

Every old city seems to have a story it tells its children... Krakow has a dragon!

The legendary dragon lived in a cave beneath Wawel and terrorized the people. The creature terrorized the settlement: Livestock disappeared. People lived in fear... even young women were threatened. Knights and warrior heroes tried to kill the monster with weapons, but strength was useless against it. Swords were not enough.

One day, an young cobbler finally understood that the monster could not be beaten simply by becoming stronger than the monster. So, he filled a sheep with sulfur and left it for the dragon. The dragon devoured it, became desperately thirsty, drank from the Vistula River until he could drink no more, and... BOOM! The dragon drank so much water that he exploded from inside out. That was the end of the dragon. Krakow was, finally, free.

This is a wonderful story, especially because the hero is not a king. He is not a knight or a general. He is a craftsman who thinks differently. And after several days in Poland, I wonder whether that old story has stayed alive because Poles know something about dragons. Not fairy-tale dragons, of course. Poland has faced far more terrible things: partitions that erased the country from the map, occupations, war, the Nazi attempt to destroy whole peoples and cultures, the murder of Jews and Poles, and then decades of communist domination. We have been walking through places where those wounds are not abstractions. They happened to families. They happened to neighborhoods. They happened to priests, professors, workers, children.

Yet the old Kraków story offers an unexpectedly wise lesson: **you do not have to become the dragon in order to defeat the dragon.** Sometimes resistance takes the form of an army. But sometimes it looks like a professor continuing to teach, a mother teaching her children to pray, an artist carving beauty, a worker insisting upon human dignity, a priest quietly forming seminarians in secret, a people refusing to forget their language, their faith, their songs, their saints. The dragon is defeated whenever fear fails to make us less human. That was the story underneath the hill as we climbed Wawel today.

And then, above the dragon, we found a cathedral.

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Our itinerary described today rather simply: Wawel Hill and Cathedral, prayer at the tomb of St. Stanislaus, Kraków's Market Square, and St. Mary's Basilica. It sounded like a day of sightseeing.

It became something much more. Wawel is where Poland seems to have gathered its memories and refused to throw any of them away. The royal castle grew over centuries from earlier residences; the official Wawel history traces the royal complex through Romanesque beginnings, Gothic expansion under kings such as Casimir the Great, and the later transformations that produced what we see today.

The cathedral does something similar. It is, in a very real sense, **a cathedral built upon cathedrals**. That stayed with me.

You walk through Wawel and realize that Poland did not build its identity in one generation. Romanesque remains beneath Gothic walls. Renaissance chapels stand beside later monuments. Kings lie beside bishops. Saints share the building with sinners. The dead remain strangely present among the living.

And perhaps that is what a human life is too. **God builds in layers**.

We sometimes imagine conversion as though God demolishes everything and starts over. But grace is usually gentler than that. God takes what has been lived (the beautiful things and even the broken things) and somehow incorporates them into what He is still building. Krakow was built that way.

A priesthood is built that way. So is a marriage. So is a family. So is a parish.

People who loved us, and who have gone before us, are still somewhere inside the persons we have become. Priests who formed us remain in the way we celebrate Mass. Parents remain in the expressions we suddenly hear coming out of our own mouths. People we have buried remain part of the tenderness with which we accompany the next grieving family.

Even grief has layers. And this became especially personal for me when we came again to Karol Wojtyła. Here at Wawel, the young Fr. Wojtyła celebrated his first Masses in St. Leonard's Crypt on November 2, 1946, remembering his deceased parents and his brother. He came to the altar as a priest, but he came there also as a son.

That moved me.

A priest does not cease being somebody's son when he puts on a chasuble.

And perhaps priesthood gives us somewhere to bring precisely those things we cannot fix. We bring our dead to the altar. We bring our people. We bring the conversations we cannot finish, the people we could not save, the things we wish we had said, and all the gratitude that death somehow makes even sharper.

So today I found myself thinking about Papa and Mama, as I write this reflection. Not in a sad way alone. More as another layer. Papa and Mama remain part of the priest standing at the altar now. They have offered me to God as a son, and now, I offer the gift of life back as a "father".

And perhaps that is one of God's quieter mercies: **the people we love do not simply disappear from our story. Love changes form, but it continues to build.**

We stood before the tomb of **Casimir III the Great**, king from 1333 to 1370.

He is remembered as a builder: of institutions, towns, fortifications, law, political stability and learning. Wawel itself grew substantially under him. There is something wonderfully humbling about seeing the tomb of a man called the Great.

He built so much. And then he died. Every crown eventually comes off. Yet perhaps the better question is not whether Casimir died. Of course he did. The better question is: **what remained because he had lived?** That is a good examination of conscience for anyone entrusted with something that does not finally belong to him. A parent receives a family. A priest receives a parish. A teacher receives students. A bishop receives a local Church.

We hold these things for a while. We care for them. We repair what we can. We add something good if God permits it. And then we hand them to somebody else.

Maybe one measure of a life is very simple: **Did I leave it better than I found it?**

We passed beneath another sentence I do not want to forget: **SI DEUS NOBISCUM QUIS CONTRA NOS?** If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31).

Those words become almost startling after learning about Poland's history. They certainly did not mean that nothing terrible would happen here. Terrible things did happen here.

And that is exactly why the rest of Romans 8 matters. Paul's confidence is not that Christians escape tribulation, persecution, danger or death. His confidence is that none of these things can finally separate us from the love of God.

Perhaps that is a much stronger faith than believing God will prevent every dragon from appearing. It is believing that **even the dragon does not get the last word.**

This is where John Paul II began to look different to me today. Karol Wojtyła knew what had been done to Poland. He lived under Nazi occupation. He knew friends who disappeared. He studied for the priesthood clandestinely. He became a priest and bishop under communism. He came from a nation with plenty of reasons to keep a careful ledger of what others had done to it.

And yet one of the extraordinary gestures of his pontificate was to ask the Church to examine **her own** conscience. On March 12, 2000, during the Great Jubilee, John Paul II led the Church's Day of Pardon in St. Peter's Basilica. He spoke of a **“purification of memory”** and asked forgiveness for sins committed by Christians through the centuries. He also insisted that purification means cleansing the memory of wrongs suffered from rancor and revenge.

Now that I am standing in Poland, I find that remarkable. A son of a wounded nation did not conclude that suffering made his people, or his Church, incapable of sin. He knew the harder Christian truth: **I can have been wounded and still be capable of wounding someone else.** As we heard it said: Hurt people hurt people.

Mercy does not require us to lie about history. Forgiveness is not amnesia. The murdered remain murdered. Auschwitz cannot be softened into a comforting lesson. Evil must be called evil.

But memory can be purified of the desire to become the evil that hurt us. Perhaps that is one of the greatest victories mercy can achieve: **that our wounds do not teach us how to wound.** Like the wounds of Jesus Christ, our wounds teach Christians to heal.

John Paul II asked the Church to kneel. For a man who had stood against Nazism and communism, that kneeling was not weakness. It was strength purified by Christ.

And then, we found ourselves passing through **Franciszkańska 3:** The Pope's Window. I loved this little stop because, after Wawel's tombs and crowns and monuments, suddenly we encountered something very ordinary: **a window.**

When John Paul II returned to Kraków, young people gathered beneath that window and he came out to speak with them. He joked. He listened. He talked to them with that wonderful ease he had with young people.

Here was the Bishop of Rome, successor of Peter, one of the most recognizable men in the world, and when he came home to Kraków, **he opened the window.**

There is a lesson there for every pastor, or for any one entrusted with responsibility and office. Authority in the Church should never become a wall. **It should become a window.** A window, come to think of it, is a channel that is open to vulnerabilities. A window allows people to see you. But it also allows you to look out and see them. However high an office places us, Christian leadership must never take us so high that we can no longer hear the people standing in the street below.

(To be continued - Part II)...