

**Maris Stella McKeown, *Cabra Dominicans and All That Jazz: A Story of Dominican Sisters in Louisiana*, Dominican Publications, Dublin, 2006. ISBN 1 871552 97 4 (paperback), pp.235.**

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This book, with its extensive, thesis-style documentation, is essentially a case-study; it is also a contemporary study, taking 1968 to 2005 as its date range. Highly focused as it is on a small distinctive group of women, there is both a radical beginning and a sense of a mission accomplished (though still open-ended) at the conclusion. It constitutes a thoroughly explored, significant research undertaking that will prove of value when the passage of time has created a longer historical perspective on an era, all of whose local developments may not have been preserved in as comprehensive a context as the issues dealt with in this book.

In 1968, the historic Cabra Dominican mother house in Dublin received an 'urgent plea for help' (p.21) from the Dominican congregation in New Orleans which itself had been founded from Cabra in 1860 and, in the traditional canonical pattern for Second Order Dominican women at the time, become independent of its Irish house of origin. With expanding enrolments and insufficient staff in a period which still saw religious as predominantly the teaching personnel in Catholic schools, the New Orleans congregation now found itself unable to cater adequately for all its schools. Their initial request to Cabra was for four sisters for two years. At this time, the mid-1960s, membership of women's congregations in the English-speaking world reached a peak before the following decades' experience of progressive decline through both falling entries and increasing departures, as well as the inevitable ageing of their active members. (The diminution for the Cabra congregation, from a total of 802 members in 1968 to 392 in 2005, is given in Appendix 3.) Hence a particular relevance in the starting point.

Cabra appealed for volunteers for New Orleans and from among these two well-qualified and experienced sisters were chosen. On arrival in Louisiana, they joined the staff of St Leo the Great school and lived in community with local Dominican sisters. The immediate challenge was adaptation, first of all to teaching in a parish-owned school rather than in their own congregation-owned schools as in Ireland, then to an ethnically diverse school population comprising African-American, as well as European background, pupils. From the beginning these Irish women were fully committed to integration. In 1969, two further sisters were sought from Ireland to help staff another school. This search itself was part of a wider phenomenon than the need evidenced among these Louisiana Dominicans. In the post World War II decades, sisters were sought from Ireland to supplement Catholic school staffs in similar need across the United States. In the diocese of New Orleans alone at a gathering in 1991, we read (p. 166), Irish-born sisters with mother houses in Ireland represented five separate institutes, including the Mercy and Presentation both of which had made a number of independent foundations in the USA in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a movement similar to that of the Cabra Dominicans.

By 1970, the four Cabra sisters in Louisiana were facing a challenge: would they return to Ireland or remain? If they remained, would they transfer to the Louisiana congregation or form a separate community remaining under the jurisdiction of Cabra? The latter alternative was chosen and put into effect from 1971. The Cabra sisters, joined by a further two from Ireland, now formed one community and were ceded the St Leo the Great school as their

responsibility. Over the years, more Irish sisters came while several of those in Louisiana returned to postings in Ireland. In all, thirty-five Cabra sisters served in the United States, with eight remaining in 2005. In 1978, with three communities of sisters there teaching in three schools, the Cabra administration constituted Louisiana as a Region under its own elected vicar, or regional superior. Progressively, in the contemporary evolution of most women's religious institutes, the sisters became involved, individually or in small groupings, in a variety of ministries, while the schools were increasingly staffed by lay teachers.

As the involvement of each sister is documented, beginning with their success as effective educators – attested to by the public awards for excellence gained by their schools – the contribution of this small number of women becomes evident. Both by individual initiatives and in collaboration with established agencies for social relief, by representation on bodies such as the Dominican Leadership Conference (a national organisation representing Dominican men and women from thirty congregations and provinces), these enterprising Irish women inserted themselves in the ongoing dynamic of American life. As they reached out to wider needs and openings, they identified with New Orleans and its unique culture, comparing their varied contribution to a typical New Orleans festival band: “But we are that jazz band where a few make plenty of sound with spontaneity and creativity”. (p.171)

Interwoven with their experiences, and exemplified by them, are the adaptations progressively made in their religious life-style over the decades of this study and their developing concern with justice issues such as racism and oppression of minorities. Together with these shifts in ministerial involvements and priority of issues, a constant remained: the supportive and facilitating backdrop of an international congregation, the Cabra Dominicans. (It is of interest that this extensive congregation, itself the result in the 1920s of an Ireland-wide amalgamation of independent houses, came to subsume the 19<sup>th</sup> century Cabra-derived overseas foundations except in Louisiana, Australia and New Zealand.).