

Book reviews

THE FIRST BLACK DOMINICAN SISTERS IN NATAL (1922–39): AT THE CROSSROADS OF RACE AND GENDER

by PHILIPPE DENIS

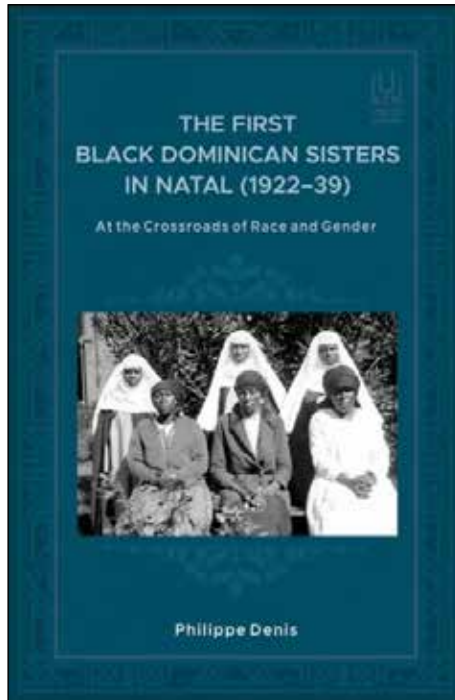
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THE KEY event of this book is the rushed and slipshod transfer of black sisters without consultation from Lennoxton (Newcastle) to Montebello (Noodsberg) in January 1939. The resultant distress resonated down the years and this account provides the context.

It is a study in segregation and the exercise of power, patriarchal and matriarchal. In the inter-war period, South Africa suffered from increasingly toxic racism and the introduction of legislation that was a dress rehearsal for apartheid. The Vatican under two missionary popes encouraged a policy of anti-colonial indigenisation that accelerated the admission of black sisters, although whether this was to be within a dualistic or integrated church was not made clear. Equality in the eyes of God did not necessarily rule out pragmatic segregation, especially since there was general disdain for African culture.

Some aspirants from the Sacred Heart Mission at Umsinsini on the South Coast joined the white Newcastle convent in 1927 and expected to be absorbed as equals. Others from the Oakford Priory (Verulam) since 1922 wished to be part of a segregated community at Montebello. Racial segregation could be binary.

Archbishop Jordaen Gijlswijk was the local apostolic delegate, quoted as remarking 'I am the Holy See in South Africa'. Whatever his aims, he behaved in an authoritarian fashion that fits Philippe Denis's description of the Catholic Church as despotic. He was successfully resisted by the Bishop of Natal, Henri Delalle, and those in authority over black sisters who used their Rome contacts to good effect. In 1921, for example, Gijlswijk's proposed visit to Newcastle was rejected.



But the authoritarianism of Rome was replaced by a local version.

The black sisters of Newcastle were required to wear distinctive habits, pray separately and perform menial tasks, although they did benefit from significant educational opportunities. Mother Rose Niland, operating from overseas, issued orders that were backed by Bishop Delalle who broadcast them as originating from Rome. So, with barely a week's notice the transfer to Montebello took place. There, the Newcastle sisters found a voluntarily segregated black community, although how much is owed to the ambition and influence of Sister Euphemia Ruf is unknown. In 1939, it had 30

members and segregation was accepted by the diocese and most nuns, white and black. Gijlswijk had to accept defeat, victim of his own dictatorial instincts.

Denis traces the history of communities of black nuns in Senegal, Lesotho and East Africa, which were formalised only in the twentieth century. The first South African community was established in 1885 at Mariannhill by the Trappists, becoming in 1922 the Daughters of St Francis of Assisi. Missing from this book because they are largely absent from the archives are the voices and experiences of black nuns. There are a few tantalising details of their relationship with their own families: tension caused by loss of lobola, demands for money, and determined runaways.

The book concludes with an informative list of *dramatis personae*; a helpful glossary of Catholic ecclesiastical terms; and six appendices of documentary sources. It makes a significant contribution to the study of race relations in South Africa prior to the onset of apartheid.

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