

**“In community of property”:
Anglican sisters and episcopal authority in Natal 1887–1937**

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between the Society of St John the Divine, an Anglican sisterhood which was founded in Pietermaritzburg in 1887, and the bishops of Natal, in the context of the work of the community in the diocese of Natal and the developments in monastic life in the Church of England, which had implications for religious communities throughout the Anglican Communion.¹ The article shows that the sisterhood enjoyed considerable freedom from episcopal control in carrying out their various works in childcare, parochial work and education in Natal. However, this freedom also meant that the sisters received no money from the diocese, but raised funds to support this work themselves. Their independence also reflected that of religious communities in England, where the Church of England bishops had no canonical or legal control over Anglican religious communities. In the 1930s, however, bishops in the Church of England set up structures to bring the Anglican religious communities under episcopal authority, and these measures were also adopted by the Society of St John the Divine in Natal.

Introduction

The mid-19th century saw the renewal of the religious life in the Church of England, with religious communities of women and men living under vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. These communities were being established for the first time since their suppression during the Reformation. There

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Church History Society of Southern Africa conference on the theme *The Church and Money*, which was held in Durban from 30 June –1 July 2011: I am grateful for the very useful comments provided at the conference. I would also like to record my gratitude for assistance as well as sustenance to the staff of the Natal Diocesan Archives in Pietermaritzburg, Ken Chisa, Mary Gardener and Mary Mullinos.

was no legal or canonical provision for the existence of these religious communities in the Church of England and no tradition to define their status (Mumm 2008:74; Anson 1958:487). Although identifying themselves as Anglican, they developed quite without the authorisation of the Church of England bishops, who were alarmed at the rapid growth of women's communities, in particular, as the communities challenged not only episcopal authority in the church, but also the prevailing doctrine of the subordination of women to men (Mumm 2008:65-68). Emily Ayckbowm, mother foundress of the Sisters of the Church,² made it quite clear that her sisters governed their community "without aid from men" and were determined to continue to do so themselves and to explain to other sisterhoods how this could be done (Mumm 2008:68). The situation in Southern Africa was somewhat different, as a bishop took the lead in establishing women's religious communities. The Bishop of Bloemfontein, Allan Becher Webb, founded the Community of St Michael and All Angels in 1874, and when he was transferred to Grahams-town, he established the Community of the Resurrection of Our Lord there in 1884. In 1883, Webb published *Sisterhood life and women's work in the mission-field of the church*, which set out his view of the relationship between the sisterhoods and their diocesan bishop, which he applied in Bloemfontein and which reflected the dominant contemporary view of the proper relationship between men and women. In Webb's scheme of things, the sisterhood fell under the authority of the bishop as "*the father of the family*" (Webb's emphasis), their governing charter was approved by the diocesan chapter of senior clergy, and the bishop took responsibility for community finances (Webb 1883:38-39). There was to be no "irresponsible rule of any woman" (Webb 1883:57, Webb's emphasis), but even in his world, women had considerable responsibility for running their communities (Goedhals 2008:338-339). Nevertheless, Webb's attempt to define the position of sisterhoods, though influential in Southern Africa because he was the founder of two women's communities, did not create canonical status for the sisterhoods. In the 1942 edition of the *Constitution and Canons* of the Church of the Province of South Africa, the only references to religious communities are resolutions relating to the status of chaplains, membership of the Clergy Pension Fund and the order of service to be used for Holy Communion in community chapels (Church of the Province of South Africa 1942:212).

The Society of St John the Divine, which was founded in Natal in 1887, was in a different position from the other two 19th-century sisterhoods established in South Africa by Bishop Webb. As early as 1869, the Maritzburg diocesan synod had expressed support for the establishment of a

² Founded in 1870, the Sisters of the Church expanded very rapidly, and apart from extensive work in England, they opened houses in Canada (1891), India and Australia (1892) and New Zealand (1896) (Anson 1958: 439-445). From 1904, the sisters worked in Umtata and Cala in the diocese of St John's (Lewis & Edwards 1934:562).

sisterhood in the diocese (SSJD 1987:17), and when the three women who formed the Society of St John the Divine arrived in Pietermaritzburg in mid-1887, Bishop Macrorie accepted them warmly: "How gladly do we offer you a home and work in this Diocese! We look upon this as a definite answer to our prayers that Sisters may be sent to us."³ Macrorie, however, did not adopt Webb's document on sisterhoods, nor his views on the status of communities. SSJD work expanded without formal approval from him and the chapter minutes contain few references to seeking his consent, though there may have been informal conversations. Macrorie seems to have fallen into the category of bishops who wished to support the religious life as a form of "full-time service to the Church", but who did not "regard the Religious State as anything more than a means of doing active work" (Anson 1958:485). Consequently, the sisters were not an official part of the diocesan structures and were free to draw up their own Rule. The sisters accepted the bishop of the diocese as their visitor, which gave him authority to approve the appointment of their chaplain, to receive the promises of sisters elected to profession and – on the advice of the community chapter – to dispense sisters from their vows or approve their dismissal from SSJD. However, the sisters of SSJD were also aware that the Sisters of Bethany, on whose Rule their own Rule was based, appointed an episcopal visitor only in 1885, twenty years after their foundation.⁴ It is also significant that sisters were never paid by the diocese for any work that they undertook; they were responsible for their own support and for raising funds for the institutions they established. This financial self-reliance, though a severe responsibility, both enabled and allowed the community to develop a considerable degree of independence.

Foundation of SSJD

The formal ties between SSJD and the diocese of Maritzburg, which subsequently became the diocese of Natal,⁵ began when Sister Fanny Bayly,⁶ who had previously been a member of the Community of St Michael and All Angels in Bloemfontein, arrived in Pietermaritzburg on 31 May 1887,

³ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.8 "The Founding of our Society, July 9 1887", read at chapter by Mother Edith 1928.

⁴ SSJD Minutes and reports DN/DR/0/3.1.1 Letter enclosed in Chapter Minute Book 1897–1916, Mother Etheldreda Bennett SSB to Mother Margaret Lucas SSJD [1906].

⁵ The name of the diocese was linked to the Colenso controversy: for an explanation, see Hinchliff (1963:101-110).

⁶ Fanny Bayly appears to have started her religious life in the Community of St Mary the Virgin at Wantage, but was advised to transfer to a community in a warmer climate as her health was delicate. She was professed in the Community of St Michael and All Angels in Bloemfontein on 11 June 1877. In 1887, at a time of some tension in that community, she and two novices withdrew and went to Cape Town, where they worked with the All Saints' Sisters until their move to Pietermaritzburg. Fanny contracted tuberculosis and died in 1890 (SSJD 1987:18-20, 25-27).

followed two weeks later by novices Anna Herrmann and Margaret Lucas,⁷ who had left the Bloemfontein sisterhood with her. The novices were professed in Bishop Macrorie's private chapel on 9 July 1887, the date usually regarded as the foundation of the Society of St John the Divine; Sister Fanny was elected as first mother superior on 28 October 1887 and was installed by Bishop Macrorie the following day. The early years were a time of considerable hardship, with only three professed sisters to sustain the spiritual and material life of the community and undertake charitable works; and in 1890, this number dropped to two when Mother Fanny died. Sister Anna succeeded her as mother superior of the tiny community in which the next novices, Alice and Emily, were professed on 30 November 1892. In 1897, when Mother Margaret became the third mother superior, there were seven professed members of the community, and by 1907, this number had risen to 17. Numbers had risen to 30 by 1918, which meant that the work of the professed sisters was being supported by a significant number of novices, but also that time had to be spent training the novices in the religious life. In 1923, the number of professed sisters reached thirty-three, the highest number to be attained in SSJD. In its 124-year history, there have been sixty professed sisters in the community, which has worked exclusively in the diocese of Natal,⁸ but because the religious life is relatively unusual within Anglicanism, their influence has probably exceeded actual numbers.

In 1887 SSJD began to run St Cross as an orphanage for white children, while in the afternoons, Sister Anna taught needlework at St Saviour's school attached to the cathedral, and Sister Margaret taught arithmetic at St Luke's, a school for coloured children. In the first decade of their foundation, in addition to the growth of St Cross, they also started a mercy house, an industrial home for girls in Durban and an orphanage for boys; in addition, they began building St John's high school for girls, which opened in 1898.⁹ As the community chapter minutes show, demand for their services always exceeded the work they were actually able to undertake,¹⁰

⁷ Anna Herrmann was born in 1844. She became mother superior of SSJD when Mother Fanny died, but resigned in 1897. She died aged ninety-four, in 1938. Margaret Lucas was born in 1854, went to Bloemfontein to work with the Community of St Michael and All Angels in 1878 and subsequently entered their novitiate. She became SSJD mother superior in 1897, an office she held until her death in 1916. Her father, the Rev W H Lucas, was a canon of Winchester and provided support for the community, particularly financially (SSJD 1987:28-34).

⁸ SSJD time charts 1887–1937 DN/DR/0/3.5.1 Sisters.

⁹ SSJD time charts 1887–1937 DN/DR/0/3.5.4 Works.

¹⁰ See SSJD Minutes and Reports DN/DR/0/1.3.11 Chapter Minute Book 1890–1910. At a chapter meeting on 6 May 1902, SSJD agreed to send two sisters to assist with work at St Aidan's mission among people of Indian origin when SSJD was "strong enough in numbers to undertake further work". This never became possible. The chapter minutes show that the sisters bought four acres of land at Mooi River with a view to working in the parish there,

and from the 1930s, as numbers dropped and sisters aged, the community began to withdraw from its work in schools, hostels and children's homes, mostly in Pietermaritzburg and Durban, but also in Bulwer, Frere and Dundee.

Sources

Although literature on Roman Catholic religious communities for women is extensive,¹¹ that on Anglican sisterhoods, which re-emerged in the Church of England in the middle of the 19th century, is both fairly recent and limited. Peter Anson's *The call of the cloister*, first published in 1955, included brief accounts of the work of Anglican religious communities for men and women outside England, but was largely based on material provided by the communities themselves. Martha Vicinus (1985) includes a chapter on the role of religious communities, while Susan Mumm's *Stolen daughters, virgin mothers* (1999) is the most recent detailed study of the communities in Britain. Nicolas Stebbing's *Anglican religious life: a well kept secret* (2003) is a reflection on the present state of religious life, rather than a history. Recent historical scholarship is reflected in essays by Peta Dunstan (2004) and Mumm (2008) on the relationships between Anglican religious communities and bishops in the Church of England between 1845 and 1914.

In the scholarly literature on Anglicanism in Southern Africa, the detailed 1934 *Historical records of the Church of the Province of South Africa* by Lewis and Edwards contains numerous index references to the various communities active at the time, including SSJD (Lewis & Edwards 1934:338-339). While Peter Hinchliff's 1963 history makes no attempt to offer a comprehensive account and does not specifically mention the Society of St John the Divine, he remarks that "religious communities have played a tremendously important part in the growth of the Church" (Hinchliff 1963:226). For a more detailed published account of the Society of St John the Divine, there is the 1987 in-house centenary history *What the world counts weakness*, written by Sister Margaret Ann, herself a member of the community.

Mumm (1999:xiii) notes that most of the records of religious communities in England remain in convents, and that some communities allowed her no access when she was undertaking her research, while others allowed her

but eventually sold the land as they could not take up the work (17 May 1906, 28 August 1906, 5 May 1907 and 1 May 1908).

¹¹ For example see *Sisters in arms: Catholic nuns through two millennia* by Jo Ann McNamara, cited above, as well as major bibliographies such as that at History of Women Religious of Britain and Ireland <http://www.history.ac.uk/history-women-religious/bibliography> (accessed 8 November 2011).

only limited access. Even among the most open communities, she found resistance to using records dating post 1900; clearly, this caution on the part of the communities resulted from the insensitive use of records by earlier researchers. The Society of St John the Divine papers are in the Natal Diocesan Archives in the cathedral complex in Pietermaritzburg, where there are very few limitations on their use. As Mumm found with many English communities (1999:xiii), the SSJD sisters were often overwhelmed with other work and did not have a policy about which archival materials were to be kept, so the collection is somewhat random. Very little correspondence survives, and there is limited information on individual sisters, as well as various pamphlets, an interesting but not systematic collection of liturgical and devotional material about the religious life within SSJD, and some photographs. However, chapter minutes and property records are available and provide a rich source.¹²

The vow of poverty

Each religious community has a Rule of Life which sets out the principles under which members live: all sisters of the community were expected to read through the Rule at least once a month and use it as a basis for self-examination. The SSJD Rule was based on the Rule of the Sisters of Bethany, founded in England in 1866,¹³ but adapted to reflect their dedication to St John the Divine.¹⁴ This extract from the chapter of the Society's Rule that deals with the vows illustrates something of the ethos of the community:

- 1 Since the life of the professed religious represents the response to a divine Vocation to live in close imitation of Jesus in the power of His indwelling grace, it is bound to this imitation by the obligation of the three vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience.

¹² The papers are catalogued and there is a detailed finding list available in the Natal Diocesan Archives.

¹³ The Society of the Sisters of Bethany was established by Etheldreda Anna Bennet (1824–1913) to work in Clerkenwell, where the slums were among the worst in London. The Bethany Rule made it clear that prayer – recitation of the Divine Office, intercession and meditation – was the most important work of the sisters. They were one of the first Anglican convents to make provision for retreatants. SSJD sisters visiting London regularly stayed with the Sisters of Bethany. The Bethany sisters ran an orphanage, as well as producing vestments in their famous school of embroidery, and they ran a children's home in Cape Town from 1916–1950 (Anson 1958:405–412).

¹⁴ According to tradition, St John the Apostle was the author of the fourth Gospel, the Revelation of St John the Divine and the three epistles of St John. On the basis of this, although disputed by later scholarship, the sisters chose St John the Divine as their patron and the words of 1 John 4:7 as their motto (SSJD 1987:26; Cross & Livingstone 1978:742).

- 2 These three sacred vows should therefore always be regarded with the deepest reverence and guarded with the most jealous care. And inasmuch as they represent counsels of perfection and are voluntarily undertaken, it is necessary that not the formal requirements only but the fullness of the spirit should be observed.
- 3 Our Holy Patron has warned us of the three chief enemies of our life, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. It is by the virtues of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience that we shall be enabled to win our victory.
- 4 Attention must therefore be given continually to the cultivation of the virtues that each may be brought to a high degree of perfection. The spiritual health of the soul and its vigour must depend to a very great extent upon the fidelity with which these sacred obligations are observed.¹⁵

Of poverty itself, the Rule had this to say:

“Love neither the world nor the things that are in the world” is the counsel of our Patron. The soul that is called to a special degree of discipleship will find in the poverty of Bethlehem, Nazareth and Calvary inspiration for the renunciation which the vow of Poverty demands.

In practice, the Rule meant that members of the community could not have anything for private use except what was provided by the mother superior; could not accept, ask for or give away anything without permission; and were required to avoid damaging items provided for community use. This, of course, involved considerable self-denial, but there is also an element that is thoroughly modern and eco-friendly about the Rule, which discouraged consumerism, allowing sisters to use only what was absolutely necessary and insisting that they avoid “any appearance of superfluity”.

All sisters who were able to do so were expected to contribute at least £50 per annum towards their own support in the community, but inability to do so would not exclude any candidate from admission, provided the community could afford to support them without what was described as a “dowry”.

¹⁵ SSJD Society DN/DR/0/2.2 Rule of Life of the Society of St John the Divine. It has not been possible to trace the first SSJD Rule, but a revision was undertaken in 1930s and as chapter had to approve any changes and chapter minutes reflect general conservatism towards the original rule and no alteration to these paragraphs, it seems reasonable to assume that this quotation reflects the original text.

Only the mother superior would know about the financial circumstances of those who joined. Novices were not to discuss "the temporal affairs of their families or their social position" and no distinction was to be made between the sisters "on account of any position they may have held in their secular life, or of any contribution they may bring", obviously to prevent social and financial inequalities from undermining community life. When a sister took her final vows, she was expected to dispose of her property in such a way that she would have no personal control over it. She was not obliged to give it to the community, but could transfer it to members of her family "or to such other recipients as the Mother may approve".¹⁶ These provisions, of course, make it difficult to find out anything about the history of the members of the community, or how the vow of poverty shaped the spiritual life of the community as a whole and of the individuals within it. The vow of poverty, however, also had implications for public work of the Society.

Property and finance

The SSJD motto, "Let us love one another", applied firstly to their life as sisters in community, but the Rule also provided that the Society would take on charitable works in the diocese in which they lived:

But whatever may be the sphere of activity undertaken, the obligations and spirit of Religious consecration shall be faithfully observed and the spirit of Love maintained.¹⁷

However spiritual the language in which the commitment to carry out "the work of the Church of God" was expressed, it was clear that the sisters would have to raise money not only for their own support but also for the various responsibilities that they undertook.

When Sister Fanny arrived in Pietermaritzburg, she initially stayed with Bishop and Mrs Macrorie and when the novices arrived, all three were accommodated by a woman worker in the diocese. As a religious community could hardly be established while the sisters were guests in the homes of others, their own accommodation was obviously a priority. Canon Usherwood, who was due to return to England, donated his property to the sisters as a convent, on condition that they also use the house for St Cross orphanage.¹⁸ By the time that Anna and Margaret were professed, the first

¹⁶ SSJD Society DN/DR/0/2.2 Rule of Life of the Society of St John the Divine.

¹⁷ SSJD Society DN/DR/0/2.2 Rule of Life of the Society of St John the Divine.

¹⁸ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.11 Letter from T Usherwood to the Lord Bishop of Maritzburg, from England 27 May 1889. Usherwood ceded the land at 34 Burger Street "with all the buildings thereon ... viz. S. Cross and S. Margaret's to the Diocese of Maritzburg for Religious Purposes and specially for the use and occupation of the Sisters of S. John the

three children, Anna, Sarah and Emily Baker, had been accepted at St Cross and were joined by Henrietta and Emily Hook on 10 August 1887.¹⁹ The sisters subsequently bought an adjoining field from Canon Usherwood and this property became a complex housing many of their various works in Pietermaritzburg.²⁰ The sisters were extremely poor, relying on gifts for food and on money collected by supporters. They had very little furniture and one of the first sisters recalls that they sat on paraffin tins in the chapel until they were able to buy six chairs for five shillings and sixpence each.²¹

There was clearly a need for the St Cross orphanage. Twenty-seven new children enrolled in 1888, and by 1922 there were seventy-eight girls in the home.²² The sisters' understanding of their work was based on compassion rather than acute social analysis:

Many children we are asked to take by the magistrates or police, some have been sold, some have been given by their parents, who have disappeared, leaving no trace, to ... people of bad character. Some poor little ones have known better days and have lost both parents, and have not a relation or friend able to do anything for them.²³

Where families of the children could afford it, they were asked to contribute to the costs at St Cross, but this income was very small. The sisters regarded society as being responsible for support and maintenance of destitute children and, in addition to official social grants provided for some of the children, they devised various ways of extracting income from the public.

Prominent citizens were approached for regular monthly subscriptions, but this only brought in relatively small amounts, although there was potential for increase if sisters could spare time to make collections personally. The sisters found that financial donations were also "always most kindly given if asked for", and they also relied on gifts in kind for bulk quantities of paraffin, flour and sugar. These donations, like the subscriptions, were acknowledged in the press. The sisters encouraged the establishment of societies that would raise money for the needs of St Cross: a boot and shoe society was run by children who collected money to repair and buy footwear; women's working parties sewed clothes for the children; volunteers promised

Divine established in Pietermaritzburg and working under the Lord Bishop of the Diocese aforesaid or his successors and in communion with the Church of the Province of S. Africa, and for the charitable works and objects carried on by them".

¹⁹ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Records 1887–1937, notes on St Cross, p1.

²⁰ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Records 1887–1937, Mother Anna's memories, p2.

²¹ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Records 1887–1937, Mother Anna's memories, p4.

²² SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Records 1887–1937, notes on St Cross. St Cross became a girls' home in 1900, pp2, 10.

²³ *Church News from Natal*, November 1896, no 68: 247.

to give a shilling a year and sew a pinafore; members of the Pound Society provided a pound of tea, sugar, soap, candles or flour each month or an equivalent cash donation; donors were invited to pay £10 a year in exchange for their name on a cot, or £200 in perpetuity; the Cake Society provided cake for the children on Sundays; and collecting boxes were placed at five stores and the Plough Hotel. The sisters ran "the Depot", which sold donated clothing, crockery, books and fancy goods, but which needed both space and a person to look after it. St Cross also depended on various benefactors — a farmer allowed boys to have a holiday on his farm, while doctors and dentists provided free treatment.²⁴ Similar means for meeting costs were used when SSJD opened St Martin's Home in Durban, but in that case a committee also organised an annual ball, which raised a significant sum.²⁵ Support in cash and kind also came from various work parties in England, who sent boxes to Pietermaritzburg several times a year. The sisters found it advisable to let their English supporters know what was needed:

We have children of all ages and of all sizes, so nothing comes amiss, only we would beg that the pinafores and dresses should be dark and of strong material. Flannelette nightgowns for the girls, and unbleached calico nightshirts for our boys are a standing want. For our household generally, dusters, tea-cloths, towels, and pillowcases would be gratefully received.²⁶

Sometimes, there was a need for major expenditure rather than simply covering day-to-day costs. For example, water-borne sewerage was installed in 1918, but the work was not carried out properly and had to be redone at a cost of £1054, which was covered by the proceeds of street collections.²⁷ SSJD also raised large sums for capital expenditure by the annual begging tours undertaken by sisters in Johannesburg, Durban and along the South Coast, journeys which could keep them away from the convent for a month at a time.²⁸

Their various fundraising efforts did not always gain public approval, which must have been hard to bear, as the sisters could hardly have regarded begging as a desirable occupation in the first place:

... nor is it an easy matter, as everyone knows, to carry on a public institution to everyone's satisfaction, and so like others

²⁴ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Records 1887–1937, notes on St Cross, pp4-6.

²⁵ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Records 1887–1937, notes on work in Durban, pp4-7.

²⁶ *Church News from Natal*, November 1896, no 68: 246.

²⁷ SSJD History, DN/DR/0/4.10 Records 1887–1937, notes on St Cross, p10.

²⁸ SSJD Minutes and reports DN/DR/0/3.1.1 Chapter Minute Book 1897–1916, 8 November 1901; DN/DR/0/3.1.2 Chapter Minute Book 1934–1947, 7 July 1945.

in our position, we have many detractors. There are those who cannot believe in disinterested endeavours to do good and who therefore strive to find the motive behind our actions in some sort of earthly advantage.²⁹

The domestic economy of St Cross relied greatly on the collecting cart taken out each day by one of the sisters, and the cart seems to have attracted the greatest opprobrium. Nevertheless, the sisters – shaped by their vow of poverty – persisted:

What a wonderful sight is the unloading of that cart! — full of food of different descriptions, old clothes for the Depot, crockery, books for the children, special little offerings for the Sisters ... How often we bless the kind hearts who give to the cart.

"It is encouraging begging" say our self-constituted mentors. *We* say "It saves busy people the trouble of sending, and jogs the memories of those who ... might otherwise forget us." Is begging for gifts in kind worse than begging for gifts in money, and, if not, why do people condone the latter and condemn the former?³⁰

In 1931 the cart horse got foot disease and the cart was falling to pieces, so a motor car was bought for £150, but when this proved too heavy on petrol, it was replaced with a more economical Ford. The sisters obviously feared that this would lead to allegations of extravagance so "the bishop very kindly wrote a letter to the *Witness* explaining that a car was a necessity and not a sign of affluence and asking our friends and supporters not to lessen their gifts on account of it".³¹

It is a sign of the sisters' inexperience, as well as their slender resources, that the first printed report for St Cross was published in 1899. Mother Margaret explained that they had not produced a formal report before, "due to real, overwhelming work, which gave us no more time each day than was sufficient for the day's doings. Now with increasing experience and organisation, and an increased staff of workers, we have been able to find time to keep records".³²

From a management point of view, 1897 was an important turning point for the Society: a deed of trust was approved which placed all property in land or buildings in the hands of three trustees, "to be administered by

²⁹ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Records 1887–1937, notes on St Cross, p3.

³⁰ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Records 1887–1937, notes on St Cross, p6.

³¹ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Records 1887–1937, notes on St Cross, p11.

³² SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Records 1887–1937, notes on St Cross, p2.

them subject to the decisions of a majority of two thirds of the Sisters assembled in Chapter",³³ chapter being made up of all the professed sisters in the community. The mother superior presented a financial report at every chapter meeting. This made it clear that the sisters controlled all major financial and property decisions, subject – obviously – to the advice of the trustees who acted as their agents. During the next forty years, the trustees handled the purchase and sometimes the sale of some twenty-five properties on behalf of the community.³⁴

In 1916 there was some public concern that money donated to the community for destitute and orphaned children at St Cross would be diverted to the new St John's School at Scottsville. A sister explained:

Our Boarding Schools ... stand on quite another footing. The Sisters have private property and incomes of their own, which they are at full liberty to use as they choose. Instead of building or renting houses for their own community use, they have chosen to use their money to build houses for educational purposes ...

In order to build the new school house at Scottsville, the Sisters (as they had not sufficient capital to do so) borrowed the necessary money by mortgaging their present property ... The Sisters do not expect help from the public for their boarding schools, which if they are to meet a need in this country, must be, and are, self-supporting.³⁵

The sisters had decided to erect new buildings for the school in 1910. In July 1914, SSJD bought eight acres of land from the municipality at a cost of £500. An architect estimated building costs at £7000, of which only £665 was available, which meant that the balance would have to be raised by mortgages on existing property. By 1919, £4000 had been raised, with the remaining £3000 debt paid off by 1922. In 1912, the mother superior went to England to raise money for the school and received influential support from Lady Methuen, wife of the last governor general of Natal: the sisters undoubtedly also received donations from those in Natal who wished to support church schools. It is, however, difficult to assess the amount of money the sisters had

³³ SSJD Minutes and Reports DN/DR/0/3.1.1 Chapter Minute Book 1897–1916, 6 February 1897. The major trustee and long-standing adviser of SSJD and also the Diocese of Natal was Frederic Spence Tatham KC, head of Tatham, Wilkes and Co, a Pietermaritzburg firm of advocates, solicitors, notaries and conveyancers and a prominent Anglican layman. A revision of the deed of trust in the 1930s secured the appointment of the mother superior and at least three sisters as trustees, thus ensuring that they could not be outvoted. SSJD Society DN/DR/0/2.1 Constitution of the Society of St John the Divine.

³⁴ See uncatalogued SSJD papers in Natal Diocesan Archives deposited by trustees.

³⁵ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.22 Sister in Charge to Archdeacon Burges, October 1916.

at their own disposal. In some cases, a sister bestowed all her income on the community when she entered, but as the documentation is very incomplete, it is impossible to tell how widespread this practice was.³⁶ Legacies received by the sisters were a useful but unpredictable source of income. Copies of some of the sisters' wills in their archives mostly show that the sister left no estate, although Mother Margaret bequeathed over £3000 (much derived from railway shares) to the community.

The work of the Society of St John the Divine was determined by the number of sisters who joined, and the community was already in decline by the 1930s. The community was, of course, limited in terms of understanding race, class and gender dynamics in colonial society, as I have pointed out elsewhere.³⁷ Nevertheless, a sisterhood, founded and governed by women, had been established in Natal, and the sisters were able to make decisions about their work and establish, fund and manage major projects without direct inference from men, although they may have received advice from men occasionally.

Episcopal authority

There was never a major confrontation between SSJD and the Natal diocesan bishop, and the bishops clearly valued the work of the community. Bishop Macrorie remarked at the 1889 diocesan synod: "I fear that it is very little realised how entirely the work of the Sisterhood ... is dependent upon the contributions of the benevolent" (quoted in SSJD 1987:36). The bishops publically supported the work of the sisters where they could: for example, Bishop Baines regularly attended the fundraising entertainments staged by the children of the Good Shepherd School, in a variety of venues, from the Forester's Hall to the YWCA.³⁸

But the investment of their lives and work, and considerable amounts of money raised for church causes, perhaps allowed the sisters to feel that they could exercise some small signs of independence in their dealings with the diocesan bishop. On at least one occasion, when faced with issues relating to the religious life, Mother Margaret consulted the Bethany superior, Mother Etheldreda Bennett, rather than the bishop of Natal, and received the following reply, which she kept, noting that the advice was valuable:

I am afraid that there is no Anglican Community existing as far as I know that would have sufficient Catholic knowledge to give me any opinion in the matter, and our Bishops (except

³⁶ SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.4-1-1.4.33.

³⁷ *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, forthcoming.

³⁸ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences of Sister Monica Fanny SSJD*, p33. Bishop F S Baines was Bishop of Natal from 1901–1928.

perhaps Bishop Creighton who is dead) know not enough about Catholic Ecclesiastical organisation to have any valid opinion on the question.

In any case, I fear that as matters now stand, we must use our opinion and judgment in particular cases ... I have an old friend, a Convert to Rome who is now Superior in England of a Dominican convent, and some day I can ask her as I have done about other RC practices. I will let you know.³⁹

This suggests that even if the bishop of Natal was officially a visitor and a valuable friend and supporter, he was not regarded as an authority on the religious life. The letter also highlighted another concern for Anglican bishops: was the 19th-century revival of religious communities evidence of ongoing reform within Anglicanism or simply the restoration of Roman Catholic practices? (Mumm 2008:72) In 1915 Bishop Baines was obviously alarmed at reports about the sisters' teaching on the nature of Anglicanism and wrote to Mother Margaret SSJD:

... it would relieve me from a real difficulty in which I find myself if you could give me an assurance that neither you nor those working with you or under you in the Community Schools, will ever teach the children under your care that the non-use of vestments in the Church ... is a sufficient reason for abstaining from regularly communicating in such [parish] Church.

I should personally much prefer that the teaching on the subject were much more positive, and that the children should be taught that though the use of vestments is a Catholic custom, tending to beauty of worship, and expressive for most of those who use them of a faith in a particular aspect of the Holy Eucharist, they must never for a moment think that the non-use of such vestments in any Church which they attend interferes with the acceptance of their worship by Him to Whom it is offered. But in view of what you said yesterday, I will not ask for any assurance that such may be the line taken.⁴⁰

³⁹ SSJD Minutes and reports DN/DR/0/3.1.1 Letter in Chapter Minute Book 1897–1916, Mother Etheldreda Bennett SSB to Mother Margaret Lucas SSJD [1906]. On Mother Ethel, see Anson 1958: 406-411. Mandell Creighton (1843–1901) was Bishop of London from 1897 until his death. From 1884 to 1891, he was Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Cambridge. His major historical work was a history of the papacy and he was the first editor of the *English Historical Review*, founded in 1886 (Cross & Livingstone 1978:359).

⁴⁰ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.17 Correspondence between the Bishop of Natal and Mother Margaret SSJD concerning the use of vestments, 1915.

The mother superior replied the same day, meticulously giving the assurances that the bishop had asked for, as well as those he had not, and pointing out that, on a regular basis, the boarders at Dundee and Krantzkloof attended churches where no vestments were used. However, Mother Margaret also reproved the bishop for his inference that the sisters had spoken indiscreetly to the children in their institutions and made her independent position very clear:

But in the latter case I should tell them that it was their duty to endeavour both by prayer and by speaking to their Parish Priest, to promote the use of Vestments. As a matter of fact, my Lord, we speak very little to our children on controversial points ... and we never allow them to hear any criticism on what is done in any of the Churches by any Priest. I know, and quite agree, that the Vestments are not necessary to the validity of the Sacrament, but Vestments, like incense, are part of the universal practice of the whole Catholic Church, both East and West, and I hold that the English Church cannot claim to be an integral part of that Church, and yet, reserve to herself the liberty to do as she likes in such matters, except perhaps, for a time, as a concession to the ignorance of those whom she has left untaught in the past.⁴¹

Mother Margaret's perspective is not surprising as sisterhoods in England and the colonies were an expression of the Oxford Movement, which emphasised the catholic heritage, including the monastic tradition, of the Church of England (Stone 1993:284-285). As this correspondence has been preserved, the community presumably saw this as an important encounter, but as this is the only existing evidence of a difference of opinion between bishop and mother superior, it also seems reasonable to assume that the exchange was an isolated incident. It is clear, however, that the worship in the sisters' chapel went beyond what was the Anglican norm, and reflected the sisters' view that they belonged to the "whole Catholic Church, both East and West": for example, the sisters, in chapter on 7 September 1899, had agreed that the community would use a special office for the "repose of the Mother of God". This feast was excluded from the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549, but was kept in the Eastern Church as the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and

⁴¹ SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.17 Correspondence between Bishop of Natal and Mother Margaret SSJD regarding the use of vestments, 1915. The use of the term "catholic" can seem confusing: after the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church tended to claim exclusive use of the term, while Anglicans (notably Tractarians and Anglo-Catholics) who believed that they, with Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, were part of catholic Christendom, also claimed use of the term (Cross & Livingstone 1978:254).

in the West, as the Assumption (Cross & Livingstone 1978:98-99). On the whole, Anglican bishops did not try to regulate worship in the chapels of religious communities, beyond the 1939 resolution of episcopal synod that "at celebrations of the Holy Communion in Community Churches and Chapels *arranged for persons other than the members of the Community* (italics mine) the South African *Alternative form of Holy Communion* or the Order in the *Book of Common Prayer* be used" (Church of the Province of South Africa 1942:146). But however catholic the worship in their chapel, the SSJD sisters saw this as an expression of Anglicanism as catholic and reformed rather than protestant, and intended to remain within the Church of the Province of South Africa. For example, in 1911, they explored the possibility of altering their 1897 deed of trust to ensure that their schools would always belong to the Church of the Province of South Africa, "without parting with our control over them".⁴² This was also confirmed in 1936, when the sisters decided to close their work at Frere because of lack of staff and funds: they experienced difficulty selling the property, but agreed not to sell it to Roman Catholics when Bishop Leonard Fisher indicated that, in his view, this would be extremely detrimental to Anglican work in the area.⁴³

Anson states that by the 1860s or 1870s, Anglican bishops "had begun to realise that sooner or later it would be necessary for them to draw up rules for directing and controlling the groups of devout women who were living in community" (Anson 1958:480). Alan Webb's 1883 *Sisterhood life* was a regional attempt to achieve this, but clearly an initiative that would ensure control of all Anglican communities was needed, as Webb — who presented himself as something of an expert — indicated at a public meeting before the 1897 Lambeth Conference.⁴⁴

In the Colonies and Mission field, where every venture for the Kingdom of God stands out in unshaded light, it is even more important than in England to provide proper safeguards against the infirmities incident to all Church agencies, and those peculiar to this special ministry. Just because the corruption of the best is the worst, it is most needful to have such bulwarks as the Church's wisdom may devise.

⁴² SSJD Minutes and reports DN/DR/0/3.1.1 Chapter Minute Book 1897–1916, 1 January 1911

⁴³ It proved very difficult to sell the Frere property, which deteriorated through lack of use and was eventually sold to the Natal provincial administration in 1942, apart from two acres which SSJD gave to the diocese with the provision that their manager, John Cassim Siddayya, be allowed to live on and use one and a half acres during his life time. SSJD Minutes and reports DN/DR/0/3.1.2 Chapter Minute Book 1934–1947.

⁴⁴ Lambeth Conferences are meetings of the bishops of the Anglican Communion held approximately every ten years since 1867 under the presidency of the Archbishops of Canterbury (Cross & Livingstone 1978:795).

Mumm (2008:78) argues that the real problem for the bishops was that the sisterhoods challenged “cultural attitudes about women’s roles and capabilities” and did not sufficiently demonstrate the subservient spirit considered appropriate in women, rather than any theological standard. Certainly Webb’s reference to corruption is puzzling, given the annals of sisterhood virtue recorded in Anson’s comprehensive account of their life and work, particularly in the era when they were notably without any suitable episcopal bulwarks. Initiatives that began at the 1897 Lambeth Conference eventually resulted in the establishment of an Advisory Council on Religious Communities, the functions of which were to draw up regulations to govern the charters and rules of communities, to advise communities about enrolment in accordance with these regulations and inform the bishops about those communities who complied with the regulations. The Council was chaired by a bishop, with six other bishops and six superiors of religious communities making up the membership (Anson 1958:482-484). Although the Council officially had oversight only in the provinces of Canterbury and York, which made up the Church of England, its influence was more widespread and the Society of St John the Divine altered their Rule and Constitution to comply with the standards required, although the Advisory Council on Religious Communities had no canonical authority, and was not particularly intended to apply to communities outside England. The structure was flexible, but moved the communities from a situation where “they felt more or less free to obey or not to obey the rules of their Church as their consciences directed” to a condition where they owed formal obedience to their diocesan bishop, or with his agreement, to another episcopal visitor (Anson 1958:480). The new situation meant that the sisters’ status in relation to the bishop had changed and that a bishop who wished to assert his authority would be able to do so. Statute II, paragraph 1 of the new constitution read:

The Bishop of the Diocese in which the Mother House of the Community is situated is the supreme canonical authority to whom all members of the Society owe their allegiance. He shall be asked to exercise the office of Visitor and shall have the customary visitatorial right to satisfy himself from time to time with regard to the well-being of the Society and its administration, in addition to such specific functions as shall be set forth in the Statutes and Rule of the Society.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ SSJD Society DN/DR/0/2.1 Constitution of the Society of St John the Divine. For details of the process, see SSJD Society DN/DR/0/2.3 Father Carey’s original Rule of Life, with letters and notes; SSJD Minutes and reports DN/DR/0/3.1.2 Chapter Minute Book 1934–1947.

In practice, the new framework does not seem to have resulted in any major alteration in the relationship between the bishops of Natal and the Society of St John the Divine. Chapter minutes show that the sisters continued to conduct their financial affairs as usual, and while the new statutes allowed the bishop visitation rights, these were hardly asserted.

Nevertheless, the context had changed. By the 1930s, women's religious communities, including the Society of St John the Divine, had gained recognition in the Church of England and its diaspora. Moreover, the mindset of the sisters had also changed and they not only accepted but actively sought to become part of the new structures, although the price was the replacement of women's initiative and leadership with canonical dependence on episcopal authority: although the implications were not obvious in the short term, this would be one of the factors that would determine the future of the community.

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