



SILENT HOMILIES

The Window That Faced the Church

*Wadowice, and the town that knew
Karol before the world did*



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



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*Wadowice, and the town that knew
Karol before the world did*

*A small book of forgotten facts,
short stories, and quiet hope.*

Before You Begin

Most people know John Paul II as the Pope who stood before huge crowds in Rome. In Wadowice he was simply Karol — or Lolek to his family and friends. He grew up in a rented flat opposite the parish church. Many of the people and places that shaped him are still there.

Wadowice sits in the hills south-west of Kraków. On 18 May 1920, a little after five in the afternoon, a second son was born on the first floor of that house. The register named him Karol Józef. The family called him Lolek.

This little book is not a short life of a pope. It is a walk around the town that knew him first. The house belonged to a Jewish merchant. The windows looked at the Church of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. On the church wall a sundial still says, in Polish, that time flees and eternity waits.

A military chaplain baptised him. His mother died before First Communion. His brother died of the fever he was trying to cure. His father knelt in the night where a son could see him. A Jewish classmate kept a radio and a friendship. Carmelites on a nearby hill gave him a brown scapular that he wore for the rest of his life.

Read this if you have only ever met him on a balcony. Read it if Wadowice has become, in your mind, a cream cake and a photograph. The cake is real. He asked about it himself in 1999. The town is older than that joke, and it is the place he kept pointing back to.

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Chapter 1

Growing Up in Wadowice

In the years when Karol Wojtyła was a child, Wadowice was not a shrine. It was a county town with a long market square, a parish that had stood in some form since the fourteenth century, a gymnasium named for Marcin Wadowita, and a Jewish community large enough to be part of ordinary life. Friends later remembered something like eight thousand Catholics and two thousand Jews. Boys from both communities played on the same cobbles.

The tenement at what is now 7 Kościelna Street belonged to the Balamuth family. On the ground floor they kept a shop. In 1919 Karol Wojtyła the elder, a soldier of the new Polish army, moved upstairs with Emilia and their son Edmund. The next spring, in the bedroom of that flat, Lolek was born.

Growing up in a town of that size meant that Karol knew neighbours, shopkeepers, school friends, Catholics and Jews as real people rather than as distant groups. Wadowice remained important to him because his family, parish, school and friendships had shaped his childhood there.

If you walk the square now, the names have changed and many visitors have come because of him. The stones have not. A small town is still the right size for a baptism to be remembered by more than the parents.

A Reflection

We can live in the same street for years and still not know the name of the person three doors away. We recognise the face at Mass, the neighbour across the road, the person behind the counter — and then we go home. A phone can hold hundreds of contacts while the house next door remains a stranger. Who around me has become only “that man”, “that woman”, “the new family”, “the foreigner”, “the difficult person”? A town like Wadowice was small enough to make that harder. Most of our lives are not. Knowing someone by name is a small thing, and it is often the first thing we stop doing.

A short prayer

Lord, help me to notice the people You have placed close to me, and teach me to know them by more than a category. Amen.

Chapter 2

The House Opposite the Church

The flat had three rooms, a kitchen you walked through, and a courtyard where neighbours talked. What it also had was a view. The windows faced the parish church. When someone opened the curtain, the church was there.

On the church wall, visible from the street and from those windows, a sundial still carries the words: *Czas ucieka, wieczność czeka*. Time flees. Eternity waits. Karol saw that church, and those words, from his home.

Inside the church, in a chapel of the Holy Family, there is a stone Baroque font with a gilt cover. Karol was baptised there on 20 June 1920, thirty-three days old. The priest was Franciszek Żak, a military chaplain and a curate. The godparents were Emilia's sister Maria Wiadrowska and her brother-in-law Józef Kuczmierczyk. The Latin entry is still in the register: Volume IV, page 149, item 671.

When he returned as Pope in 1979 he kissed that font. He had already kissed it as Archbishop of Kraków in the millennium year of Poland's baptism. He said later that the path of his life led back to the baptismal font of the church in Wadowice.

A Reflection

Many Catholics know the date and the church of their baptism. Fewer think of themselves as baptised people on an ordinary Tuesday. The font can become a photograph, a certificate, a story told about a baby we no longer remember being. If baptism really is the beginning of a Christian life, where can it be seen now — in the way I speak, forgive, work, or treat people who cannot help me? A church opposite a kitchen window is a picture of closeness. Most of us live farther away than that, not in miles, but in attention.

A short prayer

*Lord, help me to remember my baptism not only as a date, but as a life
I am still meant to live. Amen.*

Chapter 3

Karol's Mother

Emilia Kaczorowska was born in Kraków, the daughter of a saddler. She lost her own parents early. She married a soldier, gave birth to Edmund in 1906, lost a daughter named Olga in infancy, and in 1920 gave birth to Karol. Neighbours later said she would tell them, pushing the pram, that this one would be a great man. Mothers often say such things. The town remembered this remark because the sentence later came true in a way no neighbour could have meant.

She taught Karol the sign of the cross and his first prayers. She did not live to see his First Communion. On 13 April 1929 she died in the apartment, of the heart and kidney illness that had been wearing her down. Karol was not yet nine. First Communion followed on 26 May that same year.

Later, John Paul II admitted that he did not remember clearly how much his mother had influenced his early faith. He said only that the gift must have been great. That makes his recollection more honest, not less valuable.

After the funeral the three men of the house sat in a front pew: a father of fifty, Edmund at twenty-three, Karol not yet nine. The same parish church that had baptised him now held his mother's funeral.

A Reflection

Who taught me my first prayer? Who first took me to church? Who made faith seem normal when I was a child? Some of those people are dead. Some are old. Some may never have known how much they gave. Incomplete memory is common. So is a complicated family. Gratitude does not require a perfect childhood, and it does not require us to invent feelings we do not have. It does ask whether we have ever said thank you — to the living, or before God for the dead. A first prayer is a small gift. It is also easy to receive and then forget the hand that taught it.

A short prayer

Lord, I thank You for those who first taught me to pray. Receive the ones who are gone, and help me not to forget them. Amen.

Chapter 4

His Father's Faith

Karol Wojtyła the elder had served the old empire and then the new republic. In the flat he sewed, cooked, kept order, and prayed. His son would wake in the night and see him on his knees, as he also knelt in the parish church. Karol remembered that.

The house became quieter after Emilia. It became quieter again in 1932, when Edmund, a young doctor in Bielsko, caught scarlet fever from a patient he would not leave and died at twenty-six. After that the apartment held two men. They played football with a rag ball. They read. The father took the boy to Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, the calvary in the hills nearby.

John Paul II later told a story about himself. He had been a careless altar boy. His father told him, simply, that he was not being a very good one. The correction stayed with him because it came from a man whose prayer he had already seen.

His father's faith was visible in daily life. That made a lasting impression.

A Reflection

What would someone learn about my faith by watching me when I am not trying to look religious? Children notice whether we pray. They also notice how we speak about people, how we behave when we are angry, whether Sunday Mass actually matters, and whether forgiveness is real or only a word. Adults notice too. A kneeling father in the night is one kind of lesson. A hurried, irritable, private faith is another. We do not have to perform prayer for an audience. We do have to ask what the ordinary hours are already teaching the people who live with us.

A short prayer

Lord, let the faith I live when no one is watching be the same faith I claim when someone is. Amen.

Chapter 5

Serving Mass and the Scapular

After First Communion Karol served at the altar. He came in the mornings. He also came when he was not on the list, in case another boy was missing. In time he spoke for the servers when Father Kazimierz Figlewicz left the parish for Wawel. Figlewicz had arrived in 1930 as catechist and guardian of the boys. He remained part of Karol's life later in Kraków.

Each school day, the story goes, Karol stopped before the image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in the church. The picture had been honoured in Wadowice for more than a hundred years. A boy on the way to school could greet that face and go on.

On the Carmelite hill called Górka, just outside the town, he was given the brown scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. A scapular is two small pieces of brown cloth, worn over the shoulders, as a sign of belonging to Mary under that title. He wore it for the rest of his life.

None of this made him unusual in 1930s Wadowice. Plenty of boys served Mass. Plenty of families had known grief. These were the ordinary habits of a Catholic childhood in that parish.

A Reflection

Modern life often tells us that only dramatic experiences count: a conversion story, a crisis, a moment that can be posted. Much of a Christian life is formed by smaller things. A Rosary in a pocket. Grace before meals. Sunday Mass. A holy picture. A scapular. A short prayer before work. What small practice is quietly forming me? And if prayer is not forming me, what is? The feed on a phone, the tone of the house, the jokes we repeat, the silence we never keep — these also train a soul. Habits look harmless because they are repeated. That is exactly why they matter.

A short prayer

Lord, teach me the small practices that keep me close to You, and show me what is forming me instead when I neglect them. Amen.

Chapter 6

Karol and Jerzy Kluger

Jerzy Kluger was the son of Wilhelm Kluger, a lawyer and, for a time, president of the Jewish community. The family had a house on the square. There was a radio. Twice a week a string quartet rehearsed there. Karol came to listen. He also came because Jurek was his friend. They played on the cobbles. They invented stories about the town policeman's sword.

Before the war, Karol and Jerzy were school friends in a town where Catholics and Jews lived beside one another. That does not mean the town was without tension. It means the friendship was ordinary and real.

In the autumn of 1939 the synagogue in Wadowice was burned and then blown up. The Jewish community was devastated by the war. Karol's childhood world changed completely. What he kept from the earlier years was a name and a face. The friendship continued later in life, when one of them was in Rome and the other could speak of what the war had done.

Wilhelm Kluger's office sat on a corner of the market square. The Wojtyła stairs sat on another. If Wadowice is remembered only as the Pope's town, the Klugers become extras. They were not extras. They were neighbours and friends.

A Reflection

It is easy to know people first by a label: religion, nationality, politics, class, believer, non-believer. A name comes later, if it comes at all. Before a friend is a category, he is a person who has a house, a family, a joke, a face. It is harder to dismiss a category once the category has a name. Do I know people before I know their label? Or do I decide what they are, and then never have to meet them? The question is not political. It is nearer than that. It is about the next person I am tempted to summarise too quickly.

A short prayer

*Lord, help me to meet people as persons before I sort them into groups.
Amen.*

Chapter 7

School, Theatre and the Hills

The gymnasium of Marcin Wadowita taught Karol languages and the Polish poets. As a schoolboy he played football, sometimes in goal, acted in plays, and spent time walking in the hills around Wadowice. Occupied Kraków would later put him in a clandestine theatre. Wadowice had already put him on a stage in front of neighbours.

Kalwaria Zebrzydowska is a short journey away. It is a landscape of chapels laid out as the Passion and the life of Mary. His father walked him there after Emilia's death. The path gave a grieving boy stations to visit and a way of remaining close to Mary.

He also swam in the Skawa and walked in the ordinary woods around the town. In 1938 he finished school and left with his father for Kraków and the Jagiellonian University. He left Wadowice that year, but the town remained important to him for the rest of his life.

A Reflection

Faith can become a separate room in the house: prayer here, real life there. Then an ordinary good day — a walk, a game, a meal, a book, a laugh — feels as if it has nothing to do with God. Have I made my faith so narrow that I no longer recognise Him in things that are simply human and good? Holiness does not require us to stop playing, learning, resting or enjoying the hills. It does ask whether we have divided the week so sharply that God is allowed only into the religious parts.

A short prayer

Lord, teach me to find You in ordinary good days, not only in the hours I have labelled as prayer. Amen.

Chapter 8

Returning to Wadowice

On 7 June 1979 Karol came home as Bishop of Rome. He stood in Wadowice and said that when he looked back along the path, the surroundings, the parish and the family led him to the font. He kissed the stone.

He came again. In 1999 he asked, with a smile the square still repeats, whether they still made kremówki — the cream slices of his youth. The question has been told so often that it can sound thin. Under the joke is a man who remembered flavour as well as fonts. He wanted the cake still to exist, and he wanted the font still to be used for other children.

The house is a museum now. That is understandable. Pilgrims would wear out a private stair. What the rooms can still show is how small they were: three rooms and a kitchen.

When he spoke later about ordinary parishes, he was speaking from a place he knew. In Wadowice the church was across the street. The priest knew whether you had served that morning.

A Reflection

Life encourages us to move forward, improve, achieve and leave things behind. Then the people who knew us before we were busy become easy to forget. If my life becomes fuller, more successful or more public, which people do I stop calling? Gratitude is not nostalgia. It is the refusal to treat beginnings as embarrassing. A font and a cream cake are not the same kind of memory, but both can say: I have not outgrown the place that made me. Have I become too grown-up to be grateful for ordinary beginnings?

A short prayer

*Lord, keep me grateful for the people and places that formed me,
especially when life becomes busy. Amen.*

Chapter 9

The Sundial on the Church

On the church wall opposite the house is a sundial. It says: Time flees. Eternity waits.

The sundial was not put up for a future pope. It was put up for anyone crossing the square. Visitors notice it now because Karol grew up looking at that church. The words were part of the view from the street and from the windows of the flat.

The rest of his childhood was made of ordinary things: Mass, school, a dead mother, a kneeling father, a Jewish friend, a river, a scapular, a font. The sundial simply named how quickly those years pass.

If you visit, look at the sundial before you look at the souvenir shops. The sentence on the wall is already complete.

A Reflection

Time flees. Eternity waits. We often postpone the things that matter most because they rarely arrive with a deadline. A confession. A phone call. An apology. A visit. A decision. Time with someone we love. We behave as if the people around us will remain indefinitely. They will not. This is not a threat. It is a fact we already know and keep putting down. What am I still postponing because I assume there will be another week? The sundial does not ask us to panic. It asks us not to pretend that later is guaranteed.

A short prayer

Lord, show me what I keep postponing, and give me the courage to do today what love is asking of me. Amen.

Chapter 10

The Town Beyond the Pope

Wadowice was a town shared by many families, not a stage built for one child. Catholics and Jews lived there. Children played on the square. People kept shops, went to school, went to church or synagogue, and buried their dead.

Its memories include joy and grief. Emilia died there. Edmund died as a young doctor. The synagogue was destroyed after the German invasion. The occupation began the year after Karol left for Kraków.

John Paul II is part of the town's history, but he is not the whole of it. Other children were baptised in the same font. Other mothers died. Other friendships crossed the square and were broken by the war.

The parish's first work was the ordinary work of a parish: to baptise, to bury, to teach, and to keep the church close enough to the houses that the bell was part of daily life.

A Reflection

We notice people with titles, platforms, followers and public influence. Most holiness, suffering, faithfulness and love never become public. Whose life have I treated as unimportant because nobody else knows their name? A parent at the sink. A neighbour who is ill. A person who always sits at the back of church. A child who will never be photographed for a booklet. Importance is a poor way of deciding who is worth seeing. The lives that will never become a biography are still the lives God is keeping, and they are usually closer than the famous ones.

A short prayer

*Lord, teach me to notice the people whose lives will never be famous,
and to treat them as if they matter — because they do. Amen.*

Chapter 11

Visiting Wadowice

If you go, begin with the short street between the house and the church. Stand in the Holy Family chapel and look at the font. Then cross to the house and notice how little space there is between the two.

Go into the basilica and find the image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Walk to Górka if you can, where the Carmelites still keep their hill. If the day is longer, Kalwaria Zebrzydowska is the next place worth seeing: the path Karol walked with his father after Emilia died.

Buy a cream cake if you like. Then sit on the square and watch ordinary traffic. The town is still a town. Children who will never be famous are being late for something.

If you cannot go, the same places can still be held in mind: a house, a church, a font, a square, and a parish close enough to form a child.

A Reflection

We can visit a church, a shrine or a beautiful place and spend more time looking through a phone than looking at the place itself. The body arrives. The attention does not. The same thing happens at Mass, at meals, and in conversations we think we are having. When I visit somewhere important, do I actually arrive? The opposite of rushing is not always walking slowly. It is noticing. A town, a person, a prayer, a table — each of them can be passed through without being met. Presence is more than standing in the right room.

A short prayer

Lord, when I am present in body, make me present in attention as well. Amen.

Chapter 12

The People Who Formed Him

Wadowice helps us understand John Paul II in a simple way. He was formed by family, parish, friendships, prayer, school, grief and ordinary life.

His mother taught him to pray and died too soon. His father prayed where the boy could see him and raised him after that death. Edmund died as a young doctor. Father Figlewicz taught him at the altar. Jerzy Kluger was his friend. Our Lady of Perpetual Help was the face he greeted on the way to school. The Carmelites gave him a scapular. The font in the parish church was where his Christian life began.

He never pretended he had invented himself. When he came back as Pope, he pointed to those beginnings. Our lives also begin among people we did not choose and in rooms we did not build.

A Reflection

We did not form ourselves. Someone taught us to pray, or failed to. Someone believed in us, corrected us, fed us, or prayed for us without telling us. Who made me who I am? Then the question turns. Who am I forming now? There may be a child, a neighbour, a parishioner, a colleague watching a life I think is private. Ordinary influence is easy to miss because it does not feel like a vocation. It is one. The people around Karol were not a background. Neither are the people around us.

A short prayer

Lord, thank You for those who formed me. Make me faithful to the people who are now learning from the life I actually live. Amen.

A Last Word

Wadowice mattered to John Paul II because it was where his life began. His family lived there. He was baptised there. He went to school there, served Mass there, made friends there and learned to pray there. When he returned as Pope, he never treated those beginnings as unimportant.

The house, the church, the font and the square are still close together. That is what the town has to show. God still begins lives in ordinary rooms, among people who know a child by name.

Saint John Paul II, pray for us. Emilia and Karol, his parents, pray for us. Our Lady of Perpetual Help, pray for us.

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A word of thanks

If these pages have helped you see Wadowice more clearly, a small 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 tip

*This booklet is designed in A5 format. For best results print double-sided on A5 paper (or print two pages per A4 sheet and cut).
Recommended paper: 80–100 gsm for a pleasant reading feel.*

Written to be read in one or two sittings.