

”More Zulu than the Zulus” – Mission and Identity Across Continents

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The paper deals with the life stories of Catholic mission nuns in South Africa. Born in Austria and Germany between 1912 and 1942 the interviewed sisters entered the order of the Sisters of the Precious Blood after World War II. After their religious formation in Europe they were sent to South Africa where the order has maintained several mission stations since the end of the 19th century.

Over the past 60 years several profound transformations have challenged not only the Catholic mission itself but also the identity of its members. First, the political changes in South Africa, with the end of the apartheid regime, changed the framework for Catholic congregations for religious, social and institutional activities. Second, within the Catholic Church itself, the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, changed the understanding of monastic life and mission work. Third, mission orders have suffered from a dramatic decrease in members since the 1970s. Fourth, since the 1960s, indigenous women have been officially integrated in the congregation and, at present, the “young” generation of mission sisters is black and is taking over the leading positions.

The paper presents how these shifts of values and historical realities shape the self-presentations of the last generation of European mission sisters in South Africa. On the other hand the profound changes within the religious community and its engagement in South Africa is discussed.