

Silence, Disobedience, and African Catholic Sisters in Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract: This article considers the choices made during the apartheid era by Catholic sisters who were members of one of the largest orders for African women, the Montebello Dominicans, based in KwaZulu-Natal, and one of the smallest orders, the Companions of Saint Angela, based in Soweto, the sprawling African township to the southwest of Johannesburg. The Montebellos took an apolitical stance and embraced “silence,” but they could not avoid the political tensions that defined KwaZulu-Natal. The Companions became activists, whose “disobedience” brought them into direct confrontation with the state. History, region, ethnicity, and timing help explain what it meant for African women religious to be apolitical, and what it meant to be politicized, in the context of state repression so effective that every action could be interpreted as a political act.

Résumé: Cet article évalue les choix des sœurs catholiques pendant l’Apartheid, qui étaient membres d’un des plus grands ordres pour les africaines, les dominicaines de Montebello, basées dans le KwaZulu-Natal, ainsi que l’un des ordres les plus petits, les compagnes de St Angela à Soweto, le township tentaculaire du sud ouest de Johannesburg. Les sœurs de Montebello restèrent neutres politiquement, et adoptèrent un statut “silencieux,” tout en ne pouvant éviter les tensions politiques qui régnaient dans le KwaZulu-Natal. Les compagnes s’engagèrent alors politiquement, et leurs actes d’insubordination les poussèrent à un état de confrontation directe avec l’état. Le contexte historique, régional et ethnique, ainsi que l’époque permettent de comprendre la signification d’un choix de neutralité ou d’engagement pour les religieuses africaines, dans un état de répression si percutante que tout acte risquait d’être interprété comme un acte politique.

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On a street corner in Johannesburg's city center in September 1977, a sobbing white woman embraced Sr. Mary Modise, the newly elected moderator general of the Companions of Saint Angela, a Catholic religious order for African women. "They have killed him," the woman cried to the sister, who was readily identifiable by her religious habit. "Who has been killed?" Modise inquired. "Steve Biko," the woman answered. Recalling the incident almost thirty years later, Modise admitted that, ironically, despite the Companions' experience of oppression and the sisters' growing activism, she had not known who Biko was (Modise 2005).¹

Steve Biko's death in police custody followed the June 1976 uprising of schoolchildren in Soweto, the large African township outside of Johannesburg. Students demonstrated to protest the inferior education mandated by the apartheid state, and the Soweto uprising marked the beginning of what was essentially a low-grade civil war in South Africa. Black residential areas were heavily patrolled by police, resisters were jailed and tortured, and freedom of speech and assembly were severely restricted. Biko had been an outspoken advocate of the ideology of Black Consciousness, "in essence the realization by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers round the cause of their subjection—the blackness of their skin—and to operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude" (Thompson 2000:212). Black Consciousness may have played a role in inspiring the 1976 demonstrations, though how deeply students or Catholic religious women—black or white—understood the subtleties of Biko's philosophy, which was not fundamentally antiwhite, is open to question. Black activists on the ground reacted not to ideology, but to the embrace of blackness in opposition to whiteness (see Tlhalagale 2005; Malueke 2008:116–17).

Sr. Mary Modise was not alone in her ignorance. In his history of the Catholic Church under apartheid, David Ryall (1998:182–86) identified four "radical black clergy and religious." Three were priests: Fr. Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, a leading exponent of so-called liberation theology who served as secretary general of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC); Fr. Mandlenkhosi Zwane, bishop of Manzini in Swaziland; and Fr. Buti Tlhalagale, OMI. The fourth was Sr. Bernard Ncube, a Companion of Saint Angela. Ncube drew the Companions into the struggle for freedom, and she also benefited from the cohesiveness of the order as a faith community, its embrace of ethnic diversity, and the sisters' presence in Johannesburg's black townships during some of the most pitched battles against the apartheid state.

Most African women who joined Catholic religious orders in South Africa did not become activists. African sisters were a minority in a minority Church: 10 percent of Christians are Catholic, and while about 80 percent of Catholics are African, only about 30 percent of religious sisters are black. African women usually found their options limited to segregated orders, and sisters were subject, at least initially, to white women superiors and white priests.

Apartheid laws introduced after 1948 constrained them still further. In response, the great majority of African sisters practiced what Kathleen Boner has described as the expediency of “silent obedience” (2000:319). This was the path taken by one of the largest orders, the Montebello Dominicans, and it was largely true even of one its most dynamic members, Sr. Michael Mdluli, who served as prioress general for a decade beginning in 1993 (personal interview, Durban, 2008). The choice the Montebellos made was not unique to women religious. As Peter Walshe (1997) has argued, passivity characterized South Africa’s churches in general, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Independent. Only in 1977 did the SACBC forcefully condemn apartheid, and Protestant clergy who had spoken out in the 1960s were deported or jailed. By the late 1970s, Christian activists risked torture and assassination if they dared confront the state. At the same time, however, at least one African sister, Sr. Bernard Ncube, embraced overt disobedience, and the Companions of Saint Angela supported her. And while the Montebello Dominicans and Sr. Michael Mdluli eschewed political activism, they could not escape the fraught politics of rural Natal altogether. Beginning in the 1970s they were forced by circumstance to negotiate the conflict between warring political factions during the transition to democracy. Although silence almost always proved expedient for the Montebello Dominicans, therefore, its meaning changed over time.

By comparing these two orders and the experiences of the two women, this article explores what it meant for African women religious to be apolitical in apartheid South Africa, and what it meant to become politicized in the context of state repression so effective that every action could be interpreted as a political act. History, region, ethnicity, and timing are among the factors that help explain the different decisions and actions taken by the Montebello Dominicans and the Companions of Saint Angela.

Montebello Dominicans

The Dominican Sisters of Montebello make up one-third of all African women religious in KwaZulu-Natal Province.² The order was founded in 1926 by the Oakford Dominicans as a separate but affiliated novitiate in response to the request of three young African women to join the community.³ Long before the introduction of apartheid in 1948, South Africa was a segregated society and Natal Province, as it was then called, was mostly rural and counted sugar cane among its major crops. The largest African state in the region, the Zulu kingdom, had been defeated by the British in 1879. The British incorporated “Zululand” into the Natal Colony, and after 1910 they were the dominant European settlers in the Natal Province of the new Union of South Africa.

It is a common stereotype in South Africa that the descendants of English-speaking settlers were more liberal in their dealings with Africans than the Afrikaans-speakers, the descendants of seventeenth-century Dutch set-

tlers who would introduce apartheid. The argument is hard to sustain for Natal Province, where white settlers, vastly outnumbered by the defeated Zulu, “were only too acutely aware of their own weakness.” The colonial state and the province that succeeded it bolstered chiefly power in an effort to stabilize and pacify the rural areas and enforced order with the threat of state violence designed to insure white “hegemony in a segregated and class-divided society” (Marks 1986:27,40). Only a few black men had the right to vote, and Africans had only limited access to public funds even though they paid annual taxes on their houses. White attitudes to blacks were paternalistic: “they” lived communally, their houses were rondavels or “huts,” they ate different food and had different customs.⁴ It was thus in keeping both with the culture of Natal Province and with the broader expectations of Europeans in Africa that the Oakford Dominicans would establish a separate community for young African women at Montebello, between Durban on the coast and the capital at Pietermaritzburg, fifty miles to the northwest.

The foundress, Mother M. Euphemia Ruf, a German Oakford Dominican, accepted the three young African women as candidates in February 1925 and presented them as postulants in August 1926. Ruf served as novice mistress, superior, and eventually principal of the school at Montebello. She was assisted by two Oakford Dominicans, Sr. M. Josephine Peter and Sr. M. Lucina Angerer, also Germans (ACAD 1959). Despite Ruf’s leadership, African sisters existed in a sort of limbo; lacking the voting rights of white Oakford Dominicans, they could not participate fully in the life of the community. To remedy this inequity, Ruf requested independent status for the Montebello sisters in 1938. The proposed constitution for the congregation was approved in 1939 and affiliation to the Dominican Order granted in 1940. A revised constitution was approved in 1957 and in 1960 the three white Oakford Dominicans guiding the congregation became Montebello Dominicans (ACAD n.d.).

On the wall of the Montebello house in Durban hang framed photographs of the first five prioresses general of the order, beginning with Mother Euphemia Ruf (1960–72) and ending with Sr. Michael Mdluli (1993–2004). At the point that Ruf officially became prioress general, she had been leading the congregation for more than three decades, and therein lies part of the explanation for Montebello silence. As Sr. Michael Mdluli recalled (personal interview, Durban, 2008), the dynamic between the German and the African sisters could be tense. The German sisters did not eat with the African sisters and the quality of food for African sisters was inferior; African sisters were treated like children, were reminded that they were privileged to be members of the order, and performed the hard physical labor—mostly domestic work.

Cultural and racial tensions did not stop African women from pursuing religious vocations, however. Sr. Michael was born Judith Mdluli in Stanger, north of Durban, in 1942, where her family had a small sugarcane farm

(personal interview, Durban, 2008). Her mother was a Catholic who worked as a domestic servant in the local hospital. Her father, who had attended an American Missionary Board school, converted to Catholicism only on his deathbed. He had worked on the mines in Johannesburg and succumbed to miner's phthisis in 1955 at the age of thirty-nine, when his only child was thirteen. In 1957 Veronica Mdluli sent her daughter to Oakford Priory, where she thrived. Though there were separate schools for African, Indian, and white children on the Oakford property, students attended mass together and Sr. Michael recalled an open and integrated environment where students were valued.

Judith Mdluli's desire to join the Dominicans in 1959, at the age of seventeen, greatly distressed her mother, who felt that her only child was running away. Eventually her mother relented, observing that she could not "fight with God," and Mdluli joined the Montebellos in 1960. Her extended family was much less supportive of her decision, condemning her as evil and asking "what sort of God would take the only child?" Non-Catholic Africans found the concept of a celibate woman religious laughable, and Catholic Zulu families such as Mdluli's often objected more strongly, insisting that they had not relinquished their daughters completely to the Church. African women were expected to marry and through marriage to contribute *lobola* (the bridewealth paid by a groom) to their natal family. They were also expected to bear and raise children. Thus Catholic African sisters remained part of their birth family and in a sense perpetual children—their voices silenced inside and outside the community's walls (Mdluli 2008; see Brain & Christensen 1999:271)

In Mdluli's case, her father's family disowned her, an experience that was not unique. Sr. Immaculata Ngubane, also a Zulu and an Oakford Dominican, faced similar opposition from her three brothers when she sought to join the order in 1956 at the age of sixteen (personal interview, Johannesburg, 2008). Though Ngubane's mother had converted to Catholicism in 1942 after her husband's death, the extended family was polygynous and Sr. Immaculata's solution was to move to Durban and work for five years in order to pay her own *lobola* to her brothers. She joined the Oakford Dominicans in 1961 as a legal adult at age twenty-one, and acknowledged that she found a freedom as a religious that she could not have enjoyed had she entered a Zulu marriage as demanded by her brothers.

That Mdluli joined the Montebello Dominicans and Ngubane the Oakford Dominicans was a matter of timing. The Oakford Dominicans opened a new affiliated congregation for African women in 1961, the year after Mdluli joined the Montebellos. Membership in a pontifical order (whose members could be posted anywhere in the world) gave Ngubane some freedoms that Mdluli did not enjoy; she spent many years abroad, studying and working in Swaziland and in Rome, while Mdluli stayed in Natal working as a teacher and then principal of the high school at Montebello, a post she held from 1970 to 1992. Mdluli's experiences were shaped by the region in

which she lived and worked. As a youngster of eighteen in 1960 when she joined the Montebello order, she really did not think about the apartheid system that had been introduced by the National Party in 1948—though she acknowledged that she did encounter implicit racism within the order.

Companions of Saint Angela

In contrast to the Montebello Dominicans, the Companions of Saint Angela were explicitly a creation of apartheid South Africa and arguably an example of the Church's complicity with the state. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Church officials, keen to avoid any suggestion of disloyalty to a state that regarded Catholics as the *Roomse gevaar* (Roman threat), regularly consulted with Prime Minister D. F. Malan and representatives of the National Party (see Abraham 1989; Brain 1997). The 1952 "Statement on Race Relations" of the SACBC, for example, was carefully worded to avoid openly criticizing apartheid policies: "The great majority of non-Europeans, and particularly . . . Africans," the bishops observed, "have not yet reached a stage of development that would justify their integration into a homogenous society with the European" (Ryall 1998:52).

The search for common ground may have influenced the decision of William Patrick Whelan, then bishop of Johannesburg, to establish the Companions of Saint Angela (CSA). The diocesan order for African women (whose members remained within a particular diocese) was initially directed by the Ursulines. He was likely responding to the passage of the 1953 Bantu Education Act, which placed African education under government control and withdrew subsidies to mission schools. Many English-speaking private Protestant schools closed rather than accept government control; most Catholic schools did not. Whelan was concerned, according to Sr. Mary Modise, who joined the order at seventeen as one of its first postulants in January 1955, that the strict laws of apartheid would limit the Church's outreach to Africans (personal interview, Soweto, 2005; Modise 2003). Whelan's conservative approach appeared to some to condone apartheid and it placed him at odds with Denis Hurley, the more progressive archbishop of Durban, who advocated overt political action against an increasingly oppressive state (see Kearney 2009).

Of the nine African women who joined the Companions of Saint Angela in January 1955, four had lived in Sophiatown, a black suburb of Johannesburg deemed a slum and cleared to make room for the white suburb of Triomf following the introduction of the strict residential segregation dictated by the 1950 Group Areas Act. Two were from Soweto, the large African area to the southwest of Johannesburg. Two came from Potchefstroom, in the Orange Free State, where their families had been relocated to the African township of Ikageng.

In comparison to the Montebello Dominicans, who counted ninety-nine sisters in the late 1950s, the Companions were a small order. Unlike the

Zulu Montebellos, the Companions came from a variety of African groups: Sotho, Tswana, Xhosa, and Zulu. Despite their diversity, they experienced little ethnic tension, and according to Modise (personal interview, Soweto, 2005) considered themselves “a homogenous group” because they were all “African women from within the geographical region of South Africa” (Modise 2003:59). This viewpoint was rooted in the cosmopolitan nature of Johannesburg, a large and ethnically mixed city which had been drawing migrants to work in its gold mines for seventy years. Like the Montebello Dominicans, the Companions were initially supervised by white superiors. They were welcomed to St. Mary’s African Mission at Munsieville by two English Ursuline sisters released from their home community to guide the new congregation: Gertrude Moran, who served as prioress general, and Antoinette Carroll, the mistress of novices.⁵

The two Englishwomen supervised the formal training of their African postulants, who memorized the Rule of St. Augustine and read the history of the order’s patron saint, Angela Merici. Silence was dictated and singing and dancing prohibited. When Moran encountered the young women dancing and singing the Xhosa hymn “Vuka Deborah” (Arise Deborah) one day as they did the ironing, she told them that “the song and dance sounded like a witchdoctor’s” (Ntogaë 2003:13). The observation reflected Moran’s racial and cultural prejudices. The Englishwoman did not know that the beloved nineteenth-century hymn, by the African composer John Knox Bokwe, celebrated the Old Testament victory of the Israelites, led by the prophetess Deborah, against the Canaanites. For whatever reason, her African postulants did not enlighten their prioress. English became the language of the community, and European manners the standard to emulate. Still, for the most part the African postulants remained “happy and eager to learn and become Sisters” (Ntogaë 2003:14; see Opland 1996:94,n2).

Not far from St. Mary’s Mission, the opposition movement against apartheid was gaining momentum. On June 26, 1955, on the outskirts of Johannesburg in Kliptown, three thousand delegates—African, Indian, Coloured, and white—attended the Congress of the People convened by the African National Congress (ANC). Before police broke up the gathering, the delegates agreed to support the Freedom Charter, the document that would underpin the ANC’s activism for the next four decades. Both a list of grievances and an assertion of basic human rights, the charter proclaimed that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people” (Thompson 2000:208).

The nine women who began their novitiate in the first week of July 1955 after six months as postulants were largely oblivious to the seismic change that had happened nearby. Nekie Zellie Ncube, who took the religious name Sister Mary Bernard, observed of herself at twenty, “When I took the veil in 1955, I had an idealistic desire to make myself holy so that I could go to heaven when I die” (Pace 1992:151). Ncube’s idealism was in

keeping with Whelan's vision for the order, inspired by the vision of the sixteenth-century Venetian nun Angela Merici. For the bishop, "the primary aim of the congregation is not to have teachers, nurses, etc, at our disposal, but that its members devote themselves to the complete service of God" (Modise 2003:51).

Ultimately, however, all twenty of the Companions who joined between 1955 and 1971 became teachers. Six sisters left; the remaining fourteen taught in Catholic primary schools: St. Angela's School in Dobsonville, St. Peter's School in Lewisham, Kagiso, and St. Mary's School, which was also moved to Kagiso. At Kagiso—as Whelan had hoped—the sisters found a welcoming community open to their missionary efforts. Though the sisters were young, people quickly began calling them "mother," a term of respect acknowledging their service to the community. When two Companions were stopped by police in 1969 and asked to produce their identity documents, one of the officers chastised his partner for bothering the sisters because "they are our mothers" (Modise 2003:70).⁶ Although police harassment was the common experience of the people living in the sprawling black townships around Johannesburg in the late 1960s, the sisters were still somewhat insulated from it.

The Second Vatican Council and Change

For the most part, the great events that reshaped South Africa's political and social landscape in the 1960s passed the sisters by. Prayer and duty structured their daily lives as teachers or nurses. Few had access to newspapers or radios, and conversation within most convents was strictly regulated. Circumstance, therefore, rendered them effectively apolitical. Most had no direct knowledge of the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960, for example, where police fired on members of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) protesting pass laws that limited workers' freedom of movement. Nor were they aware of the arrest of Nelson Mandela of the ANC in 1963, or the treason trial in 1964 that sentenced him and his fellow defendants to life in prison. The emergence in 1968 of Steve Biko, a young Anglican student activist who had attended Catholic schools in Natal, and his advocacy of a new philosophy of resistance—Black Consciousness—also went unnoticed (interview with Immaculata Devine, Pretoria, 2005).

The 1960s were a period of dramatic change within the Catholic Church, however. Denis Hurley, who had clashed with William Whelan over the response of the Church to apartheid, spent time in Rome serving on the Commission on Seminaries and Education called by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). A committed social activist, Hurley helped establish one of the first South African Justice and Peace Commissions—an innovation recommended by the Council—in Durban in 1968.

The recommendations of the Second Vatican Council in regard to women religious ranged from calls to modernize religious dress to state-

ments about larger matters, such as reviewing constitutions, reemphasizing prayer, and encouraging greater dialogue between superiors and sisters. Before Vatican II, a prioress general and her councilors exercised considerable authority over property, finances, and the transfer of sisters between communities. After Vatican II, a given order's leader was expected to consult with her sisters: "There was to be greater freedom of speech and the right to have and express opinions" (Brain & Christensen 1999:272).⁷

Congregations responded to these directives in a variety of ways. The initial reaction of the Montebello Dominicans to the Vatican II reforms was silence. As Sr. Michael Mdluli recalled, "the German mothers banned Vatican II" (personal interview, Durban, 2008). But while Mother Euphemia Ruf may have prohibited discussion of the Vatican II reforms, she could not escape them. Under the Council's innovations, and after thirty-four years leading the congregation, she was restricted to two more terms of six years each as prioress general and her second term was slated to end in 1972 (Mdluli 2008; ACAD 1972c).

At age eighty-one, Ruf began actively searching for a successor. An early favorite was an African sister, Bonaventura Cele, who had earned a B.A. at Pius XII College in Lesotho in the early 1960s. For reasons that are unclear, Cele fell out with Ruf, and by September 1970 Cele was writing to Denis Hurley and asking to be transferred to the Dominican Speyer congregation in Germany. She was not alone; in 1970 and 1971 twenty-six sisters, or about 20 percent of the Montebello congregation, many of them nurses and trained teachers, left. The exodus revealed the class division within the order between those with higher or professional education and those without. It also revealed a generational divide, since it was mostly better-educated younger members who left. In their professional lives as nurses and teachers, the younger sisters had considerable autonomy and they resented Ruf's authoritarian rule (ACAD 1970a, 1970b, 1972a).

Over the next five years, tensions escalated, and the domestic turmoil within the community seemed to turn the Montebellos more and more inward, reinforcing their isolation from the broader South African society. In 1972 Archbishop Hurley made two extended visits to the community and interviewed many of the members. His efforts only heightened the divisions between those sisters who wished Ruf to remain and those who wanted her to retire; that an elderly German sister was fighting a middle-aged white South African cleric to maintain control of her order in a patriarchal church made gender part of Ruf's struggle. Ironically, though Ruf's obstreperous personality contributed to her failure to retain control of the order she had helped found, she might have succeeded in keeping more of the younger sisters if she had been willing to introduce the reforms of Vatican II, some of which were intended to broaden the role of women religious in the church (ACAD 1972d, 1973, 1974).⁸ She won a key battle when Hurley, frustrated by his inability to persuade Ruf to retire, asked the German-speaking Elmar Schmid, the Bishop of Mariannhill, to intervene. In

the end, Ruf lost. In 1973 Schmid was appointed by the Vatican as apostolic visitor to investigate Montebello, and he replaced Ruf with a white priest, Fr. Raphael Studerus, who administered the order while Schmid searched for a permanent replacement.

Relative calm was restored with the appointment in June 1975 of Mother Fromunda Zimmerman. At sixty-one, she had just retired as superior of the King William's Town Dominicans, which had also begun as a German order (ACAD 1975a, 1975b). They had accepted their first African candidates in 1929, and ignoring the recommendations of the apostolic delegate and the Bishop of King William's Town, had made black women full voting members of the congregation. Yet African women religious still encountered prejudice. They spent two years as candidates and one year as postulants—twice the time required of whites passing through these stages. African sisters also sat at the back of the church, took communion after the white sisters, and ate their meals in the kitchen instead of the dining room. Though these racial slights weighed heavily on them, by 1958 the King Dominicans had forty-one black sisters drawn from a variety of ethnic groups. In July of that year the King Dominicans reluctantly split their congregation in two in order to adhere to apartheid legislation that forbade black and white sisters to live together unless the black sisters served as domestic servants. The new diocesan congregation was named the Dominican Sisters of the Congregation of St. Martin de Porres of the Diocese of Port Elizabeth, but black sisters remained unhappy with the split and in 1966 they voted to rejoin the King Dominicans. By 1970 apartheid law permitted a qualified reunification, provided that black sisters did not serve in an administrative capacity (interview with Stella Hlatshwako, Johannesburg, 2006; see also Schäffler 2002; Gouws 1977).

Zimmerman thus brought to the Montebello Dominicans extensive experience working with African sisters and a degree of sensitivity to the potential tensions between black sisters and white superiors. Bishop Schmid oversaw the election of her advisory General Council by secret ballot, and as Hurley had done following his 1972 visits, Schmid rejected the results as “block voting.” Many sisters had clearly consulted with each other in advance of the vote and had written down the same six councilors in the same order on their ballots. In an open letter to the Montebello sisters, Schmid chastised them for manipulating the vote, warned them not to be “surprised or upset if Rome does not entirely approve of the numerical results of the proposals you made in the secret ballot,” and urged them to accept “the Roman decision (when it comes)” (ACAD 1975c:1–2).

Zimmerman visited all the departments at Montebello and read Schmid's letter aloud. “The reaction,” she reported to Hurley, “was invariably ‘passive.’ I think Your Grace knows their ‘silences’ in such situations. I tried to encourage them to accept things now, and then to cooperate with the General Council” (ACAD 1975d). The General Council proposed by Schmid was approved by Rome in July 1975. It included one Ruf loyal-

ist, Gemma Khuzwayo; among the remaining five councilors was Michael Mdluli (ACAD 1975e). Remarkably, as Hurley and Schmid had hoped, “reason and Christian faith” did prevail. By early October, Zimmerman reported “that there are signs, though very slight ones, of a more hopeful movement from within” (ACAD 1975g). Soon after her installation she introduced the innovations of the Second Vatican Council, setting up workshops on spiritual formation and prayer, encouraging open dialogue, and arranging opportunities for sisters to further their academic studies. It would be another eleven years, however, before the Dominican Sisters of Montebello elected their first African prioress general, Sr. Ignatia Hlatshwayo, in 1986 (ACAD 1975f, 1975g).

For the Companions of Saint Angela, by contrast, the transition from white rule to black rule in the wake of Vatican II was far less dramatic. Gertrude Moran, who had led the congregation since 1955, died in 1972. She was replaced by Antoinette Carroll, who had helped Moran found the order. Carroll retired at the end of 1976, and Monsignor A. Kelly was appointed interim moderator general. In July 1977 Mary Modise was elected the first African moderator general of this small diocesan order of fourteen African sisters (Modise 2003).

Political Upheaval

Modise had joined the Companions of Saint Angela at one turning point in South Africa’s history, and she became the order’s leader at another watershed moment. A year earlier, schoolchildren in Soweto had begun protesting the government’s plan to introduce Afrikaans as the language of instruction in about half of the subjects. For students, “the language of the oppressor” added further insult to the injury of twenty years of inferior “Bantu education.” The Soweto uprising sparked protests across South Africa, and by early 1977 almost six hundred protesters were dead. In February the SACBC issued a “Declaration of Commitment,” affirming that

we are on the side of the oppressed and, as we have committed ourselves to working within our Church for a clearer expression of solidarity with the poor and the deprived, so we commit ourselves equally to working for peace through justice in fraternal collaboration with all other churches, agencies and persons dedicated to this cause. (Abraham 1989:14)

In embracing ecumenism and deciding to oppose the apartheid state openly, the male hierarchy of the SACBC was following the lead of many women religious. In September 1975 the Association of Women Religious (AWR) had resolved to accept “non-white Christians” in a process of “quiet infiltration, with no sought-after publicity” into previously all-white Catholic schools (Boner 2000:323). In 1953 the schools had been at the center of Catholic complicity with the apartheid state; in January 1976 they sat at the

heart of the Church's opposition to the state.

Not all South African Catholics were pleased with these changes in Church policy. Conservative whites founded the Catholic Defence League in 1980 and objected to the Church's taking any political stance whatsoever. Black and white critics on the left argued that the opening up of Catholic schools, the SACBC's "Declaration of Commitment," and the appointment of African bishops were little more than a theater of reform that posed "no great threat to the status quo" (Abraham 1989:14; Brain 1997:208–9)—a criticism that might have been extended to the election of Sr. Mary Modise as moderator of a tiny order of African sisters under the authority of a white male bishop.

In response to the critics on the left, the SACBC in 1980 appointed an African priest, Fr. Smangalis Mkhathswa, as the conference's secretary general, and the bishops met more often with the South African Council of Churches, which represented the progressive Protestant churches (see Borer 1998). They also opposed the new constitution introduced in 1983 which extended voting rights to South Africa's Indian and Coloured minorities but not to Africans. In 1984 the SACBC funded the newspaper the *New Nation* under the editorship of Zwelakhe Sisulu, whose father had been jailed with Nelson Mandela twenty years earlier. It was a tacit endorsement of the African National Congress. In 1985 the Institute of Contextual Theology, dedicated to adapting liberation theology to a complex South African context that included Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and African religions, issued the *Kairos Document*, which called on Christians to "unmask and confront the structures of evil and injustice" that characterized the racist apartheid state (Walshe 1997:392; Klaaren 1997:375; UWHP 1985). Catholic clerics helped draft the document; among its one hundred and fifty signatories were Mkhathswa and Sr. Bernard Ncube.

Radical Religious

When Nekie Zellie Ncube joined the Companions of Saint Angela in 1955, she had been the kind of religious whom Fr. Mandlenkhosi Zwane, the outspoken Bishop of Manzini in Swaziland, described as a "good cultic Christian" who ignored the "unchangeable *status quo*" and looked to the reward of heaven. But eventually, Zwane predicted, apartheid would "conscientize *all* the blacks in South Africa to a violent rejection of the entire system and those who benefit from it" (Walshe 1997:385). Indeed, twenty-five years spent teaching school children in Kagiso and defusing confrontations between local residents and the police had radicalized Ncube even before she joined the staff of the SACBC in 1980, and in 1981 she joined Sr. Margaret Kelly, an Irishwoman and a Cabra Dominican, in the Sisters' Project.⁹ The Cabra Dominicans had been at the forefront of the movement to open Catholic schools to students of all races in 1975. Kelly was also the SACBC's publication officer. Beginning in September 1981, the two women traveled

the countryside holding seminars and workshops for black and white sisters in what was essentially a consciousness-raising exercise about South Africa's apartheid history and the need for sisters to get involved in the Church's Justice and Peace Commissions (SACBC 1981a, 1981b, 1981c, 1981d).

It was this work that brought Ncube to the attention of the police. On March 4, 1983, she was arrested at the Companions of Saint Angela convent in Kagiso. She was confined to her room, ordered to strip, and subjected to a body cavity search by a female officer. The convent was also searched. Ncube was charged with possession of banned publications, among them, a speech by the exiled leader of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, and an article titled "Total War in South Africa," and served four months in prison (UWHP 1983a, 1983b, 1983c).

In August 1983 an unrepentant Ncube attended the Institute of Contextual Theology's conference on "Black Theology Revisited" and gave an address on "Black Women's Liberation Theology." In the South African context, Black Theology was "a theology of struggle—in the township, church, and university" (Klaaren 1997:377). In Ncube's opinion, the black South African woman

already recognizes her anomalous position and desires a change. A change that would teach her really to live and show her how to take full responsibility of her own life. To be effective in society, giving her the right of the freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of criticisms to the leaders of the Church and state, and freedom of research with her God given talents. (UWHP 1983d:57)

That feminism was a legitimate concern of the liberation movement was an idea that fell largely on deaf ears inside and outside the Church (see Magaziner 2010). Ncube flirted with gender politics, but her argument was not consistent; the balance of her speech cast women in conventional roles unlikely to offend the sensibilities of the Catholic Church or African communities: "The primary function . . . and the sublime mission which God himself has set a woman is motherhood. . . . To this end . . . the Creator has fashioned the whole of woman's nature; not only her organism, but also and still more her spirit" (UWHP 1983d:58). Ncube was not ready to take the step that Bishop Zwane feared would be the course of action of all black Christians living under apartheid—to leave the Church.

She was, however, angry. She courted rearrest by carrying a copy of the ANC's Freedom Charter hidden in the waistband of her habit (interview with Theodora Dlamini, Welkom, Free State, 2009). In the early 1980s, the charter was central to how the outlawed ANC imagined a postapartheid South Africa. In its assertion that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white," the charter was a liberal document, but it also advocated the nationalization of banks and mines, socialist principles that had led the apartheid state to ban it. Ncube identified with the ANC, though

some of her actions seemed to move her closer to the Black Consciousness Movement's rejection of alliances with liberal whites. She rejoined Sr. Margaret Kelly in the SACBC's Sisters' Project, but at workshops and seminars she railed against white sisters in particular, dismissing as racist even an audience sympathetic to the need for political and social change. In May 1984 Marilyn Aitken, the coordinator of the SACBC's Justice and Reconciliation Commission, concerned about the impact of Ncube's public anger, suspended the Sisters' Project. Aitken's decision incensed the SACBC's secretary general, Fr. Smangaliso Mkhathshwa. Prominent white sisters, among them the Cabra Dominican prioress general, Marian O'Sullivan, also chastised Aitken. The Association of Women Religious stepped into the vacuum, resurrecting the Sisters' Project in 1985 and drawing an African King Dominican sister, Bernard Fantisi, into the effort.¹⁰

Ncube continued her activism, founding the Federation of Transvaal Women (Fedtraw) in December 1984 to help African women advocate for their legal and economic rights. In January 1986 she was arrested at a Fedtraw-sponsored consumer boycott meeting in Kagiso (UWHP 1986a). In June she was arrested again, this time on charges of sedition, along with fourteen members of the Krugersdorp Resident's Committee. The detainees included two other Companions of Saint Angela—Sr. Christine Obetseng and Sr. Raphael Molokane. They were jailed for a year; Ncube spent sixteen months in detention, an experience she likened to being "an animal in a cage" (UWHP 1986a). Released on bail in October 1987, she was permitted, ironically, to live in an Ursuline convent for white sisters in Johannesburg, but prohibited from entering Soweto, Krugersdorp, or any of the other nearby African townships, and "restricted from participating in any political . . . or civic association meetings" (UWHP 1986b). A month later Sr. Brigid Rose Tiernan, a white Zimbabwean Sister of Notre Dame who had also been active in the SACBC's Justice and Peace Department, interviewed Ncube for the *Justice and Peace News*. With only the Bible to read during her confinement, Ncube told Tiernan, "my favourite prophet came to be Habbakuk. I loved Habbakuk; as I fought with my God, I saw him fighting in the same way. 'Why do you show me so much suffering? What do you want me to do about it?'" The answer, for a reflective Bernard Ncube in late 1987, was Habbakuk 2:4, "the just, through his faith, will he live" (UWHP 1987). Ncube would not abandon the struggle, but she did, through her interview with Tiernan, reembrace her white fellow sisters.

Sr. Bernard Ncube was the most radical African sister in the 1980s, but she was not the only black woman religious to draw the attention of authorities. Theodora Dlamini, a King William's Town sister working for the SACBC in Cape Town as an outreach coordinator for Chiro, a Catholic youth movement, also felt the heat. Her efforts to coordinate the faith-based activities of Chiro with those of the Young Christian Students (YCS) and Young Christian Workers (YCW) brought her to the attention of the police. A much more retiring figure than Ncube, Dlamini managed to con-

vince authorities in a series of interviews that none of the organizations was political in nature (personal interview, Welkom, Free State, 2009).

Around the same time the Montebello Dominicans in rural Natal Province, having achieved a degree of domestic peace under Zimmerman's leadership, found they could not avoid politics. At the high school in Dalton, where Sr. Michael Mdluli was now the principal, students rioted in June 1976 when they heard what had happened in Soweto. Mdluli called the police and shut down the school. Zimmerman helped her reopen it in August, and they assessed each student a fine of R20 (US\$20) to pay for broken windows, desks, and chairs. Their goal was that students "see the effect of destroying things that belong to you" (interview with Michael Mdluli, Durban, 2008). Mdluli also took the students on a retreat to help them deal with the trauma. In December 1976, when many students elsewhere in the country still had not returned to school, 96 percent of the three hundred and fifty Montebello students who took the state-mandated high school-leaving matriculation examinations received passing grades.

To further increase solidarity among Montebello students, Mdluli established a chapter of the YCS, a decision that prompted visits from the Special Branch of the South African police and inspectors from the KwaZulu "homeland" government (interview with Michael Mdluli, Durban, 2008). KwaZulu was the largest of the ten homelands created by the apartheid state, beginning in the 1950s. Ostensibly the homelands (or Bantustans) offered Africans citizenship and a set of political rights separate from those of "white" South Africans, despite their almost complete financial dependence on the apartheid state. Eventually four of the homelands would accept "independence" from South Africa; KwaZulu did not. The Chief Minister was Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi, who in 1975 had established Inkatha. Inkatha was a cultural organization promoted as a national liberation organization meant to fill the vacuum left by the banned ANC, but it differed from the ANC politically. By 1979 Buthelezi had broken with the ANC-in-exile over its anticapitalism, prosanctions stance, and Inkatha reemerged as a distinctly Zulu movement. Educated, usually urban-dwelling Zulu tended to remain supporters of the ANC and of the United Democratic Front (UDF), which had been founded in 1983 to coordinate the efforts of smaller organizations opposed to apartheid. Inkatha, which dedicated itself to the celebration of the Zulu kingdom's military past, had an active constituency, mostly of rural peasants and urban migrant workers. Every school in the KwaZulu homeland was required to have an Inkatha Youth Brigade, and for local authorities, Montebello High School's YCS was unwelcome competition.

Both Inkatha and Special Branch officers informed Mdluli that they considered the YCS a front for the banned South African Communist Party. The evidence was the YCS members' T-shirts, which featured a fist superimposed on a large cross. Mdluli managed to keep the YCS alive by emphasizing its Catholic identity but directed students not to wear the T-shirts.

Bargaining with Inkatha became much more difficult after the founding of the UDF, considered by the Special Branch and Inkatha alike as a front for the ANC. Mdluli had to assure inspectors that the YCS was unconnected to the UDF and remind them that the school was Catholic and apolitical. As violence between Inkatha and the UDF escalated throughout the 1980s, Mdluli worried about the emotional state and physical safety of the students. She and her fellow sisters held frequent meetings, reminding the students that “we love this school, but we’re aiming for the greater goal”: that is, an education worthy of the suffering of the liberation struggle (personal interview, Durban, 2008).

This self-consciously apolitical stance did not insulate Montebello High School or its principal from South Africa’s turbulent politics. Strikes, protests, consumer and school boycotts spread across the country, even as the government sought to limit their impact by declaring a State of Emergency in 1985. The worst point for Mdluli came in January 1990 as radicalized students demonstrated outside Montebello’s gates and at the four government schools in the area. Echoing the liberation slogan “power to the people,” they shouted “power to the students,” demanded the abolition of fees, uniforms, and exams, and threatened to kill the principals if their demands were not met. Mdluli’s fellow sisters locked her in the school’s cellar, then spirited her away to Pietermaritzburg, where boycotting students recognized her. Finally she sought the help of Archbishop Denis Hurley in Durban, who sent Patrick Lekota, a Catholic politician and UDF member, to lecture Montebello’s students on the value of staying in school (personal interview, Durban, 2008). Nelson Mandela echoed the call for calm when he was released from prison in February 1990 after serving twenty-seven years for treason (see Freund 1994; Maré & Hamilton 1987).

In November 1990 Sr. Bernard Ncube embarked on a tour of the United States, where she was welcomed as a hero of the anti-apartheid movement (UWHP 1990). In January 1991 a physically and emotionally exhausted Sr. Michael Mdluli gratefully took up a year’s sabbatical in Australia (personal interview, Durban, 2008). She had never taken an overtly political stance, or spent a day in jail, but twenty years of defusing tensions in rural Natal had taken their toll.

Silence and Disobedience

Mdluli returned to Montebello High School in 1992; in January 1993 she was elected prioress general of the Montebello Dominicans. In 1990 Inkatha had begun transforming itself into a political party in order to contest the anticipated national elections. The violence between the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the ANC continued in both rural areas and urban centers throughout South Africa.

Mdluli’s long tenure at the high school and the community’s conscious policy of not taking sides had ensured the survival of the Montebello com-

plex. The politics of its students aside, Montebello High School and the adjoining convent were located in an IFP area. Silence was the pragmatic choice, though it was a silence quite different from that expected of Mdluli as a young sister in a congregation governed by Euphemia Ruf. The Montebello Dominicans' apolitical stance during the apartheid era had not always delivered peace, but its legacy did help Sr. Michael Mdluli as prioress negotiate the transition to democracy.

The local Zulu chiefs liked the sisters, and Mdluli was able to secure land to open a home for the chronically ill. Learning to manage budgets and oversee finances proved demanding, and Mdluli's learning curve was steep. There were no "gentlemen's agreements"; rather, Mdluli and her councilors had to work with the chiefs to purchase property. The chiefs were impressed, noting "these girls are doing good" and allowed the sisters to attend meetings as honorary men since they owned houses and property. While not "women," from the chiefs' perspective, they were nevertheless Zulu (Waetjen 2004:74). The Montebello Dominicans were able to cultivate these good relationships, and their priory served as a polling station during the April 1994 election that ushered in the democratic era (interview with Michael Mdluli, Durban, 2008).

In that election, Sr. Bernard Ncube won a seat as a member of parliament representing Krugersdorp. As a political activist in the 1980s, she had engaged in actions that the Church found defensible in the context of the broader struggle against an oppressive state. By entering parliament, she followed the arc of her own conscientization to its logical end point. She did not, as Bishop Zwane had feared radical Christians would do in 1979, reject her faith, but she did, in becoming a sitting politician in 1994, contravene the policy of the Catholic Church (UWHP 1990).

While silence arguably allowed the Montebello Dominicans to survive the tumult of rural Natal, the Companions of Saint Angela made the career of Bernard Ncube—the activist and the politician—possible. The support of this small, ethnically diverse congregation established in Soweto as its residents began the long struggle to overthrow apartheid buoyed Ncube as she endured the jail sentences that brought her and the order to national and international attention. In essence, the apartheid state lost any last trace of legitimacy for the Companions of Saint Angela, and made disobedience the rational response.

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- 1975e. Poledrini to Hurley. July 25. In Correspondence 1975. Dominican Sisters Montebello, Archival File No. 3, ACAD.
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Notes

1. Oral history interviews conducted for this article are part of a larger research project, "Sisters for Justice: Religion and Political Transformation in Apartheid South Africa," for which I interviewed seventy-five women religious between 2005 and 2010. I asked sisters to place their experiences in the context of the grand political events—legislation, government crackdowns, protests, and ideologies—that have shaped twentieth-century South African history and then cross-referenced their memories against archival and official documents.
2. There were 108 Montebello Dominican sisters in 2004 (*Catholic Directory* 2005).
3. On the history of the Montebello sisters, see Kusmierz (1996) and Sieber (1999).
4. On the "native" other, see Anderson (1991:122) and Penvenne (1995:256).
5. On the history of the Companions, see also Modise (2003); Ntoagae (2003); Kusmierz (1996).
6. Joan F. Burke (1993) observed a similar phenomenon in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then Zaire) in the 1970s.
7. Jo Ann McNamara argues that Vatican II did little to re-envision "the role of women in a renewed church," though the directive to write the histories of their orders did allow them to seek a "new agenda for the future" (1996:632).
8. In his report on the 1972 General Chapter of the Montebello Dominicans, Hurley observed, "There should have been a third reason for the importance of the Chapter: renewal in the spirit of Vatican II, but this could not be thought of as long as Mother Euphemia remained in command" (ACAD 1972b:1).
9. Modise (2003:54,66,68); see Brockman (1994) for a biography of Bernard Neki Zelle Ncube.
10. Interviews with Marilyn Aitken, Reichenau Mission, Underburg, KwaZulu-Natal, 2009; Theorora Dlamini, Welkom, Free State, 2009; Bernard Fantisi, Bronville, Free State, 2008. See also SACBC (1985); SACBC (1987); SND (1986).