

My dear friends and pilgrims,

Today we descend.

After days of looking upward, to towers and basilicas, to the image of Our Lady of Częstochowa, to the sanctuary of Divine Mercy, to the mountains of Zakopane, we will spend part of this day going in the opposite direction. We descend into the earth, into the ancient salt mines of Wieliczka, and there, far beneath the ordinary world of streets, traffic, houses and sunlight, we will celebrate the Eucharist.

There is something deeply Christian about that movement. It is called *Kenosis*. Christianity is a religion of descent, and also of ascent. Christ descended into our humanity, *Incarnation*. He entered poverty, suffering and death. In the Creed we even profess that he “descended into hell.” And only then do we proclaim that on the third day he rose again. Perhaps one of the lessons Poland has been teaching us all along is this: God does not always save us by preventing the descent. Sometimes he saves us by entering the descent with us!

Wieliczka is not simply an unusual tourist attraction. Salt has been mined here since the thirteenth century, and the Wieliczka and Bochnia mines became one of Europe’s oldest major industrial enterprises. Generation after generation of miners descended into these depths to work. Over the centuries they carved not only chambers and passages, but chapels, religious images and sacred spaces out of the salt itself. UNESCO describes these underground chapels and sculptures as part of the extraordinary historical character of the mines.

Think about what that means. These men did not leave God above ground and the heavens. These miners brought God down with them.

Into a dangerous place. Into the darkness. Into the place of sweat and exhaustion. This reminds me of the Psalm when it sings: *Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.*

Today, our journey will take us into the place to that place; where human beings earned their *Daily Bread*. They carved crosses where sunlight could not reach. They made altars from the very rock they were excavating. Somehow they understood something that modern life can easily forget: there is no depth of human existence in which God cannot be worshipped.

And perhaps that is why celebrating Mass underground today will be so powerful. Looking forward to it; it has always been a dream of mine to celebrate Mass on a mountain, but I have never realized (and I could not imagine) that God would grant me this awesome gift of celebrating Mass underground!

But we will not simply bring an altar into the mine. Generations before us have already proclaimed with their hands that the earth itself can become a sanctuary.

The symbolism becomes even richer because today the Church celebrates the Feast of the Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. The first reading gives us Daniel's extraordinary vision of the Ancient One upon his throne and "one like a son of man" receiving an everlasting dominion over peoples, nations and languages. The alternative reading from Revelation presents Michael confronting the dragon, while the Gospel gives us Christ's promise to Nathanael: "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

What a Gospel to hear underground.

We descend deep into the earth, and Jesus speaks about heaven opening.

That paradox has followed us throughout Poland. We have stood in places where humanity descended frighteningly low, and yet we encountered people who refused to surrender their humanity. Yesterday at Auschwitz we confronted what happens when another human being ceases to be regarded as a person—when a name becomes a number, when dignity becomes usefulness, when power is separated from conscience. Today we enter another place beneath the Polish earth, but the story is different. Here human beings descended underground and carved chapels. They took darkness and placed an altar in it.

That contrast stays with me.

Human beings are capable of turning the earth into a grave. But more strikingly, human beings are also capable of turning the earth into a sanctuary.

Poland's history cannot be reduced simply to suffering. Neither should its Christianity be reduced to survival. Again and again, what we have encountered here is a struggle head to head with the meaning of the human person. Nazism tried to answer that question through race and power. Communism tried to answer it through ideology and the state. Christianity answered differently: the human person belongs first to God.

That conviction has consequences.

If every person bears a dignity given by God, then justice cannot simply mean defeating one's enemies. Peace cannot simply mean the absence of conflict. And Mercy certainly cannot mean pretending that evil never happened.

Saint John Paul II understood this with unusual depth precisely because he had lived through Poland's terrible twentieth century. He had known Nazi occupation and Communist oppression. Reflecting upon those experiences, he insisted that a shattered moral order cannot be restored by justice alone. Justice and forgiveness must somehow meet. In his 2002 World Day of Peace message, he wrote that the pillars of true peace are justice and the love expressed in forgiveness. Forgiveness, he carefully insisted, is opposed to resentment and revenge, not to justice. That distinction is enormously important after Auschwitz.

Mercy does not say that Auschwitz does not matter. Mercy remembers. Mercy tells and retells the truth. Mercy demands justice. Mercy protects the dignity of victims. But mercy refuses to allow evil to dictate what the human heart will become afterward.

This is perhaps one of Christianity's most demanding contributions to humanity. The Christian does not overcome hatred by learning to hate more effectively. Saint Paul gives us the more difficult command: "Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good" (Romans 12:21). John Paul II saw precisely this as the creative power of Divine Mercy: it refuses to permit evil to have the final word over the human person. In *Dives in Misericordia*, he even warns that justice by itself can become distorted unless it is shaped by the deeper power of love. Mercy does not abolish justice; it brings justice toward its deepest purpose, the restoration of human dignity.

And suddenly the whole pilgrimage begins to come together.

Częstochowa taught us that a wounded image can still be beautiful. Warsaw taught us that a destroyed city can be rebuilt. Saint Faustina taught us that an obscure young woman could become the messenger of mercy to the world. Saint Maximilian Kolbe taught us that even inside Auschwitz a human being could still choose love. Saint John Paul II taught us that a man formed under tyranny could spend his life defending the dignity and freedom of the human person.

And today Wieliczka teaches us that even underground, human beings can build an altar.

These are not separate stories. They are variations of the same Christian conviction: ***evil can wound history, but it does not own history***. This is God's mercy.

Mercy is God's refusal to abandon his creation to what sin has done to it. Mercy enters the wound and begins the patient work of redemption. That is why the Eucharist today matters so much.

We will go below the surface of Poland and celebrate the mystery that lies below the surface of Christianity itself: bread becomes the Body of Christ; wine becomes his Blood; sacrifice becomes communion; death becomes life. At every Mass we proclaim that the deepest reality of the universe is not violence, domination or death. The deepest reality is self-giving love.

And perhaps salt itself gives us one final image. Jesus said to his disciples, "You are the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13). Salt does not call attention to itself. It enters something else and changes it from within. It preserves what would otherwise decay. It gives flavor without needing to dominate the whole. Maybe this is how Christians are meant to inhabit history.

Not standing outside the world condemning it. Not conquering it. Not fleeing from it. We enter it. We preserve what is human. We protect dignity. We tell the truth. We reconcile where reconciliation is possible. We forgive without calling evil good. We work for justice without allowing justice to become revenge.

John Paul II once said here in Kraków that God's mercy must be reflected in human mercy. He pointed to the long Christian history of this city as a history made luminous by people who trusted God's love enough to translate it into concrete love of neighbor.

Perhaps that is what Poland has finally been showing us.

Christianity at its best does not remove us from humanity. It makes us more human.

And mercy does not weaken justice. It prevents justice from becoming another form of hatred.

After everything we have seen, the scars of the Black Madonna, reconstructed Warsaw, the cell of Maximilian Kolbe, the barracks and tracks of Birkenau, the sanctuary of Saint Faustina, the witness of John Paul II, this may be one of the truths we carry home: the world will never find peace simply by deciding who deserves punishment. Peace begins when justice protects the truth, Mercy protects the human person, and forgiveness prevents yesterday's evil from becoming tomorrow's identity.

Today we descend into the earth. And deep beneath Poland, before an altar fashioned from salt, we will hear Christ tell us:

“You will see heaven opened.”

Perhaps heaven opens precisely there, too. Heaven opens above beautiful churches.

On peaceful mountains. Underground. Heaven opens in a prison cell. In a wounded nation. In a human heart that has every reason to hate, and nevertheless chooses mercy. We will hear the words at Mass underground, the command of a priest of Jesus: *Sursum Corda* - Lift up your hearts!

And when we return to the surface today, perhaps we should ask ourselves one final question: After everything Poland has shown us, what will we choose to bring back into the world?

Because pilgrimage cannot end with photographs and memories. We must become something because of what we have seen.

May we become salt. May we preserve what is human wherever human dignity is threatened. May we speak truth without hatred, seek justice without vengeance, remember suffering without becoming imprisoned by it, and forgive without surrendering what is right.

And may we carry into our families, our parishes, our country and our wounded world what Poland has whispered to us again and again: When humanity descends into darkness, do not surrender the human heart. Build an altar there. Choose mercy. And heaven can open even there.

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