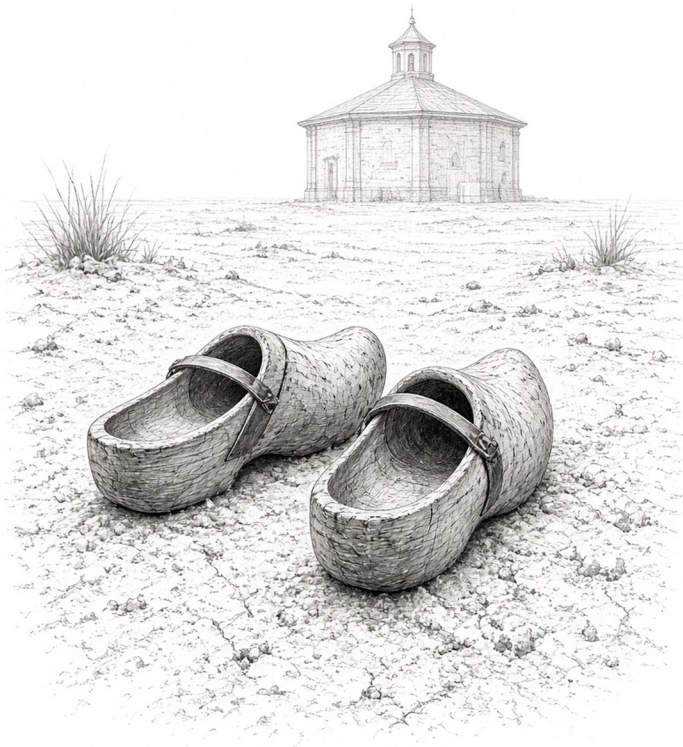




SILENT HOMILIES

The Ground That Knew His Shoes

*John Paul II's shrine on the White Seas
of Łagiewniki*





SILENT HOMILIES

LITTLE TREASURES

The Ground That Knew His Shoes

John Paul II's shrine on the White Seas of Łagiewniki

Before You Begin

Most pilgrims who come to Kraków for Divine Mercy walk first into the great church at Łagiewniki. Many of them never notice that, a short walk across a bridge, another shrine stands on ground that once looked like nothing a church would want.

The ground is still called the White Seas. That is not a name invented for tourists. It is the old local name for the pale waste ponds of a soda factory called Solvay.

That factory is the reason the new shrine stands where it does. Between 1940 and 1944 a young man named Karol Wojtyła worked there during the German occupation of Poland. He walked to the plant in wooden shoes. On the way he used to stop at the convent of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy. Sister Faustina had died in that house two years before the war.

After he died in 2005, the Church in Kraków decided that gratitude needed a house. Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz, who had been his secretary for forty years, founded a centre on the old factory land. He gave it the first words John Paul II spoke as Pope: Do not be afraid. The heart of that centre is now a church dedicated to Saint John Paul II. Downstairs, a drop of his blood rests in a marble altar. Upstairs, the cassock he wore on the day he was shot hangs behind glass.

This little book tells how a waste ground became a shrine, and why the place is not meant to be only a museum of a famous Pole.

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Chapter 1

What the White Seas used to be

If you stand on the land today you see pale stone, paths and a large church. A generation ago the same ground was industrial waste.

Solvay made soda. The leftover lime-white sludge was poured into ponds in the valley of the Wilga, between two districts of Kraków. People called the ponds Białe Morza, the White Seas. After the factory closed in the 1990s the buildings came down. The pale heaps remained for a time, empty and ugly.

The Church did not look for a pretty hill. She took ground that Karol Wojtyła already knew from work, and asked whether it could be used again. That is the first surprise of the shrine. Holiness did not wait for the landscape to become beautiful.

A Small Reflection

We often wait for a place, or a life, to look finished before we think God can use it.

The White Seas were not chosen because they were lovely. They were chosen because Karol Wojtyła had already walked them. Christian faith has always been willing to start again with things that other people have written off.

Something used up can still become a place of prayer if someone is willing to stay with it.

A short prayer

Lord of wasted ground, you do not wait for a landscape to become beautiful before you walk on it. Amen.

Chapter 2

The young man in wooden shoes

Karol Wojtyła was twenty when the Germans closed the university in Kraków. He had already lost his mother and his brother. In February 1941 his father died. To stay in the city, and to avoid being sent to forced labour in Germany, he took work first in a quarry and then, from 1941, in the Solvay chemical plant. The years were 1940 to 1944. He was a labourer with a card that said he was useful to the factory.

On 17 August 2002 he came back as Pope and consecrated the Basilica of Divine Mercy a few hundred metres from the old plant. At the end of Mass he spoke from memory. During the occupation, he said, when he was working at Solvay nearby, he used to come to this place. He still remembered the street from Borek Fałęcki to Dębniki. He took it every day, going to different shifts, with wooden shoes on his feet. Those were the shoes people wore then. How was it possible to imagine, he asked, that one day the man with the wooden shoes would consecrate the Basilica of Divine Mercy at Łagiewniki.

He was not offering a charming detail for biographers. He was remembering a road, a job and a pair of shoes that kept him in Kraków long enough to become a priest.

A Small Reflection

We usually see the Pope. God first worked through the young labourer.

The wooden shoes matter because they keep the later shrine honest. Holiness, if it comes, often comes after a long ordinary road. God does not need a young man to look destined before He can use the years that look only like survival.

If we only remember the white cassock, we have forgotten how he first walked this ground.

A short prayer

Saint John Paul II, you walked this ground before it was holy. Walk with those whose work still feels only like survival. Amen.

Chapter 3

The chapel on the way to work

On that same road he used to come to the convent of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy. Sister Faustina Kowalska had died in that house in 1938. The convent was not yet a world shrine. It was a house of sisters with a chapel and a work of mercy among girls who needed a new start.

The young worker came there because it was on his way. He did not yet know that the diary written in those rooms would one day be read across the Church. He did not make Faustina a saint while he was a student labourer. He prayed.

Years later, as bishop and as Pope, he helped bring her message to the whole Church. In 2000 he declared Faustina a saint and established Divine Mercy Sunday. Divine Mercy is not a private devotion belonging only to her or to him. It is the mercy of Jesus Christ, proclaimed by the Church. In 2002 he came back and consecrated the new basilica next door.

The two places stand within a short walk of each other. The young man did not invent Divine Mercy. He found a house on the way to a shift, and he did not forget it.

A Small Reflection

Important things in the Church often begin quietly.

A sister died almost unknown. A labourer came into her chapel because it was on his road. Decades later the same man, now Pope, asked the whole Church to keep her feast.

God can use a side chapel on the way to work. We do not have to wait until a place is famous before we pray there.

A short prayer

Saint Faustina, neighbour of this shrine, pray for those who still stop in small chapels on the way to ordinary work. Amen.

Chapter 4

A factory that became a hidden seminary

Something else was happening in those years that the factory card does not show.

In October 1942 Karol Wojtyła began secret studies for the priesthood while still employed at Solvay. A seminary is a house where men are trained to become priests. In occupied Kraków that house had to work underground. To be discovered could mean arrest. In *Gift and Mystery* he later wrote that, at a certain stage, the factory became for him a real seminary, though a hidden one. He worked in the quarry from September 1940 and a year later moved to the water-purification plant. The years in which he made the last decision to become a priest were bound to that work.

He made friends among the labourers. He went to their houses. Later, as priest and bishop, he baptised their children, blessed their marriages and buried many of them. The factory was not only a disguise. It taught him the dignity of work and the lives of particular men.

The plant is gone. The friendships were real. The hidden seminary was real. The shrine now stands on the same ground where he worked and began to think seriously about the priesthood.

A Small Reflection

A vocation can grow in difficult circumstances.

It does not always wait for a quiet room and a good library. Sometimes it grows on a factory floor, in a war, among people who will never be named in a book. Wojtyła's later teaching on work did not come from a theory he invented after the war. It came from years when work was the condition of staying alive and staying hidden.

If I think God can only call a person in respectable circumstances, I have not yet looked at Łagiewniki.

A short prayer

Lord, who called a labourer in secret, bless those who are discerning their lives in places that do not look like seminaries. Amen.

Chapter 5

Do not be afraid

John Paul II died on 2 April 2005. Kraków had to decide how to give thanks.

Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz, who had been his secretary for forty years, founded a centre on the old Solvay land. He gave it the first public words of John Paul II as Pope: Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors to Christ. Building work began in 2008. On 11 June 2011 the sanctuary was opened and relics were brought to the new church. A sanctuary is a church set apart as a place of pilgrimage and prayer.

The street that leads there is called Totus Tuus. Those two Latin words were Wojtyła's motto as Pope. He took them from Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort. For him they meant a complete giving of himself to Jesus Christ through Mary.

The centre was never meant to be only a museum. Dziwisz wanted a place of prayer, education and service. The church is the heart of it. Around it stand rooms for pilgrims, volunteers and teaching. The name on the gate is still a sentence: Do not be afraid.

A Small Reflection

“Do not be afraid” was an invitation to trust Christ.

The first words of his years as Pope were not “Remember me.” They were an invitation to open a door to Christ. A shrine that forgets that sentence will become a national exhibition. A shrine that keeps it can still help a frightened person walk in.

Fear is ordinary. The Church does not pretend otherwise. She puts the opposite sentence on the gate and then goes on saying Mass.

A short prayer

Saint John Paul II, teach us not to be afraid of the doors that still need opening. Amen.

Chapter 6

A drop of blood under marble

The sanctuary has two levels. Mass on weekdays is often celebrated in the lower church, called the Church of the Relics. In the middle of an eight-sided chapel a marble altar holds a small glass case. Inside it is a drop of John Paul II's blood.

This blood did not come from the shooting in 1981. In the last days of his illness, doctors took blood in case he needed a transfusion. The transfusion was never given. After his death, some of that blood was given to Cardinal Dziwisz. Doctors from the Gemelli hospital in Rome later gave a portion of it for the new sanctuary. On 11 June 2011 the small vial was placed in the altar.

Catholics worship God alone. We honour saints, and relics help us remember that saints were real people who lived their faith in real bodies. A relic is not magic. The Church believes that a human being is body and soul, that the body will rise, and that the bodies of the saints were temples of the Holy Spirit. That is why she keeps such things with care.

The Eucharist remains the centre of the church. The Eucharist is the Mass, in which Catholics believe Christ is truly present. The relic is there to lead towards prayer, not to replace it.

A Small Reflection

Catholic faith takes the human body seriously.

God became man. Jesus touched people, ate with them, suffered in a real body and rose bodily from the dead. That is one reason Catholics are not surprised that physical things can help us remember holy people.

A drop of blood in an altar is a strange object if you think religion is only thoughts. It is a simple object if you believe that God became man and that the saints were particular people. We do not need to stare at it as if it were magic. We need to remember whose life it came from, and then go back to the altar.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, who shed your own blood for us, teach us to honour the saints without worshipping what they left behind. Amen.

Chapter 7

The cassock from the thirteenth of May

In the upper church, behind glass, hangs the cassock John Paul II was wearing on 13 May 1981, when Mehmet Ali Ağca shot him in St Peter's Square. A cassock is the long black robe a priest wears. Cardinal Dziwisz gave that cassock to the sanctuary on the anniversary of the attack.

13 May has a special connection with Our Lady of Fatima. It is the date of the first apparition in 1917. John Paul II came to believe that Our Lady had protected him that afternoon. He later said that one hand had fired and another had guided the bullet. That was his own reading of God's care, not a teaching every Catholic must hold. In 1982 he went to Fatima to give thanks. The bullet that struck him was later set into the crown of the statue of Our Lady there.

On 27 December 1983 he visited Ağca in prison and forgave him.

The stained garment is not a trophy of violence. It is a piece of cloth that was on his body when he almost died. Seeing it is different from reading the date in a book.

Near it are other objects from the end of his life, including the cross before which he prayed during his last Stations of the Cross at the Colosseum in 2005, when he could no longer walk the stations in public.

A Small Reflection

Forgiveness does not pretend that the wound never happened.

The cassock does not explain how a man forgives the person who tried to kill him. It only keeps that afternoon from becoming a story without a body. John Paul II did not treat survival as a reason for revenge. He treated it as a reason to go on, and later to sit with Ağca as a priest sits with a man.

Forgiveness does not mean saying that evil was unimportant, or that justice and prudence no longer matter. It means refusing to let the wound decide everything that follows.

Most of us will never be shot. We will still have to decide what to do with people who have harmed us. The glass case does not finish that decision for us.

A short prayer

Lord, who kept your servant on the thirteenth of May, give us the courage to forgive without pretending that the wound was small. Amen.

Chapter 8

A first Mass among tombs

Karol Wojtyła was ordained a priest in 1946. On 2 November that year, All Souls' Day, he celebrated his first Masses in St Leonard's Crypt at Wawel Cathedral in Kraków. Wawel is the old royal hill of the city. The crypt is a burial place under the cathedral. He said Mass there among the tombs of Polish kings and saints.

The shrine on the White Seas has a side chapel modelled on that crypt. In it lies a stone from John Paul II's first tomb in the Vatican, under St Peter's in Rome. The stone was brought to Kraków after his body was moved following the beatification. Beatification is the Church's first official step towards declaring someone a saint.

So the chapel holds two beginnings: the first Mass of his priesthood, and the first place where he was buried. The copy is not meant to replace Wawel. It is meant to remind a pilgrim that the story did not start with a world pulpit. It started with a newly ordained priest saying Mass for the dead, in a crypt, in his own city.

A Small Reflection

Every vocation begins quietly before it becomes visible to others.

We remember the balcony and the crowds. The Church also remembers a young priest in a crypt on All Souls' Day. The copied chapel keeps that morning available here.

If I only honour the public years, I have not yet understood how a vocation begins. The public years grew out of an altar, a city and the dead. That is true for priests. It is also true for anyone whose faith began quietly, long before anyone was watching.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, who gave yourself to us in the Eucharist, bless those who are beginning their service of you, and keep them faithful to the altar. Amen.

Chapter 9

The things the shrine keeps

The lower church is surrounded by smaller chapels. Some of them recall Marian shrines that mattered to John Paul II. The sanctuary also keeps things he used in his ministry.

There is a papal pastoral cross, the staff a Pope carries as a sign of his office. There is a chasuble, the outer vestment a priest wears for Mass, and a mitre, the pointed hat a bishop wears. There are other objects from his work as priest, bishop and Pope.

These things are not the centre. The Eucharist is the centre. Relics and vestments are a Catholic way of refusing to turn a saint into a statue only. He wore cloth. He carried a cross. He said Mass with particular vessels.

There is a danger in a shrine built so soon after a death. People can come with cameras and leave thinking they have collected John Paul II. The objects are there to lead to prayer, not to finish curiosity. If they do not lead to the altar, they have been misunderstood.

A Small Reflection

Relics and personal objects should lead us towards prayer, not curiosity.

Catholics keep things because the faith is not only ideas. God became man. Jesus lived in a body. The saints lived in bodies. So the Church is not surprised that a chasuble, a cross or a drop of blood can help us remember them. A chasuble is not a magic coat. A relic is not a charm. They are leftover pieces of a life offered to God.

The test is simple. After I have looked, do I pray? If not, I have only visited an exhibition.

A short prayer

Lord, keep our eyes from stopping at glass cases, and lead them back to your altar. Amen.

Chapter 10

The Bridge of Mercy

A footbridge now joins the Sanctuary of Divine Mercy to the Sanctuary of Saint John Paul II. The city later named it the Bridge of Mercy.

A pilgrim can walk from Faustina's house to Karol's shrine without getting into a car. The two stories were already close. The worker used the sisters' chapel. The Pope made Faustina a saint and consecrated her basilica. After his death his own church rose on the factory side of the same neighbourhood.

The bridge does not need a long speech. It is there so that people can walk. John Paul II and Divine Mercy belong together because he spent his life pointing the Church towards the mercy of Jesus Christ. Pilgrims can now do with their feet what the history already did on this ground.

A Small Reflection

The two shrines stand close together because the two stories belong together.

We do not have to invent a link between Łagiewniki and the White Seas. A young man walked it. A Pope named it. A city built a bridge. The rest is putting one foot after the other.

If I visit only the larger basilica and never cross, I have seen half the neighbourhood that formed him. Crossing is a short walk. That is enough.

A short prayer

God of Mercy, walk with those who cross from one house of prayer to the other. Amen.

Chapter 11

Another Pope on the waste ground

On 27 May 2006 Benedict XVI came to Łagiewniki during his visit to Poland and prayed at the Divine Mercy shrine. The new sanctuary church itself was consecrated on 16 October 2016. To consecrate a church is to set it apart for the worship of God. The date was the anniversary of Wojtyła's election as Pope.

Two months earlier, on 30 July 2016, during World Youth Day, Pope Francis came first to the Divine Mercy shrine, heard confessions, and then celebrated Mass at the Sanctuary of Saint John Paul II for thousands of priests and religious. After Mass he kissed the relic of blood and went down to the chapel that holds the Vatican tomb stone.

A Pope saying Mass on the old Solvay ground is a strange sight if you remember the waste ponds. It is a simple sight if you remember that the Church blesses places. Waste ground can be set apart for God. Another Pope can stand where a labourer once stood and give thanks.

A Small Reflection

A shrine belongs to the whole Church, not only to one country or one generation.

Francis did not come to Łagiewniki to replace John Paul II. He came to pray on the same ground and to honour Mercy. Benedict had already done his part by visiting the neighbourhood and blessing the work that was beginning.

A shrine that can receive more than one Pope is not a private monument. It is a Catholic church.

A short prayer

*Lord, who let one Pope honour another on ground that once knew only dust and soda, keep us from deciding too early which places are finished.
Amen.*

Chapter 12

How to walk here

A shrine built so soon after a saint's death carries a special danger. The danger is not disbelief. The danger is collecting sights. People come with cameras and leave thinking they have seen John Paul II, when what they have seen is marble, glass and a very good exhibition.

If you are standing outside with this booklet in your hand, this is a simple way to walk.

Begin in the lower church. Sit quietly for a few minutes. Pray. Then look at the relic in the altar and remember whose life it came from. Next go into the chapel copied from Wawel and remember that the story started with a first Mass among tombs. Then, if you wish, go upstairs and look at the cassock. Stay long enough to pray. Then walk the bridge and visit the small convent chapel where a tired worker used to come. The large exhibition can wait.

You do not have to settle every argument about his years as Pope in order to pray here. You only have to believe that God can take a labourer, a hidden student for the priesthood, a bishop, a Pope, a wounded body and a piece of industrial waste, and make of them a house of thanksgiving. That is the Catholic claim in this place. It is not a small claim. It is, however, a simple one.

A Small Reflection

A pilgrimage becomes more than sightseeing when we stop and pray.

“Do not be afraid” was spoken to a packed square in 1978. It still fits a pilgrim who does not know where to start. The land knew Karol Wojtyła as a man in wooden shoes. Now it is a place where people who will never be famous can kneel.

If the shrine remembers the shoes, it can speak to a life that still feels unfinished. If it forgets them, it will become only a monument. The choice is made each time someone walks in and decides whether to pray.

A short prayer

Saint John Paul II, you walked this ground before it was holy. Walk with those who come after you. Amen.

A last word

The Sanctuary of Saint John Paul II is one of the youngest great shrines in Poland. That youth is not a weakness. It means the Church is still willing to raise a house of prayer on land that living memory can still describe as ugly.

If you remember only a few facts, remember these. A soda factory. Wooden shoes. A secret seminary. A convent chapel on the way to work. A Pope who would not let Mercy be forgotten. A secretary who asked a city to give thanks with walls. A drop of blood under marble. A cassock from the thirteenth of May. A stone from a Vatican tomb set in a copy of a Wawel crypt. Another Pope saying Mass on the waste. A bridge that lets a pilgrim walk from Faustina to Karol without getting into a car.

The land knew Karol Wojtyła before the world knew John Paul II. That is why the title of this book is not a decoration. The ground that knew his shoes is now a place where other people can sit down and pray.

Saint John Paul II, pray for us. Saint Faustina, neighbour of this shrine, pray for us.

A prayer

Saint John Paul II, pray for us. Saint Faustina, neighbour of this shrine, pray for us. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Amen.

A word of thanks

These pages are free to read.

If they have helped you, a gift through Silent Homilies is welcome. Please give only if you wish, and only if you can. It is never a charge for a blessing, and it has nothing to do with this shrine.

Printing this book

This booklet is designed in A5 format.

For best results print double-sided on A5 paper, flipped on the short edge. Recommended paper: 80–100 gsm.

Written to be read in one or two sittings.