

A DAY WITH MARY

PASTOR IUVENTUS Brought to tears by a rare devotion

We had a "Day with Mary" in the parish on Saturday. The Day with Mary apostolate travels the length and breadth the country organising days of devotion to Our Blessed Lady inspired by the revelations at Fatima. Organised by lay volunteers with the support of the Franciscans of the Immaculate, it is like a travelling mission or, at the risk of sounding facetious, a sort of holy road show, in that it arrives in the parish in the morning, is skilfully set up and executed and then equally skilfully dismantled and cleared up with minimal inconvenience or effort to the parish priest once the day is done.

A team of volunteers arrived at 8am and began unloading their van. They brought a beautiful statue of Our Lady of Fatima and one of those things to carry it on for which I can never remember the name, which the Sisters of the Immaculate in their grey and blue habits proceeded to decorate with hundreds of flowers ready for the procession. They unloaded branched candelabra to stand by it all day, and microphones

and mixer desks, hymn books and a DVD presentation for the hall, the contents of a small bookshop and repository. They provided servers, singers, organist, priests to hear Confessions. I celebrated the morning Mass and preached but for much of the day was able to benefit from the devotions as a participant as we had a procession of the Blessed Sacrament, crowning of Our Lady's statue, rosary, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Benediction, consecration of the parish to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and enrolment in the brown scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

It was a wonderful day, of a piety the like of which I think must be rare these days in England. We have devotions to Our Lady and Adoration and Benedictions here, but there can be something wistful about them, for perhaps the same half-dozen faithful people turn up each time. More than anything else, A Day With Mary brought nearly 200 people from miles around. It was profoundly moving and inspiring to have a church packed for a procession of the Blessed Sacrament, for Adoration, for Benediction.

It is a long time since this church has seen the like, people spending a whole day in devotion, raising the roof with their singing.

I found myself moved to tears over and over again. This was because many of the devotions were of the kind to touch one's emotions, and more, I think, because it was impossible not to be struck by the profound contrast with what is the norm. In anthropological terms, it was like the contrast between being at a cup final where the crowd occasionally applaud politely or pass the odd comment to one another, and one where the crowd as a whole is singing, and shouting and living every moment of the game. Please, don't misunderstand: I don't mean that the congregation were somehow behaving inappropriately or boisterously. You could have heard a pin drop during Mass and Adoration; I mean, rather, that their total engagement, their willingness to be taken up into the spirit of reverence and praise, their thirst for devotion, their joy at being there, was something which was like heady wine to the palate.

I wept for what, to my eyes at

least, has been lost to a generation or more: not just a matter of taste in liturgical matters like music or gesture but the overwhelming sense of the sacred as real, as viscerally important, as necessarily altering one's attitude and behaviour, as though one had for a while left the everyday cares and disembarked to find oneself on another, altogether less hostile, more beautiful and peaceful shore where one felt instantly at home. It was not just the content of the prayers or the old-fashioned hymns to Our Lady that brought a reminder of a vanished age. It was, rather, a certain demeanour evident in the prayer and the participation, the depth of engagement with what was going on.

Devotions like these are symptomatic of the health of the Church, for they are the equivalent of the rituals and special times that every family has in common, by which they express their unity, their common bond and purpose and the fact that they have taken to their hearts just what it is about their lives and their story that is worth celebrating and cherishing. These traditional devo-

tions tell us about how much we have internalised the Gospel story and made it our own, so that its characters and its dispositions are real and vivid to us, the object of longing and affection, and of a beauty we love to contemplate.

It is easy to recognise the antecedents of such devotion in the lives of Simeon and Anna, whom the Church puts before us on the Feast of the Presentation. Neither of them is of a priestly caste, neither is a theologian or a Pharisee. They are people of a long and faithful devotion, one of whom has had what would appear to be the equivalent of a personal revelation. Anna, who spends her time in the Temple night and day, would surely be one of those dear ladies we all know who are faithful to their daily Mass and their rosaries and novenas, the kind of ladies who will travel Saturday after Saturday to take part in A Day with Mary, or something else which helps them to describe through the ministry of the Church and the beauty of her devotions, the loving presence of the Light of the World, reflected in the beauty of his Immaculate Mother.