

# **BEATIFICATION**

## **The Towers in Rome - October,2004**

For many, many years, the Blessed Sacrament Sisters had been working hard for the Beatification of their Founder, Peter Vigne. A miracle had occurred: a young Brazilian mother had been cured inexplicably of terminal cancer through the intercession of Father Vigne, and, at last, our Founder was to be beatified.

Mrs.Baker insisted that the whole community should go to Rome. We were anxious about leaving Mother Bernard who was now bedridden, but Sister Margaret offered to come from Malahide, and Sister Zita came to stay from Henfield; Mother Bernard would be well looked after.

On the 1st October 2004, feast of St.Teresa of the Child Jesus, we left The Towers at 5.00am, with our three gallant minibus drivers: Colin, Barry and Jason. We would be twenty-seven altogether (two would join us in Henfield, Sister Patricia and Celia Emmott, and three from Welling, Betty Murphy and Kath and Peter Ward, would meet us at Gatwick). The Towers Sisters were Sister M.Patrick, Sister Breda, Sister Frances, Sister Sheila, and Sister M.Andrew, together with Sister Catherine who had joined us from Malahide. Six pupils came with us: Vanessa McAuley (Head Girl), Lottie Brown (Head Boarder), Lydia Grows, Maawura Totoe, Marielle Mills and Nina Lisapo. Other members of our party were John and Mary Newman, Gill Ness-Collins, Cath Hoad, Joan Sweeney, Catherine Cassey, Chris Hackett, and not least, Father Matthias, our Polish chaplain. Iris and Roy Williams from Henfield would also meet us at the airport.

As the plane climbed above the grey clouds into brilliant sunshine all promised to be well. We seemed to cross the Channel very quickly, flying at 33,000 feet and after a delicious snack we saw breath-taking views of the Alps below us. Before long we were flying down the west coast of Italy - Genoa, Pisa - and soon arrived in Rome ahead of schedule, where the temperature was 20 degrees.

We were met by a smiling courier from Tangey Tours who conducted us to our coach. Unfortunately, Fr.Matthias' case was badly damaged in transit, and we had to wait an hour while he filled in forms; but then we were on our way, speeding towards the city.

We arrived at our hotel, Hotel Conciliazione, at about 1.00pm. It was clean and comfortable and only a stone's throw from St.Peter's. Without wasting any time, we headed for the Basilica, and showed the girls the heart of Christianity. We admired the Pieta, the famous statue of St.Peter, with its worn foot; the crypt with its many tombs, especially the tomb of St.Peter, (several strata underneath the basilica, his tomb has been discovered); we saw tombs of Pius X, Pius XII, John XXIII, John Paul I, and the Stuarts' memorial. We prayed a while at the Blessed Sacrament chapel.

After this introductory tour, we decided it was time to eat, and headed for a restaurant aptly named St.Pietro, where we enjoyed wonderful spaghetti and other Italian specialities.

With our strength renewed, we headed back to St.Peter's, and Sister Breda and I, with our six girls, taking our courage in both hands climbed to the cupola. Sister Breda and I availed of the lift for the first part, but the girls climbed over five hundred steps. After the first level, we looked down on the interior of the basilica; miniature people were scurrying about. The final climb to the cupola, often hair-raising in parts, brought us to a beautiful, spectacular, panoramic view of the Holy City, Rome. The nerve-wracking experience had been so worthwhile; even Maawura who hated heights, and had to be persuaded to climb the second half, was pleased she had made it! The descent was almost as difficult for some of us, but the girls enjoyed ice-creams on the second level, (I cannot see ice-creams being sold on the dome of St.Paul's in London, but that is Italy for you!) and we returned to terra ferma.

Some of us then attended a Latin Mass in the Basilica. In the meantime, Sister Patrick, Sister Frances, and others of our group, made their way to our convent in Via Dei Riari, to collect our pilgrims' bags, books, and scarves. The girls then joined the other Sisters to explore Rome a little further, and enjoyed a pizza near Castel St. Angelo.

A major problem then began to emerge: Betty Murphy, an elderly pilgrim from Welling, was lost! No one had seen her since the early afternoon when she was supposed to wait for Cath Hoad who had climbed to the cupola. However, our fears were allayed when at about 10.00pm, she was escorted to the hotel by four Italian police officers! Realizing she was lost, and having no idea as to the whereabouts of the hotel, she had finally spoken to the police. These took her to the Irish embassy who 'phoned the parish priest of Welling, who 'phoned Kath Ward's daughter, for Kath's mobile 'phone number. The parish priest was then able to find out from Kath Ward the address of our hotel, and let the Irish embassy know. Betty was thus escorted by four smiling carabinieri back to our hotel.

Did someone mention 'pizza' earlier? Thereon hangs a tale! Father Matthias had discovered from a Polish friend that a special Mass was to be held that night in the Church of St. Lawrence, and the relics of St. Teresa of the Child Jesus, from Lisieux, were to be venerated. As a missionary priest, he has great devotion to St. Teresa, and wished to attend. So followed by Sister Patricia, Sister Sheila, and a few valiant members of our group, he strode out to find the church, (little knowing that there were four churches of that name in Rome!). Sister Sheila had not eaten since lunch-time and Sister Patrick had given her a pizza to eat, when possible. They followed Father Matthias up streets and down streets, and were rudely shooed away by one lady whom they followed, thinking she was going to the church, whereas she was going to the theatre. At last, the church was found, and Sister Sheila thought it was time she ate her pizza. She placed it on the bonnet of a car and produced a knife! Sister Patricia told her she could not possibly eat the pizza now, they were going into the church. "But", said Sister Sheila, "I am starving". Sister Patricia said she would have to eat it afterwards. "But I am not going to take it into the church", said Sister Sheila. "You cannot leave it here", said Sister Patricia, "it was too expensive!" and with that, she tucked the pizza under her arm and entered the church. I think Sister Patricia must be the only Sister ever to approach the altar with a pizza under her arm! After the service, as it was now very late, Father Matthias hailed a taxi. It could take only four. Father said he and Sister Sheila would walk. Sister Patricia was bundled into the taxi, still holding the pizza, and great was Sister Sheila's dismay when she saw her pizza disappearing round the corner in a taxi! She ate the pizza for breakfast the next day!

The following morning, some of us set out early for St. Peter's to find a Mass in the crypt. We managed to assist at a German Mass, but fortunately much of it was in Latin. We then found an English Mass and were able to stay for a while before heading back to the hotel for breakfast. The Sistine Chapel was our next objective. The queue extended for miles, but we joined it; every time we reached a corner, the queue disappeared round another corner! After about an hour and a half, we finally gained admission and began to make our way through the many splendid galleries and corridors of the Vatican Museum. These, too, seemed to go on forever, but they surely rank among the most beautiful buildings of the world. About an hour later, we reached the Sistine Chapel, crowded with tourists, but resplendent in colourful beauty.

We then returned to the hotel before doing a little shopping in the religious mini "super-market". What was our delight when turning a corner we came face to face with the "Street Children" of Brazil and our Brazilian Sisters. For many years now these children have been cared for by our Sisters; they teach them, train them, and give them work. Sister Rose d' Aparaceida is their mainstay. She had been determined to bring them to Rome for the Beatification. Many of these young people had formed a brass band, and Sister had managed to get sponsorship for sixty of them to come to Rome - expenses paid. One condition, laid down by the Sports Minister, who actually accompanied the Brazilian group, was that they were to play a football match against the Italians - this was to happen. Here they were before us, remarkable in their bright blue and yellow uniforms. Our Sisters threw their arms around us and thanked us joyfully for all we do to fund their ventures with the "Street Children". Spaghetti then allayed any hunger pangs as we rested our weary limbs once more in the St. Pietro restaurant.

At 4.30pm we made our way to the church of Santa Maria di Transpontina where there was to be a vigil of prayer in preparation for the Beatification. The excitement and emotion of the hours that followed is hard to describe. The joy of seeing so many of our Sisters from three continents was boundless. Some we had never met before, others we had not seen for twenty, thirty, even forty years, but they were all our Sisters, all Sacramentines, come to celebrate this amazing event. The excitement was palpable as we hugged and embraced each other. I doubt that the church of Transpontina, run by the Carmelites, had ever experienced such an event. The Bishop of Valence, accompanied by the Bishops of Grenoble, Viviers and Bahia, Brazil, together with the retired Bishop of Valence, led our vigil of prayer which was divided into four sections. Father Vigne's words, his thoughts and reflections, permeated this time of prayer. It was uplifting. The English/Irish contingent had been given the part dedicated to Our Lady. As it drew to a close, the whole congregation joined in singing the refrain of "Holy Virgin, by God's decree", "Ave, ave, ave Maria!" They must have heard us in St.Peter's basilica at the end of the Via Conziliatione.

With the service concluded, excitement and joy once more erupted as Sisters and friends, greeted long-lost Sisters and friends. Outside, the "Street Children's" band had gathered and things were fairly chaotic for a while. We found Katherine Barnes and her mother Pat who had flown out to Rome to join us for the weekend. Katherine, who had spent part of her "Gap" year helping with the "Street Children" in Brazil, said she would go to great lengths to see them again. We also met Maximo and Madeleina, summer friends from Steyning, who had driven from Florence to be with us.

Little by little the crowd diminished. We made our way back to the Via Borgo and decided to have our supper in the street outside the hotel. It was lined with little cafes and restaurants. Sister M.Patrick announced that the wine to celebrate Fr.Vigne's Beatification was on her! Sister M.Catherine then took the girls by bus to see the Trevi Fountain. There was a hair-raising moment when Marielle was lost, but she was eventually found and all retired to prepare for the coming great day.

Sunday morning dawned sunny and crisp. Breakfast was at 7.15am and at 7.45am we made our way to St.Peter's Square. Thousands were already there thronging against the barriers which had not yet been opened. Lydia came running from apparently nowhere to say that Sister Catherine had sent her to say the Peter Vigne supporters were on the other side of the square, so we set off again. We were all carrying the bags, and wearing the beautiful scarves sporting Father Vigne's image, his signature, and symbols of the Eucharist, so it was easy to recognize these from afar.

We chatted excitedly as we waited. Suddenly, the resounding beat of drums and brass instruments sounded. What joy! There was Sister Rose d'Aparaceida marching ahead of the Brazilian "Street Children's" Band, leading them proudly into St.Peter's Square - a dream come true. They were resplendent in their bright blue and yellow uniforms, carrying a banner of Peter Vigne. It was hard not to weep as we clapped and cheered. With this, the barriers were opened and we poured past the security guards into the square to take up our places. We all had seats, and it was a relief to find that wherever we were, we could see well.

The altar was situated on top of the steps leading to the Basilica. Stretching in rows to either side of this was the Austrian royal family, and military dignitaries, sporting resplendent uniforms. High up on The Basilica were hung five banners. These were covered portraits of the five people to be beatified, Peter Vigne, Anne Katherine Emmerick, Joseph-Marie Cassant, a Trappist monk, Maria Ludovica de Angelis, an Italian nun, and Emperor Charles, the last Emperor of Austria. There were nuns, priests, and monks everywhere, and 1000's of people who had come to support the five being beatified.

A time of prayer began; thoughts and prayers of the five "beati" were proclaimed throughout the square. What joy we felt as our own Sisters, headed by Sister Claire Villiers, led these prayers. During this, Austrian cavalymen, again in beautiful uniform, clattered into the square to line the route of the Holy Father.

At approximately 9.50am he appeared in his "popemobile", obviously extremely frail, but brave and

courageous, waving to the crowds. Slowly, he made his way round the square to the cheers of the faithful, and up the huge ramp to the altar. There followed a long procession of people bearing things to prepare the altar for Mass. Our two Sisters from Tanzania were prominent here, carrying large arrangements of flowers. The Mass began. As the Holy Father said the first prayer for the beatification of these five holy people, it was magical to watch the covers on the five banners being drawn upwards and there was our Father Vigne in pride of place in the centre, looking out over 30,000 pilgrims, to Rome, and to the world. Various Bishops, together with the postulators then presented each 'beati' to the Holy Father. The Bishop of Valence, accompanied by Sister Clotilde Marie, who had worked for years on this project, began the proceedings. Mass then continued with the Gloria and the Credo, parts of which were from the Missa de Angelis, and we sang with full voice.

At the offertory there was another great joy when we saw Sister Frances with Sister Barbara from Brazil, heading an impressive procession of people bringing gifts to the altar. This joy was repeated at the time of Communion when over a hundred priests led out from the altar, and there among them was our Father Matthias wearing his Peter Vigne scarf in his girdle. Sister Breda was among those who were to receive Holy Communion from the Pope, but he was too frail, so a cardinal took his place. After the silence and the singing following Holy Communion and our oneness with Christ, the square exploded to the sounds of "Holy God we praise thy name" - each nationality singing in their own tongue. Then to the strains of our Brazilian band, the Holy Father left the altar, again driving among the people. Many of us climbed onto our chairs, clapping and cheering, and waving our Peter Vigne scarves. The excitement was palpable and as the Holy Father disappeared, our "Street Children" began to march out of the square, we all joined on, making as much noise as they. The Beatification had been an experience we would remember to the end of our days.

We then paid a brief visit to the hotel and proceeded to St.Pietro restaurant and, yes, spaghetti! A recital in the Transpontina church followed. This was organized by our school in Frascati and was a beautiful portrayal in words and music of the life of Peter Vigne. Again the church was packed to bursting point. However, Sister Breda and I decided that the girls might not be so interested, as it was all in Italian, so we took them round Rome on an open-topped bus. We saw many of the sights and attractions the girls would otherwise have missed, but sadly, as it was Sunday and work was in progress, we saw the Colisseum only in the distance and did not go near the Forum.

On our return, we discovered that the "Street Children" had again performed, playing and doing gymnastics in the road outside the church; even the Sisters had joined in.

We paid a brief visit again to St.Peter's, whilst some of the girls did last minute shopping, and then we had our last meal together. One of the restaurants had set outside a long line of tables for us. It was like a street party! The usual spaghetti was certainly on the menu, but I thoroughly enjoyed a pizza "Margueritta" this time. It was delicious!

After this, St.Peter's basilica drew us back once more. It stood illuminated in the Roman sky, and our hearts rose, yet again, to see Blessed Peter Vigne with his fellow "beati", beautifully lit up and towering over St.Peter's Square. Sister Patrick prayed aloud, bringing to a close a perfect day.

We set out early the next morning for Mass in the basilica, this time to be said by Father Matthias, our Polish chaplain. The beauty of the square and the basilica, bathed in the rays of the rising sun was another unforgettable sight, and yes, our Peter Vigne was still there, resplendent.

We followed Father Matthias down into the crypt of St.Peter's; he led us to the little Polish chapel of Our Lady of Czestokovitch. What could have been more fitting! The peace and serenity of this Mass, though in tremendous contrast to all we had experienced in the few previous days, completed our pilgrimage, in its quiet loveliness and prayerfulness.

Afterwards there was just time for a quick breakfast, before our coach driver arrived and we were speeding

towards Fiumicino airport. It was then just a matter of time before Rome was disappearing into the distance, taking with it so many joys and experiences, and we were left with our memories marvelling, once more, over the Italian coastline and tiny islands, and then on to the magnificent Alps.

All seemed rather mundane as we emerged from Gatwick airport, but our trusty drivers, Colin, Barry, and Jason, soon arrived with our three minibuses, and excited chatter lasted until The Towers was reached. Mrs. Baker and all who had held the fort in our absence gave us a great welcome. Mother Bernard assured us she had had the most devoted care from Sisters Zita and Margaret, and Shep, our faithful Collie, who had boarded with Connie and Shasta in the village, went mad! We were home!