

Sally Gross

(1953-2014)

Sally Gross was born intersex, with a sexual anatomy that didn't fit the typical definitions of female or male. Born in Cape Town to Jewish parents and raised as a boy (Selwyn), Gross fled South Africa as a political exile in 1977 having attracted the attention of apartheid authorities due to her involvement in left-wing student politics. She later converted to Catholicism and was ordained as a Dominican Friar (1987), having studied Philosophy and Theology at Oxford University.

After years of inner conflict, Gross eventually underwent medical tests confirming her intersex status and changed her name to Sally and began living as a woman. Subsequently Rome excused her from her vows and a lengthy and painful battle with the Catholic Church followed – as a woman, Gross could no longer serve as a priest.

Gross returned to South Africa after 1994 and worked for the Human Rights Commission and Department of Land Affairs. She also started an organisation called Intersex South Africa, aimed at supporting other intersex people, was an advocate and lobbyist for intersex rights and legislation, and also made the documentary *The Third Sex*. Gross died in Cape Town in 2014, having never been able to reconnect with her faith.



“Much needs to be done to educate the public about intersex. They need to learn that it is part of the fabric of human diversity and not a threat, a rights issue and not pathology. Teachers and curricula need content about it. Medical students need input from a medical-ethics and human rights perspective. Religious leaders need to be educated about it to educate others. Research about the prevalence of intersex in SA, and about attitudes and practices, is needed. We need legislation to limit and regulate non-consensual genital surgery on the intersexed, and legislation must be screened with implications for the intersexed in mind.”

Sally Gross – *African Sexualities: A Reader*, page 236 (Ed. Sylvia Timale, 2011)

Sally in the Archives

The Sally Gross collection was donated to GALA by Gross' brother and friend after her death in 2014. The collection consists of Gross' personal documents, photographs and memorabilia and reflects her transition from living as a man to living as a woman, her life as a priest, work with the South African government and her crisis of faith and subsequent interest in Buddhism and Quakerism. Some of her academic writing is also included. Sally Gross' story also featured in GALA's 2016 exhibition *Journeys of Faith*.



Clockwise: Life as a Dominican Priest, c.1981, Oxford;
Dakar, Senegal 1987.

