



SILENT HOMILIES

When the House Went Quiet

*Karol Wojtyła, from an emptied kitchen
to the window a city still watches*



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



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Went Quiet**

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Before You Begin



Most of us remember John Paul II in white. We remember the balcony, the journeys, the strong voice, and later the illness. Long before any of that, he was Lolek, a boy from Wadowice.

Karol Józef Wojtyła was born on 18 May 1920. By the time he was twenty-one his mother, his brother and his father were all dead. He later said, without drama, that at twenty he had already lost all the people he loved. That does not explain everything about the man he became. It does help us understand something important. He knew grief long before the world knew his name.

This little book is not a complete life. The complete life fills shelves. It is a walk through the rooms the photographs do not show: a tailor's flat, a quarry, a secret seminary, a first parish, a workers' city that was not supposed to have a church, and a prison cell where a wounded pope sat down with the man who had shot him.

Read it if you have only ever known him as a finished saint. Read it if you loved him and have started to forget the boy they called Lolek.

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Chapter 1

A town that still says Lolek



Wadowice is a small town south-west of Kraków. Karol was baptised there on 20 June 1920, in the parish church of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a month and two days after his birth. The font is still there. So is the square. People who grew up with him did not call him Karol. They called him Lolek.

His father, Karol senior, was a retired army officer. His mother, Emilia Kaczorowska, had been a schoolteacher and was often unwell. There was an older brother, Edmund, who became a doctor. A sister had already died in infancy before Karol was born, so the family was smaller than it had once been.

He went to school with Jewish classmates. He played football, often in goal. He liked the theatre early. None of that is a secret code for the papacy. It is the ordinary beginning of a particular boy in a particular town. Wadowice still speaks of him as Lolek because that is how they first knew him.

A Small Reflection

Most of us meet famous people already finished. We meet the title, the white cassock, the last photograph. A parish that still says Lolek is doing something the rest of us find harder. It is remembering that holiness, if it comes, comes through a real childhood. A font, a square, a nickname, Jewish friends, a ball in the goal. We do not have to make his childhood look holy in advance. It was an ordinary childhood, and that is partly why it matters. If we only ever remember the Pope, we miss the boy who had to become a man before he became anything else.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, teach us to honour the small beginnings of a life, including our own.
Amen.*

Chapter 2

The family he lost



Emilia died on 13 April 1929. Karol was not yet nine. She died before his First Communion. That detail is easy to miss and hard to forget once you have heard it. The first time he received the Eucharist, his mother was already gone.

Edmund died on 5 December 1932. He had contracted scarlet fever from a patient. Karol was twelve. The brother who had become a doctor died of the work he had chosen.

Their father died in February 1941. Karol found him. He was twenty years old. After that, the immediate family was gone. He later said he had already lost all the people he loved. There is no need to decorate that sentence. After his father died, he was a young man in occupied Kraków with an emptied house and a future that had not yet declared itself.

A Small Reflection

Grief this early does not automatically produce a saint. It can also produce bitterness, hardness, or a lifelong fear of loving anyone again. What is striking in Wojtyła is not that he suffered. Many people suffer. What is striking is that he did not treat the empty house as a reason to close himself. He kept praying. He kept friends. He kept working. That is not a lesson that grief is good. Grief remains grief. Someone who has known serious grief may later be better able to stay with another person who is grieving.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, stay with those whose houses have gone quiet, especially the young.
Amen.*

Chapter 3

His father, an atlas and Kalwaria



After Emilia died, father and son lived more closely. Karol senior kept a disciplined house. He prayed. He taught his son German, and they studied maps together. That may sound like a small detail, but Poland was about to enter a period in which borders, armies and occupation would become part of Karol's daily life.

They went to Kalwaria Zebrzydowska. The shrine, with its paths and chapels of the Passion and of Mary, became important to both of them. It was not a holiday. It was a place where a widower and his remaining son could walk the mysteries of the faith with their feet as well as with their words.

People later spoke of John Paul II's devotion to Our Lady as if it had begun with a papal motto. *Totus Tuus* came much later. The habit began earlier, with a father who took a boy to Kalwaria and kept the prayers of the house when there was no longer a mother to keep them.

A Small Reflection

The Church often remembers spectacular conversions. Much more often, faith is passed on because somebody quietly keeps doing the ordinary things. A father opens a prayer book. A parent takes a child to a shrine. Someone says grace. Someone keeps Sunday different. No newspaper records it. Twenty years later it may be part of another person's spiritual foundation. Karol senior is easy to overlook because he did not become famous. That may be the point. How much of the Church survives because somebody keeps an ordinary religious habit when nobody is watching?

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless the quiet people who hand on the faith without ever standing on a balcony. Amen.

Chapter 4

Theatre under occupation



Karol loved the stage. In Kraków he studied and acted. Under German occupation, public Polish culture was being crushed. With friends he took part in the underground Rhapsodic Theatre: words spoken in private rooms, without scenery, because the play itself had to survive.

This was not a hobby that later needed a religious explanation. Language, memory and a nation's stories were being attacked. Speaking verse in a flat was one way of refusing to disappear. It was also a young man's gift. He had a voice. He had a memory. He had friends who thought words mattered.

He did not yet know he would be a priest. The theatre was a real path, not a costume he tried on before the cassock. When the vocation came, it came to a man who already knew how to stand in front of people and how to listen to a text until it lived.

A Small Reflection

We sometimes talk as if a vocation cancels everything that came before it. Wojtyła's life suggests the opposite. The theatre had already taught him how seriously words could matter, especially when people were being told what they were allowed to say. Those are not unpriestly skills. A parish still needs people who can listen to a text and stand in a room. The underground theatre does not need to be turned into a prophecy. It is already interesting enough as a young Catholic taking his gifts seriously under pressure.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless the gifts we had before we knew what they were for. Amen.

Chapter 5

The tailor



In the Dębniki district of Kraków, Karol met Jan Tyranowski. Tyranowski was a tailor. He was not a bishop, a professor or a famous preacher. He led a Living Rosary group for young people and took their interior life seriously.

He put St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila into Wojtyła's hands. Carmelite prayer, which looks from the outside like a specialist's path, arrived in a worker's life through a layman who cut cloth for a living. Karol was still finding his way. The tailor did not wait for him to become important.

People who later wrote about the Pope sometimes hurried past this chapter because it does not look like power. I think this is one of the most important episodes in his early spiritual life. A future pope learned serious prayer because an ordinary Catholic decided that a young man's soul was worth his evenings.

A Small Reflection

How many important vocations begin because an apparently unimportant person takes somebody seriously? The Church naturally looks toward bishops, priests and theologians. Here a tailor placed St John of the Cross into the hands of a young worker. He did not need a programme. He needed time, a group, and the conviction that holiness was not reserved for people with titles. One of the Church's great hidden ministries may simply be noticing the person standing in front of us. Tyranowski never became famous, but his influence reached far beyond that small group in Kraków.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, give us the courage to take another person's spiritual life seriously,
even when we have no office to hide behind. Amen.*

Chapter 6

The quarry



Under occupation a young Pole needed papers and work. Karol worked at the Solvay quarry at Zakrzówek, and later in the factory. The work card mattered. Without it, a man could be taken. The quarry was not a spiritual exercise. It was limestone, cold, exhaustion and the need to live.

He carried books. People later liked that detail, and it is true enough to keep, so long as we do not make the quarry look like a library with dust. He read when he could. He prayed when he could. The work remained work.

There was an accident with a German truck in 1944. He was left injured in the road and was helped. The story has been told many times. What it shows, without decoration, is that the life we now read backwards as inevitable was, at the time, as breakable as any other young worker's life.

A Small Reflection

Many people spend more waking hours at work than in church. Wojtyła's quarry did not become a retreat centre. It remained a quarry. Yet his prayer and his vocation had to continue during exhausting ordinary work. Catholic spirituality has to be able to survive that kind of day. A vocation, if it is real, does not only live in the hours that look religious. It also has to live in the hours that look like labour, delay and getting through the shift.

A Short Prayer

Lord, stay with us in the work that does not feel religious, and keep us from despising those hours. Amen.

Chapter 7

A seminary in secret



Karol entered Archbishop Adam Sapieha's clandestine seminary. Under occupation, an open seminary was not safe. Formation happened in hiding, in the shadow of the archbishop's house, while the young men still had to look like workers in the city.

Clandestine here does not mean romantic. It means that studying for the priesthood could get a man killed. Sapieha took that risk. He hid his seminarians and continued forming future priests when the occupation made that dangerous.

Wojtyła was ordained on 1 November 1946. The war was over. The danger was no longer the same. He had come to the altar by a road that included a quarry, a tailor, an emptied family house and a seminary that could not advertise its address.

A Small Reflection

An ordinary reader may not immediately know what a clandestine seminary was. It was the Church refusing to let a hostile power decide that there would be no more priests. The situation was specific to occupied Poland, but the deeper question is wider: who protects vocations when doing so becomes difficult? Sapieha hid his seminarians when looking after them was costly. Most of us will never run a secret seminary. We may still have to decide whether another person's vocation is worth our protection.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, bless those who guard vocations when it would be easier to look away.
Amen.*

Chapter 8

First Masses and a first parish



He said his first Masses in St Leonard's Crypt under Wawel Cathedral, among the tombs of Polish kings, on All Souls' Day. He was a priest beginning his life at an altar, and he began it among the dead.

His first parish was Niegowić. The story is that he kissed the ground when he arrived. Whether every later telling has the gesture exactly right, the meaning is simple. He treated the parish as holy ground, not as a first posting to be endured.

He was a curate before he was a public man. He heard confessions. He learned names. His first assignment was not somewhere important or famous. It was a small village parish where he had to learn the ordinary work of being a priest.

A Small Reflection

Kissing the ground of a first parish is easy to turn into a legend. The useful question is smaller. Do we still treat the actual place we are sent as holy, or only the places that photograph well? Niegowić was not Rome. It was a village that needed a priest. He began his priesthood with the memory of the dead around him and then went to serve ordinary living parishioners in a village. Both belonged to the work of a priest.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, bless the first altars of your priests, and keep us from despising small parishes. Amen.

Chapter 9

Nowa Huta and Wujek



Nowa Huta was built as a model socialist town near Kraków. It was planned without a church. The message was not subtle. A new human being would not need one. The people thought otherwise. For years they asked, gathered, and were refused. The Lord's Ark was eventually built, despite years of resistance from the authorities. Wojtyła, by then a bishop, stood with that demand.

He also had another life that the official city did not plan for. Young people called him Wujek. In Polish that means Uncle. They kept using it even when he became bishop and cardinal. The formal titles were there. The nickname stayed because they actually knew him. He went hiking, kayaking and skiing with them. On the way he would sometimes drop back from the group and find a quiet place to pray. Those who walked with him remembered the Rosary and the Chaplet of Divine Mercy. They had the sense that he was praying a good deal of the time.

Mass was said in the woods or by a lake. Students later remembered an overturned canoe used as an altar, and two paddles lashed together as a cross. In the evenings there was a fire, conversation, singing and reading. One of them, Kazimierz Braun, later said that Wojtyła never set himself apart. He was dusty and tired like the rest of them. He was present.

Some of these stories come from the memories of the young people who were with him, so the exact wording may vary. What is not in doubt is the pattern. He spent time with them. He listened. He heard confessions. He prayed with them. On one kayaking outing his boat

sank near the finish. He later joked that only the breviary had stayed dry.

When he was already a cardinal, he still skied. Asked whether skiing was suitable for a cardinal, he is remembered as saying that what was unsuitable was skiing badly. He also liked to say that forty percent of Poland's cardinals skied. When someone pointed out that Poland had only two cardinals, he answered that Cardinal Wyszyński counted as sixty percent. The joke was affection as well as humour. He remained a man who enjoyed skiing, kayaking and joking with his friends.

A Small Reflection

Why did these young people trust him? Not because he organised something for them and then went home. He walked with them, ate with them, prayed with them, listened and heard their confessions. The Church regularly asks how to reach young people. Before designing another programme, it may be worth asking whether young people actually know us. Wujek was not a branding exercise. It was a nickname that can only be given by people who have spent real hours with you. Accessibility is not the same as pretending to be their age. He remained a priest. He also remained close enough to be called Uncle.

A Short Prayer

Lord, give your Church people who know the names of the young, and who stay long enough to be trusted. Amen.

Chapter 10

The window above the square



On 16 October 1978 he was elected Pope. Witnesses later said that as the votes moved towards him he grew still and held his head. He had not gone into the conclave expecting a crown. He took the name John Paul II. From the balcony he told the city not to be afraid. *Totus Tuus*, his motto, was already old in his prayer: I am wholly yours, said to Our Lady.

He wanted to come home to Poland in 1979 around the feast of St Stanisław. The authorities were uneasy. Stanisław was a bishop killed by a king. The political meaning was obvious. Negotiations changed the dates. Instead of a short visit tied to that feast, he was allowed a longer pilgrimage in June. He said Mass in Victory Square in Warsaw, a place the state used for its own ceremonies. The crowd was enormous. On the vigil of Pentecost he cried out, as a son of that land and as Pope, that the Spirit would descend and renew the face of the earth — the face of this land.

State television tried to keep the cameras tight, so that viewers would see the Pope more than the scale of the people. It did not work as planned. Poles could see one another. The government still had political power, but those crowds showed that it did not control everything people believed about themselves. John Paul II did not bring communism down by himself. Politics, economics and many other people were involved. What the nine days changed first was simpler. People saw how many of them still belonged to the same faith.

In Kraków the window at Franciszkańska 3 had already been a meeting place. As archbishop he had spoken from it. As Pope he came back to it. Young people gathered below, singing and calling up. He would come to the window. On one remembered evening he even stood on the sill and joked about what had happened to the well-behaved man he used to be. They asked him to take them with him. He told them he already had. The window mattered because people associated it with a person they already knew and trusted.

He also went, later, to the Great Synagogue in Rome. A Polish Pope standing there was not a small gesture in the century after the Shoah. In 1995, during a visit to Slovakia, he paused to pray at a memorial in Prešov for Protestants who had been killed in the seventeenth century. He had just canonised Catholic martyrs of the same period. Loving the Church did not require him to pretend that Catholics had never done wrong.

A Small Reflection

People waited below Franciszkańska 3 because they expected a person to appear. They did not gather because the building was important. They gathered because they knew him. His title mattered, but the young people trusted him because the relationship had begun long before he became Pope. The window did not create that. It only made it visible.

A Short Prayer

St John Paul II, who told us not to be afraid, pray for us. Amen.

Chapter 11

A shot, a prison and Divine Mercy



On 13 May 1981, in St Peter's Square, Mehmet Ali Ağca shot him. He survived. He later went to Fatima and read the date in the light of Our Lady's protection. On 27 December 1983 he went to Rebibbia prison and sat with the man who had tried to kill him.

Forgiveness did not make the shooting acceptable. It did not cancel the courts. His forgiveness meant that the crime did not have to become a reason for him to live in hatred. He did not forgive a theoretical enemy. He sat in a room with a particular man.

Divine Mercy had been near him for a long time. As a young worker he walked each day between Dębniaki and the Solvay works at Borek Fałęcki, near the convent at Łagiewniki where Faustina Kowalska had lived. Later he beatified her, and on 30 April 2000 he canonised her and gave the whole Church Divine Mercy Sunday. After the Mass, people who were with him remembered him describing the day as one of the happiest of his life. The remark is not in the homily. Mercy was not a decoration added to his pontificate. He had lived through Nazism, war, communism, a bullet and a failing body. He kept returning to the same sentence: Jesus, I trust in you.

He died on 2 April 2005, on the vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday. Parkinson's had already taken much of his public strength. He let the Church see the weakness. That was not a performance. It was a man who would not hide the body that was failing.

A Small Reflection

Why did a man who had seen so much political evil become so attached to Divine Mercy? Mercy did not mean pretending that evil was less serious than it was. Nazism remained evil. Communism remained wrong. The man who fired the gun remained responsible. Mercy answers a different question: what do Christians do after evil has already happened? John Paul II's answer was not denial. Forgiveness did not remove what had happened, but it meant that the shooting did not have to determine how he lived afterwards.

A Short Prayer

*Lord Jesus, Mercy itself, teach us to forgive without lying about the wound.
Amen.*

Chapter 12

What can still be imitated



A life this large can become unusable. You cannot imitate a hundred journeys. You cannot copy a voice that stopped a square. You cannot recreate occupied Poland or a conclave.

What can still be imitated is smaller. Fr Raniero Cantalamessa once preached in St Peter's longer than expected because of the echo in the basilica. An official in charge of the timetable kept looking at his watch. The next day the Pope spoke to him, kindly, and said that when someone is speaking to us in the name of God we should not be watching the clock. Other people said the same thing in ordinary rooms. When he was with you, he seemed to be with you. The modern Church often asks what we should say. Wojtyła may suggest another question first. Can we listen?

As Bishop of Rome he visited almost every parish in the diocese. When he could no longer travel easily, he asked the remaining parishes to come to him. He believed a shepherd should go to people rather than always expect people to come to him. Friends and even political opponents noticed the same thing in conversation. André Frossard said he listened so carefully that you began to think you were saying something interesting. General Jaruzelski, who disagreed with him, said he could listen calmly even when he rejected what he heard. His life suggests that ordinary Christian habits still matter: prayer that survives a busy day, serious reading, knowing people's names, and learning to listen before answering.

There are two incomplete pictures of him. One makes him into a saint who never tired. He tired. The other makes him interesting only because he opposed communism. He did oppose it. He would have been himself without the regime. The boy from Wadowice is the one who can still be followed a little way.

A Small Reflection

The useful question at the end of a life this large is not how to become John Paul II. It is whether people experience themselves as important when they speak to us. Attention is rare. A priest can be in the room and already thinking about the next meeting. A parishioner can be talking while we prepare our answer. A phone can interrupt the person standing in front of us. Wojtyła's listening should not become another saintly legend. It is a practical form of charity. If this book has done its work, you should be able to close it and look at Lolek without immediately turning him into a poster.

A Short Prayer

St John Paul II, pray for us. Amen.

A Last Word



After all the titles, journeys and crowds, he was still a particular human being. Lolek from Wadowice. A son who lost his family early. A worker. A young man who learned prayer from a tailor. A priest the students called Uncle. A Pope who sat down with the man who shot him.

That is enough of him for one sitting. The rest is in the documents, and in the living people who still remember being young when he was Wujek.

St John Paul II, pray for us.

St Faustina, pray for us.

Our Lady of Kalwaria, pray for us.

Sources and Further Reading

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George Weigel, *Witness to Hope*.

John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery*.

Parish and museum sources in Wadowice for baptism, family dates and the house of his childhood.

Archdiocese of Kraków sources for the clandestine seminary, Niegowić, Franciszkańska 3 and Nowa Huta.

Holy See: homily of 16 October 1978; Holy Mass, Victory Square, Warsaw, 2 June 1979; visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome, 1986; meeting with Mehmet Ali Ağca, Rebibbia, 27 December 1983; homily at the canonisation of St Faustina, 30 April 2000; remarks after the 1995 visit to Slovakia, including prayer at the memorial in Prešov.

Memories of Wujek, including those of Kazimierz Braun, should be read as memories. They are valuable. They are not all of equal documentary weight.

Skiing remarks and the Wyszyński joke are widely attested in Polish and English reporting; wording varies.

Fr Raniero Cantalamessa's recollection of the sermon in St Peter's and the remark about the watch. Recollections of André Frossard and General Wojciech Jaruzelski on his manner of listening.

The remark that 30 April 2000 was the happiest day of his life is remembered by those present at a gathering after the canonisation, including Dr Valentin Fuster. It is not part of the published homily.

A word of thanks



There is no charge for reading this booklet. If Silent Homilies has helped you, and if you wish to support the work, you may. If you simply close the book and pray, that is already enough.

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