

Nuns of Color

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Tales from the African-American Women's Front: For nuns of color, their mission doesn't end at the convent walls

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Tales from the African-American Women's Front: For nuns of color, their mission doesn't end at the convent walls

By Terri Heard

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OSSINING, N.Y. -- The mission of the nun of color isn't confined to the world outside the convent walls. Unlike her white sisters, the Black nun who returns home from the mission field doesn't just rest and recharge for the next assignment. She takes up her secondary mission: fighting racism within the convent itself.

So says Geneva Lassiter, also known as Sister Martin Corde, and the first African-American nun to remain permanently in the order known as Maryknoll, the Catholic Foreign Missionary Society of America. In her life, Sister Geneva, as she is fondly known, has consistently bucked stereotypes and traditions -- such as the presumption that most Blacks are Baptists, and her family's own tradition of Protestant worship.

Before high blood pressure caused her kidneys to fail, Sister Geneva spent 18 years educating and working with the people of Africa, particularly the women.

Now retired, her travels restricted by the dialysis machine and increasing glaucoma, she still fights the good fight by educating her sister nuns on the need for tolerance and a multicultural perspective that respects all cultures and races.

In addition to her duties in the mail room and on the switchboard, she frequently runs workshops on cultivating multicultural understanding. As for

the expectation that racism would never be a problem in as devoutly a religious community as a convent, she said, "We're human too."

Founded in 1911 by Mary Josephine Rogers, later known as Mother Mary Joseph, the Maryknoll community is located just outside of Ossining, New York in a peaceful, suburban town of rolling hills and whispering evergreens.

The Order includes priests as well as nuns and they live in separate buildings on the Maryknoll grounds which also include a home for the lay missionaries who do not take vows of celibacy.

From the simple comfort of her room at Maryknoll House, Sister Geneva described her life and the challenges she has met, and continues to anticipate.

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A Catholic Among Baptists

The fourth of 15 children, born in Cape Charles, Virginia on April 19, 1925 to the late sharecropper Brogie and Bernice Lassiter, Sister Geneva was raised in a solid Baptist family. While she acquired Catholic playmates after her family moved to Philadelphia, they were mostly of Polish and Ukrainian descent, and she never met a Black Catholic.

Therefore, when as an adult, she called her family from Portland, Oregon to tell them she was becoming a Catholic, the impact was immediate.

"My family became spastic!" she recalled, laughing.

"First of all, I was in Portland, so we were far apart," which cushioned the shock. "I told them on the telephone that I was Catholic and that was strange (for them), but then she (her mother) thought that it was better that I was going to some church (rather than none)."

Sister Geneva moved to Oregon after earning a master's degree from Columbia University's New York School of Social Work. She earned her undergraduate degree at Central State College in Wilberforce, Ohio. In Portland, she worked for the Oregon State Public Welfare Commission, where she specialized in foster children placements.

However, she kept coming across Catholic children who had to be placed in the homes of practicing Catholics.

"I had a lot of Catholics on my caseload, and I had to find special homes for them," she said. "Their (placement) families had to be practicing Catholics and see that the youngsters followed their religion. And not being a Catholic, I said 'What's so special about them?' So I took instructions in Catholicism to learn how I could work with them better."

Eventually she converted and became active for more than two years in the Young Christian Workers group, which promoted spirituality in the community.

But how did she make that final step to take her vows?

"I had a lot of friends who were Catholic," she said, "and we did a lot of activities together. But then all of a sudden everybody was entering the convent. So I said 'Oh, what's so new about the convent?' I thought, this is interesting."

Then, one Sunday afternoon, she and a friend sat down to look through a book listing all the Catholic orders in order to decide which one they would enter.

"Then I saw Maryknoll was a foreign mission, and I said 'Oh, that's what I'd like to do, foreign mission,' "she said. She was drawn to them because she felt the people overseas needed her help more than those in the states where there were so many people to help them already.

It was another shock for her family.

"Well nobody understood that (her decision to join the mission), NOBODY. Daddy understood it better," she said. "He thought it was a wonderful idea."

However, her mother needed time to adjust. Her mother's attitude was "She's always been a Baptist, and she's going to die a Baptist," Sister Geneva said, "and she can't understand anybody changing and she was sort of cool for a few years."

Eventually her mother worked her way through the reality.

"Well, I guess she talked to Rev. Adkins (the late founder and pastor of the Lassister family's place of worship, Mt. Ephraim Baptist Church in North Philadelphia). She was always sort of upset about it but then she sort of came around."

Sister Geneva entered Maryknoll in December 1956. By the time she was assigned to Africa in 1960, things were back to normal.

In 1969, when she came home for a visit, she said, "They had a reception in the Baptist church in the basement. And I showed slides of Africa and my work."

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On To East Africa

Sister Geneva was in Tanzania, East Africa from 1960 to 1978, spending 18 years working with the people, living with them, eating with them, teaching them, and being taught by them.

"Oh, East Africa was wonderful!," she said, her dark, cherubic face lighting up with the memories.

"Oh the people! They are so nice and friendly and wonderful. (There are) really many things you can learn from the women of East Africa."

"Their values," she elaborated. "They have a hospitality for one thing. They are a very hospitable people. And even though they are poor -- many of them are very poor -- they share what they have with you."

"Whenever you'd go on a visit, they'd run out. You'd wonder where she (the hostess) disappeared to. She went out to catch her chicken and kill her chicken before you left, so you'd have a good meal. The toughest chickens they can make tender. I don't know what they do to them..."

"Hospitality is their greatest thing, and manners," she continued. "They revere the old people. I mean they have great respect for their elders."

The hardest thing about working there, she said was "When you didn't have any water. You had to go and find water like the people. Go take your bucket to some hole."

"Or cooking on three stones. But, no," she added, "I mastered that."

"I didn't have any difficulty with that. I learned very well how to roast a turkey in nothing -- in two pots, over three stones. Or make bread. I taught every woman that I ever taught how to make bread. You use three stones and some sand and you had nice cooking pots. Yes, it was fun adapting," she fondly recalled.

* * *

The Other Mission

Even more challenging than adapting to the conditions in Africa, however, was adapting to the racism that subtly emerged in the field.

"The thing that you want to be careful of because -- I found this in the beginning -- that you're so in tune with them (the Africans) that you do create sort of a jealousy (among the white sisters), you know?"

That subtle prejudice is what inspired the multicultural workshops at Maryknoll. Started in the late 1970s, the workshops continue at Maryknoll now as mini-courses for which any sister may sign up. Sister Geneva is a frequent volunteer.

"We are trying to deal with the multicultural situation because we have people from all different cultures here, and we feel it's very important that we learn to live together with other people, learn to respect other people's customs, and how to blend them so that we don't make other people Americans. We have to be able to integrate."

Why is integration so important?

"Because when you have other cultures at Maryknoll, for instance, or many of the American groups, they (the non-Americans) have to do the adapting for the most part and they become like Americans," she said.

"We're still learning and we're trying to say what is necessary in a multicultural living situation," she continued. "What does everyone have to give up and what does everybody have to take? How to get along without one being dominant or thinking themselves better, you know? In other words, we work a lot on racism."

Asked whether the problem of racism has gotten bigger or smaller now, she said, "It's becoming better when people recognize the fact that it exists."

"Most people deny the fact that it exists. But when you recognize it, then you watch what you say, you listen to what people are saying, you say, 'Hey, there you go again.' Reality check. So we have our watchdogs who keep check."

Of which she is one.

Did she have a problem being the by-default watchdog?

"I think I adjusted to it because I, for myself, I had lived out in the world a long time before I entered (the convent). I've always lived with mixed groups of people, I've always known how to deal with them, how to adapt, you know? But some people had less contact on either side and don't know how to deal with it, and sometimes it causes a lot of friction."

Dealing with prejudice and racism is the workshops' function. People get together to discuss the problem and follow up on actions.

"We have put it on our agendas and our schedules and we have involved the whole house in this by different courses...you can sign up if you want to teach a course. So a couple of times a group of us will sign up and say we want to teach. We want to do a session on racism, we want to do something on multicultural relationships." A course that is currently running has 20 people participating.

The idea developed at the grassroots level, and, she said, "Many (religious) communities are looking at these because we work with communities that have very few (minorities in) the vocation and they wonder how can they get them. The problem is not how do you get them but how do you keep them," she laughed.

A multicultural focus is essential, she said, because Black nuns add perspective.

"For the Blacks in America, most whites see them on the television, fighting and killing and drugging, things like that.

"One (white) sister said to me the other day that she had gone some place in Chicago, I think, when she was doing some work there. (She saw) a whole church full of Blacks -- she went to a Black service -- a whole church full of prominent women, you know, well dressed, well mannered, and in all kinds of professions.

"We can do anything. We're in all professions and people are surprised when they see a GROUP of Black people like that because they say 'Yes, here's one or two,' that they've heard about -- but a whole room full of people? And that kind of shocks them. And you say (to them), well you know, 'You're limited because, you know, you don't have the exposure that you need.'"

It's an exposure that would help whites work more effectively with Africans and Asians, she said. It alters their whole approach to Africa, and people of African descent.

"You go in (to Africa) saying we're going to learn something together (as opposed to saying) I'm just going to teach this ignorant person. You then realize that person has a value and you both can learn things from each other," she said.

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