

Dear friends,

There is something really special about visiting your mother. That was the feeling that stayed with me today as we made our pilgrimage from Warsaw to Jasna Góra, the spiritual heart of Poland, to pray before Our Lady of Częstochowa, the Czarna (Black) Madonna, honored for centuries as the Queen of Poland. The official itinerary brought us here precisely as one of the central Marian moments of the pilgrimage, before continuing on to Kraków.

I had seen this image so many times before. I knew the basic history. I knew that the icon had been at Jasna Góra since the fourteenth century, that it had been attacked and damaged in 1430, and that the scars on Mary's face remain visible to this day. I knew, too, that the image belongs to the ancient *Hodegetria* tradition, Mary as the one who "shows the way" by pointing to her Son. But researching and knowing these things beforehand did not prepare me for what it felt like to enter the chapel itself.

We arrived at a moment I could never have planned. The Mass was already underway, and we entered exactly at the *Lamb of God*, which people singing with passion and in one voice in the Polish language, just before the reception of the Holy Eucharist, i.e., the Holy Communion. For a pilgrimage centered on Divine Mercy, it was almost overwhelming. We had come to visit the Mother, and the first sound before us were the singing of... "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us." It felt as though Mary herself had done exactly what she always does: she receives, and then immediately turns our attention to Jesus. We came looking for her, and she pointed us to her Son in the Eucharist.

What did Our Lady bring to my attention today? First, Jesus in the Eucharist. Second, the palpable faith of the people around us. And third, the crutches and votive offerings on the walls, each one carrying a story of its own.

The faith in that chapel was difficult to describe. People were kneeling, praying quietly, waiting patiently, and carrying intentions that were invisible to everyone except God. Some were there in gratitude. Some were clearly there in sorrow. Some had probably been praying the same prayer for years. There was something deeply moving about being surrounded by people who had not come to look at a famous religious artifact but had come because they believed. They had come because they trusted that God still listens, still acts, still heals, still surprises.

Then I saw the votive offerings. Crutches, walking aids, rosaries, medals, and other objects left behind in thanksgiving. Every one of them belonged to somebody. Someone once needed that crutch. Someone once walked into this chapel carrying fear. Someone came here hoping. Someone asked for grace. Someone returned to give thanks. We cannot know the full story behind every object, and faith should never become superstition or a demand that God perform on our timetable. But taken together, those votive gifts say something unmistakable: people came here believing that mercy was still active.

What also made me smile was seeing countless number of students making a pilgrimage to our Lady. Some were asking simply to pass their exams; others, I suspect, were asking for a miracle because they already knew they had not studied nearly enough to pass (therefore, needed a miracle!). There was something tender and familiar about that. Even in a shrine carrying centuries of national history, suffering, kingship, war, and miracles, people still come with the very ordinary anxieties of life's journey: an exam, a result, a future, a fear of failure. And somehow that belongs here too. Mercy is not reserved only for the dramatic moments. We bring God the great wounds and the small panics, the crises of nations and the crisis of tomorrow morning's test. A mother receives all of it. And maybe that is one of the reasons Jasna Góra feels so alive: people come believing that nothing is too small to bring to Mary, because nothing is too small to bring to her Son.

That is what connected the whole day so strongly to our pilgrimage of Divine Mercy. Mercy is not only forgiveness after sin. Mercy is God drawing close to us in the very place where we are weak, afraid, wounded, confused, or unable to fix things by ourselves. We bring our childlike faith, the illness, the grief, the child we worry about, the family wound, the decision we do not know how to make, the prayer that hurts to pray one more time, and we place it before God.

There is something deeply maternal about this. A mother does not always have the answer, and she cannot always remove the pain, but she receives what her child brings. She listens. She stays. She knows. That was how the chapel felt today. We came carrying things, and Our Lady seemed to receive them without needing explanation.

And yet she never keeps us at herself. That is the beauty of the image. Mary points to Jesus. Her whole life has always done that. At Cana, she says, “Do whatever he tells you.” At Calvary, she remains with Him. At Jasna Góra, she seems to say the same thing again: look at Him, trust Him, follow Him.

Her scars became part of the image. That felt like a very important lesson in mercy. Sometimes God removes the suffering. Sometimes the crutches are really left behind. Sometimes the healing comes exactly as we asked. But sometimes mercy looks different. Sometimes the wound remains, but it no longer owns us. Sometimes the scar stays, but it becomes part of a story of survival, faith, grace, and love.

Later, at half past noon, we were able to witness the closing of the miraculous image. That was another deeply emotional moment. The image slowly disappeared from view, and the chapel seemed to become even more still. It felt almost like the end of a visit with someone you love. Music is played live in the background. Then, you come to see your Mother, you sit with her, you bring what is heavy, you say what you need to say, and eventually you leave. But you do not leave empty. You carry something of that visit with you.

That is what I felt as the image closed. Our Lady disappeared from sight, but she did not feel absent. In fact, it felt like the opposite. What we had seen was now meant to remain with us.

The day also brought me back to the question of surrender. Saint John Paul II's motto, *Totus Tuus* ("Totally Yours") suddenly felt much more like a demanding prayer. What in my own life still resists those words? The places where I still want control. The plans I want to unfold a certain way. The disappointments I would rather manage myself. The wounds I do not completely know how to surrender. Even good desires can become difficult to hand over when I have already decided how I think God should answer them.

One detail of the chapel deserves its own place in the reflection. The altar itself seems to gather the whole meaning of Jasna Góra into one frame. At the center is the Miraculous Image of Our Lady of Częstochowa, richly adorned but still unmistakably marked by the scars on Mary's face. To the left are the insignia of the Queen of Poland, the scepter and orb; to the right are votive gifts associated with Saint John Paul II, including the Golden Rose and the heart inscribed "TOTUS TUUS." The sanctuary also preserves his bloodstained cassock belt from the 1981 assassination attempt as a votive offering of thanksgiving. Standing before all of this, I realized that the altar is not simply beautiful decoration. It is a wall of memory. It holds suffering, gratitude, kingship, surrender, answered prayer, and survival all around the Mother who continues to point to her Son. Even visually, the message is clear: Mary is surrounded by the stories of those who came with wounds and left with trust. And for me, that made the words *Totus Tuus* much more demanding. What am I still reluctant to place there? What part of my life still wants to remain outside the altar, outside surrender, outside mercy? Jasna Góra seems to answer gently: bring all of that too.

As a priest, that question becomes even sharper. It is possible to give God my ministry, my preaching, my sacraments, my schedule, my parish, and still keep one interior room locked. *Totus Tuus* leaves no room for that. It means my plans, my wounds, my successes, my disappointments, my people, my friends, my parishioners, my future, even the parts of myself I do not yet understand.

Mary's greatness is not that she understood everything before she said yes. Her greatness is that she said yes before she understood everything.

That, perhaps, was the deepest grace of Jasna Góra for me today.

We came to a mother. We came carrying prayers. We came looking for comfort. We came with hopes, fears, intentions, and unanswered questions. And Mary did what she has always done: she pointed us to Jesus.

So tonight, the prayer I carry from Jasna Góra is this: Mother, take what we brought today: the names, the fears, the hopes, the things we cannot fix; and bring them to your Son. Teach us to trust Him, even when we do not yet know what the answer will look like.

And perhaps one more prayer belongs beside it: Mary, show me what I am still holding back. Teach me how to say with you: *Totus Tuus*.

Today mercy looked like a mother receiving what we carried, pointing us to the Eucharist, surrounding us with the faith of countless pilgrims, and reminding us through every crutch, every scar, every votive gift, and every whispered prayer that God is still at work.

There is something special about visiting your mother.

And there is something even more beautiful about realizing that she has been waiting to point you, once again, to her Son.

Your parish priest and co-pilgrim in the journey,

Fr. JC Merino