

My Dear friends,

Our pilgrimage to Poland begins today.

For the next eleven days, I hope to share something more than a travelogue.

Alongside the *Pilgrim Companion* (printed for those joining us on the actual pilgrimage, and attached to those joining us virtually/digitally) prepared for our group, I want these daily email notes to become a small spiritual dossier of the journey: what we saw, what happened, what the places taught us, what the saints said to us, and perhaps most importantly, what God was quietly doing within us while we were moving from one place to another.

Today is mostly a day of departure. Our group leaves Newark this evening, flying first to Vienna and then on to Warsaw tomorrow. The official itinerary simply calls today “Flight to Warsaw,” but pilgrimage begins long before the airplane touches foreign soil. It begins with leaving.

1. The Day and the Road

There are suitcases to weigh, passports to check, people to gather, goodbyes to say, and the ordinary anxiety that accompanies any international journey. Tonight we leave Newark for Vienna, and tomorrow we continue to Warsaw, where Poland will begin to unfold before us.

Yet the first movement of pilgrimage is not geographical. It is interior. To travel as a pilgrim means accepting, at least temporarily, that we will not control everything. Someone else will drive. Someone else will decide when we stop. Flights may be delayed. Luggage may wander. We will become dependent upon one another. Already, without visiting a single shrine, pilgrimage begins teaching us its first lesson: **relinquishment**.

2. What Happened

At this moment, there is not yet a great story to tell. But this is important too. Because pilgrimages do not always begin with big revelations. Sometimes, a pilgrimage may begin with a lifeless suitcase standing by the door.

Today will be composed mostly of ordinary things: gathering our group, getting through the airport, finding our seats, settling into the long flight, meeting people with whom we will share the next eleven days. Some of us know one another well. Others will become friends somewhere between Warsaw and Kraków. The community of pilgrims has not fully formed yet. We are simply people carrying bags, expectations, prayers, histories, and perhaps a few burdens we have not told anyone about.

And somehow God has gathered all of these stories onto the same road.

3. What I Am Trying to See

Before Poland gives us churches, icons, mountains, saints, and history, I want to learn to notice the pilgrimage itself.

Who is sitting beside me? Who is nervous? Who needs help with luggage? Who is already laughing? Who has quietly brought a prayer intention across the Atlantic? Who is carrying grief or doubts? Who has come because somebody else invited them? Who does not yet know exactly why they came?

It is easy to travel halfway around the world looking for God and overlook Him already sitting in the airport chair beside us.

Perhaps that is the first discipline of this pilgrimage: **looking carefully.**

4. What the Road Is Already Teaching Me

A tourist leaves home primarily to see something. A pilgrim, on the hand, leaves home willing to be changed by what he sees.

That difference will matter during these days. We will certainly take photographs. We will eat wonderful polish food. We will enjoy Poland. We should. Beauty, laughter, friendship, architecture, music, and a good meal together belong to the human experience of pilgrimage.

But underneath all of it lies another question: **What is God asking me to receive here?**

Warsaw will speak about destruction and rebuilding. Jasna Góra will teach us something about trust and Mary. Wadowice will introduce us again to the ordinary beginnings of holiness. Zakopane will place us before beauty. Łagiewniki will bring us directly into the school of Divine Mercy. Auschwitz will require something different from us altogether: silence, memory, truth, and moral seriousness. Wieliczka will take us underground before we finally begin the long journey home.

The itinerary gives us destinations, but the grace that God will grant us will be the one to decide what those destinations become for each of us.

5. Learning from Drew Mariani: What Is Mercy?

I brought Drew Mariani's *Divine Mercy* with me because I do not want simply to visit the places associated with Saint Faustina. I want to understand more deeply the mystery that Poland gave back to the Church with such extraordinary force: **MERCY.**

Mariani begins in exactly the right place. Before discussing Saint Faustina, the image, the Chaplet, or the great promises associated with the devotion, we have to understand what mercy actually is.

Mercy is a particular expression of love. Love encounters another person's misery, weakness, suffering, need, and even sin, and instead of withdrawing from them, love **moves toward the person**. Mercy sees misery and responds from the heart.

That is why mercy tells us something essential about God. Scripture does not reveal a God standing at a safe distance from damaged humanity. Again and again, God moves toward His people. He hears. He sees. He forgives. He rescues. He restores. Human sin is real, justice matters, and evil must never simply be renamed as good. Yet our failure does not exhaust God's desire for us.

This is one of the important distinctions running through Mariani's reflection: **mercy is not pretending that nothing happened**. Mercy requires truth. If there were no wound, mercy would have nothing to heal. If there were no sin, there would be nothing to forgive. If there were no human misery, there would be nothing for compassion to enter.

Christian mercy therefore reaches its fullest expression in Jesus Christ. Christ enters our wounded condition. He touches the sick, receives sinners, seeks the lost, forgives, restores, and ultimately takes human sin and death into the mystery of the Cross. Mercy is God's love refusing to abandon the sinner to his sin or the suffering person to his suffering.

And mercy must eventually change the one who receives it. The person who has been forgiven cannot indefinitely withhold forgiveness. The person who has been treated compassionately cannot remain indifferent to another's suffering. Divine Mercy is received as gift and then becomes a way of living.

So perhaps the simplest lesson with which to begin Poland is this:

Mercy is the love of God coming toward us precisely where we most need to be found.

That is where this pilgrimage begins.

6. The Catholic Lens

The entire Christian life is already a pilgrimage of mercy.

Every time we approach Confession, we acknowledge that we cannot save ourselves. Every Eucharist begins with the confession that we need mercy. At Mass we repeatedly pray, *Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.*

Remember always that those words are not a prayer of people whom God despises; the truth is they are the prayer of a people who have discovered what God is like.

Jesus tells us, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Mercy therefore begins with God, passes through the human heart, and is meant to reach someone else.

In the coming days we will stand before images and relics associated with Divine Mercy. But the real test will not be how moved we feel before an image. The test will be whether mercy begins reshaping the way we see the person standing beside us.

7. The Shepherd's Journal

As a pastor, I find myself beginning this journey with one question that follows me everywhere: **Do people encounter the mercy of God when they encounter the Church?**

That question is much harder than discussing a devotion.

People come to our parishes carrying complicated lives. Some are deeply faithful. Some are already angry before even entering the door. Some have failed badly. Some have been wounded by the Church. Some have buried spouses or parents. Some are worried about their children. Some have been away from the sacraments for decades and barely know how to come back home.

A parish devoted to mercy cannot merely display the Divine Mercy image. Mercy has to become recognizable in the way we welcome, listen, preach, forgive, tell the truth, protect the vulnerable, accompany the suffering, and give someone just another chance to encounter Jesus Christ.

I suspect Poland is going to ask me repeatedly what kind of shepherd I want to be when I return home. As for all of us pilgrims: what kind of disciple do I want to be when I return home.

8. What I Want to Remember

Before anything else, I want to remember this: **God's mercy has already begun the journey toward us.**

This amazing pilgrimage we are undertaking is itself a gratuitous action of a merciful God for each one of us. Perhaps that is why pilgrimage is possible in the first place. We imagine ourselves traveling to holy places in search of God, only to discover that God was moving toward us long before we even packed our bags.

9. Prayer at the End of the Day

Merciful Jesus, receive the road that begins today.

Receive our excitement and our weariness,
the prayers we can speak and those we carry silently.
Protect our families and communities while we are away.
Watch over every pilgrim who travels with us.

Teach us to see Poland with grateful eyes,
its beauty without possessing it,
its suffering without simplifying it,
its saints without turning them into monuments.

Most of all, teach us mercy.

Let us discover again
the God who comes toward human misery
rather than fleeing from it.

And when we finally return home,
may the mercy we have received become mercy given freely to others.

Jesus, I trust in You.

Your parish priest and co-pilgrim in the journey,
Fr. JC