

Dear friends,

Two words stayed with me tonight after our first evening in Poland.

"Follow me."

Fr. Vincent drew our attention to them in his homily at our welcome Mass, and perhaps because we had just crossed an ocean to begin a pilgrimage and was a little exhausted (as I am sure everyone is), I heard them differently today.

"Follow Me". They are among the simplest words Jesus ever speaks in the Gospel. Two words. No elaborate explanation. No itinerary. No guarantee about where the road will lead. Just: Follow me.

And somehow, that was enough to change a life.

Our Day 2 began after our arrival in Warsaw with Mass at the parish of St. James the Apostle in Ochota, the very parish connected with one of the decisive moments in the life of the young Helena Kowalska, the woman the world would later know as Saint Faustina. Our official pilgrimage itinerary intentionally brought us here at the beginning of the journey, before the fuller exploration of Warsaw tomorrow.

There is an important historical detail here that makes the place even more beautiful. When Helena arrived in Warsaw in July 1924, the beautiful parish church we see today was still under construction. She entered the first church she encountered and prayed for God to show her what to do. In her *Diary*, she recalls being directed to speak with the priest after Mass. That priest was Fr. Jakub Dąbrowski, then, the pastor of St. James. He helped her find lodging and work with the Lipszyc family in Ostrówek while she continued discerning religious life. The temporary chapel used by the parish during those early years stood beside the present church; the site is remembered today in the parish's Sister Faustina pastoral hall.

And Helena's path was not as instantaneous as we sometimes make the stories of saints sound. She approached the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy in Warsaw and was provisionally accepted, but because she lacked the necessary dowry, she worked for another year before finally entering the congregation on August 1, 1925.

That makes her story more compelling to me.

God called. Helena followed. But following did not mean that every door immediately opened. In my reflection, I have come to recognize my own vocation to the priesthood; it has not always been easy. There definitely times of graces, but a lot were times of difficulty and setbacks. One thing I have learned in life is that blessings don't usually come easy; and as a friend once reminded me: some blessings that we receive from God are hard.

And suddenly, I found myself reflecting about Saint Matthew, whose feast the Church celebrates today. Matthew was sitting at the customs post when Jesus saw him. He was a tax collector, a man whose occupation placed him among people regarded with suspicion and contempt. Jesus did not begin by presenting Matthew with a résumé of everything wrong with his life. He offered him something far more unsettling. "Follow me." Matthew got up and followed.

What an unexpected mercy that must have been. Before Matthew had proven himself worthy of discipleship, mercy found him sitting exactly where he was. Jesus saw a future apostle where everyone else could easily have seen only a tax collector. And perhaps this is one of the first lessons Poland is giving me.

Mercy often arrives as an invitation. "Follow Me".

We tend to imagine mercy only as what God gives after we fall: forgiveness after sin, healing after a wound, another chance after failure. Certainly it is all of those things. But sometimes mercy comes earlier. Sometimes mercy is God interrupting the life we have settled for and saying, *Come. There is more for you than this.* "Follow me."

Matthew heard it at a customs post. Helena Kowalska heard it gradually through the restless desire for religious life that would not leave her alone. She came to Warsaw with very little certainty. She prayed in a church, and spoke with a priest, she did not know. She was directed toward people she had never met. A convent did not immediately receive her permanently. She had to work, wait, persevere, and trust. Yet the invitation remained. Follow me.

That strikes me powerfully on the first evening of our pilgrimage because we, too, have been doing a lot of following. We followed airport signs. We followed one another through Vienna. We followed our guide through Warsaw. We followed schedules, buses, passports, boarding calls and luggage.

But beneath all those little acts of following lies the real reason pilgrimage exists. We are only trying to follow Christ.

And following Christ rarely means knowing the entire road in advance. I suspect that many of us came to Poland carrying intentions that have little to do with tourism. Some are praying for children or grandchildren. Some carry people who are sick. Some bring grief or loneliness. Some seek clarity about something in their lives. Some may simply know that God invited them onto this pilgrimage before they would completely understand why. Perhaps we do not need to know the "why" yet. And that is OK.

Helena did not know everything that would come from that morning of prayer in Warsaw. She could not have known that one day millions of Christians throughout the world would pray the Chaplet associated with the message entrusted to her. St. Matthew certainly could not have imagined, sitting at his customs post, that centuries later Christians would still open a Gospel bearing his name.

Grace seldom gives us the whole map. It gives enough light for the next act of fidelity.

Our first day in Poland ended very differently from the way it began. After airports, airplanes, buses, unfamiliar streets, and our first Mass together, we gathered around the table at the Polonia Palace Hotel for a wonderful dinner.

I loved the intimacy of that moment (although I must admit, my eyes were already to heavy for them to be opened). These pilgrims whom I had begun meeting only yesterday were now sitting around tables together in Warsaw. Conversation came more easily. Names were becoming faces, and faces were becoming stories. We were no longer simply twenty-eight people whose names appeared on a pilgrimage roster. We were beginning to become pilgrims together.

And perhaps that, too, is unexpected mercy. God calls each of us personally, but He rarely asks us to follow Him alone.

On Day 3, we will see more of Warsaw. There will be history to learn and holy places to enter. But tonight I want to hold onto the simplicity of those two words. Follow me.

Perhaps Christ is saying them to every one of us somewhere on this road.
We may not know yet where He intends to take us. Matthew didn't. Helena didn't.
Perhaps faith and holiness begin when we finally discover that we do not need the whole
road before we take the next step. We need only enough trust to rise when Christ passes
by. And follow.

Jesus, I trust in You.
I remain your parish priest and co-pilgrim on the journey,
Fr. JC Merino