

Dear friends,

Today Warsaw taught me that reconstruction is not simply about rebuilding what was destroyed....

We walked through a city whose historic center was deliberately devastated during the Second World War and then painstakingly rebuilt by its people. UNESCO calls Warsaw an extraordinary example of near-total reconstruction, and even speaks of the city as a symbol of an “invincible city.”

Yet after spending the day here, I think the deeper miracle is not only that stones were put back into place. The deeper miracle is that a people's hearts (in solidarity) refused to allow destruction to become the final word.

That refusal seemed to follow us everywhere today.

At St. Stanislaus Kostka Church in Żoliborz, the memory of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko is still intensely present. He is a well-beloved priest, especially in the this town we visited. He celebrated the Masses for the Homeland there (at times, from the balcony facing the big plaza-park, preaching during a time when truth itself could carry weight. In 1984, he was abducted, silenced, and murdered by officers of the communist Security Service.

What moved me, however, were not only the large historical facts. It was the small things. An empty frame. A portrait. The symbol of the white Polish eagle.

Objects that could easily be passed by if we were rushing.



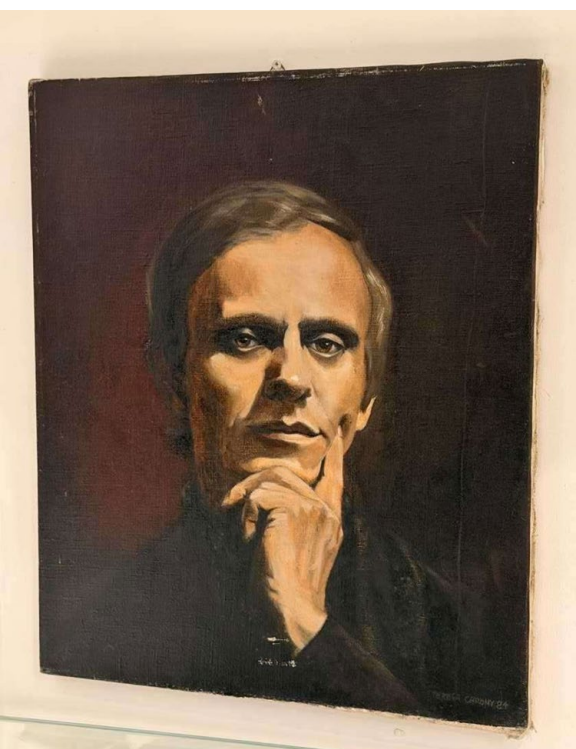
The empty frame especially stayed with me: In 1957, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński began a nationwide pilgrimage of a consecrated replica of the icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa, carrying it from parish to parish as Poland prepared for the millennium of its baptism. The communist authorities quickly recognized how powerfully the image was gathering people around the Church and Polish Catholic identity.

In 1966, the Security Service repeatedly intercepted the replica and eventually forced it back to Jasna Góra, where it was effectively “detained” until 1972. But their pilgrimage did not stop. The faithful continued from parish to parish carrying the empty frame, often with candles and the Gospel, as if the absent image were still present. The attempt to suppress the devotion only made the symbolism stronger: the state could confiscate the picture, but it could not confiscate the people’s memory, faith, or devotion to the Mother of God.

An authority can remove an image from a wall. It can prohibit a symbol. It can silence a voice. It can attempt to rewrite history. But it cannot automatically enter the human heart and erase what has already been loved. The empty frame remembers.

That is perhaps what made Catholic faith so important during some of Poland's darkest periods. The Church was not the only force that resisted communist domination, nor can Poland's eventual political transformation be reduced to religion alone. Yet churches became places where another language survived: conscience, dignity, truth, sacrifice, forgiveness, God.

The State could tell people what they were expected to say. But faith kept asking them the demanding question of who they really were, their true identity. And Blessed Jerzy understood that kind of struggle deeply.



Look at this portrait of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko. This portrait of him that we saw today, painted by Teresa Chromy in 1984, struck me because he does not appear heroic in the theatrical sense. He looks thoughtful. Almost burdened. His hand rests against his face as though he is still discerning. She painted a living priest!

History now asks us to look upon the same face and remember a martyr. And perhaps that is another lesson of mercy: martyrdom does not suddenly begin at the moment someone dies. It begins much earlier, in the quiet decisions to remain faithful when compromise would be easier.

Today the crowned White Eagle of Poland also appeared differently to me. The eagle is a national symbol of Polish sovereignty and continuity. But in one object we saw, Our Lady of Częstochowa had been placed at its heart.

It seemed almost to say: a nation needs memory, but memory itself needs a heart. The Mother of God is at the heart of the symbol of Poland.

For generations of Poles, faith, nation, family, sacrifice and Marian devotion became deeply intertwined. No country's history is perfect. But repeatedly, when political structures disappeared or foreign powers attempted to redefine Poland, memory and remembering carried something forward.

Sometimes *home* is where the heart insists on returning.

That thought immediately brought me back to our pilgrims. Some of them came here carrying Polish ancestry through parents or grandparents. Perhaps they had never set foot in Poland before this pilgrimage, but something had already connected them to this land long before the airplane landed.

And then we came across Piłsudski Square.

Imagine what those words meant in that place and at that time. A communist system stood around them. Yet thousands upon thousands stood beneath the Cross and heard a Polish pope speak about Christ, human dignity, conscience, nationhood and hope. John Paul II even pointed to Warsaw's reconstruction as a symbol of the sovereignty of the homeland.

And perhaps that is where everything we saw today came together for me.

The Old Town. The empty frame. The eagle. Blessed Jerzy. The Cross in the square. All of them are, in different ways, stories of something that someone tried to destroy, remove, silence, bury or carry away. And all of them say: It remained. Not always in the same form. Not untouched. Not without scars. But it remained.

At the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, memory became more solemn still. We stood on ground that had once been part of the Warsaw Ghetto, where the Nazis confined hundreds of thousands of Jews before deportation and murder, and where on April 19, 1943, Jewish fighters began the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the largest act of armed Jewish resistance during the Second World War. The monument we saw was designed by Warsaw-born sculptor Natan Rapaport and unveiled on April 19, 1948, the fifth anniversary of the uprising; today it stands opposite the POLIN Museum on the site of what had been the heart of Jewish Warsaw. Here reconstruction cannot mean restoring everything that was lost, because so many lives, families, communities, and memories were annihilated. Mercy therefore asks something different of us here: not explanation, not easy consolation, but faithful remembrance. To remember the victims truthfully is itself a moral act. To refuse to let their suffering disappear into statistics is an act of human dignity. And perhaps this, too, belongs to Divine Mercy: the conviction that no person is disposable, no suffering is beneath notice, and no life should be allowed to vanish from the conscience of the living.

This is where God's mercy entered today's pilgrimage for me.

We often imagine mercy only as forgiveness after sin. But God's mercy is also the mysterious love by which He refuses to allow destruction to possess the final word over His children. Mercy remembers what suffering tries to erase, but also it rebuilds what violence tears down.

Mercy restores dignity when systems reduce people to numbers. Mercy keeps conscience alive when fear pressures it into silence. Mercy teaches the heart to hope after hope has become unreasonable. Warsaw itself is a parable of Divine Mercy today.

The city does not hide its wounds by rebuilding. Its reconstruction actually bears witness to them. You look at the Old Town and realize that much of what appears ancient had to rise again from devastation. Its beauty does not deny destruction. Beauty is the answers destruction.

And perhaps that is one of the most important things Divine Mercy teaches us.

God does not restore us by pretending that nothing bad or evil happened. Wounds are real; sin is real. Grief is real. Injustice is real. The ruins are real.

But none of them is greater than His ability to bring life from what we believed was finished.

That is why Christian memory is so powerful.

At every Mass, Jesus tells us, “Do this in memory of me.”

Christian memory is not nostalgia. It is not a sentimental attempt to recover yesterday. Christian memory is the conviction that what God has done remains alive enough to shape what we do today.

Perhaps that is why regimes that seek absolute control so often fear memory.

A people (of Christ's Re-surrection) who remember cannot be completely rewritten. A Christian who remembers the Cross cannot be completely convinced that suffering has the last word. A Christian who remembers Easter cannot be completely persuaded that the tomb is permanent.

And a sinner who remembers Mercy can never completely believe that his worst day is the whole story of his life.

We leave Warsaw carrying one image above all the others: The empty frame.

At first glance, it seemed to hold nothing. But perhaps it was holding everything.

It held memory of loss, defiance, the invisible presence of something that had been taken away but never truly surrendered.

And, today I learn, that is what God's mercy does in us. There are places in our lives that feel like empty frames. A person we have lost. A dream that disappeared. A relationship that changed. A failure we cannot undo. A part of our life that once held something beautiful and now seems vacant.

We look at the emptiness and assume that nothing remains.

God sees differently.

Sometimes, our empty frames become the place where deepest love is remembered. Warsaw taught me that today. God's infinite mercy does not always erase the ruins. He teaches us how to build upon them.

And somehow, through conscience, memory, faith, perseverance, and hope, God can take what has been wounded and make of it something beautiful enough to become a gift for others.

An image could be taken from a frame, but it could not be taken from the people, because it had already entered the human heart. Mercy works like that. Once it has taken root in us, this gift of grace in us remembers. And where there is memory of mercy, something in us endures. Where something endures, hope begins to rise. And hope, even when it begins small, becomes the first stone laid in the work of rebuilding.

Jesus, I trust in You.

Your parish priest and co-pilgrim on the journey,

Fr. JC Merino