



SILENT HOMILIES

When the Sceptre Left Her Hand

*Ludźmierz, and the wooden Queen
of Podhale*



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



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Left Her Hand**

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Before You Begin



If you know Ludźmierz at all, you may know the story of the sceptre that fell into Karol Wojtyła's hands in 1963. It is a good story, and it really happened. Cameras were running. But the parish was already more than seven hundred years old by then.

Ludźmierz sits on the open ground of Podhale, before the Tatras rise. It is the oldest Catholic parish in that highland country. Long before Zakopane became the place visitors think of first, there was a wooden church here dedicated to the Mother of God, Cistercian monks from Jędrzejów, and later a lime-wood Madonna whom the highlanders call Gaździna Podhala.

This little book tells that longer story. It keeps legend and documented history apart where they should be kept apart. It does not treat a falling sceptre as a required prophecy. It tries to show why a village parish became the Marian house of a whole region, and why a Pope still spoke of her in the language of the house.

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Chapter 1

The oldest parish under the Tatras



If you come to Podhale looking only for Zakopane and the cable car, you can drive through Ludźmierz without noticing that you have passed the oldest Catholic parish in the highland country. The village sits on the open plain before the mountains rise. It does not look like a capital of anything. Faith in this region did not begin in a spa town. It began in a settlement that had to be planted on purpose.

In 1234 Prince Henry the Bearded, duke of Silesia and Kraków, gave the Kraków voivode Teodor Gryfita the right to settle colonists along the White and Black Dunajec and the smaller rivers of the foothills. The land was wet and thinly inhabited. In the same year Bishop Wiśław of Kraków allowed Gryfita to found a church in honour of the Mother of God. The first building was of wood, roofed with shingles, and it held three altars. It was the first parish church Podhale could call its own.

People still say that Saints Cyril and Methodius once passed this way in the ninth century. That is a pious memory rather than a document. What can be dated is the church of 1234 and the decision to put Mary's name on the first parish of the region. Everything later at Ludźmierz grows from that decision.

A Small Reflection

The oldest parish of Podhale is not in the place modern visitors think of first. I think that is worth noticing. Catholic history is often older than the towns that later become famous. People come to Podhale for Zakopane and the mountains. The Church remembers a wooden church on wet ground, dedicated to the Mother of God long before that. There was nothing grand about the beginning, but this is where the Catholic history of Podhale took root.

A Short Prayer

Mother of God, who was given a wooden house before this country had a city of visitors, keep also the small houses we live in. Amen.

Chapter 2

Why the Cistercians came, and why they left



Teodor Gryfita did not only build a church. He brought Cistercian monks from Jędrzejów, the abbey his own family had helped to found, and he gave them the land called Ludźmierz so that they would raise a monastery beside the parish. The Cistercians were useful in more than one way. They knew how to drain wet ground and how to farm difficult land. By the rule of their order they also placed the Mother of God at the centre of their life. A Marian parish and a Cistercian house were meant to grow together.

The monastery itself lasted only from about 1234 to 1245. The later memory of the place is plain about the reasons. Tatar raids reached this far. Bands of robbers used the forests. The rivers flooded. The monks moved the convent to Szczyrzyc, which was safer and drier.

What is less often said is that they did not abandon the people. The Cistercians of Szczyrzyc continued to serve the parish of Ludźmierz until 1824. That is nearly six hundred years of pastoral care from a house that no longer stood on the same ground. Diocesan priests took over only in the nineteenth century.

The first monks left because the land was dangerous. The parish did not leave with them. Mary's house stayed in the village even when the cloister moved.

A Small Reflection

The Cistercians had moved away, but they had not simply washed their hands of Ludźmierz. Priests continued to come back for centuries to baptise, bury and say Mass. Continuity can survive a change of place. A shrine is sometimes the memory of that kind of staying, not only the memory of a first foundation that looked successful.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, teach us to stay with a people after the first plan has had to move.
Amen.*

Chapter 3

A merchant in the peat



Around the year 1400 a story began to be told that the highland people have never quite stopped telling. Local tradition says that a Hungarian merchant, travelling with wine toward the fair at Nowy Targ, lost the road among the peat bogs and marshes that then surrounded Ludźmierz. Night came down. The wagon stuck. The horses could not pull free. The man was hungry and frightened, and he prayed to the Mother of God.

According to the old story, a woman appeared and led him out. In some tellings she stands on a golden cloud. In others she is simply a lady who knows the path. When he reached the wooden church he understood who had walked ahead of him. In thanksgiving he promised a statue of Mary as he had seen her, and he kept the promise. On the spot where he had been saved a spring later rose. People still come to that water.

No one can prove the merchant's name. Art historians date the wooden figure itself to about 1400 and place it among the Beautiful Madonnas of the Sącz and Spiš workshops. We can say confidently that the statue belongs to around 1400. The merchant's story is different: that comes to us through local tradition.

What the story has carried for centuries is simpler than a proof. This Lady is remembered as someone who finds a traveller when the road has disappeared.

A Small Reflection

What do we do with an old Catholic story that cannot be proved in every detail? We do not have to believe every later flourish, and we do not have to treat the whole memory with contempt. A shrine can keep historical facts and inherited stories at the same time. The spring is there. The statue is there. We may not know the merchant's name, but the story has been part of the memory of Ludźmierz for centuries.

A Short Prayer

*Holy Mary, when we lose the path, do not wait for us to become impressive.
Amen.*

Chapter 4

The wooden Madonna



The figure that pilgrims now call Gaździna Podhala is carved from lime wood and stands about one hundred and twenty-five centimetres high. Mary holds the Child on her left arm and, in her right hand, a sceptre. The unknown carver worked in the late Gothic manner that Central Europe loved around 1400. She is gilded. The Child is dressed, not left naked as in some other Gothic figures. His right hand is raised. In his left he holds the world.

For a long time she was not the image in the high altar. Another statue of Mary and the Child, a little later, around 1420, was judged by later eyes to be finer as a work of art. The figure that people actually loved stood in a side altar. A visitation record from 1765 already calls that side-altar carving a gilded wooden statue of the Mother of God with the Child, famous from time immemorial. In 1776 the diocese allowed it to be moved to the high altar. In 1795 a rococo altar was built for it.

Artistic quality and devotional importance are different questions. The Church can value beauty deeply without treating beauty as a competition. A worn image before which generations have prayed can matter in a way that cannot be measured by craftsmanship alone. The statue that specialists later preferred did not gather the pilgrimage. This one did.

A Small Reflection

By the eighteenth century more people were coming to pray before the side-altar statue than before the image that later eyes judged finer. Art historians and pilgrims are asking different questions. Beauty matters. Over time, an image can acquire another kind of importance because of what generations of people have done in front of it: prayed, asked, thanked, mourned and returned. The Church did not have to despise the finer statue in order to recognise that this lime-wood Madonna had become the one the region would not let go.

A Short Prayer

*Lord Jesus, teach us to honour beauty without confusing it with the faith
that gathers around an image. Amen.*

Chapter 5

Gaździna Podhala



The highlanders of Podhale have two titles for her, and they use both. She is Queen of Podhale. She is also Gaździna Podhala. Gaździna is not a joke and it is not quite “housewife” in the thin modern sense. In a highland farm the gaździna is the woman who keeps the house: the one who knows the stores, the work, the people, the honour of the place. The title has dignity. It means the house has a mistress.

Mary is Queen everywhere the Church prays. In Podhale she is also spoken of as belonging to the house. The title does not replace Catholic doctrine. It gives the doctrine a local accent. She remains the Mother of God. The people who work this ground have found a word for her that sounds like their own speech.

The devotion travelled with those who left. In 1953 a Ludźmierz parish club was formed in Chicago under her care. Later the Polish Highlanders in North America kept a circle named for her. Copies of the statue stand in highlander chapels and parish rooms far from the Tatras. The house, in that sense, went with the people.

A Small Reflection

What happens when universal Catholic faith enters a local language? Mary is Queen everywhere. In Podhale she is called Gaździna. The title Gaździna does not replace what the Church teaches about Mary. It is simply the local way people here learned to speak about someone the whole Church honours. That may be one of the quieter strengths of Catholicism. The faith can travel without erasing the house it enters, and it can enter a house without becoming only a local custom.

A Short Prayer

Mary, Mother of God and Gaździna of this country, pray for the people of Podhale and for those who carried your name abroad. Amen.

Chapter 6

A new church, the same house



The wooden church did not last for ever. Between 1869 and 1877 a neo-Gothic brick church was built and dedicated to the Assumption of Our Lady. The old building came down. What could be saved was carried across. The rococo altar of 1795 went into the new church with the statue. So did the organ, two bells, the font and the small sanctus bell.

A parish can take down a centuries-old building without believing that the faith has been taken down with it. What actually has to survive is not every beam. The image stayed. The altar stayed. Baptism still had a font. Mass still had a bell. The dedication to the Assumption remained the name of the place.

The feast of 15 August still gathers the region here. Older descriptions speak of highland carts on all the surrounding roads. The building is nineteenth-century brick. The feast is older than the brick. People come because the Lady is here, not because the architecture is fashionable.

A Small Reflection

When a church is rebuilt, the interesting question is what a parish believes must travel into the new room. What they chose to carry into the new church tells us what they thought really mattered: the altar where Mass was celebrated, the font used for Baptism, the image, and the bells. One physical building disappeared. Continuity remained real because those things were not left behind.

A Short Prayer

Lord, when the house of prayer changes shape, keep us from thinking that the faith has to change its centre. Amen.

Chapter 7

A coronation delayed by war



A canonical coronation of a Marian image is not an attempt to make Mary Queen, as if she were waiting for gold. Her queenship comes from her relationship to Christ. The crown is a public act of honour, authorised by the Church. Human beings often express love through physical things. That is why wedding rings, photographs, gifts and religious objects can matter so much to us. The Church knows that, and she also knows that the metal is not the holiness.

The first serious preparations at Ludźmierz began in 1934, when Fr Józef Styrylski wanted the coronation to mark seven hundred years of the parish. The war made that impossible. After the war Fr Leonard Harędziński took the work up again. Pope John XXIII granted the coronation. The ceremony was set for 15 August 1963, the feast of the Assumption, which is the dedication of this church.

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, Primate of Poland, crowned the statue with papal crowns. Bishop Karol Wojtyła of Kraków stood with him. A great crowd filled the village. The Assumption at Ludźmierz had always been the feast of the house. That year it became something the whole country would later remember, for a reason nobody had put on the programme.

A Small Reflection

Why does the Church crown images at all? A crown does not make Mary greater. People need visible ways of saying thank you, of honouring doctrine, and of gathering a region around a faith they already hold. We use visible signs because we are bodily human beings. War can delay a ceremony. It cannot invent the reason for one. The reason was already seven hundred years old.

A Short Prayer

*Mary, crowned only because your Son is King, keep our honour of you
inside the honour we give to him. Amen.*

Chapter 8

When the sceptre fell



At the end of the coronation the crowned figure was carried in a feretron, a processional frame, so that the bishops could bless the people with it. During that blessing the statue tilted. The sceptre left Mary's hand. Bishop Karol Wojtyła caught it as it fell.

Cameras were running. The physical event is not in doubt. What people later made of it is another matter. The sanctuary's own history remembers the Primate turning to Wojtyła with words to this effect: Karol, Mother of God is handing the authority to you. Other later accounts attach a similar remark to Cardinal Franciszek Macharski. Exact wording and exact speaker are not as solid as the catch itself. It is better to say that a remark of that kind was remembered than to pretend we possess a transcript.

Years afterwards, when Wojtyła had become Pope, people naturally joined the two events. A sceptre fell. A bishop caught it. He later sat in Peter's chair. Human memory does that. Faith does not require us to treat the coincidence as proof that Mary appointed a Pope. The Church has never required that interpretation. Wonder is allowed. Invention is not required.

The title of this book comes from that afternoon. The shrine does not begin there.

A Small Reflection

Why do people look back at ordinary moments differently after later events? A sceptre fell. A bishop caught it. Years later he became Pope. We do not have to choose between laughing at the story and calling it a prophecy. We can simply say that the moment happened, and that it became more striking after Wojtyła became Pope. Wonder is allowed. The Church has never required more than that.

A Short Prayer

Lord, keep us capable of wonder without forcing every event to carry more meaning than it will bear. Amen.

Chapter 9

The stolen crowns



On 19 March 1983 the gold crowns, the sceptre and votive offerings were stolen from the church. The theft was a wound in a village that had waited decades for the coronation. The thieves could take the crowns, but of course they could not take away the devotion of the people.

John Paul II was in Poland that June. On 22 June 1983, at the Błonia in Kraków, he blessed new insignia for Our Lady of Ludźmierz. On 15 August the statue was crowned again. Cardinal Franciszek Macharski took part in that second crowning. The gold had been replaced. The people did not have to start honouring her all over again.

Catholic devotion uses precious objects while knowing that the gold is not the holiness. Why then use crowns and jewels at all? Because love often becomes material. A wedding ring is not a marriage, but people still care when it is lost. The new crowns were not a pretence that nothing had happened. They were a way of saying that the honour continued.

There is a tradition that a copy of the Ludźmierz Madonna remained among the images John Paul II kept near him. What can be said without strain is that the bishop who caught the sceptre did not later treat Ludźmierz as a story he had outgrown.

A Small Reflection

The theft makes a distinction that theology can talk about for years. The object can be stolen. The honour given to Mary is not stored in the metal. And yet the parish still wanted new crowns. That is not a contradiction. Human love uses things. When the thing is taken, people feel the wound, and then they make the sign again. The second coronation in 1983 was not less Catholic than the first. It was the same honour, after a night in which someone had treated the gold as the only thing that mattered.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, teach us to value the objects that carry memory without mistaking them for the holiness they serve. Amen.

Chapter 10

John Paul II comes home to her



On 8 June 1979, during his first pilgrimage to Poland, John Paul II said Mass on the airfield at Nowy Targ. The Communist authorities had their own reasons for keeping him off certain ground. The highlanders brought the Ludźmierz statue to the outdoor altar. Crowd estimates for that day run into the hundreds of thousands. Exact millions are less certain than the fact of a vast gathering.

He spoke of her there as Gaździna Podhala. He said, in the way a son of this Church would say it, that the Mother of God is always like the people of her own house. He could honour Guadalupe in one continent and Ludźmierz in another without making the two devotions compete. Local language did not make the faith less universal.

On 7 June 1997 he came to the sanctuary itself. He prayed the Rosary. He stood on the meadows around the church. Accounts of that visit remember a replica sceptre and his invocation of the Lady of Ludźmierz. He did not need to repeat the 1963 story in order to show that he knew where he was.

A Small Reflection

Why did John Paul II use a highland word for Mary when he had the whole vocabulary of the Church available to him? He did not need to stop using the language of the universal Church in order to use the language of his own people. He could honour Guadalupe and Ludźmierz without making one devotion compete with the other.

A Short Prayer

Saint John Paul II, who called her Gaździna in the hearing of your own people, pray for us. Amen.

Chapter 11

Basilica and Rosary Garden



Around the church a Rosary Garden was laid out, with help from highlanders at home and abroad. It remembers the 1997 visit and gives pilgrims a way to walk the mysteries instead of only standing in a queue. On 22 February 2001 the church of the Assumption at Ludźmierz received the title of minor basilica.

A minor basilica is an honour given by the Holy See to a church of particular importance for the life of a region. It does not turn a village into Rome. It ties a local church more visibly to the wider Church. The parish remains a parish. The title says that what happens here matters beyond the parish boundary.

Among the later gifts kept at the sanctuary is a zucchetto of John Paul II, given in connection with the fortieth anniversary of the coronation. A chapel dedicated to him was later blessed beneath the papal altar. Blessed copies of the statue travel from house to house. That custom is as important as any title. It means the Lady of Ludźmierz is not only visited. She is received.

A Small Reflection

A basilica title draws pilgrims inward. House-to-house copies send the same image outward, into kitchens and sickrooms. One devotion travels in both directions. I find that one of the most interesting things about Ludźmierz now: the shrine is visited, and it is also received.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, bless this church in its village and in its title, and bless the homes
that receive her image. Amen.*

Chapter 12

How to stand here



If you come to Ludźmierz, you are allowed to look. You are allowed to take a photograph. You may buy a small card if that helps you remember the day. None of that makes you a shallow pilgrim. A shrine is not a museum, and it is not only a place where something once happened. It is still a place where people pray now.

The Assumption on 15 August remains the great local feast. Highland dress, music and carts still belong to that day when the region can manage them. Come if you can. Stay for Mass if you can. Look at the wooden figure without needing her to perform. There is no need to turn every old story into documented history, and there is no need to dismiss it simply because it belongs to tradition.

The sceptre gives this book its title. The parish is older than the sceptre. The Cistercians, the peat, the side altar, the word Gaździna, the delayed coronation, the theft and the Pope all belong to the same house. The best visit may be to learn that, to pray, and then to leave without trying to possess the place.

A Small Reflection

What does it mean to visit a shrine well? Not to collect a proof, and not to refuse every story that cannot be footnoted. A good visit holds both kinds of knowledge: the date on the stone, and the reason people kept coming when the stone was still wood. Then it returns the place to the people who live here. Pilgrimage is not ownership. It is a few hours in somebody else's parish, asking the Mother of God to do what she has always done, which is to take us to her Son.

A Short Prayer

Mary, Mother of God, pray for the people of Podhale and for all who come to Ludźmierz seeking Christ. Amen.

A Last Word



People may arrive knowing only the story of the sceptre. After this book they know that Ludźmierz is much older. The falling sceptre is one memorable afternoon inside a very long story. What remains is a parish, a wooden Madonna, pilgrims, Mass, prayer, and people who still call her Gaździna.

Our Lady of Ludźmierz, pray for us.

Saint John Paul II, pray for us.

Lord, remember all those who carried the image, built the shrine and kept the faith here.

Sources and Further Reading



Official sanctuary history: Sanktuarium Matki Bożej Królowej Podhala, Ludźmierz, mbludzm.pl, Historia parafii and Historia sanktuarium.

Parish chronology: 1234 foundation under Bishop Wiśław and Teodor Gryfita; Cistercians from Jędrzejów; transfer to Szczyrzyc c. 1245; Cistercian pastoral care until 1824.

The statue: lime wood, c. 1400, Beautiful Madonna type of the Sącz–Spiš circle; 125 cm; 1765 visitation of Dean Jakub Zaskalski; transfer to the high altar in 1776; rococo altar 1795.

New church: 1869–1877, dedicated to the Assumption; fittings brought from the wooden church.

Coronation: preparations 1934; ceremony 15 August 1963, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński and Bishop Karol Wojtyła. The falling sceptre is recorded by the sanctuary and was filmed. Later prophetic readings are distinguished from the event itself.

Theft of 19 March 1983; blessing of new insignia by John Paul II at the Błonia, Kraków, 22 June 1983; recoronation 15 August 1983.

John Paul II: Mass at Nowy Targ, 8 June 1979; visit to Ludźmierz, 7 June 1997.

Minor basilica: 22 February 2001.

A word of thanks



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