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RELIGION/RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

The New Orleans Sisters of the Holy Family. By Edward T. Brett. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. Pp. x, 248. Notes. Bibliography. Appendixes. Index. \$30.00 paper.
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Within the realm of American Catholic history, the roles of African-American Catholics and the stories of US missionaries abroad have not been well developed. Edward T. Brett's recent monograph begins to remedy this situation by examining the Holy Family Sisters, the first order of African-American women to serve as missionaries in Central America. Brett's extensive research, which spans the 110-year period from the order's arrival in Stann Creek, British Honduras (now known as Dangriga, Belize) in 1898 to 2008, is based on a particularly rich set of sources. He not only had access to the order's archives, but was also able to interview and correspond with members of the order as well as some of the Belizeans who interacted with their mission. Some of the sisters he interviewed had begun to work in the mission as early as the 1940s, while others had come in the early years of the twenty-first century. Ultimately, Brett argues, the mission was successful despite many challenges.

Although the order struggled to obtain adequate financing for its activities in Belize and had to cope with a challenging climate and frequent disease, they maintained a small but influential community there for over a century. Initially asked by Bishop Salvatore Di Pietro of British Honduras to operate the Sacred Heart School for the primarily Garifuna population, the Holy Family Sisters' mission eventually expanded to include several schools, a teacher training program, and, in 1953, the first girls' high school outside the capital. "Indeed, no more than ten Holy Family Sisters ever served in the Stann Creek district at one time, yet the sisters would train generations of capable teachers sufficient to educate students throughout the entire district and beyond" (p. 37). In the process, the sisters helped transform the Belizean education system from a British-based system for the elite to an American-style system for the masses (p. 139). They also achieved another pre-Vatican II mission goal by recruiting 50 local women to the order during the twentieth century.

One critical reason for the mission's success, Brett finds, was good leadership that protected the order's long-term interests. Through the contract they made with the bishop, the motherhouse in New Orleans maintained control over the mission, with the sole right to determine which sisters were there and who their local superior was, and the bishop had to provide the convent with a house rent free. Although Di Pietro's successors struggled for control over the Holy Family Sisters, the women used the contract effectively to their own advantage. In contrast, without such protection, the (white) Mercy Sisters, also from New Orleans, were forced to separate their British Honduras mission from the motherhouse and lost control to the local bishop.

Along with good leadership, Brett identifies race as a contributing factor in the sisters' success. Their experiences facing racism at home, he argues, helped them "to understand the sufferings of the poverty-stricken people to whom they ministered" (47). Unfortunately, Brett does not document the locals' receptivity to the missionaries, although he does note that white religious women found it difficult to gain real access to their black clientele's struggles and needs in Belize and other Central American and Caribbean missions.

The changing atmosphere in the Church and society in general that began in the 1950s was a double-edged sword for the order. African Americans were no longer excluded from white congregations, and fewer women joined all-black orders. Brett finds that the quality of leadership that had helped the order survive the early twentieth century also failed in the middle and latter part of the century. This became a crisis when New Orleans-based superiors and newly arrived missionaries ignored the advice of women who had served in Belize to allow some communal prayers to be recited in the Garifuna language. The order failed to see the importance of adapting to the changing local political and cultural environment as Belize became independent from Great Britain. The most compelling part of the sisters' story, however, is told through the individual accounts of three women who worked in Belize during the 1980s and 1990s. This final chapter of Brett's book focuses on the stories of Sisters Clare of Assisi Pierre, Lucia Carl, and Judith Barial, who helped to "[redirect] the missionary community so that it integrated itself into the culture of those whom they served" (p. 108), fulfilling the goals and the promise of the Second Vatican Council.

Ultimately, Brett argues, the Holy Family Sisters have been successful because they managed to adapt to changing times. Although the order had ceased to have a full-time presence in Belize by 2008 and was unable to create an indigenous community, it has continued to send a small number of sisters to run catechism programs in rural villages during the summer. Through this compelling story that covers more than a century, Brett's *New Orleans Sisters of the Holy Family* sheds light on the shifting dynamics of race and gender, the impact of broader Church trends on one congregation, and an important aspect of US-Latin American relations.

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RURAL SOCIAL HISTORY

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