

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday Easter (C)

2<sup>nd</sup> June 2019

‘Saints, building on saints’

Acts 7: Stephen sees Jesus in the glory of God

Ps 96: *For You indeed are the Lord most high above all the earth*

Apoc 22: *Come, Lord Jesus*

Jn 17: 20–26: *may they be so completely one ...*

I’ve spent the past week in Poland, with parishioners from here and other local parishes, on pilgrimage to sites of religious significance in and around Kraków, the former capital city of Poland. It was a very blessed week, and, as I tried to sum up the week, yesterday, as we drew our pilgrimage to a close, I found myself drawn to threading the days together through a recollection of the saints whose lives had touched us through the week.

Our day trip on Tuesday to the Polish national shrine of Our Lady, Częstochowa, meant a deeply moving experience of Our Blessed Mother — her ancient icon venerated with such fervour there over 600 or more years. We celebrated the feasts of the Pope St Paul VI, the Ascension, the Visitation (of Mary to Elizabeth), and St Justin, during our days away, so naturally they were a part of our journey too. But it was really the panoply of saints and martyrs of Poland that impacted most on us, I think.

1. We began and ended our pilgrimage with Mass in the heart of Kraków’s exquisite main square: the ancient site of the first church in Kraków, a chapel dedicated to **St Wojciech**, the 10<sup>th</sup>-c. bishop and missionary to Poland from Prague.
2. We visited the impressive cathedral of Kraków on Wawel Hill, alongside the royal castle on its imposing promontory above the river, the cultural and spiritual heart of Poland for centuries, and still. At that cathedral we paused at the shrines of **St Stanislaus** and **St Jadwiga** — St Stanislaus the 11<sup>th</sup>-c. bishop of Kraków martyred rather like St Thomas à Becket in our land a century later, at the behest of the king; and St Jadwiga the 14<sup>th</sup>-c. monarch of Poland, who lived a most devout life, and whose remains lie today beneath the great black crucifix before which she would often pray.
3. We went, too, to the great salt mines south of the city, and learnt of **St Kinga**, another saint of Polish royal stock, who was a woman of immense charity in the 13<sup>th</sup> c., and when widowed gave herself to the life of a Poor Clare nun. She is the patron saint of the salt miners, and the vast chapel (100m underground) in the complex of mines is dedicated to her: its central sculpture in the rock salt is of St Kinga.
4. We faced solemnly the horrors of the Auschwitz

concentration camp where c. 1.5m people met horrific deaths in the 2<sup>nd</sup> WW, and we came face to face with the heroic, saintly, figures of **Edith Stein** and **Fr Maximilian Kolbe** — they endured the darkness of Auschwitz’s evils with the light of Christian faith. Franciscan friar, Fr Maximilian, gave his life in 1941 in a starvation cell to save a fellow prisoner, a husband and father, from going to that same fate.

5. And in the Kraków suburbs, at the Divine-Mercy shrine, we venerated **St Faustina Kowalska**, the former penniless housemaid, who became the the nun and visionary to whom God granted the mission of promoting the Divine Mercy devotions, and whose cause was promoted so valiantly by the former Archbishop of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła, himself a towering saint ... **Pope St John Paul II**.
6. In fact, it was ‘in the footsteps of Pope St John Paul’ that our whole pilgrimage was conducted: he who had spent 40yrs of his life — from university student of literature, to manual labourer, to underground seminarian, to priest, bishop and archbishop — in that city of Kraków, after his childhood years in Wadowice, which we also visited.

My point in this litany of Polish saints is this: that whilst we honour the greatness of Pope St John Paul II (‘the Great’),

and rightly so, he of all people would acknowledge that he stood on the shoulders of those saints and martyrs — and countless holy others — who had gone before him. Surely, this is always the case in the Church, that we venerate the saints and martyrs precisely because they passed on the foundations of our own faith to us ... John Paul was ‘Great’ because he lived in the unity of faith that had stirred queens and housemaids to do great things in the name of the Lord.

We heard in the 1<sup>st</sup> Reading the account of the martyrdom of the first Christian saint, the deacon St Stephen. Ever since that day, saints and martyrs have been building up the Church. Every generation in the Church looks back on its saints, both those ancient and those new, in order to draw strength to keep the faith. We must do the same. As we honour saints of our own lifetime — giants, even, such as John Paul the Great — we know that their faith was learnt from others, was drawn from holy families, devout parishes, heroic lovers of Jesus Christ. Let us love our saints, St Stephen onwards, and implore their prayers: that we stay strong, keep the faith, teach holiness to others.