

My dear friends and pilgrims,
There are days on a pilgrimage when we return with photographs, stories, discoveries, and perhaps something new that we have learned. And then there are days when we return carrying mostly...
silence.

Today was such a day. Our itinerary simply called this Day 9: Auschwitz-Birkenau, a guided visit followed by Mass. But no itinerary can adequately prepare anyone for what it means to walk into Auschwitz. This was not simply another place to visit in Poland. It belongs, certainly, to the history of Poland, to Jewish history, and to the history of all those who suffered here, but it also belongs to the moral memory of humanity. Auschwitz is one of those places where the human family must stop and examine what we are capable of doing to one another when we forget who the human person is; and what it means to be a human person. Something happened almost immediately as we entered that stayed with me throughout the day. As we enter, we heard names. Names were being spoken, solemnly, one by one. Before the barracks, before the fences, before the statistics and photographs, before the machinery of death confronted us, we heard names. I found that profoundly moving because Auschwitz had once attempted precisely the opposite. Here human beings were classified, transported, stripped, numbered and reduced to categories. Yet today, before we entered, names were being spoken again. It was almost as though memory itself were correcting what hatred and evil had attempted to do.

Perhaps that is the only proper way to enter Auschwitz. We are not merely visiting the location of a terrible historical event. We are entering the memory of persons. Every number we encountered today once had a name. Every suitcase belonged to somebody. Every pair of shoes had walked somewhere before arriving here. Every photograph contains a life immeasurably larger than the few inches of paper upon which it survives. These people had mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, children and friends. They had professions and prayers, familiar streets and favorite foods. They laughed. They argued. They celebrated birthdays. They had traditions. They worried about their children. They planned what they would do next week. They expected tomorrow.

Then we walked beneath perhaps the most infamous words at Auschwitz: Arbeit macht frei: "Work sets you free." It was a lie, and that lie began to reveal another disturbing pattern that followed us throughout the day. Auschwitz corrupted things that ordinarily serve human life. Work, which can express human dignity and creativity, was transformed into forced labor. Administration, which should serve society, became an instrument of persecution. Technology and transportation, achievements of modern civilization, became mechanisms for deportation and killing. Even music, something capable of expressing the deepest beauty of the human spirit, was made to serve the machinery of the camp.

We saw where the prisoner orchestra played as prisoners marched to and from forced labor. Music helped regulate their steps so that thousands of people could be moved and counted more efficiently. That image has remained with me: human beings marching while music played, not primarily for consolation, but for control. We entered Auschwitz hearing names; they entered hearing marching music. We were being invited to recover the person. The system they encountered was designed to transform persons into a procession that could be reduced to numbers.

Then came the roll-call ground, where prisoners could be forced to stand at attention for hours, sometimes under brutal conditions. Again, something ordinary had been corrupted. Time itself became punishment. The body became something to command. Stand here. Wait. March. Work. Return. Be counted. Auschwitz attempted to regulate almost every dimension of human existence. Name became number, freedom became command, work became coercion, music became control, and time itself became torment.

Yet perhaps the most disturbing corruption we encountered was something even more intimate: ***hope itself was used to deceive***. As I was looking at some of the pictures, I wondered why many looked they were really not being forced to be there. Then I learned: People were told about evacuation, resettlement, transfer, work or life somewhere else! They arrived carrying suitcases because they believed they might need those things at the end of the journey. They brought clothes, utensils, photographs and the ordinary possessions with which people prepare for another chapter of life. Some were told they would shower or be disinfected. The language varied, but the deception served the same purpose: to keep people moving toward a destination whose real purpose had been concealed from them. Hope used to deceive! I kept thinking about those suitcases because they tell us something statistics cannot. They packed because they expected a tomorrow. That is what makes them so heartbreaking. Hope, one of the most beautiful capacities of the human heart, was manipulated in order to lead people toward death, annihilation. It reminds us that evil does not always present itself honestly as evil. Sometimes evil borrows the language of ordinary life. Sometimes it hides behind efficiency, procedure, bureaucracy and reassuring words.

This is where I found myself thinking about Viktor Frankl and *Man's Search for Meaning*; a required reading during my years at the University. Frankl survived the concentration-camp world and spent much of his later life reflecting upon one of the great questions of human existence: What remains of the person when almost everything has been taken away? Auschwitz attempted to control clothing, food, sleep, movement, work, time and eventually life itself. Yet Frankl discovered that within some prisoners there remained an interior territory where love, memory, meaning and moral responsibility could sometimes still survive.

But we must be very careful here. Auschwitz should never become an inspirational story about the triumph of the human spirit. Many human beings were broken here. Many were terrified, traumatized, humiliated, starved and murdered. We should never judge those who could not summon some heroic interior strength. Auschwitz reveals not only the resilience of human beings but also our terrible vulnerability. Christian hope therefore cannot rest simply upon the strength of the human spirit. It must rest upon something deeper: even when the human person can no longer hold onto God, God can still hold onto the human person.

That thought brought me back to yesterday at Łagiewniki. Only yesterday we stood at the Shrine of Divine Mercy and prayed before the image of Jesus from whose Heart flow the rays of mercy. We repeated words that have accompanied this pilgrimage: "Jesus, I trust in You." Today those words became more difficult. Perhaps they also became more truthful. Divine Mercy was not entrusted to the Church because the world was already merciful. The message of mercy came into a century, a time, a generation that would demonstrate with terrifying clarity what happens when the human person is stripped of dignity.

And so Auschwitz forced me to think again about what Divine Mercy actually means. Mercy is not God's refusal to see evil. Mercy sees evil more clearly than we do. Mercy does not call cruelty good, and it does not erase justice or memory. Mercy means that evil never receives the authority to define the ultimate worth of the human person. Human beings may reject mercy, suppress conscience and construct entire systems around hatred, but we cannot exhaust the mercy of God.

They could tattoo a number upon a body, but they could not replace the name by which that person was known to God. They could decide that someone was useless, but they could not determine that person's worth. They could imprison the body, manipulate time, separate families and ultimately take life itself, but they could never make God cease to love the person. The deepest Christian claim at Auschwitz is not that the human soul is invulnerable because human beings are strong. It is that no human being is beyond the reach of God because God is faithful.

And then we came to Fr. Maximilian Kolbe. There is something about the physical movement he made that I cannot get out of my mind. Auschwitz was a world of lines. Stand here. March there. Remain in formation. Be counted. Do not move unless commanded. The entire structure of the camp was designed to tell the prisoner where he belonged and what he was permitted to do. And then, during a roll call in the summer of 1941, after ten prisoners had been selected to die by starvation in retaliation for an escape, Maximilian Kolbe stepped out of line. Franciszek Gajowniczek had cried out in anguish for his wife and children. Fr. Kolbe heard him. He stepped forward and offered himself in the man's place. Eventually he was taken with the others to the starvation bunker in Block 11. There, in Cell 18, he endured nearly two weeks of starvation before being killed by an injection of phenol.

The more I thought about it, the more extraordinary that simple movement became. Auschwitz was designed to eliminate choice, and suddenly one man chose. The camp said, *Stay where we put you*. Love stepped forward. The camp said, *This man has been selected to die*. Mercy answered, *Take me instead*.

This is yet another clear lesson about mercy: Mercy is not merely feeling compassion or merely empathy. Mercy is freedom placed at the service of love. Gajowniczek was not Kolbe's brother or lifelong friend. He was another prisoner, another "number". But Kolbe heard a man cry for his wife and children and recognized something Auschwitz had tried to erase: a person. That was enough. The system saw a prisoner selected for death. Fr. Kolbe saw a husband, a father, a human being whose life mattered.

In a place constructed to prove that human life was disposable, Fr. Maximilian Kolbe gave his own life because another human life was precious. Yesterday at Łagiewniki we contemplated mercy flowing from the Heart of Christ. Today, at Auschwitz, we saw what can happen when a human being allows that mercy to pass through his own freedom, his own body and ultimately his own life. John Paul II would later canonize Fr. Maximilian Kolbe as a martyr of charity. That title seems almost startlingly precise after standing here. Fr. Kolbe's witness tells us that even in a place built according to the logic of hatred, love remained possible.

Yet Auschwitz gives us another saint, whose witness is very different and equally necessary: St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, or as she was popularly known in history: Edith Stein. She came here not as someone who stepped forward from a line to exchange places with another prisoner, but as one who was swept into the machinery of extermination because she was Jewish. She had been born into a Jewish family, became one of the remarkable philosophical minds of her generation, entered the Catholic Church and eventually became a Carmelite nun. Yet her Christian faith did not erase her relationship with the Jewish people from whom she came.

When Edith and her sister Rosa were arrested in the Netherlands in 1942, Edith is remembered as saying to her sister, “Come, we are going for our people.” They were deported east and murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau. John Paul II later spoke of her with great sensitivity precisely because her life cannot be reduced to a simple category. She was a daughter of Israel and a daughter of the Church. Her death belongs to the Shoah, and her Christian faith led her to understand her own suffering through the Cross without diminishing the Jewish identity for which the Nazi regime condemned her.

Edith Stein had written about what she called the *scientia crucis*, the “science of the Cross.” But Auschwitz warns us not to misunderstand those words. Christianity does not teach that suffering is good simply because suffering exists. The Holocaust was evil. Auschwitz was evil. We should never romanticize such suffering or suggest that God somehow needed millions of people to suffer so that holiness might emerge. The Cross says something more difficult and more beautiful: suffering is not good, but love can still enter that suffering. Evil can wound the human person terribly, but evil cannot force God to abandon the person who suffers.

Both Saints give us two very different windows into holiness. Fr. Kolbe was confronted with another man's death and freely stepped forward. Edith Stein was herself swept into the destruction of her people. Kolbe's witness says, “Your life is worth my life.” Edith Stein's witness says, “I will not separate myself from the suffering of my people.” Neither makes Auschwitz less terrible; but both reveal that the machinery of hatred never acquired complete possession of the human heart.

Then we were transported to Birkenau, and the experience changed again. At Auschwitz 1, so much of the horror comes to us through particular things: a block, a photograph, a cell, a suitcase, a pair of shoes, a wall. Birkenau confronts us with scale. The railway tracks disappear into an enormous landscape. The barracks stretch outward. The ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria remain. Here one begins to comprehend, though never completely, how modern organization, engineering, transportation and bureaucracy were brought together in the service of extermination - the service of evil.

This may be one of Auschwitz's most urgent warnings to the modern world. Civilization is not guaranteed merely because we become more educated, technologically advanced or administratively efficient. Auschwitz possessed timetables, advanced engineering, records, complex transportation systems and bureaucracy. It was a well-oiled machine. What it progressively abandoned was the human person. Civilization survives only insofar as the human person remains at its center. Once ideology becomes more important than the person, intelligence itself can be recruited to serve evil.

The gas chamber, then, is not where the road to Auschwitz begins. The road begins much earlier. It begins when the category becomes easier to see than the person. It begins when we decide that some lives are less worthy of protection, when human dignity becomes conditional, when language makes contempt respectable, when another person's suffering becomes inconvenient enough to ignore. The categories change throughout history, but the temptation remains.

And mercy moves in exactly the opposite direction. Mercy takes us from category back to face, from statistic back to story, from number back to name, from usefulness back to dignity, and from abstraction back to person. Perhaps that is why the names at the entrance affected me so deeply. We began the day hearing names, then entered a well-oiled machinery system constructed to erase them, and now we leave carrying them.

At Birkenau, after everything we had seen, we celebrated Mass, as our pilgrimage had planned for this day. I found myself hearing words I have spoken countless times as a priest with an entirely different weight: “This is my Body, which will be given up for you.”

Here human bodies had been taken. At the altar, Christ's Body is given. That distinction is everything. Violence says, “Your body belongs to me; I will decide what it is worth and what I will do with it.” Christ says, “This is my Body, given for you.” One is possession. The other is gift. One destroys the other person in order to preserve power. The other gives himself so that another might live.

Yet we did not celebrate Mass at Birkenau because we had finally discovered an explanation for Auschwitz. There are places where explanations become too small. Nor did we celebrate the Eucharist in order to place a Christian interpretation over the Jewish dead. The Jewish victims of Auschwitz must be remembered precisely as Jews, and their suffering deserves that integrity. We celebrated Mass because, after everything we had seen, we needed somewhere to place the dead, the survivors, their descendants, humanity, and our own troubled hearts. And there was nowhere else to place them except before God.

Perhaps that is what prayer becomes at Auschwitz. Prayer is not an answer that makes the mystery disappear. Prayer becomes presence. Prayer becomes remembrance. Prayer becomes repentance. Prayer becomes the refusal to allow hatred to determine what our own hearts will become. And in the Eucharist, we encountered again the One who does not explain suffering from a safe distance but enters into the suffering of humanity and gives himself in love.

I thought also of Karol Wojtyła, the young Pole who lived through this terrible period only a short distance from Auschwitz. He was never a prisoner here, but he knew occupation, forced labor, the deaths of friends, the destruction of his country and the systematic assault upon human dignity. The young Wojtyła who worked in the quarry and at the Solvay plant, studied secretly for the priesthood and lived under Nazi occupation would eventually become the pope who returned to Auschwitz in 1979. So much of John Paul II's later teaching can be understood as a great defense of the human person against every system that attempts to reduce human beings to something less than persons.

And perhaps this is what he helps us understand today: the human person is always more. More than race. More than nationality. More than a political party. More than usefulness. More than ideology. More than economic value. More than the worst thing someone has done or the worst thing that has been done to them. The person possesses a dignity that precedes the judgment of the state, society or any ideology because the person has first been willed and loved by God.

This is why Auschwitz-Birkenau belongs not only to history but to the human conscience. The question it leaves us is not simply, "How could they have done this?" That question is necessary, but it can become too comfortable if "they" always remain people safely confined to the past. Auschwitz asks something much more uncomfortable of every generation: How do we regard the human person now? Whose human dignity are we tempted to make conditional? Whose suffering have we learned not to notice? Who has become a category before becoming a face?

Yesterday at Łagiewniki, we stood before the words, "Jesus, I trust in You." Today Auschwitz asked whether we can still say those words when the road passes through some of the darkest places of the human heart.

Tonight, I think our answer must be quieter than it was yesterday, not because our faith has become weaker, but perhaps because those words have become more costly - and personal. *Jesus, I trust in You.* I trust that no number can erase a name that You know. I trust that no ideology can determine the worth of a soul that You love. I trust that even when human beings try to extinguish mercy, they cannot prevent You from continuing to seek the human heart.

And perhaps this is what we take away from Auschwitz-Birkenau. We cannot undo the evils that happened here, and we should never try to make its suffering fit neatly into an explanation. But we can decide what kind of people will walk away from it. We can refuse to allow categories to become more important than persons. We can remember the face behind the statistic and the name behind the number. We can recognize, with Edith Stein, that solidarity may ask us to remain close to those who suffer. And we can learn from Maximilian Kolbe that there are moments when mercy asks us to step out of the line the world has drawn for us and see the person everyone else has stopped seeing.

Today we entered Auschwitz hearing names. We walked through a machine that tried to replace those names with numbers. We stood where Fr. Maximilian Kolbe stepped forward because another man's life mattered. We remembered Edith Stein, who entered Birkenau among the Jewish people to whom she belonged. And finally, in a landscape where human bodies had once been taken and destroyed, we stood at an altar and heard again of a Body freely given in love. Perhaps this is the grace of Day 9: not that we have understood Auschwitz, but that Auschwitz has asked us whether we truly understand the human person. And as we leave, may God give us the courage to remember the name, to recognize the face, to defend the dignity of every person, and whenever love requires it, to step out of line and choose mercy.

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