

Coming down from Wawel, Kraków changed.

On the hill, we had been among kings, bishops, tombs, chapels, memories of war, the first Masses of Karol Wojtyła, and all those layers of a nation that has learned how to carry its past without allowing the past to become its prison.

Then the streets opened, and suddenly there was the Rynek Główny. The great Main Market Square was laid out in 1257, where older trade routes already crossed, and it became the principal public space of medieval Kraków. Its basic plan has endured for centuries.

But standing there today, the dates almost became secondary. What I noticed was the life: Children. Students. Shopkeepers. Florists. Tourists trying to decide where to eat; tourists trying to cut long lines to enter St Mary's. Priests passing through. Couples walking close together under one umbrella. Older people taking their time. Someone hurrying somewhere important. Someone sitting over coffee as though there were nowhere else in the world he needed to be. And I found myself thinking: this too is history.

History is not only kings changing borders or armies entering cities. History is also people continuing to live. They fall in love. They bury their parents. They argue with their children. They go to Mass. They forget to pray. They begin again. They open shops in the morning and close them at night. They sit at tables with friends. They worry about tomorrow.

Wawel keeps the memory of kings, while the Main Square keeps the memory of ordinary life. And perhaps that is where most of God's work actually happens.

Not on thrones, nor beneath monuments, but at everyday kitchen tables, in conversations, in ordinary fidelity, in the thousand small decisions by which a person either becomes more loving or less loving. The square has seen centuries of this. And still people continue come; they continue to live.

Above them stands St. Mary's Basilica, whose present Gothic church grew from a late-thirteenth-century rebuilding and was consecrated around 1320.

The Hejnał Mariacki (pronounced roughly *HEY-now mah-ree-AHT-skee*) is the famous trumpet call sounded from the taller tower of St. Mary's Basilica. What makes it extraordinary is its rhythm: every hour, day and night, a trumpeter climbs the tower and plays the melody four times, toward the four cardinal directions. At noon, the performance is also broadcast nationally on Polish Radio. It is one of Kraków's most recognizable living traditions.

And then comes the detail everyone remembers: the melody suddenly stops. It does not finish. According to the beloved Kraków legend, during a medieval attack, usually associated in popular tradition with the Mongol invasion, a watchman saw the approaching enemy and sounded his trumpet to warn the city. While he was playing, an arrow struck him in the throat. The warning saved the city, but the trumpeter died, his melody ending abruptly.

So today the Hejnał supposedly stops at the same point in remembrance of him. The story is beautiful, but there is an important historical distinction: the interrupted-trumpeter story is legend, not securely documented medieval history. The trumpet tradition itself is genuinely old. Kraków's records attest a tower watch and trumpet signal centuries ago; historically the call helped mark time and warn the city of dangers such as fire or approaching threats. That actually makes it more meaningful to me.

The hejnał was originally a sound of vigilance: *Pay attention. Stay awake. Something matters.* Over centuries it became something else as well: a sound of continuity. A trumpet sound that keeps on returning.

Every hour.

Even its unfinished melody becomes strangely beautiful. It ends abruptly; and then, an hour later, someone plays it again.

For our pilgrimage, that gives us an even stronger image: Maybe faith is something like the Hejnał of Kraków. The melody is never quite finished. One generation sounds it as long as it can, and then another takes its place at the window. The important thing is that the song entrusted to us does not disappear.

That fits everything Kraków has been teaching us today about inheritance. We do not have to finish the whole song. We are asked to sound faithfully the part entrusted to us, and then hand the trumpet to the next generation.

Hand the trumpet to the next generation... Sometimes, this is the hardest part of our song. And perhaps that is why, above all the noise of Rynek Główny, I find the Hejnał so moving: Kraków does not merely remember its history. Every hour, it sounds it. Every hour, every melody, every player, handing on the faith, handing on the song, handing on the story for it to continue and grow. That is another face of Mercy that God is granting us through Krakow; we have to allow the handing on. And every hour, from the tower, the Hejnał sounds over Kraków.

The market does not stop for it. Conversations continue. Somebody laughs. Somebody complains. Someone poses for another photograph. A waiter carries plates. A child wants something from a shop window. And yet the trumpet sounds. Nothing could silence the city. Krakow's melody simply refuses to disappear from it.

Maybe faith is like that. We sometimes imagine faith as something dramatic enough to stop the world. But much of faith is simply a sound that keeps returning: Morning prayer. Sunday Mass. The Sign of the Cross before a meal.

A Hail Mary whispered when sleep will not come. A priest saying the same words of absolution that generations of priests have said before him. Parents teaching a child to pray. Someone returning to church after years away.

Not always spectacular.
Just faithful enough to keep sounding.

And in a world filled with so much noise, perhaps holiness begins not by making the loudest sound, but by making sure that the sound of God is never completely lost.

Then came one of the most beautiful surprises of this pilgrimage: the opening of the Altar. We entered St. Mary's Basilica and waited before the great altarpiece of Wit Stwosz, Veit Stoss, created between 1477 and 1489, one of the great masterpieces of late Gothic sacred art. And then the wings began to open.

The story of Mary unfolding around the mystery of Christ. And immediately I thought of yesterday. At Jasna Góra, we had come into Mass almost at the Lamb of God, witnessed the faithful receive Holy Communion, and later witnessed that extraordinarily emotional moment when the image of Our Lady of Częstochowa was closed. Yesterday, the Mother disappeared behind the veil. Today, another Marian sanctuary gave us the opposite movement. Yesterday, the Mother was veiled. Today, her story opened and unfolded.

I do not want to manufacture meaning from every coincidence. Pilgrimage becomes sentimental very quickly when we force every detail into a message.

But sometimes a moment is simply given to us. And this one was kind of a special moment. As the altar opened, I thought of how these days in Poland have been doing the same thing. Poland keeps opening.

We begin to know stories and names: Faustina. John Paul II. Our Lady of Częstochowa, and more to come...

Perhaps we thought we already knew their stories. But then we came here.

And behind one story, another story opened. Behind John Paul II was Karol Wojtyła, the son who buried his mother, his brother, and his father. Behind the pope was the young priest who brought his dead to the altar at Wawel. Behind the saint was a son. Behind the monument was a person. Behind the person was often a wound. Behind the wound was a choice. And behind the choice, very often, was simply someone who refused to stop loving God. Beyond every pilgrim, a faith story.

That is what pilgrimage does if we allow it. It takes names that have become familiar and gives them back their humanity. Saints stop being statues. History stops being dates. Places stop being photographs.

And suddenly we begin to understand that holiness was lived by people who woke up tired, experienced disappointment, buried people they loved, felt afraid, made decisions without knowing how everything would turn out, and simply kept on... walking.

Maybe that is why opening the altar moved me so much. It felt like a sacramental image of pilgrimage itself. God does not show us everything at once. He opens things. A little at a time. A person. A memory. A wound. A vocation.

Sometimes even ourselves.

Now, What Remains?

By late afternoon I found myself thinking again about the dragon beneath Wawel.

The oldest written form of the Wawel Dragon legend reaches back to Wincenty Kadłubek around the turn of the thirteenth century, and the familiar cobbler Skuba entered later versions of the story. Even today the Dragon's Den remains beneath Wawel Hill, and the legend is still one of Kraków's great symbols.

This morning the dragon was charming.

By evening, he seemed almost like a question.

What are the dragons of a human life? - Are we aware of our own dragon?

Fear certainly. Pride. Hatred. Resentment. Violence.

Grief that slowly hardens into bitterness.

Power that forgets the people standing beneath the window.

Memory that remembers the wound but forgets mercy.

The frightening thing is that we do not always defeat these dragons simply by fighting harder.

Because many times, in fighting what wounded us, we begin to resemble it.

And perhaps this is where everything Kraków has shown us today comes together.

At Wawel we learned that we inherit something before we build anything. The tombs reminded us that whatever authority or responsibility we hold will eventually pass to someone else. Casimir the Great made me ask whether I will leave what was entrusted to me better than I found it. John Paul II reminded you and me that memory must sometimes kneel before it can become mercy.

The Papal Window reminded us that Christian leadership must remain close enough to hear the people below. The Market Square reminded us that holiness has to survive in the middle of ordinary life. And St. Mary's reminded us that God is still opening things.

Our official pilgrimage schedule gave us Wawel, prayer near St. Stanislaus, the Market Square, and St. Mary's Basilica today. But Kraków gave me something beneath all those places. We do not survive merely because we defeat what threatens us. We survive because we remember what must never be allowed to die within us: Faith. Beauty. Memory. Humility. Laughter. Repentance. Goodwill. The willingness to forgive. The courage to begin again. The ability to open the window. The wisdom to recognize that having been wounded does not give us permission to wound someone else.

And this, I think, is where mercy enters history.

Mercy does not erase what happened.

Mercy does not call evil good.

Mercy does not ask the wounded person to pretend he was never wounded.

Mercy decides what happens next.

That may be one of the deepest lessons Poland is giving me. A people can carry terrible history without allowing terrible history to become the only thing they hand to the next generation. A person can carry grief without allowing grief to become bitterness. A Church can remember its saints and still kneel in repentance for its sins. A pastor can carry authority and still open the window. A human heart can know dragons and still choose **not** to become one.

Tonight, Kraków has given me enough. The dragon is beneath the hill. The kings and saints are above it. And somewhere between them are the rest of us.

We are the ones crossing the square. Still learning. Still walking. Still building. Still carrying people we love in our hearts. Still asking forgiveness. Still hurting. Still trying to forgive. Still discovering what God has hidden within our own stories. Still waiting for certain doors to open.

Tomorrow, our pilgrimage takes us to Wadowice, to the parish church and the ordinary streets where Karol Wojtyła was baptized, made his first Confession and First Communion, served at the altar, and began the life that would one day become known throughout the world.

But perhaps Kraków has already prepared us for Wadowice. Because great stories usually begin in very small places. Before there was a pope at the window, there was a child at the baptismal font. Before there was Saint John Paul II, there was Karol. Before there was a cathedral, someone laid a stone. Before the altarpiece opened before us today, somebody spent years carving what others would not fully see until the doors were opened.

God seems to love beginnings like that: Small. Hidden. Ordinary. And entrusted to love.

So tonight I think again of the square. People are still crossing it. The shops will close and open again. Somebody will light a candle inside St. Mary's. Someone will pray for a person we will never know. And from the tower, the trumpet will sound again.

Kraków continuing; that is an image... And maybe that is grace too. Not always the great miracle that removes the dragon. Sometimes grace is the quieter miracle that, after everything, the trumpet still sounds, the altar still opens, and the people keep showing up.

Your parish priest and co-pilgrim,
Fr JC Merino