

# Cabdrivers line up for heavenly fare



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

**Enough cabbies** ▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

take part in the blessing to make short work of 150 sandwiches.

modest parish, St. Boniface has only one aspergillum.) Two years ago the leaves were eucalyptus. This year, Roberto, the florist inside the Civic Center BART station who Theresa Hausser, of the St. Boniface staff, mercilessly plunders for flora for this event, offered huckleberry. Nobody noticed but me.

The enticements that drove the cabbies to the doors of St. Boniface, a choice of turkey or roast beef sandwiches, with chips and a soft drink, were about the same. I don't remember there being a soft drink the first time around, but I could be mistaken. The sandwich count was 150, the same as two years ago. Once again, they ran out of roast beef first.

masonry. The project, as reported in The Extra, was completed late last year and the church officially reopened Oct. 6.

The shift in focus at this blessed event occurred precisely at 12:15 p.m. when the basement playground erupted with the voices of 30 to 40 kids, students at the 2-year-old De Marillac Middle School, which once had been an elementary school but had been closed for many years.

According to Hausser, tireless collector of flora for worthy causes, "the Daughters of Charity and the De La Salle Christian Brothers were open to doing a joint middle-school venture and the St. Boniface staff has always dreamed of having the old school building reused and reopened." This year, for the first time, all three grades – 6,7,8 – are operating.

And yet the seemingly tired sameness of this particular media hustle belied some changes that had occurred in the past two years that are real pluses for the Tenderloin.

Two years ago, the whole focus of the cab blessing was centered on what was taking place on Golden Gate Avenue. That's because St. Boniface was closed and covered with scaffolding, undergoing what proved to be, according to Joe Halaiko of St. Boniface's staff, a \$13 million seismic retrofit ordered by the city of all buildings with non-reinforced

She, in turn, told me the students' recess was over and she was going to have to send them back down the stairs.

In fact, the recess was not over, and the quickness with which the woman ended my contact with the children, along with the obscuring gate, bespoke the guarded concern the school's staff has toward strangers who show any interest in their charges. This is not a school posture particular to De Marillac, nor is it a slur on the Tenderloin. The same response might have just as easily been incurred at a middle school in Palo Alto. Where children are concerned, the watchword is now "vigilance."

Still, the raucous sound of children at play in the background was a happy addition to this year's taxi blessing.

Which, as we sidled up to 12:30 p.m., was beginning to peter out. Suddenly, Vitale and Lotito were standing in the street by themselves with nary a taxi to bless. Growing restless, it occurred to me I had never been inside St. Boniface and, given the break in the action, it now seemed like an excellent time to pay a visit.

Which is where I discovered the second difference between the blessing two years ago and today's. Not the church, which is beautiful, with Romanesque vaulted arches in the ceiling, walls lusciously painted in creams and gold tint with pictures of cherubs and saints and a whole bunch of words I couldn't make out painted on a band that enclosed the nave. A great church; a place to go and drink in beauty.

The second difference was that a Mass was being said in the church with about 100 people in attendance. Not a taxi driver among them. Mostly older people from the neighborhood, there was also a sprinkling of office workers – I recognized Louella who works in my building – and young people with their inevitable backpacks.

I was later told Mass was said by Father Juan, a priest just visiting the parish who had to rush off to catch a plane.

There was, I suppose, nothing special about the Mass, although it was accompanied by some fine singing and a great deal of responding by the congregation that is the hallmark of the modern Catholic Mass in English. A woman served as Father Juan's assistant and helped with the handing out of Holy Communion.

God knows I am not a religious person, but I was pleased that each day there's a Mass at 12:15 p.m. that anyone can attend and take a half hour out of the ugliness and turmoil that defines a lot of modern life. I know I will avail myself in the not-too-distant future.

The Mass over, things were finishing up back out on Golden Gate Avenue. Henry Kim of the San Francisco Taxi Owners Association was packing up his truck with the empty boxes that had held the sandwiches.

Halaiko explained to me that the Restoration Drive for St. Boniface, which the first blessing had been meant to promote, had morphed into a Maintenance and Ministry Fund. The church's beautiful stained-glass windows are almost 100 years old. St. Boniface was rebuilt after the 1906 earthquake and fire, and stained glass of the intricacy adorning this edifice needs to be releaded and repaired every 100 years or it falls apart. So the fund raising will continue, the taxis will be back next year for another blessing, and the media will have something to cover other than the usual mayhem and madness.

As the late Mr. Rogers would have said, it was a beautiful day in the neighborhood. ■

I walked over and stood by the gate that enclosed the steps leading down to the playground. I couldn't make out much because the gate was practically solid metal, with a pattern of tiny holes that allowed you to make out shapes but not actually see any faces. The rebellious middle schooler inside me wanted to immediately judge it a prison.

I soon became aware of shapes behind the gate and one voice asked me if I could put him on TV. Confessing to my lowly scribe status, I asked in turn when school had begun. They groaned "over a week ago," and began describing the classes they were taking.

The conversation was cut short by a woman I took to be a teacher who demanded to know who I was. Explaining the taxi-blessing taking place behind me, I told her I merely wanted to ask a few general questions "for background color."

## The Blessing of the Taxi Fleet

THE Blessing of the Taxis was supposed to start at noon, but by the time your Official Counter (that being myself) arrived at 11:55 a.m., the line was already moving down Golden Gate Avenue. Driving a taxicab is a very competitive occupation, and the drivers' mantra is move it or lose it; "it" being the fare. So, my count may be shy a few early birds, but it's close – and suggests a 25% dropoff from 2001. Yellow held up its end, but Luxor was only half the 2001 count and National was down 10.

|                      |           |                         |            |
|----------------------|-----------|-------------------------|------------|
| <b>Yellow Cab</b>    | <b>72</b> | <b>Big Dog City Cab</b> | <b>3</b>   |
| <b>Luxor Cab</b>     | <b>21</b> | <b>Veterans Cab</b>     | <b>2</b>   |
| <b>National Cab</b>  | <b>7</b>  | <b>United Cab</b>       | <b>2</b>   |
| <b>Arrow Taxicab</b> | <b>6</b>  | <b>KSJ Kab</b>          | <b>1</b>   |
| <b>Royal Taxi</b>    | <b>4</b>  |                         |            |
| <b>DeSoto Cab</b>    | <b>3</b>  | <b>Total</b>            | <b>121</b> |

Of the blessed taxis, only three were driven by women – all in Yellow cabs. ■

– Joseph Thomas