

My dear friends and pilgrims,

Today I realized that we did not really come to Łagiewniki to learn a new devotion. We came here to remember something about God that the human heart keeps forgetting. Long before St. Faustina wrote a single word in her Diary, long before the image of the Merciful Jesus was painted, long before anyone prayed the Chaplet or celebrated Divine Mercy Sunday, mercy was already at the heart of God. From the first pages of Scripture, humanity hides and God comes looking. Israel wanders and God remains faithful. His people sin and God continues calling them home. The prophets struggle for words large enough to describe God: a father, a shepherd, even a mother who cannot forget the child she carried. Then in Jesus, Mercy acquires a human face. God no longer simply tells us that He is merciful. He comes looking for us Himself.

Perhaps that is why the image of the Merciful Jesus is so compelling. Jesus is not seated far away waiting for sinners to somehow make themselves worthy of approaching Him. He is standing, blessing, coming toward us. His wounds remain visible. From His pierced side come the rays that recall the blood and water of Calvary. Mercy, then, is not God pretending that sin does not matter. Mercy is God's love entering the place where sin has wounded us and refusing to abandon us there. This is the great intuition that St. John Paul II would later develop so powerfully: mercy is not weakness. It is love confronting evil and human misery while continuing to affirm the dignity of the person.

That is why Divine Mercy is at the heart of Easter. On the evening of the Resurrection, the disciples were behind locked doors. They had reasons to hide. Peter denied Jesus. Most of the others fled. It was just the locked doors that imprisoned them; fear, shame and failure have become their little prisons. Then Jesus comes through these very locked doors. His first words are not, "Where were you?" His first words are, "Peace be with you." Then He shows them His wounds. I find that extraordinarily beautiful. The risen Christ still has wounds. Resurrection does not pretend that Good Friday never happened. Instead, something has happened to the wounds themselves. The wounds remain, but they have become signs of great love. The place of violence has become the place from which forgiveness is proclaimed. The wounds have become doors through which mercy enters the world.

Today, God wants to do something similar with our wounds. We sometimes pray that God will erase everything painful from our history. Sometimes He heals in that way. But sometimes grace works more powerfully, more authentically, more mysteriously. Because Jesus wants that the person who has known grief becomes able to sit quietly beside someone who is grieving; that the person who has experienced failure becomes less eager to condemn another person's weakness; that the person who knows what it means to be forgiven becomes capable of forgiving others. The wound is still part of the story, but it no longer has to dictate the ending. Mercy - it does not always erase the wound. Sometimes mercy teaches the wound how to live, how to love.

Then there is Faustina herself. What impressed me today was how much of this enormous message was entrusted to such an ordinary life. She cooked. She gardened. She answered the door. She became sick. She struggled with exhaustion. She lived under obedience. She prayed. The woman whose writings would eventually travel around the world spent much of her life doing work that probably seemed completely unremarkable to everyone around her. God placed an extraordinary mission inside an ordinary life.

The story of the potatoes captures this beautifully. In her diary, Faustina shared being exhausted by the heavy work of draining them. She trusted that God would give her the strength, and in the mystical experience she describes, the potatoes appeared as beautiful red roses. The Lord allowed her to understand that her hard work had become like flowers whose fragrance rose before Him (Diary, Entry number 65). I love that story because it corrects one of our great spiritual temptations. We imagine holiness happening somewhere else: when life becomes easier, when we finally have enough time, when God gives us something important to do, when we understand where everything is going. Faustina says something much simpler, but yet profound. Give God what is already in your hands, in Him, even potatoes can become roses. A kitchen can become a sanctuary. Weariness can become an offering. An ordinary duty performed with love can reach the throne of God.

Perhaps holiness is not waiting for a more beautiful life. Perhaps holiness is allowing God to make something beautiful from the life we already have.

And then there was the gate. I think this may remain one of the most important things I saw today. Faustina shared that a poor young man came to the convent asking for something hot to eat. She served him. Only afterward did she understand that Christ had visited her through this poor man. She records Jesus telling her that the blessings of the poor had reached Him and that He had descended “to taste the fruit of your mercy.” (Diary, number 1312).

Think about that. Faustina had extraordinary mystical experiences. She saw Jesus. She received the message of Divine Mercy. Yet one of her most important encounters with Christ happened when she did not recognize Him at all. He simply looked hungry.

If Jesus appeared at our door dressed exactly as He appears in the Divine Mercy image, surrounded by light with rays streaming from His Heart, I suspect we would all make time for Him. But that is usually not how He comes. Sometimes Jesus looks like an interruption. Sometimes He is the person who needs us when we are tired. Sometimes He is someone grieving, lonely, frightened or confused. Sometimes He is the person who has been away from the Church for thirty years and is afraid to walk through the door. Sometimes He is someone who has made terrible mistakes. Sometimes He is simply difficult to love.

Inside the chapel we say, “Jesus, I trust in You.” At the gate Jesus seems to answer, “Then love Me here.”

That is where devotion becomes discipleship. The image teaches us to look at Mercy. The inscription teaches us to trust Mercy. The Chaplet teaches us to beg for mercy “for the whole world.” The Hour of Mercy takes us back to the Cross. Divine Mercy Sunday brings us into the Upper Room where the risen Christ gives peace and forgiveness. But **the Gate** teaches us to recognize Mercy when Jesus no longer looks like the image. Devotion has to survive the walk from the chapel to the gate.

Outside the chapel where we celebrated Mass, through the garden of roses, we are greeted by the statue of our Blessed Mother: The Mother of Mercy. Mary accompanied us again today as the Mother of Mercy, and perhaps we understand that title differently after everything we have seen. There is something special about visiting your mother. We experienced that at Czestochowa, and today Mary appeared again beside the mystery of mercy. I found myself thinking about her Seven Sorrows: Simeon's prophecy, the flight into Egypt, losing Jesus in Jerusalem, meeting Him on the road to Calvary, standing beneath His Cross, receiving His dead body and accompanying Him to the tomb. The Seven Sorrows might be understood as seven schools of trust. Mary did not always understand what God was doing, but she remained. When she was afraid, she remained. When she lost Jesus, she searched. When He carried the Cross, she followed. When He died, she stood. When His body was placed into her arms, she received Him. When the stone closed the tomb, she continued to trust.

Mary teaches us something essential about mercy: mercy stays. Sometimes the greatest work of mercy is not fixing something. Many times we cannot fix it. We cannot remove another person's grief. We cannot reverse a diagnosis. We cannot undo the past. We cannot answer every question raised by suffering. But love always and simply sits beside the hospital bed. Love listens. Love accompanies. Love stands beneath the Cross. Mary teaches us that presence itself can become an act of mercy.

One of the most significant times at the Shrine of Divine Mercy was the time of visit to the Eucharistic Adoration Chapel. It reminds me of another passage from the Diary of St. Faustina. She records hearing Jesus speak from the Eucharistic Host: "Here is My repose." There is something profoundly tender about those words. We have spent these days searching for holy places where we can encounter God, but perhaps God has also been searching for a place where He can dwell. Not because God needs rest in a human sense, but because love desires communion. God does not simply want to be visited. He wants to remain.

That changes the meaning of our pilgrimage. We come to shrines looking for God, but God is looking for a human heart willing to become His dwelling place. We crossed the threshold of the Shrine of Divine Mercy today, but perhaps the more important question is whether Divine Mercy crossed the threshold of us. A tourist can leave a holy place with photographs. A pilgrim should leave having become, in some small way, a holy place for Jesus: someone in whose presence another human being can encounter patience, welcome, forgiveness, truth, tenderness and hope. We came looking for the sanctuary of Divine Mercy. Perhaps God has been quietly trying to build another sanctuary inside the pilgrim.

Then we went to the St. John Paul II Center, and suddenly the story widened. Faustina received the message of mercy; Karol Wojtyła helped carry it into the life of the universal Church. This is particularly moving here in Kraków because the story of John Paul II and Łagiewniki is not merely the story of a pope who later developed an interest in Faustina. As a young man during the Nazi occupation, Karol Wojtyła worked at the nearby Solvay factory. He knew these roads before the world knew his name. Years later, as Pope, he would return here and entrust the world to Divine Mercy.

That gives us one of the deepest lessons of our pilgrimage. The young Wojtyła walking to work could not see the papacy from the factory road. Faustina working in the convent kitchen could not see millions of pilgrims coming to Łagiewniki. We want to see the destination; God often gives us only the road. We want clarity; God gives us opportunities to trust. We want God to explain what He is doing; God often says simply, "Walk with Me." Faithfulness does not require seeing the harvest.

John Paul II spoke here of a spark of Divine Mercy that must become a fire carried into the world. I find the image especially beautiful after learning about Faustina's ordinary life. A spark is small. A convent is small. A kitchen is small. A cup of hot food handed to a hungry stranger is small. One person's forgiveness is small. One visit to someone lonely is small. One confession, one conversation, one act of patience, one decision not to retaliate can seem very small. Yet Christianity began with small things: a young woman's *fiat* (be it done), twelve apostles, five loaves, a mustard seed, a little yeast, an empty tomb before sunrise. God has never been afraid of small beginnings. What matters is whether the small thing is surrendered to Him.

Then, after the group recitation of the Holy Rosary at the crypt main chapel, almost as though God wanted to place a final sentence beneath everything I had learned today, I found myself entering the Chapel of St. James, at John Paul II Center. Above me, as I entered on my own, were the words *Vita hominis peregrinatio*, human life is a pilgrimage. There could hardly be a more fitting inscription for me to come across today. James left his nets when Jesus called him. He witnessed the Transfiguration and entered Gethsemane. He eventually gave his life for Christ. Christian tradition remembers him as the Apostle associated with Spain and, through Santiago de Compostela, one of the great patrons of pilgrims.

At the left wall of this chapel is depicted the story of the ancient tradition of Our Lady of the Pillar. James, discouraged in his mission, receives the encouragement of Mary. She appeared to him on a Pillar, which tradition states that it was the first recorded and accepted apparition of Our Blessed Mother, while she was still alive! What strikes me about that story is that Mary does not remove the road from James. She strengthens the pilgrim. Maybe we spend much of our lives asking God to change the road when sometimes God is trying to strengthen our feet. We ask Him to remove uncertainty, and He gives us trust. We ask Him to explain everything, and He gives us enough light for the next step. We ask Him to take away suffering, and sometimes He gives us someone who will stand beside us while we carry it. The pillar then becomes a beautiful image of what holds us when the road is uncertain. For James, there is the pillar. For Faustina, through her Diary, her mantra *Jesus, I trust in You*. For John Paul II, his total surrender, his *Totus Tuus*, totally yours. For Mary, her *Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*, let it be done to me according to your word. Different words, but the same movement of the heart: Lord, I cannot see the whole picture, the whole road ahead, but I will keep walking with You.

And perhaps that is what these eight days have slowly been teaching us. Warsaw showed us that memory matters, and that what has been destroyed can be rebuilt without pretending that destruction never happened. Częstochowa taught us that mercy has a Mother, and that even a wounded image can continue looking upon a wounded people with tenderness. Wadowice reminded us that extraordinary vocations can begin in very ordinary homes. Zakopane taught us that beauty, gratitude and even rest can be forms of mercy. Łagiewniki has taught us that mercy must move from prayer into life, into mission. Faustina teaches us to trust. John Paul II teaches us to carry that trust into history and the world. St. James teaches us to keep walking...

And our pilgrimage is not finished. Some of its most difficult ground is still ahead of us. That matters because we should not decide in advance what those places will say to us. A pilgrim receives the road as it comes. Today, we have been given mercy. We have been given the words, "Jesus, I trust in You." We have been given Mary, the Mother who remains. We have been given the Eucharistic Christ who desires to dwell within us. We have been given James, the pilgrim who keeps walking. Perhaps God is giving us these things now because we will need them for whatever the road still holds.

Tonight, however, I think we can already say something we could not have said on the first day. Mercy was never simply another destination on our itinerary. ***Mercy has been the road beneath our feet all along.***

And eventually we will go home. That is when pilgrimage becomes serious. God did not bring us thousands of miles simply so that we could say, "I have seen Poland." The more important question is: who will encounter God's mercy because I came to Poland? Who will be treated differently? Who will be forgiven? Who will be listened to? Who will be welcomed? Who will discover that the Church still has a door open for them? Who will encounter the Merciful Jesus because something of His mercy passed through me?

That is the test of this pilgrimage: that something holy comes home with us, that we now see people differently, that someone will recognize the face of the Merciful Jesus in the way we treat them, that mercy crossed the threshold of our hearts.

So perhaps tonight our prayer can be simple. Jesus, if You are looking for somewhere to rest, rest here. Take the wounds I carry and make them doors of compassion. Take the ordinary work in my hands and turn the potatoes into roses. When You come disguised as someone poor, lonely, grieving, difficult or inconvenient, help me recognize You at the gate. When I cannot change another person's suffering, give me the heart of Mary simply to remain. When I cannot see where the road is leading, give me the faith of James to take the next step. Give me Faustina's trust and John Paul II's courage to carry the fire of your love into the world.

And when I return home, Lord, do not let me simply remember Divine Mercy. Make me merciful. Perhaps that is why You brought us here. We came looking for the Shrine of Divine Mercy, and slowly, quietly, patiently, You have been building another shrine somewhere else: inside the pilgrim.

Jezu, ufam Tobie. Jesus, I trust in You. And tomorrow, we keep walking.

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