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# **World Youth Day 2016 in Krakow: a homecoming**

## **1. Youth – John Paul’s hope**

I cannot write or speak about the wonderful World Youth Day experience in Krakow during July 2016 without remembering with gratitude the force, power, vision and memory of the founder of these blessed events, Karol Wojtyla. The celebration of World Youth Day in Krakow was really a homecoming, a return to the sources and the very places where a young, Polish priest laid the foundation, sowed the seeds and gave birth to the dreams of young people who would become the beneficiaries of these blessed events since their foundation in Poland, and then in Rome.

Inaugurating his Papal ministry on October 22, 1978, John Paul II, the newly elected Polish Pontiff told young people at his inaugural mass, “You are the hope of the Church and of the world. You are my hope”. John Paul II always loved young people, and believed in ministry and presence to youth. He was on a canoe trip with young people when Pope Pius XII named him bishop in 1958. The external trappings of priesthood and the rank and administrative burdens of the episcopacy would not take him away from

his beloved young people. John Paul II knew deep within that without a love for and presence to young people, the Church would have no future.

He once wrote: “Whenever I meet young people in my travels throughout the world, I wait first of all to hear what they want to tell me about themselves, about their society, about their Church. And I always point out: What am I going to say to you is not as important as what you are going to say to me. You will not necessarily say it to me in words; you will say it to me by your presence, by your song, perhaps by your dancing, by your skits, and finally by your enthusiasm”. A lesson that some of us in Church leadership and ministry should take to heart quickly if we would like to make the Gospel relevant to future generations.

From the beginning of his Pontificate, he insisted on meeting young people whenever he visited Roman parishes or foreign countries. Building on a tradition begun by his predecessor, Paul VI in the twilight years of his reign (1976), John Paul II invited large groups of young people to Rome in 1984 for the Jubilee Year of the Redemption, and in March 1985 for the International Year of Youth, when, on Palm Sunday, he established World Youth Days as a permanent event. “No one invented the World Youth Days. It was the young people themselves who created them”, John Paul II wrote in his 1994 book, *Crossing The Threshold of Hope*. In actual fact, he first sought them out; they then discovered him. Most of the World Youth Days, including ours in Canada in 2002 and the most recent one in Poland, have been something of a surprise for priests and bishops, in that they surpassed all our expectations!

John Paul II enjoyed an incredible popularity with young Catholics. At the World Youth Day in Rome in 2000, he called the young people of the world his “joy and his crown”. In July 2002 in Toronto, he showed us the same. Young people today are experiencing an extreme crisis of fatherhood. I am convinced that they flocked to him because in many cases he was the father they never had and the grandfather who had been so painfully absent in their lives. John Paul II was a rock, a moral compass, and a very demanding friend. He made all of us discover our youthfulness, generosity and joy as he invited us to become salt and light in a world, a society and a culture that is so cynical, so tasteless and so often devoid of the flavor and joy of the Gospel and the light and hope of Christ.

During the 17th World Youth Day's concluding mass at Downsview Park in Toronto on Sunday, July 28, 2002, the Pope spoke deeply personal and touching words to the assembled crowd of over 850,000 people at an event that would be his last World Youth Day on earth, "You are young and the Pope is old and a bit tired. But he still fully identifies with your hopes and aspirations. Although I have lived through much darkness, under harsh totalitarian regimes, I have seen enough evidence to be unshakably convinced that no difficulty, no fear is so great that it can completely suffocate the hope that springs eternal in the hearts of the young. Do not let that hope die! Stake your lives on it! We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his son".

It's not remarkable that the Pope saw his youthful friends as a metaphor of renewal and hope; what's remarkable is that the young people have also seen and understood themselves that way as well. Very few leaders have ever had such an impact on young people as this leader has had. What will be the enduring messages and legacy of John Paul II on the young people who consider themselves to be part of "John Paul II Generation?" I consider myself part of that generation. The Pope, himself, often said, "In the designs of Providence, there are no mere coincidences". Maybe the reason this man became Pope is that he bore messages the world and especially young people needed to hear.

Upon the death of Pope John Paul II in 2002, many asked if World Youth Days would be able to continue without him. The most recent celebration of these blessed, international events was living proof that the seeds had been sown, the dream had been passed on to future generations, and that World Youth Days had become a significant instrument of Catechesis, Evangelization and Church life. No one said this better than the host of World Youth Day 2008 in Australia in the concluding moments of those splendid days Down Under, in the presence of Pope Benedict XVI. In remarks at the concluding Mass of Australia's 2008 World Youth Day, Sydney's Cardinal George Pell, thanking Pope Benedict XVI, said that World Youth Day acts as an antidote to images of Catholicism as in decline or wracked by controversy. "It shows the church as it really is, alive with evangelical energy". Cardinal Pell con-

cluded his address to Pope Benedict XVI at Randwick Race Course with these prophetic and affirming words:

“Your Holiness, the World Youth Days were the invention of Pope John Paul the Great. The World Youth Day in Cologne was already announced before your election. You decided to continue the World Youth Days and to hold this one in Sydney. We are profoundly grateful for this decision, indicating that the World Youth Days do not belong to one pope, or even one generation, but are now an ordinary part of the life of the Church. The John Paul II generation – young and old alike – is proud to be faithful sons and daughters of Pope Benedict”.

## **2. Three unique features of Krakow’s World Youth Day**

I would like to reflect on three unique features of Krakow’s World Youth Day in 2016 that linked us powerfully with the founder of World Youth Days. The three features are: mercy, the Stations of the Cross, and the nightly window appearances of Pope Francis at the Archbishop’s residence in Krakow.

### **2.1. Mercy at the heart of Krakow 2016**

Pope John Paul II’s interest in Divine Mercy goes back to the days of his youth in Krakow when Karol Wojtyla was an eyewitness to so much evil and suffering during World War II in occupied Poland. He witnessed the round ups of many people who were sent to concentration camps and slave labor. In his hometown of Wadowice, he had many Jewish friends who would later die in the Holocaust. During that time of terror and fear, Karol Wojtyla decided to enter Cardinal Sapieha’s clandestine seminary in Krakow. He experienced the need for God’s mercy and humanity’s need to be merciful to one another. While in the seminary, he met another seminarian, Andrew Deskur (who would later become Cardinal), who introduced Karol to the message of the Divine Mercy, as revealed to the Polish mystic nun, St. Maria Faustina Kowalska, who died at the age of 33 in 1938.

At the beginning of his pontificate in 1981, Pope John Paul II wrote an entire encyclical dedicated to Divine Mercy – *Dives in Misericordia* (Rich in Mercy) illustrating that the heart of the mission of Jesus Christ was to reveal the merciful love of the Father. In 1993 when Pope John Paul II beatified Sr. Faustina Kowalska, he stated in the homily for her beatification mass: “Her mission continues and is yielding astonishing fruit. It is truly marvelous how her devotion to the merciful Jesus is spreading in our contemporary world, and gaining so many human hearts!”.

Four years later in 1997, the Holy Father visited Blessed Faustina’s tomb in Łagiewniki, Poland, and preached powerful words: “There is nothing that man needs more than Divine Mercy... From here went out the message of Mercy that Christ Himself chose to pass on to our generation through Blessed Faustina”.

In the Jubilee year 2000, Pope John Paul II canonized Sr. Faustina – making her the first canonized saint of the new millennium – and established “Divine Mercy Sunday” as a special title for the Second Sunday of Easter for the universal Church. Pope John Paul II spoke these words in the homily: “Jesus shows His hands and His side [to the Apostles]. He points, that is, to the wounds of the Passion, especially the wound in His Heart, the source from which flows the great wave of mercy poured out on humanity”.

One year later, in his homily for Divine Mercy Sunday in 2001, the Pope called the message of mercy entrusted to St. Faustina: “The appropriate and incisive answer that God wanted to offer to the questions and expectations of human beings in our time, marked by terrible tragedies... Divine Mercy! This is the Easter gift that the Church receives from the risen Christ and offers to humanity at the dawn of the third millennium”.

Again in Poland in 2002, at the dedication of the new Shrine of Divine Mercy, the Holy Father consecrated the whole world to Divine Mercy, saying: “I do so with the burning desire that the message of God’s merciful love, proclaimed here through St. Faustina, may be made known to all the peoples of the earth, and fill their hearts with hope”.

In his Regina Caeli address of April 23, 2006, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said: “The mystery of God’s merciful love was at the centre of the pontificate of my venerated predecessor”.

## 2.2. Mercy is our hallmark

We must ask ourselves: what is new about John Paul II's message of Divine Mercy? Why did he insist so much on this aspect of God's love in our time? Is this not the same devotion as that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus? Mercy is an important Christian virtue, much different from justice and retribution. While recognizing the real pain of injury and the rationale for the justification of punishment, mercy takes a different approach in redressing the injury. Mercy strives to radically change the condition and the soul of the perpetrator to resist doing evil, often by revealing love and one's true beauty. If any punishment is enforced, it must be for salvation, not for vengeance or retribution. This is very messy business in our day and a very complex message... but it is the only way if we wish to go forward and be leaven for the world today; if we truly wish to be salt and light in a culture that has lost the flavor of the Gospel and the light of Christ.

Where hatred and the thirst for revenge dominate, where war brings suffering and death to the innocent, abuse has destroyed countless innocent lives, the grace of mercy is needed in order to settle human minds and hearts and to bring about healing and peace. Wherever respect for human life and dignity are lacking, there is need of God's merciful love, in whose light we see the inexpressible value of every human being. Mercy is needed to insure that every injustice in the world will come to an end. The message of mercy is that God loves us – all of us – no matter how great our sins. God's mercy is greater than our sins, so that we will call upon Him with trust, receive His mercy, and let it flow through us to others. Essentially, mercy means the understanding of weakness, the capacity to forgive.

Pope Francis travelled to Poland in July 2016 to remind us of God's mercy, tenderness and closeness to us. Whereas Pope John Paul II gave the Church the beautiful devotion and spirituality of Divine Mercy, Pope Francis has spent his Petrine Ministry teaching us how to put that mercy into practice each day. God alone knows how many young people, how many sick, suffering and handicapped persons Pope Francis stopped to touch and bless in the streets of Krakow. He embraced them and loved them. Those who took part in the great celebration of faith and Catholic

life in Krakow will never be the same. They travelled to Krakow as pilgrims. They have been sent forth as disciples and missionaries to share what they have seen and heard.

### 2.3. The Stations of the Cross in Krakow

I shall never forget the very powerful celebration of the Stations of the Cross in Krakow. Having taken part in these celebrations in Rome, Toronto, Cologne, Sydney, Madrid, Rio de Janeiro prior to World Youth Day in Krakow, I always appreciated the devotion, creativity and prayerfulness of these important devotional moments. However there was something absolutely unique about Krakow's Stations. The text for Krakow's devotion was written by Auxiliary Bishop of Krakow Grzegorz Rys, who is a Church historian and responsible for the New Evangelisation in the Polish Episcopal Conference. Each station included new artistic forms that demonstrated the name and content of each station. The forms included modern dance, murals, acrobatics, computer animation, street art, etc.

The carefully chosen groups and organizations featured in Krakow's Via Crucis – the Missionaries of Charity, the Community of Sant'Egidio, Aid to the Church in Need, and others presented each station through the lenses of a work of mercy.

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Mt 25:35–36).

Joined by tens of thousands of participants, Pope Francis presided over the Stations of Cross at Blonia Park this evening at 6:00 pm. In the context of the 31st World Youth Day's message of God's Mercy, the procession intertwined the traditional devotion with elements of reflective works of mercy depicted in artistic demonstrations. Dancers, acrobats, painters and other artists performed interpretations of each key moment leading up to Christ's crucifixion, death and burial.

The meditation took on a very special and unique face of mercy after watching earlier in the day Pope Francis sitting quietly on a bench at Auschwitz Concentration Camp, in penetrating silence and prayer, unit-

ing himself with a suffering humanity – with prisoners who were stripped of their dignity and given poison as food, an event not very different from the Passion of Christ.

Pope Francis reminded the people that, “Without mercy we can do nothing; without mercy, neither I nor you nor any of us can do a thing.” Jesus freely gave himself to humiliation by being stripped of his clothes, to be nakedly exposed to all, we freely received and continue to receive, thus we must freely give. To understand mercy, seven corporal works of mercy were remembered along the Way of the Cross: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and those in prison, and burying the dead. The remaining seven stations depicted the seven spiritual works of mercy: counseling the doubtful, instructing the ignorant, admonishing sinners, consoling the afflicted, pardoning offences, bearing wrongs patiently, praying for the living and the dead.

In his words following this intense and moving event, the Holy Father asked the question: “Where is God, if evil is present in our world, if there are men and women who are hungry and thirsty, homeless, exiles and refugees? Where is God, when innocent persons die as a result of violence, terrorism and war? We can only look to Jesus and ask him”, the Pope said, “and Jesus’ answer is this: “God is in them”. Jesus is in them; he suffers in them and deeply identifies with each of them.”

As Pope Francis departed from Błonia Park on that unforgettable Friday evening, he left the hundreds of thousands of young people present with this message of hope. “Humanity today needs men and women, and especially young people like yourselves, who do not wish to live their lives ‘halfway’, young people ready to spend their lives freely in service to those of their brothers and sisters who are poorest and most vulnerable, in imitation of Christ, who gave himself completely for our salvation,” the Bishop of Rome said.

“The Way of the Cross alone defeats sin, evil and death, for it leads to the radiant light of Christ’s resurrection and opens the horizons of a new and fuller life”.

The Stations of the Cross in Krakow were the most powerful experience of this ancient devotion that I have ever experienced.



## 2.4. From the Window of the Father's House

The Archbishop's palace at Franciszkańska 3 is the second largest residence in Krakow (after Wawel) and has been the residence of Krakow's bishops since it was first built in the 14th century. Today the Palace is most famous for having been the residence of Cardinal Karol Wojtyła from 1958 to 1978, before he was elected Pope. During numerous visits to Krakow as Pope, he would often make evening appearances in what has now been labelled 'papal window' to address the crowds of his followers below – a tradition which Pope Francis continued during his visit for Krakow's World Youth Day. An image of John Paul II usually fills the window (making it easy for tourists to identify), and during anniversaries the area will be decorated with flowers and candles.

Whereas Pope John Paul II's greetings were often filled with much joy, singing and excitement of cheering crowds, Pope Francis' impromptu remarks each evening of Krakow's World Youth Day had a more somber tone. When he returned from his visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau, Pope Francis told the crowd from the window:

"I don't want to make you bitter, but I have to tell the truth. The cruelty of Auschwitz and Birkenau hasn't ended. Even today many people are tortured.... Many prisoners are tortured immediately, in order to get them to talk. It's terrible! Today there are men and women in overcrowded prisons. They live – forgive me – like animals. This cruelty is there today".

Friday wasn't the first time Francis used the window to deliver a somber address. On Wednesday, when he arrived for his July 27–31 visit to Poland, he took this opportunity to talk about Maciej Szymon Cieśla, a graphic design who two years ago quit his job to be a full time volunteer for World Youth Day. On July 2, only weeks before the event began, he died of cancer. "He did a lot of good for everyone," Francis said that day talking about Cieśla. Adding that he didn't want to ruin the mood of celebration, the Pope said that "We must get used to the good things and the bad things. Life is like this, dear young people," he said, while stressing that "there is something we cannot doubt: the faith of this young man, of our friend, who worked so much for this WYD."

Thursday's window address, on the other hand, had a different spirit. He spoke in Spanish, and in particular to the many newlywed couples that were present. To them, he spoke of the "three words" that can help live a married life: "permission, thanks, and forgiveness."

"Permission: always ask the spouse (the wife to the husband, the husband to the wife) what to you think? Never run over. Permission," he said.

On thanks – or being thankful – Francis said the spouses should use this word often. Forgiveness, Pope Francis said, is a word "difficult to pronounce." In a marriage, he said, both the husband and the wife make mistakes, and it's important to recognize this and apologize.

He also told them that even though arguments are bound to happen – with some silverware flying here or there – they must never end the day without making peace.

"You know why? Because the cold war on the next day is very dangerous!"

### 3. Conclusion

World Youth Days have become a part of my life for nearly 20 years. Since 1997, I have followed each of these events closely. The body of teaching emerging from each international celebration offers to the Church a brilliant catechesis and teaching for all involved with young adults. At times, I have wondered about the density of the Papal texts that seem to speak much more to adults than to young people. No doubt that the Holy Spirit works through those texts as well, but the accessibility to previous texts was at times a challenge.

During World Youth Day 2016 in Krakow, I had no concerns whatsoever about the quality of the texts and their ability to reach their target audience: young people. The Pope's words spoke powerfully, directly and clearly to the youth of the world. I heartily congratulate the Polish Organizing Committee, the Bishops of Poland the all who worked with Pope Francis in masterfully weaving together the theme of mercy and issuing profound, stirring challenges to the young people of the world. If any World Youth Day commissioned young people to be missionary dis-

ciples, it was Krakow's edition of World Youth Day! How fitting that this powerful connection would be made in the very places where World Youth Days were born in the mind and heart of Fr. Karol Wojtyla, the boy from Wadowice who would grow up to be a priest and Bishop of Krakow, the Bishop of Rome, and a hero for the ages.

On April 8, 2005, during the globally watched funeral mass of Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger told the world that the Holy Father was watching and blessing us "from the window of the Father's House". In Krakow during Poland's World Youth Day, we all felt again that blessing and gaze, both from heaven and also through the current Bishop of Rome from the window of the Saint's house.

