

Dear friends,

Today our pilgrimage began, although we have not yet set foot in Poland.

It began in the simple gathering of people. Some of our pilgrims I met for the first time today. Others I had the joy of seeing again, reconnecting after time apart. And as those first conversations unfolded, I became aware of something I had not fully considered before.

For some in our group, Poland is not simply another country on the itinerary. It is part of their family history! Their mothers or fathers, their grandparents or great-grandparents, came from Poland. Perhaps these their "ancestors" carried with them a name, a devotion, a recipe, a prayer, a language, a memory of a village or a church, or simply a longing - a desire - for a place their future children and grandchildren would inherit. And now, for some of our pilgrims, this will be the first time they stand on Polish soil. For me, I find this amazing!

And that makes this journey something more than a visit.

For some, this may become a kind of homecoming. Not a homecoming in the ordinary sense, because the houses where their parents lived and grew up may be gone, the people may be gone, and the stories may have become faint with time. But there are ways in which the human heart recognizes a place before the mind understands why. Sometimes we arrive somewhere for the first time, and discover that someone we loved has already been there long before we existed.

That very thought moved me today.

It is realizing that a life does not have to remain somewhere in order to leave something there. Parents leave something in their children. Grandparents leave something in generations they may never live to see grow old. Immigrants leave something in the land they departed and something else in the land where they begin again. Priests leave something in parishes long after they have moved on. Friends leave something in one another (like the song goes: "*...like a handprint in the heart*"). Even a brief encounter or acquaintance can leave a grace that outlives the moment itself. That is the power of the human spirit!

This is also why this pilgrimage cannot be measured only by distance or duration. We are about to spend eleven days in Poland. Eleven days is not enough to fully know a country, a people, a history, or the depth of its faith. But length of time has never guaranteed depth of encounter. A person can remain somewhere for years and never truly see it. But, another can pass through for a short time and be changed forever.

So perhaps the better question is not, “How long will we be there?” The better question is, “How deeply will I allow myself to be present?” Will we listen before we explain? Will we allow the history of these places to disturb us, console us, teach us? Will those with Polish roots discover something of the people who came before them? Will those of us without Polish ancestry still find ourselves received into a story of faith larger than ourselves?

And then comes the question I want to carry through the whole pilgrimage: **When I have passed through a place or encounter, how strong the current of mercy that remains because I was there?** That is a serious question for any pilgrim in general.

It may be an even more serious question for a priest.

Priesthood is, in many ways, a life of passing through; and endless series of hellos and goodbyes, and gratitude for the gift of the moment. Priests are sent to a place. We love the people we meet; we develop friendships. We baptize their children whose futures we may never fully see. We bury parents whose stories we only partly know. We walk with families through their joy and grief. We preach words that may be forgotten before the week is over.

And yet grace remains; one could only hope that Mercy might remain.

A word remains. A blessing remains. A kindness remains. A memory remains. A sacrament remains. Mercy remains.

Perhaps that is one of the most beautiful truths of our lives: we do not have to remain forever in order for God to leave something through us.

So before Warsaw, before Jasna Góra, before Kraków, before Łagiewniki, before Auschwitz, this is the prayer I am carrying: **Lord, when I have passed through this place, let some of your mercy remain.**

And may the same be true of all of us.

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