



SILENT HOMILIES

The Paths His Father Taught Him

*Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, and a
Jerusalem you can walk*





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LITTLE TREASURES

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Before You Begin

Fourteen kilometres from Wadowice the hills are still ordinary Polish hills. For four hundred years they have also been used to help people remember Jerusalem.

Chapels mark an Upper Room, a Gethsemane, and a meeting of Son and Mother. The paths that connect them are called *drożki*. You do not drive them. You walk.

In 1600 a Kraków nobleman, Mikołaj Zebrzydowski, began to build a chapel of the Crucifixion on the hill called *Żar*. He had a model of the Holy Sepulchre brought from Jerusalem. He thought the local ground already looked like the Holy Land. He invited Bernardine friars to keep the place. By 1617 a line of chapels ran through the woods. Later a second line grew beside it, for Mary. The two paths meet. That meeting is the heart of Kalwaria.

This little book is not a trail guide and not a life of a pope. It is the story of a place that taught a boy from Wadowice how to pray while walking. After Emilia died in 1929, Karol Wojtyła the elder brought his sons here. A father who had lost his wife pointed his children towards a Mother who would not leave them. The boy came back as a student, a priest, an archbishop who hid from the monastery guardian so that he could walk alone, and twice as pope. In 2002 he said the last Mass he would ever say on Polish soil on this hill.

Read it if you think a calvary is only fourteen stations on a church wall. Read it if Kalwaria has become, in your mind, only a photograph behind a pope. The paths are older than he was. They are still walked by people who will never be famous. That is what they were built for.

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Chapter 1

A Jerusalem you do not need a ship for

Most pilgrims in Counter-Reformation Europe would never see the real Jerusalem. So some places were built to help them walk the story at home. Kalwaria Zebrzydowska is one of those places.

Mikołaj Zebrzydowski had the land and the money. He also had a surveyor, Felix Żebrowski, who measured the slopes as if they were a map of the Passion. The first stone of the Crucifixion chapel was laid on 4 October 1600. A year later the papal nuncio consecrated it. In 1602 Zebrzydowski gave the hill to the Bernardines. The first friars arrived in 1604. Paul Baudarth, a mason from the Low Countries, designed the earliest chapels. They still look a little different from the buildings around them. That was part of the point. The place was meant to feel like somewhere else as well as like home.

There is a later story that Zebrzydowski and his wife Urszula saw three burning crosses over the hill from the castle at Lanckorona. It is a foundation legend, and it should be told as one. What can be dated is the model from Jerusalem, the survey, the invitation to the friars, and the fact that the nobleman kept building even through years of political trouble. The paths outlasted the politics.

By the time Karol Wojtyła came here as a boy, people had been praying at Kalwaria for more than three hundred years. He did not invent the place. He inherited it. That is how Catholic shrines work when they are doing their proper work.

A Reflection

We often treat a holy place as if it began on the day we first noticed it.

Kalwaria was already three centuries old when a child from Wadowice arrived. Someone else had measured the hill. Someone else had paid for the first chapel. Someone else had walked it in rain before that family ever came.

Most of what forms us was already there: a parish, a habit of prayer, a church we did not build, a devotion we did not invent. The useful question is not whether we started something. It is whether we received it, and whether we will keep it open for the next person who arrives with grief and no map.

A short prayer

Lord, thank you for the holy places we did not invent. Teach us to receive them without pretending we built them. Amen.

Chapter 2

Two paths, and the place they meet

Kalwaria is not one Way of the Cross. It is two walks that keep crossing.

The Path of the Lord follows Jesus from the Upper Room to the tomb. The Path of Our Lady follows Mary from the Annunciation, through her suffering at the Cross, and on to the Assumption. Some chapels belong to both paths. In the old counting, ten of them are shared, because the two lives were shared.

The buildings themselves make this clear. The chapel of the taking up of the Cross is built in the shape of a cross. The chapel of the meeting of Jesus and Mary on the road is built in the shape of a heart. A pilgrim who cannot read Latin can still understand the plan. The seventeenth-century builders trusted walking and looking as much as they trusted a lecture.

The two paths meet at the largest Marian chapel, the Assumption. Christ's victory and Mary's share in it are set in the same clearing. When John Paul II preached here in 2002, he returned to that meeting. Zebrzydowski had wanted the Passion near. Devotion to Mary then asked for a second path on the same ground. The Marian path does not compete with the Passion. It stays beside it.

If you walk only one path you have not yet seen what the place is for. The surprise of Kalwaria is not that there are many chapels. It is that a Mother and a Son are allowed to keep pace with each other across a whole hillside.

A Reflection

Catholic faith can treat Mary as decoration, or as a rival to Christ. Kalwaria does neither.

The two paths share chapels because the two lives shared suffering. Mary does not replace the Passion. She walks it. That is a theology you can learn with your feet if you take both routes.

In ordinary life we often want one story at a time: either the hard thing, or the person who stays beside it. Kalwaria keeps both on the same hillside. It is worth noticing which of those two we usually refuse.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, and Mary who stayed with you, teach us to walk with the One who suffers and with the one who remains. Amen.

Chapter 3

Bernardines who kept the hill alive

Without the friars the chapels would have become pretty ruins.

Bernardines — Franciscans of the Observance, known in Poland by that name — have lived here since the first decade of the seventeenth century. They hear confessions, walk with the crowds in Holy Week, keep the image of Our Lady of Kalwaria, and know which path is which when the fog is down.

In 1641 a nobleman named Stanisław Paszkowski brought them a painting of Mary that had already been honoured in his house chapel. The image stayed. It was crowned in 1887. The basilica grew around that face, as the paths had grown around the Passion.

A calvary that is only stations can become grim. A calvary that also keeps a Mother remains a place people can return to in August as well as in Holy Week.

There are still hermitages on the hill — small stone houses where a friar can live almost alone except on Sundays. Magdalene's hermitage is one of the oldest buildings Zebrzydowski raised. Visitors who think a pilgrimage site is only a crowd are often surprised by that. Kalwaria has always had a room for the person who needs the hill without the hymn.

When the pope came, he thanked the Bernardines by name. A shrine does not keep itself. Someone has to unlock the chapels with a large old key and lock them again after the last pilgrim has gone down in the dusk.

A Reflection

Great traditions often survive because ordinary people continue doing ordinary work.

Someone opens the church. Someone hears confessions. Someone keeps the key. Someone repairs what is broken. Someone waits for the next pilgrim.

We notice the famous visitor. We forget the person who unlocked the door before he arrived and locked it after he left.

Who does that work in my parish? Do I know their name? A holy place is not kept by atmosphere. It is kept by people who return when the crowd has gone.

A short prayer

Lord, bless the people who keep keys, hear confessions and lock the chapels after dusk. Keep us from treating their work as scenery. Amen.

Chapter 4

Holy Week that will not stay indoors

The great surprise for a visitor from a tidy parish is Holy Week. Kalwaria does not keep the Passion only in a church. It walks it.

Thousands come. Men dress as the apostles. A heavy cross is carried that a friar can barely lift. The Gradusy — the stairs — are climbed as if they were Pilate's. The tradition is old enough that when UNESCO listed the site in 1999, it named the long-running mystery plays as part of what should not be lost.

It is easy to be superior about outdoor theatre. It is harder to explain why the same scenes, done in the rain on a Polish hill, still move people. The place supplies what a hall cannot: distance, weather, and the time it actually takes to go from one refusal to another. A Passion that lasts an afternoon is closer to Friday than a Passion that lasts forty minutes.

15 August is the other great gathering — the Assumption, when the Marian path is in festival clothes. Between those two feasts the hill is quieter. That quiet is when a bishop from Kraków used to come alone.

A living calvary is a rare thing. Many European calvaries became parks. This one kept the walking. That is the work of the Bernardines and of the people who refused to let the custom die. Both deserve to be named.

A Reflection

We like religion that stays dry and on time.

Kalwaria asks for weather, tiredness and an afternoon. The Passion took longer than a service. Walking it outdoors is one way of remembering that.

I do not have to go to Poland to learn the point. A parish Way of the Cross walked slowly, without rushing the last station so that lunch is not late, already belongs to the same family.

The question is whether I want the story of Good Friday, or only a tidy version of it that will not make me cold.

A short prayer

Lord of rain and of outdoor Passion, do not let us prefer a dry play to a wet fidelity. Amen.

Chapter 5

A father, two sons, and another Mother

Emilia Wojtyła died on 13 April 1929. Not long after, the captain took Edmund and Karol the fourteen kilometres to Kalwaria. They prayed before the image. They walked the wooded paths.

One telling, kept by the Bernardines and by later memory, says the father pointed to Mary and said that the boy's mother was dead and that this was his mother now. We cannot be sure the sentence was quite that neat. The act was. A widower gave his son a place where grief could walk instead of only sit.

They came again after Edmund died in 1932. A photograph survives of a ten-year-old Karol at a Kalwaria feast. The hill was already, for him, the place you go when the house has a new absence. That is a hard education and a merciful one. It teaches that prayer is allowed to have a geography.

He would say, much later, that as a child and still more as a priest and bishop, devotion to Mary led him here often. He would walk the paths in solitude and put before the Lord the problems of the Church, especially in the years when the state wanted the Church small. Kalwaria was not an escape from those problems. It was a place large enough to hold them without panic.

A father cannot give a child a living mother once she is gone. He can give a path and a face. The gift looks small until you notice that the child never stopped using it.

A Reflection

A parent often cannot fix a child's pain. Words run out. The house stays quiet.

Karol Wojtyła the elder could not bring Emilia back. He could take his sons to a place where grief was allowed to walk, and where another Mother was already being honoured.

That is sometimes all a parent can give: not an answer, but a church, a habit, a path, a person to pray with.

If I cannot remove someone's sorrow, I can still show them where to take it. The gift is smaller than a solution. It may last longer.

A short prayer

Lord, keep every parent who must hand a child to a Mother they cannot see. Receive the widowers who know where to walk. Amen.

Chapter 6

The archbishop who hid from the guardian

When he was Metropolitan of Kraków he came so often that he learned a trick. Kalwaria, he said with a smile in 2002, has this about it: you can easily hide from the monastery's guardian. He would arrive and disappear onto the paths of the Lord and of His Mother. He wanted the hill without a reception.

The sentence is funny. It is also a rule. A holy place that cannot be walked alone has become only an event.

He brought the difficulties of a Church under pressure and walked until those difficulties had been said. In Gift and Mystery he records the habit without drama. The paths were where he thought. Thinking, for him, was not only a desk. It was a sequence of chapels that forced the body to take time.

On 7 June 1979, as a new pope, he came and made the church a basilica. In 1987 he left a golden rose at the image, though that year the image itself was brought to him in Kraków. In 1991 he stopped in the market and blessed the town. In 2002 he came for the four hundredth year and said Mass for the last time in Poland. After lunch he rested in a room the friars still show. There is a pair of slippers under a bed. It is not a relic. It is only the proof that a tired man lay down.

He repeated here the words he had taken for a motto: Totus tuus. I am all yours. The motto had come from St Louis de Montfort. The hill had already taught him the same sentence by walking.

A Reflection

Even important people need somewhere they do not have to perform their importance.

An archbishop hiding from the guardian so that he could pray alone is a comic picture. It is also a serious one. A holy place that exists only as a public event has stopped being a place of prayer.

I may not have a monastery guardian. I still know the difference between arriving in order to be seen and arriving in order to walk.

Where do I go when I need to put a difficulty down without an audience? If I have no such place, the difficulty stays on the desk.

A short prayer

Lord of unannounced visits, thank you for a bishop who knew when to hide in order to pray. Give us one place where we do not have to perform. Amen.

Chapter 7

What the chapels are trying to say

A calvary can fail by becoming a museum of small buildings. Kalwaria survives because the chapels were not built only to be looked at. Pilgrims were meant to walk from one to another, remembering the events of the Passion as they went. The walking is the prayer. Standing still in front of a pretty façade is only half the work.

Some chapels are almost houses. Some are almost sculptures you can enter. Baudarth's buildings, especially, have a slightly theatrical stance, as if the seventeenth century already knew that Holy Week would be performed here. Theatre and liturgy have always been close on this hill. That is not a confusion. It is how a pilgrim who cannot read is given the Gospel in rain, cold and distance.

UNESCO later called the whole site a Mannerist architectural and park landscape, and listed it as the only calvary of that kind. The honour is deserved, and a little comic. The builders were not applying for a list. They were trying to make it possible to spend an afternoon remembering Friday and the woman who stood through it.

If you are tired after six chapels, that is not a failure. The Passion was not designed as a circuit you complete before lunch. Leave the rest for another year. The place has been waiting since 1600.

A Reflection

Pilgrimage is not an achievement. You do not always need to finish.

A person who walks six chapels honestly has not failed the other thirty. The hill was built for return visits, not for a single complete performance.

We treat many good things as circuits we must finish: books, prayers, conversations, grief itself. Some of them are paths. You walk what you can today. You come back.

Tiredness is not always a sign that you should have stayed at home. Sometimes it is a sign that the thing you are doing is the right size.

A short prayer

Lord of unfinished walks, receive the chapels we did not reach, and do not let our tiredness become a verdict. Amen.

Chapter 8

A treasury he said he only drew from

In 2002 he told the crowd that whenever he came he knew he was stepping into a reserve of faith, hope and love that generations of people from his own land had carried onto these hills. He had drawn from that treasury, he said, and had perhaps added a little himself.

The humility is not decoration. If a pope thinks he invented Polish piety, he has already misunderstood Kalwaria.

The sentence is useful far beyond this valley. Every parish is a reserve someone else stocked. We walk into it. We take. If we are fortunate we leave a small thing — a habit, a repair, a child baptised. The hill makes the exchange visible because you can see the worn steps.

He also said that the truth of the Paschal mystery, written later in the documents of a Council, had already been known here by the sense of the faithful — by feeling, imagination, and the piety of the people. That is a high compliment from a man who wrote encyclicals. He was saying that the people climbing the Gradusy were not waiting for Rome to explain Good Friday.

If we remember only his visits we will miss his point. He came because the people had already been coming.

A Reflection

What did I inherit that I treat as if I invented it?

A parish, a way of praying, a feast, a hymn, a grandmother's sentence before a meal — most of these arrived before we did. Someone else filled the treasury. We draw from it.

The next question is quieter. What are we leaving that another person could draw from in fifty years? Not a monument. A habit someone can still use. A door that still opens. A path that has not been allowed to grow over.

A short prayer

Lord of gifts we did not fill, let us draw without pretending we built the place, and leave something a stranger can use. Amen.

Chapter 9

What Kalwaria is not allowed to be

Kalwaria is not a private papal park. The paths were crowded before 1920 and they are crowded without him. A pilgrimage that notices only the plaques to John Paul has walked past the Passion on the way to a celebrity.

Kalwaria is not a fake Jerusalem. No one here thinks Żar is Golgotha. The thought is older and kinder: those who cannot go may still walk. Treating the place as a theme park of the Holy Land is a failure in the opposite direction.

Kalwaria is not only Holy Week. The Marian path, the quiet Tuesdays, the hermitage, the image in the basilica — these are the rest of the year. A devotion that only knows how to weep in April has not yet learned August.

Held inside those limits, the hill can go on doing its first work. It can give a grieving father a sentence to a son. It can give an archbishop somewhere to hide. It can give a tired pilgrim one more chapel before the bus.

A Reflection

We are good at turning holy places into backdrops for famous people.

Kalwaria formed a pope. It does not belong to him. The same mistake is easy in a parish. We remember the priest who was here in our youth and forget the people who kept the place before and after him.

A church is larger than the most famous person who prayed in it. If I can only see the plaque, I have not yet seen the path.

A short prayer

Lord of hills that will not be owned by any one life, keep our looking wider than a plaque. Amen.

Chapter 10

How to walk if you ever come

Come on an ordinary day if you can. Holy Week will teach you the scale of the crowd. A Thursday in October will teach you the scale of the woods.

Take a leaflet from the friars so you know which path you are on, and then put the leaflet away for a while. The chapel in the shape of a heart does not need a caption.

Wear suitable shoes. Some paths become muddy, and that is part of walking them. The seventeenth century did not pave every metre.

Go into the basilica and look at the image Paszkowski brought in 1641. Light a candle if that is your custom. Then go back out. Kalwaria is not completed indoors. Much of it can only be understood by walking the paths.

If you cannot come, you can still borrow the method. A parish Way of the Cross, walked slowly, in weather, without needing to finish, is already a cousin of this hill. The cousin is enough for most of us on most Fridays.

A Reflection

We photograph holy places as if the photograph were the visit.

Kalwaria is built for walking, getting tired, and coming back. The same is true of many smaller places nearer home.

If I ever stand on this hill, the useful question is not how many chapels I managed. It is whether I let one of them slow me down.

If I never stand on this hill, the useful question is the same. Which ordinary path near me have I been treating only as scenery?

A short prayer

Lord of mud and of unfinished circuits, be at the next chapel even if we turn back. Amen.

Chapter 11

Living as if a path could teach you

The easiest way to miss Kalwaria is to treat it only as scenery behind a saint. It is scenery. It is also a way of teaching.

The lesson is simple enough to sound naïve. Some prayers need distance. Some griefs need a hill. Some decisions need the time it takes to go from one small building to another.

Living as if a path could teach you means not despising the body in prayer. Knees, weather, a stitch in the side — these are not interruptions of the Passion. They are how the Passion reaches people who do not live in libraries.

It also means keeping a place you can go when the house has a new absence. For him it was this valley. For you it may be a cemetery, a quiet church, a stretch of sea. The point is not to copy his map. The point is to have a map.

A father taught a boy these paths because words had become too few. The boy became a man who still trusted walking when documents piled up. That trust is the inheritance. The rest is only the particular landscape.

A Reflection

Not every problem is solved at a desk.

Some thoughts need the time a walk takes. Some griefs need a place that is not the kitchen. Some prayers need the body to be slightly tired before the mind will tell the truth.

I do not need Kalwaria's forty chapels to learn that. I need one route I am willing to walk more than once, and the honesty to take a difficulty there instead of only talking about it.

The father could not explain the deaths. He could show a path. That is still a form of teaching.

A short prayer

Lord who let a landscape teach a child, give us one path we are willing to walk more than once. Amen.

Chapter 12

The last Mass on Polish ground

On 19 August 2002 he was old, and everyone could see it. He spoke of the founder, of the two paths, of the Bernardines, of the treasury he had only drawn from. He entrusted the Church and himself again to Our Lady of Kalwaria. Then he left. He would not say Mass in Poland again.

The last time is easy to make theatrical. The better reading is quieter. A man went back to the place a father had taken him after a funeral, and finished there.

The chapels did not close behind him. The Gradusy are still climbed. The heart-shaped meeting still waits in its clearing. A child from a nearby town can still be brought here when the house is too small for what has happened.

If you remember only one thing, remember the order. First the founder and the friars. Then the people. Then a father and two sons. Then a priest who hid from the guardian. Then a pope who said he had added only a little. The hill was never his private property. He belonged to a place that had been praying long before he arrived, and that would remain after he left.

A Reflection

Near the end of a life, people often want to return to something that formed them near the beginning.

He came back to the hill his father had shown him after a death. The hill was still larger than his biography. The friars were still locking chapels. Pilgrims who would never be famous were still arriving.

A holy place can help form a saint and still be waiting for an unknown child tomorrow.

That is the kind of ending worth wanting: not that the place remember us, but that the path remain open after we have gone down it for the last time.

A short prayer

Our Lady of Kalwaria, keep the paths open, and walk with those who come because someone they love is gone. Amen.

A last word

A father showed his son a path. The son kept returning throughout his life. The path existed before him and remained after him.

You do not need to finish every chapel. You need to understand why someone would build so many, and why a child would be walked among them after a death.

May every grief be given a path. May every path keep a Mother as well as a Cross.

A prayer

Our Lady of Kalwaria, pray for us. Saint John Paul II, pray for us. Holy Bernardine brothers, pray for us. Amen.

A word of thanks

If these pages have made a hill of chapels feel less like a backdrop and more like a path a father could still give a child, a gift on the Silent Homilies website would be received with real gratitude.

It is never asked as a condition of reading — only as a kindness, if you wish and if you can.

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.