

My dear friends and pilgrims,

Today our pilgrimage brought us to Wadowice, the hometown of the Karol, the future Pope of Rome and saint of Poland. Perhaps more than any other day so far, it reminded me why we call what we are doing a pilgrimage and not simply a tour. A tourist comes to see where something happened. A pilgrim enters a place asking what God might reveal there about one's own life. Wadowice gave us plenty, but its greater gift was to make us look backward at our own beginnings and forward toward the kind of people we are still becoming.

John Paul II once said of Wadowice, "Here everything began." Life began here. School began here. Theatre began here. And, as he himself said, the priesthood began here. There is something almost disarming about standing in a small town that produced a life of such consequence. We naturally look for great beginnings behind great lives. Wadowice offers something much less grand than what we would expect, but this, my friends, is essentially consoling: an ordinary home, a small parish church, schoolmates, books, theatre, mountains, family meals, prayer, loss and friendship. Holiness was not dropped fully formed into Karol Wojtyła. Holiness seem to have grown in heart for many years.

Our day therefore began at precisely the right place: Karol's family home, beside his parish - presenday John Paul II Museum. As we entered the house/museum we met Karol. We met a son before the Pope, the boy before the bishop. His words about returning to the threshold of his family home and the threshold of the house of God suddenly made sense because the two stand almost beside each other. Home and church formed one landscape of belonging. Family taught him that he was loved; Baptism told him whose he was.

But Wadowice did not preserve Karol from suffering. His mother died when he was eight. His brother Edmund died only a few years later. Eventually his father would die as well. Then came occupation and war. It would be easy, looking backward from sainthood, to make suffering sound useful, as though every tragedy had to happen in order to produce John Paul II. I do not believe that is the Christian claim. Christianity does not call evil good simply because grace later emerges from it. The more profound claim is that God refuses to abandon the human person who suffers. Mercy does not explain every wound. Sometimes mercy is the mysterious presence that keeps the wound from becoming the whole story.

The museum showed us a wonderfully human Karol: the young man who loved theatre, poetry and the mountains; the worker; the intellectual; the Carmelite influence and the scapular; the clandestine seminarian. I found myself thinking about vocation differently. John Paul II later called priesthood a “gift and mystery.” Today we saw why. The priesthood did not erase the actor, poet, philosopher, athlete, worker or son. Grace gathered them. The voice that learned how to speak through theatre would one day address millions. The mind trained to ask difficult philosophical questions would eventually write *Fides et Ratio*. The young man who loved the mountains would carry into his priesthood a capacity for friendship, contemplation and wonder.

This may be one of Wadowice's finest lessons: God does not ordinarily call an imaginary version of us. He calls the person who has actually lived our life. Our gifts, histories, friendships, losses, failures, education, temperament and even the roads that seem unrelated can become material for vocation when surrendered to grace. God wastes very little.

Then came that wonderful sundial outside the window of his childhood home (this is a favorite detail of mine today): “Time flies, eternity waits.” This child could look from the Wojtyła apartment toward his parish church and see those words. Today these words felt almost truly like a commentary upon the entire museum. We walked through decades in minutes: childhood, adolescence, war, priesthood, episcopacy, conclave, papacy, assassination attempt, old age. Time flies indeed. Yet Christianity insists that our lives are not merely disappearing. They are moving somewhere. The pilgrim therefore asks not simply, *How much time do I have?* but *What am I becoming with the time I have been given?*

The papal years then unfolded before us, but after seeing the childhood rooms they felt different. *Redemptor Hominis*, *Dives in Misericordia*, *Laborem Exercens*, *Veritatis Splendor*, *Evangelium Vitae*, *Fides et Ratio*, *Redemptoris Missio*, *Ut Unum Sint*, and *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* no longer seemed like an impressive library of papal documents. They appeared as the mature fruit of convictions planted much earlier. Christ reveals the human person to himself. Mercy restores what sin wounds. Work exists for the human person, not the human person for work. Freedom requires truth. Human life possesses a dignity no usefulness test can measure. Faith need not fear intelligence. The Gospel must be carried outward. Christians must long for unity. And underneath everything, the Church lives from Christ in the Eucharist. It struck me that John Paul II's theology continually returns to the human person before God.

Perhaps that is why “Do not be afraid” became so powerful. It was never merely motivational language. At the inauguration of his pontificate he said, “Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ.” Christ knows what is in the human person. The invitation was not to become fearless by trusting ourselves more; it was to become free by trusting Christ more deeply.

I could not stand there without remembering Manila in 1995. I was a teenager, newly moved from Brunei to the Philippines, without the friendships and bearings that would come later, and Mama accompanied me through so much of that time. World Youth Day 1995, Manila; I could not have known what those days were becoming inside me. I certainly could not have imagined that thirty-one years later I would return, in a sense, to the childhood home of the man who had spoken to us, this time as a priest myself, celebrating Mass in his parish church. I would never claim that one event explains a vocation; John Paul II's own language of "gift and mystery" warns against making God's providence too tidy. But sometimes, after many years, we are allowed to recognize an old grace that has quietly continued traveling with us.

Then, in the afternoon, I was gifted with the celebration (as a presider) of Mass at the Basilica of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Karol's parish church. Here he was baptized. Here he received the sacraments. Here he served at the altar and learned the rhythms of Catholic life. In that moment in time, and for a few moments, we stopped looking at Wojtyła's story from the outside and entered the mystery and faith that nourished this human heart from within. The same Gospel was proclaimed. Bread and wine were brought to the altar. Christ became present among his people.

That may have been the most important thing we did all day. Before John Paul II could write *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* and tell the Church that she "draws her life from the Eucharist," there was a boy in Wadowice learning to kneel before the Eucharist. Before the great papal Masses attended by millions, there was the ordinary Sunday Mass of a parish. Before history noticed him, grace was already at work. There is a lesson here for every family and every parish. We rarely know what God is beginning in the people sitting beside, in front, and at the back of us. The child who fidgets at Mass, the teenager who appears only half interested, the grieving parent, the young person trying to understand a vocation; God's work is seldom visible in its entirety! We plant, accompany, forgive, teach, celebrate the sacraments and keep the doors open. Much of pastoral ministry consists of believing that God is doing more in someone's life than we are presently able to see.

And then our pilgrimage gave us one final gift. On the way home, we passed through Kalwaria Zebrzydowska.

That stop completed Wadowice for me. Wadowice showed us where Karol's life and vocation grew; Kalwaria showed us where he brought that life and vocation when they became heavy. This was the great Marian sanctuary of the Church of Kraków and one of Wojtyła's spiritual homes. He came here as a boy and young man, and later as priest, bishop and cardinal. He walked the paths of Jesus and Mary and brought difficult pastoral questions here. In 1979, at that time Pope, he described Kalwaria as a kind of spiritual reservoir filled with the faith, hope and love of generations of God's people, into which he himself came to be immersed.

We stood before Our Lady of Kalwaria, the beloved image associated with the tradition of the tears of 1641. But after being there, I think the more interesting story is not simply that the Madonna was said to have wept. It is what happened afterward. For centuries people came there with their own tears. Parents came with children. Families came with troubles. The sick came with fear. Sinners came seeking reconciliation. Priests came carrying their people. Karol Wojtyła came carrying responsibilities that even his formidable intelligence could not solve. This is why the image is so beautiful. Mary and Jesus press their faces together in tenderness, while the whole sanctuary leads toward the Passion. Kalwaria does not give us a Mary who keeps suffering away. It gives us the Mother who stays close enough to Christ to walk with him toward Calvary. Marian devotion here is therefore not an escape from the Cross. It teaches us how to remain near Jesus when we cannot remove the Cross.

Then we encountered the inscription from John Paul II's 1979 visit. After speaking of that reservoir of faith, hope and love, the Pope asked the people: *"pray for me here, during my life and after my death."*

I found those words unexpectedly moving. We sometimes imagine the shepherd as the one who must always be strong enough to carry everybody else. Yet one of the great pastors of the modern Church stood before his people and essentially said: *I need you to carry me too.*

Nearby our Lady's image at the main altar of the Shrine, stands his Golden Rose, his votive gift to the Madonna of Kalwaria. After all the encyclicals, papal journeys, speeches and crowds, I found the gesture almost childlike in its tenderness. A son came back and brought his Mother a flower. The boy from Wadowice had become Pope, so the flower happened to be gold. But the gesture remained one of gratitude. And above all of this hangs the prayer that gathered his Marian spirituality into two words: **Totus Tuus**. All yours. Not Mary instead of Christ, but Mary teaching the disciple to belong completely to Christ. Near the end of his life, John Paul II returned to Kalwaria in 2002, invoked Mary as Mother of Mercy, entrusted the fruits of his ministry and the future of the Church to her, and again prayed, "Totus Tuus." And suddenly the whole day came together.

Wadowice taught us that grace begins quietly. The family home taught us that vocation grows inside ordinary and faith-filled human life. The museum taught us that grace does not erase our history but gathers it. The sundial reminded us that time is carrying us toward eternity. The Eucharist reminded us where the Church receives her life. And Kalwaria taught us what to do when the vocation God has given us becomes too heavy to carry alone.

That is pilgrimage.

We did not simply visit the places where Karol Wojtyła once walked. We allowed his road to question our own. Where did grace first begin in me? Who brought me to Christ before I could find him myself? What suffering am I still asking God to explain when perhaps he is asking me first to entrust it? What gifts have I underestimated because they did not initially look "religious"? What burden am I carrying alone because I have confused self-sufficiency with fidelity? And when my time has flown, as the sundial says it will, what will remain because I passed this way?

Tonight I do not leave Wadowice merely admiring John Paul II more. I leave grateful for something simpler and more demanding: God can begin an astonishing work in an ordinary home, an ordinary parish, an ordinary family and an ordinary child. We rarely recognize the beginning while we are living it. Our task is to remain faithful enough for grace to continue.

Our day appropriately began at home and then at an altar and ended before the consoling presence of a Mother. Between them lies almost the whole Christian life: receive Christ, follow him, carry what you can, entrust what you cannot, and keep walking.

Time flies. Eternity waits.

And the pilgrim goes on....

Together, our pilgrimage continues.

Fr JC Merino