

My dear friends and pilgrims,

Tonight, we end our pilgrimage, I think I understand Poland differently than when we arrived. Poland has never asked us to look away from its wounds. It has shown us both, the wound and what human beings, with God's grace, can do with it. We have seen destruction and rebuilding, cruelty and courage, suffering and holiness. Perhaps this is why Poland has been the right place for a pilgrimage of Divine Mercy. Mercy does not deny the wound. Mercy enters it and refuses to let the wound have the final word.

Today we descended into the Wieliczka Salt Mine, one of the first sites placed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1978. For centuries miners went beneath the earth to work, but they did something remarkable there: they carved chapels, crosses, sacred images and altars into the salt. Their faith did not remain above ground. More profoundly, they discovered that God was already waiting for them below; in their labor, danger, friendship and hope.

Way deep beneath Polish soil, we celebrated Mass at the St. John Paul II Chapel. I could not help thinking how fitting that was. Karol Wojtyła was formed by this land; by its faith, its culture, its suffering under Nazism and Communism, and its stubborn insistence upon the dignity of the human person. He would eventually teach the world that justice and mercy are not enemies. Forgiveness does not erase justice; it prevents justice from becoming revenge. Mercy does not pretend that evil never happened; it refuses to allow evil to determine what the human heart becomes afterward.

And today's Gospel, on the Feast of Saints Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, gave us words almost written for this moment: "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:51). We descended into the earth, and Christ spoke of heaven opening. Perhaps that is the mystery we have been discovering throughout Poland: God does not always rescue us by keeping us away from the depths, away from suffering, away from darkness. Sometimes, he enters the depths with us and transforms them from within.

The contrast with yesterday was impossible to miss. At Auschwitz-Birkenau we confronted what happens when human beings strip others of name, dignity and life. At Wieliczka (Salt Mine) we encountered generations of human beings who descended beneath the same Polish earth and created work, beauty, prayer and sanctuary. Human beings can turn the earth into a grave; human beings can also turn the earth into a sanctuary. The difference begins with what we believe about the human person.

That question has followed us for ten days. Częstochowa showed us that a wounded image can remain beautiful. Warsaw showed us that a destroyed city can rise again. Faustina showed us that an unknown young sister could carry a message of mercy to the world. Maximilian Kolbe showed us that even at Auschwitz a human being could still choose love. John Paul II showed us that a man formed amid tyranny could spend his life proclaiming human dignity and telling a frightened world, “Be not afraid.” And today the miners of Wieliczka showed us that even underground, human beings can build an altar. The human spirit is, indeed, a marvel to behold; an image of the one, true, and living God!

Surrounded by salt today, I also heard differently the words of Jesus: “You are the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). Salt does not dominate what it touches; it enters quietly and changes it from within. Perhaps this is how Christians are called to live in history. We preserve what is human. We protect dignity. We tell the truth without hatred. We forgive without calling evil good. We seek justice without vengeance. We enter the wounded places of the world carrying Christ.

Then we came back to the surface. And tonight, at Biała Róża in Kraków, after all the shrines, churches, monuments, mountains, barracks, mines and miles, our pilgrimage ended in the simplest possible place: around a table. We shared our graces. We told stories. We laughed. We remembered. And above all, we said thank you; our pilgrimage that is, in its core, eucharistic and full of giving-thanks.

Perhaps that was exactly how this pilgrimage needed to end, because Christianity itself keeps bringing us back to the table, to give thanks for each other to God. The disciples recognized the risen Christ at Emmaus “in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35). Jesus left us not merely an idea to remember but a meal: “Do this in memory of me.” Christian memory is never simply looking backward. We remember so that what we have received can become the way we live.

Tomorrow someone will ask us, “How was Poland?” Perhaps the deepest answer will not be found in our photographs. The answer must eventually be found in the people we become. If we return more merciful, Poland has traveled home with us. If we defend someone's dignity more courageously, Auschwitz has not simply been a place we visited. If we forgive someone, Łagiewniki has followed us home. If we discover God in our ordinary work, Wieliczka has taught us something. If we become less afraid to give ourselves away in love, Maximilian Kolbe's cell will remain more than a memory.

Remember the image of the river? We began this pilgrimage asking what current of mercy might remain because we had passed through a place. Tonight perhaps the question has changed: What current of mercy will pass through the places to which we return because Poland has passed through our hearts?

And perhaps this is how our pilgrimage was always meant to end: as a pilgrimage of two tables. Deep beneath the earth at Wieliczka, we gathered around the first table, the altar of the Eucharist, where Christ gave himself to us and reminded us that no depth is beyond the reach of God. Hours later, beneath the open sky of Kraków, we gathered around the second table, where we broke bread, named our graces, remembered, laughed, and gave thanks. At the first table, God gave himself to us; at the second, we began to understand what we had been given.

Between those two tables lies the meaning of these ten days: grace received must become grace shared; mercy encountered must become mercy given; memory must become responsibility; Eucharist must become our life. Tomorrow we leave Poland, but the Christian pilgrimage does not really end, because the Eucharistic table always sends us forth. We came here looking for the places where God's mercy entered history. Now we return home with a greater responsibility: to allow God's mercy to enter history through us.

So perhaps Poland's final word to us is not goodbye. It is *Eucharistia*: thanksgiving. We have received. We have remembered. We have given thanks.

And now, from these two tables, we are sent.

Your parish priest and co-pilgrim on the journey,
Fr JC Merino