agreed to grant me access to their archives. As time went on they also allowed me to interview former missionary sisters and Garifuna (black Carib) sisters who were stationed in New Orleans.

Not long after I entered into my new research project, I realized that I knew little about the history of black Catholics in the United States. For my study to be of any value, it had to be written in a way that placed it in the overall context of the U.S. black Catholic experience. But just as with U.S. Catholic missionary history, I soon found that this African American subset of U.S. Catholic history had until very recently been almost totally ignored by American historians and historians of U.S. Catholicism.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Josephite John Gillard had authored two studies on black Catholicism. Although these works were the first of their kind and contained much important information, they were replete with prejudiced and paternalistic notions that were unfortunately almost universal among white American priests at that time, even among the Josephites whose mission was to minister to African Americans. In 1955 the Jesuit Albert S. Foley contributed a collection of short, descriptive biographies of over half of the seventy African American priests ordained between 1854 and 1954. The book, *God’s Men of Color*, has its weaknesses, which result at least in part from the fact that Foley was forced to compromise his work and submit to church officials who insisted that he sanitize his writing in order to avoid any embarrassment to the institutional church. In an article that appeared over three decades after *God’s Men of Color* had been published, Foley was finally able to reveal the details of the censorship and restrictions that he had endured in his attempt to write black Catholic history in a pre–Vatican II environment. This article vividly illustrates a major reason why the subfield of African American Catholic history was all but nonexistent throughout most of the twentieth century.
The late 1980s saw the beginning of a renaissance in black Catholic history. In 1988, Marilyn W. Nickels’s *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics, 1917–1933: Three Perspectives on Racial Justice* was published. The fact that the work was completed in 1975, but not published until thirteen years later, shows that in the United States, even as late as the 1970s, African American Catholic history was still considered to be of little relevance. Nickels’s book is important in that it shows that black Catholics in the early part of the twentieth century were unwilling to accept a place of inferiority in the U.S. Catholic Church. Led by the layman Thomas Turner, they fought to end discrimination in their church and to obtain black priests for their parishes. Their efforts were not in vain. After countless petitions to Rome, the Vatican interjected itself into U.S. church politics and played a major role in creating a seminary for African Americans in Mississippi.

In 1990 two valuable studies appeared. The first, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871–1960*, by Stephen J. Ochs, is more than simply a dry history of the Josephites. After presenting a solid overview of African American Catholic history, Ochs carefully documents the long struggle by black priests. In contrast to Foley’s *God’s Men of Color*, he makes no attempt to whitewash this embarrassing chapter of U.S. Catholic history. On the contrary, he paints a vivid picture of the racism and timidity that permeated the institutional U.S. Catholic Church when it came to issues of justice for black Catholics.

Shortly after the appearance of *Desegregating the Altar*, Cyprian Davis’s groundbreaking study, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, was published. Just as Angelyn Dries’s book was a major advance in the field of mission history, so is Davis’s pioneer study destined to be the fountainhead for many future specialized studies. Largely based on information that he gleaned from an enormous number of archives throughout the United States and Europe, Davis’s book is a comprehensive, meticulously researched history of the African American Catholic community. It is not an exaggeration to say that it is the work that was needed in order to give black Catholicism its rightful place within the context of U.S. Catholic history and the history of American religion.
Up to this time, however, save for a few articles and pamphlets, little of professional quality was written on African American female religious congregations.¹⁸ This gap was especially unfortunate because, with the absence of a black clergy well into the twentieth century due to the church’s refusal to ordain African Americans, it was these religious women who represented the African American face of institutional Catholicism for both black and white Americans. The gap was partly filled in 2002 with the publication of Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828–1860 by Diane Batts Morrow.¹⁹ Largely based on documents found in the sisters’ archives in Baltimore, the book presents a detailed history of the first thirty-two years of the oldest surviving African American religious congregation. Morrow does more than merely present a narrative history, however. She skillfully intertwines the latest scholarship on issues of race and gender into her monograph, and in so doing she demonstrates how the sisters were able to survive by negotiating with a church and a secular society that more often than not had little sympathy for them. But Morrow goes further by adroitly addressing conflicts within the Oblate Sisters’ community that resulted from ethnic, class, and skin color differences. A masterful study, Morrow’s book influenced my own approach in my work on the Holy Family Sisters, whose history I would find had much in common with the Oblates of Providence.

As with U.S. Catholic missionary history and that of African American Catholicism, the history of U.S. female religious and their congregations has been largely neglected until the last few decades. As historian Carol Coburn writes, “With the exception of early congregational in-house histories often written for novices, American women religious have been virtually ‘invisible’ in American Catholic history until recently.”²⁰ This began to change, however, in the early 1980s. Evangeline Thomas’s Women Religious History Sources: A Guide to Repositories in the United States and Elizabeth Kolmer’s Religious Women in the United States: A Survey of the Influential Literature from 1950 to 1983 laid a foundation upon which other scholars could build.²¹

The study of Catholic religious sisters was given a major boost, however, when the Conference on the History of Women Religious
was formed in 1989. Scholars interested in the history of female religious could now formally gather together once every three years to present research papers and discuss the latest ideas and techniques concerning their subfield of history. A by-product of these meetings was that the study of women’s religious history became more analytical, nuanced, and sophisticated. No longer was it studied in isolation; it was now examined in a way that intertwined it within the larger context of U.S. and world history.

With the additional aid of the newly formed field of feminist studies, which provides models of how to view history through the lens of gender, a plethora of rich scholarship on women religious and their contributions to the U.S. Catholic Church have appeared within the last two decades. Consequently, religious sisters are no longer “invisible,” and the struggles they underwent to control their own destiny in a male-dominated, patriarchal church are finally seeing the light of day. In the last three decades, historians have proven beyond a doubt that female religious, beginning with the coming of the Ursulines to New Orleans in 1727, have played a major role, albeit usually out of the limelight, in the development of the American Catholic Church. Moreover, these historians have made it clear that, contrary to what had previously been assumed, U.S. Catholic sisters had always been far more than mere ancillary assistants to the male clergy. Many excellent histories of female religious congregations, including that of Morrow, have now been written, but little has appeared on these congregations’ contribution to the U.S. foreign missionary movement. Thus, it is hoped that the pages that follow will fill this void at least in a modest way, while also adding a small contribution to the fields of black Catholic history and of women religious.

The letters, reports, and other documentation dealing with the founding and growth of the Holy Family Sisters’ mission in Belize, which are located in New Orleans in the congregation’s archives, form the principal source for my study. These resources, covering a 110-year span from 1898 to 2008, have been almost entirely ignored by previous scholars, thus making them especially valuable for my project. Interviews that I conducted with Holy Family Sisters and letters that they wrote to me in answer to my questions constitute the second most important primary source. Most of the nuns who
communicated with me in this fashion are North Americans, but several are Garifuna or Belizean Creoles. Some began serving in what was then British Honduras in the 1940s; others worked in Belize in the period following the Second Vatican Council, when long-accepted notions of what constituted good missionary techniques were giving way to new ideas. Still others served the people of Belize in the 1980s and 1990s and into the twenty-first century when the sisters were confronting mission challenges with creative innovations. This personal correspondence provided me with factual information crucial to my study; however, it was also vital in that it shed light on the transformation that took place over time in the congregation’s mission outlook. Letters and testimonies from Belizeans who were not Holy Family Sisters constitute the final type of primary sources. Some of these came from lay people and others from Sisters of Charity, whose congregation has worked in Belize in recent years. This correspondence was important in that it provided me with the perspectives of people who had been influenced by the Holy Family Sisters but were not members of their congregation.

Part I of this book treats the sisters’ missionary work in the period before the Second Vatican Council. The first chapter discusses the foundation and growth of the congregation in New Orleans prior to the sisters’ decision to accept a teaching commitment in what was then British Honduras. This chapter is essential to my study in that it provides the reader with basic facts on the charism of the Holy Family Congregation and also with an understanding of how the sisters coped with the racism and gender problems that they were forced to endure because they were African American women. Chapter 2 treats the early history of the British Honduras mission, concentrating especially on Mother Mary Austin Jones, the superior of the Holy Family Sisters, who was responsible for expanding the congregation’s work into the mission field. Highlighted in this chapter is the significance of the contract between Mother Austin and the first bishop of Belize, which detailed the sisters’ rights vis-à-vis those of the bishop. The third chapter treats the conflict between the second bishop of Belize and the Holy Family Congregation over finances and missionary personnel. Here I contend that the sisters prevailed in this struggle because Mother Austin had had the foresight to demand a written con-
tract from this bishop’s predecessor. At the end of this chapter I also examine the relationship of the first two bishops of Belize with the white, New Orleans–based Mercy Sisters—the first Catholic female religious missionaries in British Honduras—and compare it with that of the bishops and the Holy Family Sisters. Chapter 4, the last chapter of Part I, takes the story of the mission from the 1920s to the Second Vatican Council. Here the sisters’ accomplishments are evaluated from the perspective of what leaders of the institutional church in the pre–Vatican II era believed constituted success in the mission arena.

Part II deals with the Belizean mission from the eve of the Second Vatican Council through the post–Vatican II years. Chapter 5 addresses the effects that the Council had on women religious in general and on the Sisters of the Holy Family in particular. It also documents and analyzes the sisters’ amalgamation of their Catholic high school with those of two Protestant denominations in the Stann Creek region of Belize. This chapter makes it clear that following Vatican II the Holy Family Sisters were united in their eagerness to amend their missionary efforts so that they conformed to the spirit of the Council.

Chapter 6 treats the congregation’s failure to understand and adjust to the sense of ethnic pride that had recently come to permeate its Garifuna (Carib) members as a result of the Belizean struggle for independence from Britain and to a modern spirit within the Catholic Church emanating from the Council. It is here that I attempt to explain the reasons behind the sisters’ failure to “read the signs of the times,” thereby causing a preventable rift to develop within the congregation.

Chapter 7 presents case studies of three of the congregation’s missionary sisters in an attempt to illustrate how the Holy Family Congregation, beginning in the 1980s, learned to adapt to and assimilate into their own lives the culture of the people whom they served. It especially emphasizes the creative innovations that the Holy Family community, true to the spirit of Vatican II, introduced into the Belizean educational system. It likewise shows why these innovations were so important to the people of Belize.

The final chapter chronicles the congregation’s efforts to keep its missionary work alive and meaningful when faced with an ever-growing shortage of new religious vocations. Finally, following the
conclusion, there are three appendices: the first lists all Holy Family Sisters who have served as missionaries in Belize; the second lists all members of the congregation who were natives of Belize; and the third gives the testimonies of three lay people who had been taught by the sisters in Dangriga (Stann Creek).

The Sisters of the Holy Family are unique in that they were the first African American Catholics to serve as missionaries. It is my hope that the hitherto unknown story of their missionary efforts in Belize will enhance the already distinguished reputation that they have earned for themselves through their work with poor blacks in the United States.
Part I

The Pre-Vatican II Period
On March 31, 1898, Mother Superior Mary Austin Jones of the Holy Family Sisters, her traveling companion Sister Mary Ann Aazende, the postulant Addie Saffold, and four soon-to-be-missionary sisters boarded a steamer, the Stillwater, at New Orleans. The intended destination of the seven African Americans was Stann Creek (today called Dangriga), a settlement on the Atlantic Coast of British Honduras (since 1973 called Belize), south of Belize City. There, the four missionaries—Sisters Mary Rita Mather, Mary Dominica Bee, Mary Emmanuel Thompson, and Mary Stephen Fortier—with the help of Saffold, who would work for a year in the sisters’ preschool program, were to run Sacred Heart primary school for mostly black Carib (Garifuna) students, whose ancestors had first settled the area in the 1790s. An English Jesuit, Brother Daniel Reynolds, had started the school, and it was the Jesuit Order that since the 1860s had labored virtually alone in evangelizing the Caribs, a close-knit people descended from shipwrecked African slaves and indigenous Caribbean islanders.

After an uneventful voyage, the steamer docked at Belize City on April 3, where the seven religious women stayed overnight with the
Sisters of Mercy, a white congregation, who, like the Holy Family Sisters, were also from New Orleans. The Mercy nuns were the second Catholic religious order to enter British Honduras and had been teaching at St. Catherine’s and Holy Redeemer primary schools since 1883. In 1886 they had opened St. Catherine’s Academy, the oldest Catholic secondary school in Belize. The next morning, after a “hearty breakfast” provided by the Mercy community, the Holy Family nuns were given a tour of St. Catherine’s convent and “select school.” At about 3:00 p.m., the seven companions reboarded the Stillwater, which had finally finished unloading the bulk of its cargo. After sailing south for an additional thirty-six miles, the nuns reached their destination.

Because Stann Creek had no wharf, but only a pier for small craft, all seven religious had to be lowered from the ship into a rowboat (called a “dorey” by the natives) about a mile offshore. Since they were dressed in their bulky habits, this transfer was not only a frightening experience but also an adventure that became part of the congregation’s folklore. When they reached the pier, Jesuit Fathers C. J. Leibe and Matharus Antillach greeted them, as did a large contingent of townspeople. After a most impressive welcome, they were shown to their convent, a small frame building with a zinc roof, prepared for them by the Jesuits and the families of the merchants of the town, “who left nothing undone to make everything as comfortable as possible.” On April 12 the sisters took charge of Sacred Heart, which by British Honduran law served as a public school. They also opened a select school for students who could afford to pay tuition.

On April 15, after making sure that all was in order, Mother Austin returned to New Orleans with her traveling companion. Sister Mary Francis Borgia Hart, in her in-house history of the Holy Family community, sums up the mother superior’s impressions of her first trip to British Honduras: “The primitive condition of the people, the unique reception given to the Sisters and the nature of the work which was to be done for God’s glory, so impressed the Mother, that Stann Creek and the Caribs won a place in her zealous heart, and until her death, its needs and the frequent replacements of its personnel claimed her attention, and were always the first to be served.” Perhaps Mother Austin realized that the mission begun by the four sisters whom she had left behind was a historic first, in that it was the
The earliest missionary endeavor by Catholic African Americans, male or female. From extant sources, however, it is clear that she and her sisters were well aware of the hurdles they would face. Consequently, using pragmatic mechanisms they had developed in their struggle to survive in nineteenth-century New Orleans, they would overcome racial and gender discrimination and in some ways would even turn these negatives to their advantage. As a result, the congregation would enjoy over a century of remarkable missionary success.

Before addressing the Holy Family Sisters’ ministry in Belize, however, it should prove useful to look at the unique origin and early history of this congregation. This, in turn, necessitates a review of Henriette Delille, the foundress of the religious community, and the peculiar environment from which she came.

Henriette was born in New Orleans in 1812. Although we are not completely sure who her father was, it is virtually certain that he was a member of the Creole class, that is, he was a white gentleman probably of French or Spanish descent. Her mother, Marie Josephe Dias, was a Creole femme de couleur libre (free woman of color) whose parentage was of mixed race, on the paternal side Caucasian and on the maternal a mixture of African and white. Just like Henriette, her mother was the offspring of a white Creole and a femme de couleur libre. Her maternal grandmother, Henriette Leveau, and great-grandmother, Cecile Dubreuil, although born into slavery and later freed, were likewise of mixed race, but her great-great-grandmother, Nanette, was an African slave. Thus, for three generations her ancestors had an arrangement known as plaçage (placing). They did not marry—interracial marriages were illegal—but instead voluntarily entered into a liaison whereby the femme de couleur libre was kept by her Creole lover as his mistress. Herbert Asbury, in his racy The French Quarter: An Informal History of the New Orleans Underworld, claims that it was indeed rare for a young Creole gentleman not to have a femme de couleur libre as his paramour. Sometimes these relationships remained for life but this was uncommon. Almost always the male partners in these arrangements “came and went . . . leaving the women to raise their children with little or no support.”

Young free women of color usually received a practical education while also being schooled by their mothers in the ways of seduction.