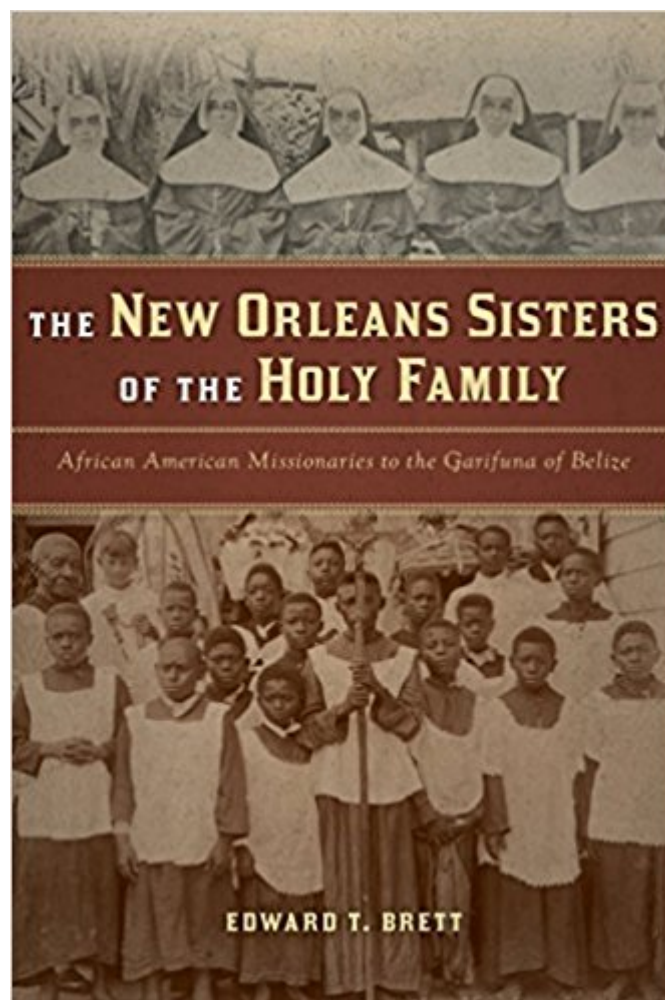




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# The New Orleans Sisters Of The Holy Family: African American Missionaries To The Garifuna Of Belize



## Synopsis

The Sisters of the Holy Family, founded in New Orleans in 1842, were the first African American Catholics to serve as missionaries. This story of their little-known missionary efforts in Belize from 1898 to 2008 builds upon their already distinguished work, through the Archdiocese of New Orleans, of teaching slaves and free people of color, caring for orphans and the elderly, and tending to the poor and needy. Utilizing previously unpublished archival documents along with extensive personal correspondence and interviews, Edward T. Brett has produced a fascinating account of the 110-year mission of the Sisters of the Holy Family to the Garifuna people of Belize. Brett discusses the foundation and growth of the struggling order in New Orleans up to the sisters' decision in 1898 to accept a teaching commitment in the Stann Creek District of what was then British Honduras. The early history of the British Honduras mission concentrates especially on Mother Austin Jones, the superior responsible for expanding the order's work into the mission field. In examining the Belizean mission from the eve of the Second Vatican Council through the post-Vatican II years, Brett sensitively chronicles the sisters' efforts to conform to the spirit of the council and describes the creative innovations that the Holy Family community introduced into the Belizean educational system. In the final chapter he looks at the congregation's efforts to sustain its missionary work in the face of the shortage of new religious vocations. "Brett's study is more than just a chronicle of the Holy Family Sisters' accomplishments in Belize. He treats the issues of racism and gender discrimination that the African American congregation encountered both within the church and in society, demonstrating how the sisters survived and even thrived by learning how to skillfully negotiate with the white, dominant power structure. "The Holy Family sisters made a large contribution to the education of women in the Belizean mission and work with the poor eventually drew the Sisters back to their original charism. In the appendices, Edward T. Brett names the women who served in the mission and their dates of service, identifies women from the Belizean mission who entered religious life, and includes tributes written by some laity regarding the sisters' mission. The book will interest students and scholars in women's studies, Afro-Caribbean history, regional history of the South, the history of missions, education, and American Catholic history."

•Angelyn Dries, O.S.F., Saint Louis University

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## Customer Reviews

"Brett has crafted a meticulously researched study which he effectively situates within three streams of scholarly discourse: United States foreign mission history, African American Catholic history, and the history of women religious. Utilizing previously ignored archival documents as well as a substantial body of personal correspondence and interviews conducted with a broad, balanced spectrum of informants, he has produced a lucid study of an African American sisterhood's evolving concept of mission during a century of service. The racial component of his work makes it especially compelling in that he analyzes in nuanced fashion how the common African descent of both the missionaries and their target population simultaneously facilitated and complicated their interactions. Scholarly works examining African American women religious remain exceedingly rare. This book adds to this worthwhile but extremely underserved area a unique focus on their missionary activities." —Diane Batts Morrow, University of Georgia —[The Holy Family Sisters made a large contribution to the education of women in the Belizean mission, and work with the poor eventually drew the sisters back to their original charism. The book will interest students and scholars in women's studies, Afro-Caribbean history, regional history of the South, the history of missions, education, and American Catholic history.](#) —Angelyn Dries, O.S.F., Saint Louis University —["This short, informative text tells the little-known story of the foreign missionary efforts of one of the two oldest Catholic orders for African American women in the US, the New Orleans-based Sisters of the Holy Family.](#) —[Choice](#) —["Edward T. Brett engages extensive archival research, interviews with Holy Family sisters, and testimony by Garifuna community members to provide a compelling and comprehensive overview of the contributions of this pioneering group of women religious. He expertly contextualizes the work in the understudied history of African American Catholicism, U.S.](#)

mission history, and the history of women religious. . . . This is, in short, an important contribution to Catholic history that establishes the crucial role played by an African-descendent congregation in mission history. • The Catholic Historical Review • “Extensive interviews with and letters from the nuns authenticate the humanity in the Belize mission story. This narrative calls for additional work in the records of the Holy Family Sisters, whose voices must be more fully heard in American Catholic history. • American Catholic Studies • “This is an institutional narrative whose strength is Brett’s analysis of religious missionary life by black Catholics to black Catholics. . . . This volume is a welcome addition to the study of Black Catholic history, the examination of missiological approaches, insights into the lives of women religious, and Caribbean Catholic culture. • Theological Studies • “The New Orleans Sisters of the Holy Family: African American Missionaries to the Garifuna in Belize by Edward T. Brett is a significant contribution to Black Catholic history. Brett presents the history of the first overseas mission taken on by African American Catholic sisters. . . . Brett reveals the influence of the Second Vatican Council on the SSF women’s identity and ministry. • Journal of African American History

Edward T. Brett is professor of history at La Roche College. He is the author or co-author of a number of books, including *The U.S. Catholic Press on Central America: From Cold War Anticommunism to Social Justice* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

Wonderful insight into the history of the Sisters of the holy family as well as the historical context in which they as had to operate as individuals as well as a community in reaching their goal of service. Edward T. Brett is to be commended in telling their story.

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