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"A Role Model for Women"

Virginia Monagle, a supernumerary in Opus Dei, recently died of breast cancer. After learning she couldn't have children, she helped found 4 schools and encouraged others to have large families. An article published in "The Australian."

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The sending of Christmas cards is a fading tradition. This year, of the cards we received, the one that

moved me most was from a dear friend who was dying. I received Virginia's card, written with only faintly wobbly handwriting, on Christmas eve and on December 29 she died.

Only a person like Virginia Anne Monagle (nee Corry) would think to send her friend a card as she approached the last days of her life. Virginia had developed secondary cancer last year after breast cancer. I saw her in May looking absolutely glamorous in a stunning black dress with her new short silver hair-do.

But she knew her chances were slim. Her breast cancer was not caught early enough and for all the talk of cures and no deaths by 2030 the death rate from breast cancer has declined only because of early diagnosis and treatment. Although research has dramatically improved survival rates it has not lowered the

incidence of the disease. Even after treatment the possibility of the cancer returning is very high.

Virginia is the second of my friends to die of breast cancer which, despite more money poured into identifying its origins and treatment than any other disease, continues to cut a swath through Australian women.

But this column is not about Virginia's cancer with all the usual pink-ribboned emotional stuff, that tends to surround it. She was not defined by that disease. Virginia's death was heroic and saintly -- her funeral conducted by Cardinal Pell filled St Mary's Cathedral. But Virginia's life was much more. She was both the embodiment of modern femininity and a successful professional woman. She called herself a "good" feminist, (even though I disputed the existence of that species) and she was. Unlike so many of the new handbag hit squad

fixated on power and advancement, Virginia was the embodiment of refined human virtue, the sort of woman we ought to look up to -- not the sort we usually do.

An educator with a brilliant vision, she and her husband Frank were part of a group that founded several schools in Sydney, notably Tangara and Redfield in the northwest and recently several other schools in the western suburbs. The schools were set up as part of the Pared foundation, which is a conservative but visionary idea of education based on the parent as the child's first educator. It relies on the philosophy of synchrony between the aims of the parent and the aims of the school. The schools teach the traditional disciplines well and the Catholic faith. They are part of the work of Opus Dei, but they are not exclusively Catholic; about one third

of the children are non Catholic, and some are not Christian.

It is a novel idea when the state seems to have taken over so much of our lives that a child's education should be the first and most important obligation and vocation of parenthood. Strangely Virginia's vocation as an educator came out of her inability to be a parent.

I first met Virginia and her sister Suzanne when they were part of the old University of Sydney Democratic club "gang" and I was an undergraduate at UNSW. Everyone noticed the Corry girls because they were physically so very beautiful and Virginia, with her dark hair and eyes, was very proud of her part-Aboriginal ancestry from her grandmother, a heritage she later wrote about in *The Australian* . The group at Sydney, which included the young Tony Abbott and Greg

Sheridan, were much more serious about student politics than I or my mates at UNSW, who tended to be in it for downright frivolous reasons -- like meeting boys. Indeed, the University of Sydney group had to be serious as student politics there was pretty brutal and the Left was doing its best to wreck the normal course of academic life.

Virginia met her husband Frank at about this time. Both were involved then in the battle for ideas and together they played a part, opposing the influence of Marxism within student movements at the university. They were serious about their whole lives, their vocation and their faith. Virginia completed a bachelor of arts at the University of Sydney and was invited to do a masters in English or history but chose a diploma in education, hardly the choice of a crassly aspirational careerist.

Nor were Frank and Virginia narrowly political. Together they became part of Opus Dei, and as supernumeraries, dedicated their lives to whatever work God had called them to do. The Monagles had assumed, like most young marrieds, it would be as parents.

But Virginia never had children. Like all women in her position, her inability to conceive a child was a huge sadness which cast a shadow over her life. She wrote very movingly and bravely about her childlessness in *The Australian*. She even talked about the little set of baby clothes she had kept since the first year of her marriage at age 22 and the fading hope, month after month, as she waited and prayed, but to no avail.

But then Virginia's life took a turn which she later told me made everything more clear for her.

In 1977, on their honeymoon, Frank and Virginia were encouraged to visit schools founded by parents under the inspiration of St Josemaria Escriva. Just over a year later, they spent 12 months in Spain and Ireland learning as much as they could about these schools and the importance of putting parents first in education. The establishment of four schools and courses for parents became Virginia's life work and those children became as her own.

Virginia was on the board of the Pared Schools since the company started meeting in 1979. She was also a talented and lyrical writer, had many human-interest articles published, particularly in *The Australian*, and she wrote the lead chapter in a book called *Women of Hope*. Her theme was the spiritual motherhood of a childless woman. She spoke on the family at conferences in Australia, Rome,

Singapore and in the UN. Most significantly, through conversations and public talks, she inspired many mothers to try to have more children. She once laughingly told me, after I bemoaned yet another pregnancy, that she is "responsible" for many more children than she could have managed had she borne them herself. In 2012, she was given life membership of the NSW branch of the Australian Parents Council.

My last column was about the education of boys. However the education of girls is often lacking in really substantial inspirational examples. In a world where vice is virtue and girls are swamped with media-manufactured "heroines," the loud, ambitious and superficial often carry the day. With her gentleness, grace and virtue, my friend Virginia Anne Monagle was the kind of woman we should hold up as a real example to girls.

Angela Shanahan, The
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