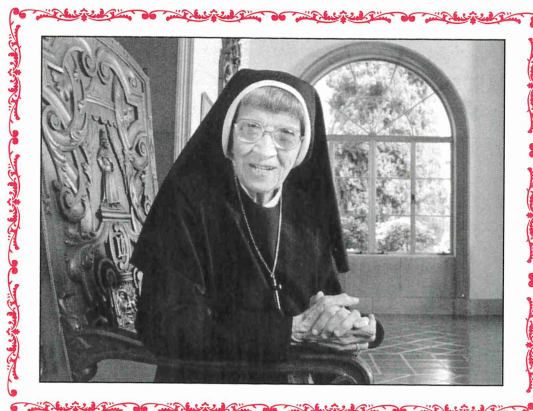


# SOUL PROVIDER

Call her, if you will,  
determined, or  
single-minded, or  
even stubborn. But  
with people  
in need,  
Sister Alicia Sarre  
isn't about to call  
it quits.



By Jacqueline Genovese

Sister Alicia Sarre, RSCJ, makes a confession of sorts as she walks into San Diego's downtown Metropolitan Correctional Center.

"When I was a little girl growing up in Mexico, I wanted to be a martyr," she says. "But then I went to the dentist, and right then I changed my mind. That was enough pain."

The 75-year-old nun laughs as she enters the prison through a series of heavy doors and screening devices. "I come every week, but still I go through this process," she whispers, rolling her eyes as a burly guard stamps her hand.

Dressed in a traditional black habit and walking with a spring in her step that belies her years, Sister Sarre walks fearlessly into a smoky room housing some 100 inmates, many of them illegal aliens from Mexico.

"These men are criminals," she says, shaking her head. "But they look like such nice boys, don't they?" She waits quietly, hands folded, as some of the men get up and offer her their table. With a smile and a nod, she sits at the table and beckons.

First two, then three, and finally seven men join her at the table. Hands clasped, heads bowed, they begin to pray the rosary in Spanish. Between prayers, the tiny nun asks the men questions about sin, forgiveness and *el infierno*—hell.

When she rises to leave, the men form a circle around her, standing at a respectful distance. One man with a battered, bruised face asks her to please bring him a prayer from Tijuana: *Quince Minutos en Compañía de Jesús Sacramentado*, Fifteen Minutes in the Company of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Two other men tell her they haven't received the sacraments of Holy Communion or Reconciliation.

Barely out the prison door, Sister Sarre is making plans. "I'll have to talk to Chaplain Crespo (the prison chaplain) about preparing those men for their sacraments."

She concludes with a wry smile. "After all, now is as good a time as any for them. When else are they going to have all this time to study?"

This August, Sister Alicia Sarre will celebrate her 50th anniversary as a Professed Religious of the Sacred Heart. It will also mark a milestone in a life that took her from a childhood surrounded by violence to a 30-year career at the University of San Diego to "retirement," where she works virtually seven days a week for the Diocese of San Diego as assistant director for Hispanic adult faith formation.

Throughout, she has been characterized by a tenacity that some would call sheer stubbornness, a humility that inspires others to do their best, and a courage that defies the odds.

She gained that courage the hard way, for fear was a frequent companion during her childhood in late 1920s Mexico. It was a time when Catholic nuns and priests faced persecution from the Mexican government.

"Priests were being killed just because they were Catholic. And my school, which was run by the Religious of the Sacred Heart, was closed down. The nuns had to leave the country."

Among those nuns was her older sister, Dolores. "Dolores went to the United States in 1926 when she was 25. She went to where it was safe," Sister Sarre says softly.

The Sarre household became a sanctuary where priests could safely celebrate Mass. "We kept the Blessed Sacrament at our house. My father's family was French, and I guess my parents thought the worst thing that could happen to us if we were caught was that we would be sent back to France."

Her parents' faith—and their bravery—impressed young Alicia. "I learned that the most important thing is to do God's will because, without that, nothing else matters," she says.

The 11th of 12 children, Alicia simply was expected to become a nun. "My family thought that since I looked like Dolores, I was going to be a nun, too," she says, shaking her head. "I used to get angry and tell them, 'That's none of your business; that's between God and me.'"

When she did decide to become a nun, Alicia joined her sister Dolores at Barat College in Lake Forest, Ill., where new challenges awaited.

"I didn't speak a word of English," she says. "I knew French and Spanish, but that didn't do me any good here,

especially not in freshman chemistry."

She learned English quickly and overcame any problems in understanding her English texts by memorizing them. She earned a master's in French at Marquette University and a doctorate in romance languages at Stanford.

It was after Stanford, in 1952, that Sister Sarre was called to San Diego to be the secretary for College for Women Co-founder Mother Rosalie Hill, RSCJ.

"Mother Hill inspired me," she says. "She was very holy, capable woman. She was never impatient. She believed that if you were impatient, you were telling Jesus that you didn't want to suffer."

Sister Sarre also took on the role of Professor Sarre, teaching romance languages first to the students of the College for Women and, later, the University of San Diego. By all accounts, her influence as professor and adviser was profound.

"Alicia created and fostered the Spanish major," says USD Provost Sister Sally Furay, RSCJ. "Her contributions to the university and her students are immeasurable."

A self-described "longtime admirer" of Sister Sarre, Sister Furay says her colleague's spirituality and generosity have greatly influenced the students she has taught.

"She always had time for her students. She was always more interested in them succeeding than they were, and that motivated them to succeed themselves," Sister Furay says. "I've had dozens of students tell me what a great lady she is."

In 1981, the mandatory retirement age was 65. Sister Sarre had no choice but to leave USD—reluctantly. "Stopping my teaching at USD was the hardest thing I ever had to do," she says. "I watched the school grow up from the very beginning. We were all like family."

But Sister Furay says it would have been a terrible loss for the diocese if Sister Sarre had stayed. "Do you know what Alicia did when she knew she was going to retire?" she asks, leaning forward at her desk. "She went to Texas and studied toward a master's degree in religious education. Age 65, and she undertook another master's!

"Now she has put a stamp on a lot of people in her work in Hispanic Evangelization. Those people love her for the



same reason her students love her."

In her work for the diocese, Sister Sarre travels to some eight parishes, conducting Bible studies and forming small faith communities for the Spanish-speaking parishioners.

"The faith communities are working out beautifully," she says. "It is nice for people to have friends they can talk to about spiritual things. Most people can't go into work and ask the people at the office, 'Did you get a chance to pray today?'"

One day last year, Sister Sarre got a call from Chaplain Crespo at the correctional facility, wondering if there was anyone who could pray the rosary in Spanish with the men at the prison. She volunteered herself, and the weekly visits quickly became part of her regular routine.

"Sister is a prime example of what commitment and perseverance are all about," Chaplain Crespo says. "These men have a deep respect for her—in a way, she is a mother figure to them. She is pointing the way for them with her gentleness and love. She doesn't forget, and that makes them feel important. It means a lot to the men."



Chaplain Crespo's admiration for the "little nun" grew when he learned that she rode the bus to the prison. "She comes every week, no matter what the weather, and she rides the bus," he says in disbelief. "Incredible."

Indeed, the bus is Sister Sarre's sole means of transportation. She takes it everywhere her job takes her—Ramona, Southeast San Diego, Mira Mesa, North Park and downtown. (That's not to say she doesn't enjoy a car ride once in a while. "There's a part missing from the Bible," she says, eyes twinkling. "That's the part that says people who give rides will go to heaven.")

With her diminutive stature and black habit, she is a subject of curiosity and conversation among her fellow passengers. "In my habit, I am everybody's sister," she laughs. "People come up to me all the time—on the buses, at the stops—and talk to me about their lives, their problems. People feel comfortable telling me things they can't tell anyone else."

Not only does she serve as a friend, confidant and counselor to passengers; sometimes, she is looked to for news. "When Mother Teresa was in the hospital in La Jolla, people stopped me a lot and asked how she was doing. I guess when people saw my habit, they thought I talked to her or had a daily report," she laughs.

Riding on the bus isn't always a pleasant experience, however. Last year, Sister Sarre was attacked by a man while waiting for a bus on Midway Drive. Instead of relinquishing her purse, the determined nun bit her attacker's hand and refused to budge. A passerby saw the attack and grabbed her assailant.

Did that experience stop her from taking the bus? "Of course not!" she says, eyebrows raised. "How else am I going to get around?"

Kathy Lamb '71, worries about her former teacher. "I think about her all the time, and I worry about her taking the bus everywhere," she says. "But Sister's love of God has made her totally without fear."

Others might attribute it to her renowned single-mindedness. She simply isn't going to let what might happen keep her from doing what she has to do.

"Alicia is so stubborn, sometimes I think even God Himself couldn't change her mind," quips Sister Virginia McMonagle, RSCJ, assistant to the president at USD.

Sister McMonagle should know. When Sister Sarre was first contacted about being interviewed for this story, she respectfully but steadfastly declined, saying, "Why do you want to write about me?" Sister McMonagle intervened by contacting their provincial, Sister Rosemary Bearss, RSCJ, who asked Sister Sarre to do the story. She reluctantly agreed, but still didn't understand all the fuss: Her tenacity is heavily laced with a genuine humility.

"Alicia has always been very humble and quiet, but also very present," notes Sister Irene Cullen '69, RSCJ, a longtime friend and former student.

Sister Furay concurs. "Alicia is humble in the right sense. She knows what she's good at, and she attributes her talents to God. Real humility is using God's gifts."

And using them to their fullest. Sister Sarre is happy with the accomplishments of her life, but has no intention of slowing down.

"When I go, I'll probably go on my feet," she says with a smile. The thought does not frighten her. "I know I'll be with Jesus and Our Lady, and I'll be able to see my parents, my brothers and sisters—people I haven't seen in a long time."

In the meantime, she'll continue to work toward seeing her own wish for the world come true.

"There is so much sickness in this world, so much corruption. If we could all just remember, 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.' It's that simple."