

She'll bring love and faith to hurting nation

By John Sutherland

Her bright blue eyes cloud over and her soft-spoken words ease into a near whisper when she talks about her visit to Haiti last May and June. A listener quickly understands why. Could any human being look into the harsh face of death and despair that casts such a heavy pall over this Caribbean nation or listen to its woeful tales without shedding at least a tear or two?

But for Sr. Virginia McMonagle, USD's gracious director of constituent relations for the past nine and a half years, death and despair are not enemies from which to retreat. Rather, they are obstacles — obstacles to be confronted, examined, questioned. And faced with unyielding love, faith and compassion, perhaps understood, and perhaps conquered; one small patient step at a time.

That explains in part Sr. McMonagle's decision, at age 66, to give up her comfortable life at Alcalá Park in February and exchange it for a world of uncertainty in Haiti. It's a world in which she will not only run a hospice for children



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dying from AIDS and malnutrition, but also work with other volunteers to build an orphanage and school someday capable of housing and educating 1,000 orphans.

It's also a world far different from San Diego. More than 6 million people — about half of them under the age of 16 — live on the island of Hispaniola, 60 miles east of Cuba. Per capita income is just \$380 a year. Half the population is unemployed. Life expectancy is 54 years. Four-fifths of all Haitians are illiterate. A large percentage is afflicted with AIDS.

Ask her to explain the reasons behind

her decision more fully, and she describes in hushed tones the pain and misery and suffering of the Haitians — especially the tiny children — and how she feels challenged to reach out to those in need.

"There were such sad, hard things to see among these beautiful, gentle people," she recalls. "A mother washing her baby in the gutter water running by; an old man picking up a styrofoam cup, washing it in the gutter and then scooping up a drink. There is rarely any water besides this; a tank on a truck may come around twice a week where people line up with one bucket while the

naked children wildly run to catch the drips; dark schoolhouses with no chalkboards, no books, no desks.

"The evening before I left, I was walking alone through the churchyard and heard a baby crying. There before my eyes, lying on a dirty rag, were newborn twin girls and a three-year-old little girl between them. When one fussed the three-year-old picked her up like a doll to cradle her. That vision is tattooed on my heart forever.

"Obviously the poor mother brought them to the churchyard counting on the priests to find a place for them. The cook and maid at the priests' residence threw up their hands with a shrug as if to say, 'No big deal; it happens all the time!'"

And then she pauses to ask her own question.

"How can we in our land of plenty turn our backs on the misery of people living such a short distance from our shores?"

In Haiti Sr. McMonagle will join a small team of volunteers who are part of an organization run by Fr. William Wasson, a shy 61-year-old priest who has fed, clothed, housed and educated thousands of orphans during the last 30 years in both Mexico and Honduras. In just the past year, Fr. Wasson decided to initiate a similar venture in Haiti, generally acknowledged as the poorest nation in the western hemisphere.

He enlisted Sr. McMonagle's help after learning from a mutual friend about her nearly 35 years of experience as a school administrator and her compassion for others. But convincing her to leave Alcalá Park and USD wasn't easy, Sr. McMonagle says.

"Fr. Wasson and Fr. Rick Frechette, a young Passionist priest, visited me four times in three months. And each time they stayed for three days," she recalls with a laugh. "They kept working on me to join them. I told them there was no way I would ever leave USD, that there was no job I love more than USD."

Eventually, though, she was convinced to attend an informational meeting. She made no commitment to volunteer, but became enamored of the people she met. Then last spring, her priest friends convinced her to accompany them to Haiti while they searched for a suitable site for a school and orphanage. What she saw melted her heart.

"I was deeply touched at Mother

Teresa's home for the dying, where Fr. Rick anointed a 14-year-old while the other young girls looked on from their beds with prayerful big round eyes, knowing their time was near.

Later Father got them all laughing as he led them in the only tune we all knew — "Auld Lang Syne" — which they sang in Creole; we in French and English . . . I can really say they appeared happy; they were off the streets and would go to their Maker in peace, surrounded by the love of the nuns."

She also recalls her visit to a shop where prostheses are made for young children. She met an eight-year-boy there who took her hand, exclaiming, "Oh Sister, I want to show you. I made legs for my friend." Then he introduced her to his five-year-old friend, who proudly showed off the ease with which he could maneuver on his new legs.

"I just said to myself: 'If our people could only see what is going on in this world,'" she remembers. "We just have no concept of what is going on."

After returning to San Diego in June, still undecided about committing her-

self to Haiti, Sr. McMonagle struggled, by her own admission, to put her experience in perspective with her USD life.

Shortly afterward, she began her yearly retreat. She says she spent hours walking the beach at San Juan Capistrano, playing out again and again in her mind the scenes she witnessed in Haiti.

She also recalled the speech of USD President Author E. Hughes at an opening-of-school address three years ago in which he exhorted his audience to take a more global view of the world. It reminded her that she originally joined her religious order — the Religious of the Sacred Heart — because of the order's commitment to missionary work around the world.

"For the first four days of my retreat I kept saying to myself, 'If I go to Haiti, I wonder what life will be like.' Everything was if; if Haiti. Then, on about the fifth day, I found myself saying 'when I go to Haiti'. And I thought, 'My heavens, what is happening.' And it was just that simple.

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Sr. McMonagle and a painting she purchased during her earlier visit to Haiti.

should do whatever little bit they can to help. It is so fulfilling."

Now she's prepared to spend the rest of her life in Haiti. But in the event she finds the physical demands of her duties too great, she will return to the University at the end of a year.

Simply saying Sr. McMonagle will be missed at USD doesn't do justice to the hundreds of close relationships she has established with students, alumni and friends of the University. Examples of her care and concern abound from her near decade on campus.

There was the student who didn't have money for a meal card. The parents whose ill daughter needed personal attention. The international student whose financial aid left her without funds for clothes. And dozens of others. It's no wonder she's earned a reputation as a real-life oasis of dependable helpfulness in a world that all-too-often comes across as impersonal and too busy to care.

As the University's director of constituent relations, her official duties have included maintaining good relations with parents and trustees, coordinating black tie dinners for Dr. Hughes, and planning and executing other special events on campus. But that description only hints at the devotion she's demonstrated to her university.

"I really do love this place," she says emphatically, "and it's because of the people. Our faculty and our administrators and staff really care. They give of themselves. And that personal touch makes a difference."

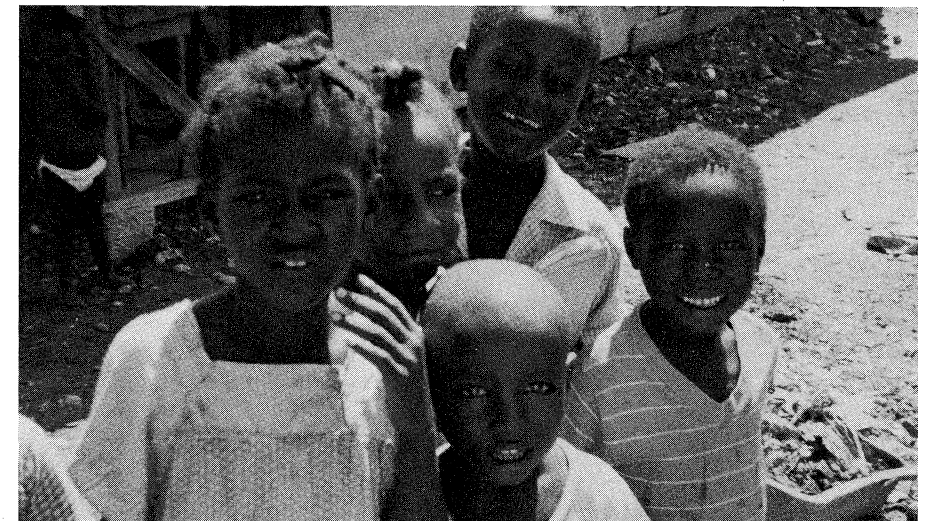
She credits Dr. Hughes for setting that kind of tone for the rest of the campus. "His leadership is beautiful in every aspect. He is a great Christian leader and a great educator, and he loves and understands youth. He is truly a great inspiration to work for."

She says living next door to USD students in the on campus Mission apartments makes her optimistic about the future. "The students are so idealistic. They're unafraid to change the world. Through their experiences here — especially through their involvement in service projects and their travel through our study abroad programs — I think they are beginning to gain a world vision.

"They have a hunger and a need for God, a need for giving of themselves; I think they're beginning to recognize that."

A native of Seattle, Sr. McMonagle traces her introduction to the religious life to an inauspicious incident. Seems one day after she came home from first grade at the public school using some unladylike words, her mother immediately declared that little Virginia and her sister and brother were going to be educated by the nuns.

After completing her elementary and secondary schooling at Sacred Heart-run schools in Seattle, she headed off to what was then Lone Mountain College (now the University of San Francisco), where she declared her intention to join the Sacred Heart order, and also earned bachelor and master's degrees in English. Later, her sister also opted for the religious life. Not to be outdone, her brother became a Jesuit priest.



"How can we in our land of plenty turn our backs on the misery of people living such a short distance from our shores?" she asks.

Sr. McMonagle served in a variety of school administrative posts before coming to USD in 1978: teacher and dean of students at Forest Ridge, a secondary school for girls near Bellevue, Wash. from 1943-57, founding principal at El Cajon's Academy of the Sacred Heart from 1957-1963, and principal and development director at Forest Ridge from 1963-77.

Following a 15-month sabbatical in 1977-78 during which she traveled to 37 countries around the world to study other Sacred Heart schools, the USD chapter of her life opened.

"Some of my former students — including Betsy Manchester, Maureen King and Kay Davis — asked me if I would consider being principal at All Hallows School in La Jolla. Well, after

being a principal for 30 years, that didn't sound so appealing. But I decided to go and find out more.

"While I was in San Diego I stopped by USD to say hello to Art Hughes, whom I knew very slightly. He asked me what I would be doing when I got back to Seattle. I said 'I don't know.'"

"Why don't you come to work for us?" he replied.

"Doing what?"

"Whatever you want to do," was the response.

The next thing she knew Dr. Hughes was introducing her to Dr. Gil Brown, then vice president for university relations, as the newest member of his staff.

She started building her legion of friends for USD in September of 1978,

and has been going strong at it ever since. It's a job her friends suspect she'll continue, even though she'll be more than 3,000 miles away in the Caribbean.

The road ahead is difficult, perhaps treacherous, given Haiti's recent politically-related violence. But that just strengthens this determined nun's resolve.

"They need us more than ever," she says. "The difficulties simply prove it's God's work. What man could undertake this project? We're just instruments in God's hands."

Alison Tibbitts and John Nunes also contributed to this article.