THE SECRET

I don’t deserve blessings, but I get them.

On Saturday, my friend Diane called. She's a lay sister with the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa's order. So she knew, and whispered to me, that Mother Teresa was around, visiting the MC houses in Tijuana and San Diego, in secret like she does, since she'd rather not get mobbed.

The MCs rise early. Diane said Mother would attend Sunday mass at St. Jude's church at 7 AM. After a late night at a birthday party up the coast, I staggered from bed to my car and blearily followed Diane's directions. St. Jude's is near downtown in an old flatland neighborhood of two bedroom homes and vintage Chevrolets so lowered so that sparks fly from underneath, plentiful thrift stores, corner groceries and at least one storefront evangelical church on every block.

Mother Teresa's secret had gotten out. People in orange vests directed traffic. In the parking lot, vendors sold oranges, onions, tapes and CDs in Spanish. I didn't see any Mother Teresa dolls, but I was half asleep.

At 6:30 the church was crowded, standing room only. I found a place against the west wall near the front section, where the seats were reserved for MC sisters in their white saris. They're mostly small brown women with eyes so bright, at first glance they could pass for children. Two summers ago, I spent a

few days around the MC seminary and soup kitchen in Tijuana and concluded that the order's sisters and brothers, in their daily routine of service, study and devotions, enjoy life more than anybody else does. It shows in their words and faces.

Up front, across from me was a small choir accompanied by a guitar and electric keyboard. They sang folk style hymns like “Change my heart oh God, make it ever new, change my heart oh God, make me be like you.”

I leaned against the wall observing the congregation, vaguely aware that my heart sorely needed to change, since that morning my pastime was criticism. I grumbled inaudibly at the people who crowded, trying to position themselves for a clear view of Mother Teresa's approach. I disdained the TV camera bearers who nudged the rest of us aside as if the front row was their birthright. Watching the choir, I wondered if the women wearing doilies on their heads believed the accessory would meet the spirit of Saint Paul's admonition that women should keep their heads covered in church. Alert for any sign of humbug or hypocrisy, I noted that one of the priests who chanted a responsorial psalm sounded much like a particularly off key karaoke singer at a late night Chinese restaurant. When Mother Teresa entered at the rear of a procession of sisters and escorts, I sneered at the rubber-neckers, asking myself why these folks didn't comprehend that to worship a human offended God. The question was rhetorical--obviously, people

acted so boorishly because they weren't as cool or enlightened as me.

During mass, I considered the priest's accent monotonous and uninspired, as though after forty years of mouthing the same lines, it all sounded to him like blah blah blah.

Attending Catholic services, communion tries my patience, as I'm not allowed to participate. But while a young woman read, "He took bread, gave thanks and broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance . . .'" and the choir chanted, "Sing hallelujah to the Lord" a breath of Spirit touched me. Through all the minutes while wafers got distributed, I heard a small voice reminding me that I ought to pluck the log out of my own eye before picking at the speck in somebody else's. So I was slightly less mean by the time Mother Teresa walked to the altar.

In strong, mild English, she said, "Let us ask Our Lady to give us her heart . . . so that we will offer service to the poorest of the poor."

Neither weathered skin nor stooped shoulders could alter the beauty she exhibited, as she recited from the Gospel of Matthew. "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. . . ."

Her eloquence depends upon simplicity and a talent for repeating for emphasis without condescension. Her message always expresses or implies that by serving the poorest of the poor, the MCs minister to Christ in his distressing

disguise. This morning she quoted, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

She only spoke a few minutes, yet three times she asked that we pray for the MCs and the poorest of the poor.

I joined the receiving line. As those of us standing went first, it only took a few minutes, during which I got blessed with a clear recognition that God, the source of all power, only works through people who stand aside and let him.

Mother Teresa has built a mighty force of little, brown, meek, powerful women, because she knows and practices the art of humility, as perfectly as anyone I've witnessed. Her ego vanishes. God fills the vacuum.

One of her warm hands touched mine and the other pressed my forehead. She smiled as poignantly as though I were her son, and her greatness revealed itself instantly. Because I realized that although she earned a Nobel prize and is frequently called a living Saint, she considers herself no better than me.

Talk about humility.