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Mass in the Shrine of St. John Paul II: continue to write the Gospel with the works of mercy

The shrine to St. John Paul II, where Pope Francis celebrated the votive Mass of Mercy with Polish priests, men and women religious, consecrated persons and seminarians, is the heart of the “Have no fear!” St. John Paul II Centre, built between 2013 and 2015, which also houses the St. John Paul II Museum, an observation tower, a conference centre, a lodging house for pilgrims and a rehabilitation centre. Its white colour is reminiscent of the clay-based minerals and gypsum mined nearby since the eighteenth century, and used for the production of calcinates and caustic soda. Indeed, the “Solvay” sodium carbonate factory where Karol Wojtyla worked during the Second World War was located in the grounds of the Shrine.

Built on two floors, the upper part contains the main church, with six chapels situated around the nave and the presbytery. On the door of the church there is a representation of St. John Paul II, surrounded by the Polish saints he beatified and canonised. On the lower floor there is the church of the relics, octagonal in shape and surrounded by chapels with various themes: the Pope’s Marian devotion, the chapel of the priest with the plaque of the Vatican tomb of St. John Paul II, the Chapel of St. Cunegonda, with the figure of the saint made of salt and the walls with reliefs depicting scenes from the Gospels. In the centre of the Church of the Relics, there is a marble altar with a precious relic of the blood of St. John Paul II, contained in a phial given to Cardinal Dziwisz by the doctors of the Gemelli Hospital. The other objects there include the pectoral cross of St. John Paul II and the tunic he was wearing on 13 May 1981, the day on which the attempt was made on his life. The mosaics in the shrine were produced by the international group of artists of the Centro Aletti (Ezio Aletti Centre for Studies of the Pontifical Oriental Institute), under the direction of Fr. Marko Ivan Rupnik, S.J. The Centro Aletti, located in Rome, is a place for theological and artistic exchange among Eastern and Western Christian traditions, and was founded by St. John Paul II in 1993.

After listening to greetings from the Cardinal Archbishop of Krakow, Francis addressed the two thousand people attended the Mass, reiterating that from the very beginning Jesus wanted an outbound Church that went out into the world, as he did, not to wield power but rather in the form of a slave, and added that Christ asks us to “pack lightly for the journey, to set out renouncing our own security, with Him alone as our strength”.

“The words of the Gospel we have just heard speak to us of a place, a disciple and a book”, began the Pope. “The place is where the disciples gathered on the evening of Easter; we read only that its doors were closed. Eight days later, the disciples were once more gathered there, and the doors were still shut. Jesus enters,

stands in their midst and brings them His peace, the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins: in a word, God's mercy. Behind those closed doors there resounds Jesus' call to His followers: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'.

"Jesus sends. From the beginning, He wants his to be a Church on the move, a Church that goes out into the world. And He wants it to do this just as He did", Francis continued. "He was not sent into the world by the Father to wield power, but to take the form of a slave; He came not 'to be served, but to serve' and to bring the Good News. In the same way, His followers are sent forth in every age. The contrast is striking: whereas the disciples had closed the doors out of fear, Jesus sends them out on mission. He wants them to open the doors and go out to spread God's pardon and peace, with the power of the Holy Spirit.

"This call is also addressed to us. How can we fail to hear its echo in the great appeal of St. John Paul II: 'Open the doors'? Yet, in our lives as priests and consecrated persons, we can often be tempted to remain enclosed, out of fear or convenience, within ourselves and in our surroundings. But Jesus directs us to a one-way street: that of going forth from ourselves. It is a one-way trip, with no return ticket. It involves making an exodus from ourselves, losing our lives for his sake and setting out on the path of self-gift. Nor does Jesus like journeys made halfway, doors half-closed, lives lived on two tracks. He asks us to pack lightly for the journey, to set out renouncing our own security, with Him alone as our strength.

"In other words, the life of Jesus' closest disciples, which is what we are called to be, is shaped by concrete love, a love, in other words, marked by service and availability. It is a life that has no closed spaces or private property for our own use, or at least there shouldn't be. Those who choose to model their entire life on Jesus no longer choose their own places; they go where they are sent, in ready response to the one Who calls. They do not even choose their own times. The house where they live does not belong to them, because the Church and the world are the open spaces of their mission. Their wealth is to put the Lord in the midst of their lives and to seek nothing else for themselves. So they flee the satisfaction of being at the centre of things; they do not build on the shaky foundations of worldly power, or settle into the comforts that compromise evangelisation. They do not waste time planning a secure future, lest they risk becoming isolated and gloomy, enclosed within the narrow walls of a joyless and desperate self-centredness. Finding their happiness in the Lord, they are not content with a life of mediocrity, but burn with the desire to bear witness and reach out to others. They love to take risks and to set out, not limited to trails already blazed, but open and faithful to the paths pointed out by the Spirit. Rather than just getting by, they rejoice to evangelise.

"Secondly, today's Gospel presents us with the one disciple who is named: Thomas. In his hesitation and his efforts to understand, this disciple, albeit somewhat stubborn, is a bit like us and we find him likeable. Without knowing it, he gives us a great gift: he brings us closer to God, because God does not hide from those who seek Him. Jesus shows Thomas His glorious wounds; He makes him touch with his hand the infinite tenderness of God, the vivid signs of how much He suffered out of love for humanity.

"For we who are disciples, it is important to put our humanity in contact with the flesh of the Lord, to bring to Him, with complete trust and utter sincerity, our whole being. As Jesus told St. Faustina, He is happy when we tell Him everything: He is not bored with our lives, which He already knows; He waits for us to tell Him even about the events of our day. That is the way to seek God: through prayer that is transparent and unafraid to hand over to Him our troubles, our struggles and our resistance. Jesus' heart is won over by sincere openness, by hearts capable of acknowledging and grieving over their weakness, yet trusting that precisely there God's mercy will be active.

"What does Jesus ask of us? He desires hearts that are truly consecrated, hearts that draw life from His forgiveness in order to pour it out with compassion on our brothers and sisters. Jesus wants hearts that are open and tender towards the weak, never hearts that are hardened. He wants docile and transparent hearts that do not dissimulate before those whom the Church appoints as our guides. Disciples do not hesitate to ask questions, they have the courage to face their misgivings and bring them to the Lord, to their formators and superiors, without calculations or reticence. A faithful disciple engages in constant watchful discernment, knowing that the heart must be trained daily, beginning with the affections, to flee every form of duplicity in

attitudes and in life.

“The Apostle Thomas, at the conclusion of his impassioned quest, not only came to believe in the resurrection, but found in Jesus his life’s greatest treasure, his Lord. He says to Jesus: ‘My Lord and my God!’. We would do well, today, and every day, to pray these magnificent words, and to say to the Lord: You are my one treasure, the path I must follow, the core of my life, my all.

“The final verse of today’s Gospel speaks of a book: it is the Gospel that, we are told, does not contain all the many other signs that Jesus worked. After the great sign of His mercy, we could say that there is no longer a need to add another. Yet one challenge does remain. There is room left for the signs needing to be worked by us, we who have received the Spirit of love and are called to spread mercy. It might be said that the Gospel, the living book of God’s mercy that must be continually read and reread, still has many blank pages left. It remains an open book that we are called to write in the same style, by the works of mercy we practise. Let me ask you this, dear brothers and sisters: What are the pages of your books like? Are they blank? May the Mother of God help us in this. May she, who fully welcomed the word of God into her life, give us the grace to be living writers of the Gospel. May our Mother of Mercy teach us how to take concrete care of the wounds of Jesus in our brothers and sisters in need, those close at hand and those far away, the sick and the migrant, because by serving those who suffer we honour the flesh of Christ. May the Virgin Mary help us to spend ourselves completely for the good of the faithful entrusted to us, and to show concern for one another as true brothers and sisters in the communion of the Church, our holy Mother.

“Dear brothers and sisters, each of us holds in his or her heart a very personal page of the book of God’s mercy. It is the story of our own calling, the voice of the love that attracted us and transformed our life, leading us to leave everything at His word and to follow Him. Today let us gratefully rekindle the memory of His call, which is stronger than any resistance and weariness on our part. As we continue this celebration of the Eucharist, the centre of our lives, let us thank the Lord for having entered through our closed doors with His mercy, for calling us, like Thomas, by name, and for giving us the grace to continue writing his Gospel of love”.

After imparting his blessing, the Holy Father returned to the archbishopric of Krakow where he lunched with the cardinal archbishop Stanislaw Dziwisz and twelve young people of various nationalities (a boy and a girl from each continent, and a Polish boy and girl).