

Sr. Anne Gregson and Elizabeth Power

I should like to comment on the article entitled 'Black Nuns in Africa' (December 1966), by Elizabeth Power.

It is certainly a very depressing picture Mrs Power paints, and one can only feel deep sorrow if such conditions exist in 1966, and hope that – despite the sweeping title – her unfortunate experience concerns only an isolated case. However, if it is true anywhere in missionary work that a delicate balance must be kept between a blind and rigid conservatism, on the one hand, and the imprudent imposition of European customs, on the other, it is especially true in the training of African religious.

There are many Congregations of African Sisters, a dozen of which are known to the writer from long contacts either in east Africa or over here: what strikes one most about them is the tremendous efforts made, in recent years especially, for their promotion, by the European Congregations that have had the privilege and responsibility of training them, and by their own Bishops, African and non-African alike.

The oldest established of them now numbers over 600 nuns. Many of these were trained as teachers by the Missionary nuns in a College set up for them *before* the colonial government of the country made any provision for training teachers – in the 1920's. The nuns of this Congregation are highly esteemed by their compatriots and reached complete autonomy in the 1950's.

For years now, African Sisters have been taking up scholarships in Europe and America. They are the exceptions, admittedly. But those at home have likewise been trained according to their capacities to teach and nurse, sometimes running their own dispensaries and hospitals. In one place they even perform hundreds of delicate eye operations each year. They conduct women's clubs, adult literacy campaigns and marriage preparation courses, and direct building operations. A number are heads of schools with the missionary nun who used to be headmistress working under them on

their staff, and one, whom I know personally, is Assistant Education Secretary General for all Catholic schools in her country.

To achieve autonomy, as a good number of these orders have, presupposes the careful training of their future 'leaders' not only in coping with the normal problems of community life and the apostolate, but also in the intricacies of setting up their own Secretariat and Accounts Department, of preparing and running their own General Chapters, with elections of Superiors General and other officials – all in due accord with the prescriptions of Canon Law!

I should like to add that the greatest tribute to the decried missionaries – whatever shortcomings they may have been guilty of in the past – lies surely in the real friendships and true sisterly love that exist between white and African Sisters in so many parts of Africa. In the Eastern Congo, heroic deeds were done by African nuns to succour their European Sisters during long weeks of imprisonment.

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Elizabeth Power comments:

I should have made myself much clearer in my article. I did not intend to generalise from this one mission to all missions, though I do not believe the case I described to be entirely isolated.

I did want to show that relations between white and black, whether in the missionary, colonial or post-colonial situation (not to mention post-slavery America and post-immigration England) are strained by white patronage and by the out-dating of our 'civilising' mission. With the deterioration in race relations there has been a growth in black nationalist 'Black Power', Pan-Africanist movements, in which white people are not wanted. I am afraid that our often unconscious paternalism our role as 'teachers', 'guides', 'moralists' and 'civilisers' among non-white peoples is faced no

longer with tolerance, nor even resentment, but with bitterness and hatred. I feel that in the West we are collectively responsible in large part for the tragedies of the Congo, of Algeria, of Southern Africa. The Western Church has her share of this guilt; and our time of grace is fast running out in the eyes of our non-white brothers.

Unless we face our record realistically and change our whole way of looking at civilisations outside our own, multi-racialism will be buried for a long while. Indeed it is already difficult to see how widespread bloodshed can be averted in the parts of Africa that are still in the hands of white minorities.

The Church has so far failed to give adequate leadership. She has been defensive, cautious and 'impartial' in the racial troubles of this decade. If we shy from facing the realities of the fairly innocuous mission where I worked, in one of the most stable, democratic and racially

harmonious African states, how will we face the Church's record in more troubled parts of Africa? In the words of a famous Belgian monk, now a missionary in the Congo: 'We white Christians have committed crimes against black people that we will find it difficult to atone for - Christian Americans, Christian Belgians, Christian Afrikaners.'

Having said this, I must agree with Sister Anne Gregson that the missionaries as a whole have played an invaluable role in education, medical work and other fields. It is also important to stress that some missionary orders handed over all positions of leadership to their African Brothers and Sisters many years ago, and that most if not all orders today are in the process of change-over. It is vital that this transfer of authority should take place in an atmosphere of complete faith and trust in the greater ability of African Christians to run the Church in their own continent.

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