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## **Reflections on World Youth Day**

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Last month I had the privilege of travelling to the city of Krakow in Poland for the great Catholic celebration of World Youth Day, a nearly weeklong festival of faith called and presided over by Pope Francis. Please indulge me as I share a few memories and impressions from this remarkable journey.

I know that many of us were drawn to Krakow by the life and witness of Pope St. John Paul II, the “founder” of World Youth Day. After his election as Pope in 1978, John Paul II became a national hero in Poland, and his memory is still revered, especially in Krakow. Young Karol Wojtyla grew into adulthood in Krakow, and I was able to visit the humble apartment that he shared with his father until he entered the seminary.

I also visited the Cathedral chapel where the newly ordained Father Wojtyla celebrated his First Mass in 1946. And we walked the streets and visited the churches where he preached and served as a priest and bishop, even under the yoke of communist oppression.

John Paul II constantly defended the rights of all people to live out their faith in God freely and openly. He challenged the authorities who sought to eradicate God and religion from public life, and he would not allow them to erase the Catholic heritage of Polish history and culture. For an entire generation of the faithful throughout the world, Pope St. John Paul II was a hero of strength, compassion and fidelity to Jesus Christ. Even now, eleven years after his death, he calls us to holiness, to union with God, wherein we find our truest selves. He stills cries out as he did in the first days of his pontificate: “Do not be afraid to open wide the doors to Christ.”

Krakow is also the home of the Shrine of Divine Mercy. In the 1930s, just before the start of World War II, a young Polish nun by the name of Sister Maria Faustina Kowalska received extraordinary revelations from our Lord, reminding us that God’s mercy is abundant and always available to those who would seek it.

In the face of the horrors of war and tyranny that Poland would see in the years to come, this message of Divine Mercy was especially timely. Without God’s mercy, we are lost, but with his mercy we can abide in his love forever. I was able to visit the tomb of St. Faustina in her convent chapel, and sensed the hand of God’s providence who raised up this unknown Polish sister to renew the faith of millions in God’s Divine Mercy.

In the midst of all the exuberance and joy of World Youth Day was a sobering tour of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Auschwitz-Birkenau is a short drive from the city of Krakow, so it seemed imperative to me to see this infamous place that is synonymous with cruelty and hatred. It is difficult to fully comprehend the magnitude of the crimes of Auschwitz, but the tour made it clear that when we banish God from our culture and forget the dignity of every human person, terrible things will result. Auschwitz is a place of overwhelming sadness, but there is one spot that actually inspires.

In one of the cell blocks, St. Maximillian Kolbe gave his life for another prisoner. Maximillian might have seemed, in the eyes of his captors, to be a weakling, a fool or just crazy. But by stepping forward and offering his life, he demonstrated quite the opposite. He had greater power than anyone there who was holding a gun. He had the power of mercy, the power of love, the power of Christ. He gave his life, and he saved a life. Maximillian Kolbe shows us that the grace of God’s mercy can penetrate even the darkest of places.

The faith of the Polish people is itself an inspiration. Poland has experienced great suffering over the centuries, most recently during the Nazi occupation and then under the iron heel of atheistic communism. But throughout those dark times, the faith burned brightly in the hearts of ordinary Poles. Countless bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful were imprisoned or martyred in that sad era, but the faith endured and remains strong today.

In our own nation, we can learn a lesson from those who sacrificed so much to remain true to our Lord and the Church he founded. A key figure in that heritage of faith is our Blessed Mother Mary, venerated in Poland as Our Lady of Czestochowa. The shrine of Mary at Czestochowa is often called the heart of Poland, and millions pray there every year before an ancient icon of Mary. I was blessed to celebrate Mass with a group of bishops and pilgrims in the shrine chapel, and I was deeply moved by the devotion to Mary that I witnessed.

Within this setting, Pope Francis came to pray and celebrate with over a million young people from around the world. The universality of the Church was on full display, and it was amazing to see and hear the energy and enthusiasm of young people from every corner of the globe. They came to meet Jesus Christ and to experience his love for them, and they had a great time along the way. I had some delightful conversations with young people from the U.S., Ireland, Singapore, France and Poland, and I was deeply impressed with their joy and the depth of their faith.

Some have questioned whether the World Youth Days have made a difference in the life of the Church. But from my experience, this event is an occasion for great hope. When so many young Catholics from around the world come together in peace to pray and enjoy each other's company, the Church and the world are better for it.

A highlight of the pilgrimage for me was the opportunity to celebrate Mass for all the pilgrims from the Diocese of Fargo at the Church of the Transfiguration in Krakow. Three different groups from our diocese made this trip, totaling almost 130 young people and adults. It was wonderful to pray with all of them gathered together, and I was extremely proud of them for making this journey. World Youth Day is not a vacation, and it certainly entails some hardship and sacrifice. But it was inspiring to see this group of the faithful from North Dakota praying and celebrating the great gifts of faith and God's mercy. I know their experience will be a blessing to our diocese for a long time to come.

Finally, I share a few words of encouragement that Pope Francis spoke to the gathered youth: "Following Jesus demands a good dose of courage, a readiness to trade in the sofa for a pair of walking shoes and to set out on new and uncharted paths.... Jesus can give you true passion for life. Jesus can inspire us not to settle for less but to give the very best of ourselves. Jesus challenges us, spurs us on and helps us keep trying whenever we are tempted to give up. Jesus pushes us to keep our sights high and to dream of great things."

May we all keep our sights high and reach for great things. May we reach for Jesus.