



SILENT HOMILIES

The Place That Must Be Walked Slowly

*Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the names
we are not allowed to tidy*



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



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Before You Begin



I have been to Auschwitz-Birkenau four times. I am not writing this because four visits make me an authority. They do not. I would still be very careful about saying that I understand this place.

If you are able to go, I think it is one of the places a person should try to see at least once in a lifetime. Not as a tourist attraction. Not as something to collect. As a place in history that is better encountered directly, if the opportunity is given.

This is a Catholic booklet. It will speak about St Maximilian Kolbe, St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, secret Masses, and the popes who have stood there. It will not try to make Auschwitz-Birkenau into a Catholic story. About one million of the people murdered there were Jews. That fact has to stay at the front of the book, not at the back.

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Chapter 1

Two places with one name



People often say they have been to Auschwitz when they have seen the brick camp at Oświęcim. That is Auschwitz I. It matters. The gate is there. Block 11 is there. Kolbe's cell is there. The Wall of Death is there. Many of the photographs visitors remember come from those yards.

Auschwitz II-Birkenau is a different scale. It lies at Brzezinka, a short distance away. The railway comes in. The wooden barracks stretch out. The ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria are there. Many people who arrived after 1942 never became registered prisoners. They went from the ramp toward death the same day.

The German occupiers took a Polish town name, Auschwitz, and the name stuck to the crime. Both sites belong to that crime. If you only see the first camp, you have not yet seen the size of what was done.

A Small Reflection

It is easy to remember a gate and a slogan and think you have understood a whole system. The brick camp is easier to photograph. Birkenau is harder because of the distances. I notice, when I go back, how often people leave tired after Auschwitz I and wonder whether they still need the second site. If you feel tired after Auschwitz I, that is understandable. But Birkenau still matters, because without seeing its scale it is difficult to understand what the camp system became.

A Short Prayer

Lord, keep us from thinking we have understood a place because we have seen one part of it. Amen.

Chapter 2

The numbers we are given



The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum estimates that about 1.3 million people were deported there between 1940 and 1945, and that at least 1.1 million were murdered. About one million of the dead were Jews. That is about nine in every ten people killed there.

Poles were the largest group among the non-Jewish prisoners: about 140,000 to 150,000 were sent, and about 70,000 to 75,000 were killed. About 23,000 Roma were deported; about 20,000 of them died. About 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war were sent; about 14,000 were killed. Other groups were smaller, and they also died.

These are museum figures, not slogans. They will never be exact to the last person. Many at Birkenau were never given a number. The point of stating them is simple. Catholic names belong in this history. They do not own it.

A Small Reflection

A number as large as a million is hard to hold in the mind. That is why we reach for one face, one cell, one story. There is nothing wrong with a face. The danger is when the face becomes a way of not looking at the rest. If we hurry past the Jewish victims simply because we are more familiar with a Catholic saint, we have misunderstood the history.

A Short Prayer

Lord, remember every person murdered here, named and unnamed. Do not let us tidy the dead into the groups we prefer. Amen.

Chapter 3

Prisoner 16670



In July 1941 a prisoner escaped from Auschwitz I. As a reprisal, ten men from the same block were chosen to die of starvation in the bunker of Block 11. Franciszek Gajowniczek was one of them. He cried out for his wife and children. Another prisoner, number 16670, stepped out. His name was Maximilian Kolbe, a Conventual Franciscan. He offered to take Gajowniczek's place.

The ten were locked in the starvation cell. Witnesses later said they prayed and sang. After two weeks Kolbe was still alive. On 14 August 1941 he was killed by an injection of carbolic acid. The cell is numbered 18. Gajowniczek survived the war. He was present when Kolbe was canonised.

Paul VI beatified him in 1971. John Paul II canonised him in 1982 and named him a martyr. The Church was saying that this death, offered for another man, belongs with the witnesses of the faith. Kolbe had founded Niepokalanów. He had published. He had the ordinary faults of a man who ran a large work. None of that needs decorating. He stepped forward.

A Small Reflection

Why do we remember one man who stepped forward more easily than thousands who were given no chance to speak? Part of the answer is simply human. A name and a choice can be held. A million deaths cannot. Kolbe's act does not repair the system that numbered him. It shows that, inside that system, one prisoner refused to treat another man as replaceable. That is enough to honour. It is not enough to explain the camp.

A Short Prayer

Saint Maximilian Kolbe, who took another man's place, pray for us.

Amen.

Chapter 4

Edith Stein



Edith Stein was born to a Jewish family in Wrocław. She became a philosopher of real seriousness. After a long and honest struggle she was baptised and later entered Carmel, taking the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. In 1942 she was in the Carmel at Echt in the Netherlands, with her sister Rosa, who had also been baptised.

In July 1942 the Dutch bishops publicly protested the deportation of Jews. The Nazi authorities retaliated against Jewish converts who had been, until then, in a slightly different position. Edith and Rosa were arrested. They were sent east. On 9 August 1942 Edith Stein was killed in the gas at Birkenau.

John Paul II named her in his 1979 homily at Birkenau, and later canonised her. Both titles are required. She was a daughter of Israel. She was a Catholic and a Carmelite. A devotion that forgets she was Jewish has not told the truth about her. A telling that treats her baptism and her Carmel as unimportant has not told the truth either.

A Small Reflection

Edith Stein belongs to a Jewish family and to the Catholic Church. That is not a puzzle to be solved so that one side wins. It is the fact of her life. She was murdered with her people. She also went to her death as a nun who had taken the Cross as her name. Christians can honour that vocation without taking her away from the family that first named her.

A Short Prayer

*Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, daughter of Israel and of Carmel,
pray for us. Amen.*

Chapter 5

Priests, Hosts and bread rosaries



Priests and religious were deported to Auschwitz in large numbers, most of them Poles. Public sacramental life was forbidden. What happened instead was hidden and small. Prisoners heard Confessions in whispers. Hosts were sometimes smuggled in. Rosaries were made from bread. People prayed when they could.

This is part of the Catholic memory of the camp, and it is true. It should not be told as if the camp were an underground parish that almost succeeded. People were starving, beaten and killed. A smuggled Host did not empty the bunks. A whispered Mass did not stop the selections.

The wider destruction of the Polish clergy belongs beside this. Many priests died in Auschwitz and in other camps. The Church later honoured a number of them. Their courage does not turn the camp into a Catholic victory. It shows that some men still tried to be priests when almost every visible sign of priesthood had been taken away.

A Small Reflection

Why do sacraments matter when they cannot rescue a body? That is a hard question, and I do not want a cheap answer. Confession and the Eucharist do not make a man safe. They keep a person related to God when everything else is trying to make him only a number. That is not a small thing. It is also not a substitute for the justice the dead were denied.

A Short Prayer

*Lord Jesus, present in the sacrament even when it had to be hidden,
remember the priests and the people who prayed with almost nothing in
their hands. Amen.*

Chapter 6

Other prayers were said here



A Catholic booklet about this place has to say something obvious, and then stay with it. Jewish prisoners prayed in the camp when they could. Most of the dead were Jews. Most of the prayer that belonged to them was not ours.

If we can only imagine Catholic prayer in this place, we have already made God too small for the people who died here. That is not an attack on the Mass. It is a warning against a habit. We remember what we know how to name. We have to work to remember what we do not name as easily.

We do not know every prayer that was spoken there, and there is no reason to pretend that we do. What we should refuse is the picture in which the only people at prayer were the people whose saints we already keep.

A Small Reflection

Can Christians remember their own martyrs without taking ownership of other people's suffering? I think that is one of the tests of this book. Kolbe and Edith Stein are ours to honour. The Jewish dead are not a background for Catholic meaning. They are the largest part of what happened. Prayer that cannot imagine their prayer has not yet learned how to stand here.

A Short Prayer

Lord of all, you heard every cry that was made here. Teach us not to hear only the voices that sound like our own. Amen.

Chapter 7

When the Pope came home



On 7 June 1979 Karol Wojtyła came back as John Paul II. He had been here already as Archbishop of Kraków. He went down to Kolbe's cell. He stood at the Wall of Death. He went on to Birkenau and said Mass.

He named Kolbe. He named Edith Stein. He also said that people of other faiths and other hopes had died here. That sentence matters. A Polish Pope, standing on that ground, refused to make the homily only a Catholic roll-call.

Later popes came with even fewer words. Benedict XVI stood there as a German pope and spoke of the shame of his own people. Francis walked in silence for a long time. Silence is not emptiness. Sometimes it is the only honest length of time a visitor has.

A Small Reflection

John Paul II had words for this place, and he used some of them. He also left room for people whose hope was not his. Later popes seemed to trust silence more. I do not think one approach cancels the other. There are days when a name must be spoken. There are days when speaking too quickly would sound as if we had found a meaning that the dead did not receive.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless those who have stood here as pastors of your Church. Keep their words honest, and keep their silences from becoming a way of looking away. Amen.

Chapter 8

The convent at the edge



In 1984 Carmelite nuns moved into the old theatre building at the edge of the Auschwitz I site. Catholics could understand the desire. Carmel prays. A convent near a place of slaughter can look, to Christian eyes, like a watch kept for the dead.

Many Jewish people found a Christian convent on or beside this site deeply troubling. The camp is not, for them, a Christian holy place. A cross and a cloister at the edge of it could look like a claim. The disagreement was real. It was not simply hostility to prayer. After a letter from John Paul II, the nuns moved in 1993 to a new house nearby. The Centre for Dialogue and Prayer now stands as part of that later settlement.

The Carmelites were not malicious. The objections were not small. The fact that the convent was established in good faith does not mean that Jewish objections were unimportant. A religious sign offered with love can still wound somebody else's memory.

A Small Reflection

What do we do when a gesture we believe to be prayer is received as a claim? The convent controversy is not a story with a villain chosen in advance. It is a story about land, symbols and whose dead this place holds first. Christians can keep wanting to pray here. They also have to hear why a convent on this particular ground was not a gift everyone could receive.

A Short Prayer

Lord, teach us to pray without taking a place that is not only ours. Amen.

Chapter 9

How a Christian walks here



If you have the opportunity, I recommend visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau at least once in your life. Give it enough time. Visit Auschwitz I and Birkenau. A good guide can make an enormous difference. Listen. Do not rush. You do not need a photograph of everything.

On one visit I had a very good woman guide. I was walking beside a friend of mine who is also a priest. We were listening to her explain what had happened there. At one point I looked at him. We both had tears in our eyes. We already knew much of the history. Hearing it while standing in the actual place was different.

I do not tell that as a rule about how a visitor ought to feel. Some people cry. Some people do not. Both can understand the seriousness of the place. What I would ask is simpler. Do not treat the gate as a backdrop. A smiling photograph at the gate can easily become disrespectful, because this is not simply a famous backdrop. People entered through that gate as prisoners.

A Small Reflection

Two priests can know the history and still be unprepared for the ground itself. Books help us understand the history, but standing in the place itself is different. I have no interest in telling anyone how many tears they should produce. I am interested in whether we let the place interrupt us.

A Short Prayer

Lord, when we stand where others suffered, keep us from performing a feeling, and keep us from having none. Amen.

Chapter 10

Why the first visit is not enough



One visit does not mean that you have understood the place. On a first visit there is so much to take in: the buildings, the names, the numbers, the guide's explanations and the scale of Birkenau. It is difficult to absorb everything.

If circumstances allow and you feel able to return, a later visit can reveal things that were impossible to take in the first time. You already know where you are. You listen differently. You notice connections you missed. On a later visit you are less occupied with finding your way and taking in the basic information.

Most people will go once, if they go at all. Once is already a serious act. I only want to say that returning can be worthwhile, and that familiarity should make a person more careful, not more confident.

A Small Reflection

On a first visit, much of your attention goes into understanding where you are and what happened. If you return, you may notice one building, one name or one distance that you hardly registered the first time. That is why returning can teach something the first visit could not.

A Short Prayer

Lord, save us from the pride of having been there, and from the laziness of never going if we could. Amen.

Chapter 11

The names we keep, and the names we lose



Catholics keep a calendar. We keep 14 August for Kolbe and 9 August for Edith Stein. Those days are right. A parish that keeps them and never mentions the Jews who died on the same ramp has kept a calendar and lost the company of the dead.

Antisemitism did not begin in 1940 and it did not end in 1945. A Christian who honours Kolbe while making excuses for hatred of Jews has not learned the first lesson this place teaches. The moral point does not need a party. Contempt for Jews is a sin. It was a sin before the camps. It remains a sin after them.

Memory that is only Catholic will fail here. Memory that is only national will fail here too. The names we find easy are not the only names.

A Small Reflection

We instinctively remember one heroic name more easily than thousands of unnamed victims. That instinct is human. It becomes a problem when it is the only instinct we trust. A saint can help us enter this history. A saint can also become a way of stopping once we have found a Catholic face we already know how to love.

A Short Prayer

Lord, help us remember people beyond the names we already know. Amen.

Chapter 12

What we are not allowed to tidy



There is a temptation, after a book like this, to arrange the place. Kolbe here. Stein there. Priests in one paragraph. Jews in a respectful sentence. Popes at the end. Then we feel we have been fair.

The place will not accept that arrangement. It does not need us to force a neat interpretation. What we owe is simpler than a scheme: to keep the numbers honest, to keep the Jewish dead first in the count, to keep our own people without stealing the rest, and to walk the ground, if we go, without rushing.

I still leave with more than I can easily explain. That is not a failure of the visit. It may be the only proper result.

A Small Reflection

Some histories can be summarised. This one resists a tidy last page. If we have to walk here at all, we should not be in a hurry to finish the meaning. I think we should be cautious about reaching neat conclusions too quickly. Some things here should remain difficult to explain.

A Short Prayer

Lord, remember all those who suffered and died here. Teach us to honour their memory truthfully. Amen.

A Last Word



If you have the opportunity, I would recommend visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau at least once in your life. And if you are able to return one day, do not assume that the first visit told you everything. It certainly did not for me.

Saint Maximilian Kolbe, pray for us.

Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, pray for us.

Lord, remember all who were murdered here. Hold their names when we cannot. Amen.

Sources and Further Reading



Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oświęcim: official figures for deportees and victims; site history of Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Museum estimates: about 1.3 million deported; at least 1.1 million murdered, of whom about one million were Jews; Poles about 70,000–75,000; Roma about 20,000; Soviet prisoners of war about 14,000.

Franciszek Piper's research on the number of victims remains the basis of the museum's published figures.

On St Maximilian Kolbe: camp records and witness testimony concerning July–August 1941, Block 11, Cell 18; beatification 1971; canonisation 1982.

On St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein): biographical sources of the Discalced Carmelites; arrest after the Dutch bishops' protest, July 1942; death at Birkenau, 9 August 1942.

John Paul II, homily at Auschwitz-Birkenau, 7 June 1979. Later visits of Benedict XVI and Francis.

On the Carmelite convent and its relocation in 1993: contemporary reports and the later work of the Centre for Dialogue and Prayer, Oświęcim.

Yad Vashem, for the wider history of the Shoah, against which this one camp must be read.

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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