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At: Anne's

MARY McGRORY

Socks and Santas

WHEN the First Lady went to St. Ann's Infant Home the other day for a Christmas visit, she was accompanied by her cat, Socks, and the White House Santa Claus. The children weren't all sure who she was, but they loved her companions.

The meeting between the ultra-contemporary First Lady and the sisters of the ancient order of the Sisters of Charity, who have run the home for homeless children for over 100 years, was unexpectedly cordial. Although they have deeply contrary views on abortion, it turned out that Administrator

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Sister Josephine and Hillary Rodham Clinton are sisters under the skin about one of the great problems in dealing with abused children, the infamous Family Reunification Act, which sends tortured children back to their torturers. Mrs. Clinton told the sisters that she has been roundly criticized as an advocate of children's rights. The sisters sympathized, then took her through nurseries and playrooms, where little children lurched towards her and reached for her necklace of flashing Christmas lights.

She caused the most excitement in the Guardian Angel unit, which is for the 3-to-8 set. Having heard Santa
See McGRORY, C5, Col. 1

McGRORY, From C1

was coming, the children went into their routine, which I will explain later. They sang "Jingle Bells" twice. When he appeared, they stampeded past her to get to Santa and throw their arms around him.

Socks strode into the thick of things with a purposefulness and bravery I found most impressive. That is one political cat. When four little boys closed in on him and with great ardor began stroking his fur the wrong way, he made no protest.

I do not wish to speak for Mrs. Clinton, but I think that the inclusion of Santa in her entourage is a pretty clear indication that she is on my side in this year's Christmas controversy. An NAACP chapter in North Carolina suggested a Santa boycott. They wouldn't have done it if they had ever been to one of our Christmas parties.

Some of us volunteers at St. Ann's give a Christmas party for the older children. Over the years, they have taught us how to do it. For instance, we once had a Santa, a jolly Irishman when he hadn't gone to the Market Inn to brace himself with a four-martini lunch for his chores. When he had had just the one extra sip, his good nature slipped several notches, and he had been seen throwing a present at a child who had not moved smartly enough when his name was called. Two little girls we found sobbing in each others' arms in the hall convinced us we

had to do something different.

We worked out a formula we thought the most timid dormouse of a child might find unthreatening. Santa was asleep on the couch when they arrived. They sang "Jingle Bells" very softly at first and then applied the crescendo; by the time of the second "hey," Santa was up and ho-ing. Thomas Noyes, a most civilized and gentle fellow

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with a taste for the theater, refined the role. He was also very good at batteries and assembly.

Our perennial and heroic hostess, Gertrude Cleary, moved out of her big old picture-book house and into an elegant apartment. She would not give up the franchise. We changed Santas too. Tom Noyes' good heart gave out and we found someone new. Mark Shields, who had been, he said South Weymouth's finest Santa in his youth, took over. He was so sorry for the children he could hardly bring himself to do the interrogatories. They perjured themselves copiously and at the earliest opportunity, hurled

themselves on him as if he were a trampoline. There was that melting moment when the toughest, most case-hardened, most sent-home-from-school boy fell apart and unleashed a smile that never dimmed. A shy little girl put her hand on his arm and tried to thank him for the doll—and the love—he gave her. He wasn't much at batteries and assembly. They didn't care. He was just what they had in mind.

This year a hip operation sidelined him. We prevailed on Tim Russert to be surrogate Santa. We told him it would be just like "Meet the Press," lots of commentary, endless Q and A. He went at it with great gusto, making statements about correct behavior, quizzing them at great length about their lapses. "Did you bite? Did you fight?" He asked over and over. He launched into a homily about respect.

The children began to squirm and fidget, like delegates to a Democratic Convention trapped in a Bill Clinton speech. One of them, Ralph, took me aside. "Is he ever going to give us presents?" he asked. "Ralph," I said, "I promise you."

And Gertrude's wonderful neighbor, Jeremy Young, came in to play the piano, and we sang "The Twelve Days of Christmas" so you could hear it at the White House, and Robert, whose heart was broken because his mother walked out on him, leapt up and danced. He made his way to Santa, through the paper and the toys and the batteries and said to him, "You should be here all the time."