

A day with Therese

Monday. 1.30 pm. I'm driving to the parish of Varroville (NSW) to spend some time in the presence of the relics of St Therese of Lisieux. I am interested, but a touch skeptical. Remember, I grew up in the 70s: devotions were 'out', human development was 'in'. The thought of venerating the bones of a saint is all a bit alien to me. But the saint herself – Therese – now there's an incredible woman, a real lover of Christ and the Church. It is she who draws me here.

2.25 pm. I reach the parish church five minutes ahead of the relics. A crowd gathers outside anticipating the arrival of 'the red car'. School students line the street, balloons and streamers strewn through their number. It is unbearably hot and I wonder how long they have been standing in the scorching sun.

2.30 pm. The red car emerges and, as it enters the church grounds, the cheering kids break rank and swarm behind and around the car and all over the property. By now I am swimming in a sea of youth. They are so beautiful! I can feel God's nearness in this dishevelled, sweaty mass of youthful humanity, and it moves me to tears. I've lost sight of the relics, but who cares – I'm swimming in grace! Meanwhile, an uplifting song pours forth from the external speakers. I had expected 'Faith of our Fathers', not a song about Therese which could easily fit into the musical genre of the

Top 40. This musical welcome, complete with youthful dancing, surprises and delights me.

3.30 pm. We're in the church and one thing is clear: This is Carmelite territory! Our hosts, the local friars and sisters, offer a natural hospitality, a depth of knowledge of Therese, and the witness of their community and prayer life. It's a great 'vocations' advertisement. Here, in the midst of this outpouring of the faith of God's people, in the presence of a Carmelite saint, their religious commitment makes incredible sense.

7.30 pm. A standing-room-only crowd packs the church for the official Mass of welcome. It's one of those rounded worship spaces, so you can actually look into the eyes of the body of Christ, the people gathered. The church shines, bright and beautiful. Banners and roses adorn the sanctuary where the gold tabernacle sparkles. Two large screens display changing photographs of Therese. It's a feast for the senses.

A moment of silent anticipation before the Mass begins, then: kapow! The whole congregation bursts forth in song. 'Hail Redeemer' sung as I have never heard before, with vitality and energy and sounding as if it had just been composed yesterday. So, everything old is new again. I continue to feast upon the richness of the celebration: the passion of the Bishop, the solidity of the Carmelite preaching, the strength of the assembly' responses, the powerful

but unpretentious musical extravaganza. Right down to the loving interactions of the family next to me where the little boy has fallen asleep and his mother rocks him in her arms.

11 pm. Mass is long over, but a crowd remains to quietly pray and keep vigil throughout the night. People come forward to touch and kneel by the relics. The stream of humanity is a tapestry of cultures and ages, from the elderly Italian grandma to the young bloke with the mohawk hair-cut. Again, I am moved by the faith of the Church. I come away with a renewed sense of the Incarnation and the 'earthiness' of our Catholic faith. How wonderful it is to have sights and sounds and smells and tangible objects - yes, even bones! – through which God can speak to us, draw us and touch us in ways we don't always consciously comprehend but which at some deep level ground us in the reality of God-with-us. •

