

My dear friends and pilgrims,

Today was tiring, but it was a good (and beautiful) day.

By the seventh day of a pilgrimage, the body begins to tell the truth. We have walked a lot. We have climbed steps, entered churches, listened to stories, moved from place to place, carried bags, taken photographs, prayed together, eaten together, and probably slept a little less than we should.

And then today, Zakopane gave us something different: Mountains. Trees. Wood. Fresh air. Walking. Rest. It felt almost as if the pilgrimage itself was telling us: **now receive.**

The seventh day has always had a special meaning in Scripture. God rested. Was it because He was tired? No. He rests and looked upon creation and delighted in it. Rest, in the biblical sense, is not doing nothing; it is receiving what God has made as gift.

And perhaps that is what today was for us. A day to breathe. A day to walk. A day to enjoy creation. A day to enjoy one another. A day to remember that rest itself can be holy, and even an act of mercy.

Mercy toward the body, which is not a machine. Mercy toward the soul, which cannot hear God clearly when everything inside us is hurried. Mercy toward one another, because when we stop rushing toward the next destination, we finally have time simply to be with the people walking beside us.

That is what struck me about today.

There is something about walking. We have done a lot of it on this pilgrimage. And when you walk beside someone long enough, the destination begins to become secondary. You talk. You listen. You share stories. Sometimes you laugh. Sometimes you become quiet. And somewhere along the way, strangers become companions, and companions become friends.

I remembered today how much walking was part of my own priestly formation.

When I was in the seminary in Spain, the formators would sometimes arrange an excursion on a Saturday afternoon or on a Sunday after Mass. We would go walking and hiking, sometimes into the Pyrenees. At the time, it simply felt like a welcome break from classes and studies.

But looking back, I realize that they were teaching us something important.

Formation does not happen only in a classroom or chapel alone. A Catholic priest, as a disciple and co-pilgrim, also has to learn how to walk. How to observe. How to listen. How to share time with another person without an agenda. How to slow down for someone. How to walk in silence. How to be present.

These too were part of priestly formation.

And perhaps that is one reason Zakopane felt so familiar to me today. The mountains, the walking, the open air, the slowing down; it all reminded me that recreation can actually be part of a serious spiritual life.

Saint John Paul II understood that deeply. He loved these mountains. He hiked. He skied. He prayed in nature. He spent time with young people here. For him, the mountains were not an escape from priesthood. They were one of the places where his priesthood was renewed.

And our own itinerary brings us here on Day 7 precisely because Zakopane was a place associated with his recreation and rest.

That makes today feel almost providential. The seventh day. A day of rest. A day in the mountains. A day to receive creation again. And then there is the beauty of Zakopane itself. The woodwork everywhere is unbelievable. The ceilings, beams, carvings, gables, altars, railings, churches, houses; it is all so warm, so human, so carefully shaped. Nothing feels cold or manufactured.

The wood itself seems to preach. It comes from the mountains. It is ordinary material. It has grain, knots, age, imperfections. And yet in the hands of a craftsman it becomes beautiful.

That is a very Christian image. Grace does not always replace what is ordinary; grace transforms it. And of course, for Christians, wood always leads us somewhere deeper: to the Cross.

The wood of the Cross stands in the middle of beauty, not outside of it. That is important. Because mercy does not mean that suffering disappears. Sometimes mercy means that suffering is transformed into an offering.

That is where the story of Saint John Paul II and Fatima becomes so powerful. This shrine (where we celebrated Mass) at Krzeptówki was built as an act of thanksgiving after the assassination attempt on John Paul II on May 13, 1981, the feast of Our Lady of Fatima. He believed that his life had been spared through her intercession.

And what did he do with the life he believed had been given back to him? He gave it away again: To the Church. To the youth. To the families. To the world. To the Gospel. That is gratitude at its deepest.

Saying thank you isn't saying: "Thank you, Lord, for giving me more."
Saying thank you find its highest expression in this prayer and sentiment:
"Lord, because You have given me life, let my life become a gift for others."

That speaks to me personally.

Some of you have heard my story over dinner already. Fatima has been part of my vocation for many years. I entrusted my priesthood to Our Lady of Fatima, and at several important moments in my journey, I received what I have always understood as signs of her maternal care.

So standing here today was not just another stop. It was personal. I gave my vocation to Our Lady of Fatima (during my years of formation). And through all the years, all the unexpected turns, all the joys and difficulties, I have felt that she took it seriously and kept pointing me back to her Son.

That is what Mary always does. Everything that we give her, she gives it bak to Jesus.

And maybe that is one of the deeper lessons of this pilgrimage. We often come looking for the best view, but God gives us the road. We ask for clarity, but God gives us opportunities to trust. We may wish for a life without interruption or suffering, but God can take even what is painful and make it an offering for others; something that becomes love, service, and mercy.

Today reminded me too that rest is part of vocation. Rest is not wasted time when it restores us for love. Recreation is not laziness when it helps us see God again. Walking is not merely exercise when it becomes companionship. Nature is not merely scenery when it teaches us gratitude. And sometimes God forms us not at a desk, but on a mountain path beside another person.

That question sits at the heart of our readings today.

Ecclesiastes reminds us that youth passes, strength changes, seasons move on. Psalm 90 gives us the prayer we need: “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart.” Because life is precious, not bleak. Because we do not have an unlimited number of mornings, conversations, walks, embraces, chances to forgive, chances to say “I love you,” chances to begin again.

And in the Gospel, while everyone was amazed by Jesus, He spoke of the Cross. The disciples did not understand. They wanted triumph. Jesus spoke of surrender. They wanted greatness. Jesus spoke of self-gift.

Do you think that our pilgrimage teaches us the same thing? We may come looking for the view, but God gives us the road. We may ask for clarity, but God gives us moments/opportunities in which we might learn to trust.

We may wish for a life without interruption or suffering, but God can take even what is painful and make it an offering for others, something that becomes love, service, and mercy.

So perhaps today we do not need to rush. Let us enjoy the mountains. Let us walk with one another. Let us receive this seventh day almost as God received the seventh day of creation: with gratitude, with delight, with rest.

And as we walk, perhaps carry one question quietly in your heart: What am I doing with the life God has given me? With my remaining years? With my health? With my relationships? With the second chances I have received? With the people who are walking beside me right now?

Because one day the pilgrimage ends. The mountains disappear behind us. The suitcase is unpacked. The photographs are put away. But perhaps the greatest gift we bring home is this: We discover that the Christian life was never simply about reaching a destination.

It was learning how to walk with God. And learning, along the way, how to walk with one another.

I hope everyone enjoyed today. It was tiring, yes. But it was good. And perhaps that is exactly what a good pilgrimage day should be: A little tired. A little more grateful. A little more human. A little more aware of the people walking beside us. A little more awake to the beauty God has placed around us.

Tonight, rest well. Because tomorrow is Sunday.
And tomorrow, our pilgrimage brings us to the heart of everything we
have been walking toward: **Divine Mercy.**

So let today's rest prepare the heart. Let our mountains quiet us. Let the
walking soften us. Let gratitude open us. And tomorrow, may we be ready
to stand before the mercy of God with hearts that can finally say: **Jesus, I
trust in You.**

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