

Homeless *in* Haiti

BY CYNTHIA MACDONALD

FOR DAYS AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE IN HAITI, nobody knew whether Sister Mary Alban Bouchard was dead or alive. It seemed reasonable to fear the worst: the building where she lived had been destroyed. Phones were still dead. And nobody could find her.

But on Sunday, seven days after the devastating tremors that left so many others dead or injured, two Canadian journalists spied the tiny 79-year-old nun singing hymns at an outdoor mass. They approached her, hugged her—and put her on the front page of the next day's *Globe and Mail*. "That relieved a lot of people," smiles Sr. Mary Alban at the recollection. "Especially people here who could say, well, she's alive. And she's singing!"

Although the earthquake was the worst crisis Sr. Mary Alban has witnessed while living in Haiti, there have certainly been many others. Poverty, political instability, violence and hurricanes are just some of the afflictions the country has endured in the 22 years since the Sister of St. Joseph first began doing social justice work there. In what is, by most measures, the poorest country in the Americas, she has dedicated herself in countless ways, whether by helping women to start their own businesses, or building houses to empower them with ownership. She has also taught people to read, conducted a countrywide peace program on behalf of the UN, and helped to arrange medical care and education, both of which cost money in Haiti.

But on the afternoon of January 12, so much of this good work looked as if it might vanish in an instant.

On that day, Sr. Mary Alban had decided to attend a conference outside of Port-au-Prince. It was a choice that saved her life. "We were having a late coffee break and suddenly there was a rumble that threw us all over," she remembers. "Coffee went

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“We were having a late coffee break and suddenly there was a rumble that threw us all over. Coffee went everywhere. I backed up against the door frame and just held on....The building had cracks in it. And we kept getting shocks and shocks all night”



Sr. Mary Alban Bouchard CSJ 6T2

everywhere. I backed up against the door frame and just held on.” Miraculously, the building didn’t collapse, and the inhabitants were able to crawl out on their hands and knees. But later, “we had to sleep on the ground because the building had cracks in it. And we kept getting shocks and shocks all night.”

To be in Haiti over the next days was to witness death and destruction on an unimaginable scale. The recollections from Sr. Mary Alban’s diary are poignant, sometimes gut-wrenching. She writes of many friends lost or buried in the rubble, of a young friend, a child who spent his days running and playing, lying untended after his foot was severed. Another Sister she knew, a school principal, was “practically catatonic. She just sat in her chair and could hardly speak...the shock was just so bad for her, and I guess she was thinking of all it meant for the future.”

The aftershocks kept coming, and Sr. Mary Alban’s survival even after the quake was by no means assured. Fortunately, she found nourishment: cooking in Haiti is traditionally done outside, and stores of rice and beans were mercifully unburied. Trucks came by with water. Still, there was nowhere to stay. When the *Globe and Mail* found her almost a week later, this self-described “runt” (she is a former teacher who left the profession after a constant run of health problems) had become accustomed to spending each night on the cold ground outside. She had no money, no passport, and no means of leaving the country. “I was poor among the poor, homeless among the homeless,” she says.

On January 23, dressed in summer clothes and bereft of resources, Sr. Mary Alban was finally evacuated on a military airplane to Montreal. There she and others were met by a battalion of Red Cross volunteers, bearing food, blankets and mukluks. “That was the first time tears came to my eyes,” she recalls. “We hadn’t had the luxury of thinking about it hardly. But when I landed and knew I was safe, and saw all the people who were there to help...it was so beautiful.”

That Sr. Mary Alban can see beauty in the midst of squalor has no doubt been helpful to her in her life of service. Her diary makes note of the wailing cries that filled each terrible night after the quake, but she also notes small, heaven-sent gifts: a child banging joyfully on a foam lid, or a beautiful orange moon overhead.

Her love of literature was nurtured at St. Michael’s, she says, where she completed an honours degree in English Language and Literature in 1962. She also had a passion for philosophy and remembers classes taught by Marshall McLuhan, whose daughters she would later go on to teach. “He was entertaining, witty, friendly, and profoundly religious. St. Mike’s was a growthful campus to inhabit!” she adds. “I have kept a journal all my life and written continually. I can’t help myself!” she exclaims, going on to note: “I am always happiest when the product is a poem.” She has in fact published much poetry, in addition to articles and books on a diverse array of topics, including nuclear disarmament.

In the years before she took up work in Haiti, disarmament was but one of Sr. Mary Alban’s myriad concerns. After leaving teaching, she lived and worked with recovering alcoholics, and established the

Sisters of Saint Joseph as an NGO at the United Nations in New York City. It was while there that she fell in love with the Haitian liturgy. “They bring their kids, and they sing and dance, you know?”

She had always prayed to be sent to work with the poor. Increasingly, Haiti looked like the best place to do that. “I started thinking, it’s crazy; I’ll probably get sick the first week I’m there. But the urge was there; it wouldn’t go away.” On January 25, 1989, she arrived for the first time, speaking rudimentary French and no Kreyol (the local languages).

In many ways, she has never left—and in any case, she always returns. In March, Sr. Mary Alban was back in Port-au-Prince, bearing powdered milk, flip-flops, and a substantial housing grant from the Hilton Foundation. This August, after a rest in Toronto, she returned again. She considers her vocation “a call and a grace given. But it is also a choice. It was a good choice I made.” ♦



PHOTOS: JOHN RENNISON, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR