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Building from the heart in Nowy Sącz... A story about the commemoration of John Paul II

In the South of Poland, along the Dunajec river, one finds the town of Nowy Sącz. This town of eighty thousand residents lies just 120km away from Wadowice, John Paul II's birthplace. We share the same range of mountains, the Carpathians, a common culture and the region - Małopolska.

Visiting the centre of Nowy Sącz, in particular the Municipal Park, one can come across an unusual tree. It was planted in 1918 by the residents of Nowy Sącz to commemorate the re-emergence of Poland on the map of Europe following more than a century of enslavement under the partitions. "The Oak of Freedom," as it called, has grown big and it was in this place that in 2005, the residents of Nowy Sącz decided to honour the person, the life and the works of Pope John Paul II, the son of Małopolska, our father – the Highlander. And this is how Peter's Rock, torn out of the Dunajec river-bed, appeared in the Municipal Park...

In 1978, the year when two conclaves took place, the Pope from Poland assumed the papal throne. Karol Wojtyła, born in Wadowice, in the Province of Małopolska, became John Paul II. His pontificate was a milestone in the history of the Catholic Church, Europe and the whole world. His death constituted an unfathomable loss to his compatriots. On April 2, 2005, at 9:37 pm, when the heart of John Paul II stopped beating, people all over Poland wanted to face this loss together. So was the case with the residents of Nowy Sącz. The idea of creating a local movement was inspired by a tide of intense emotions and the need to seek the community, which, for the years to come, will be remembered as a unique phenomenon accompanying the last days of John Paul II's life and his extraordinary presence in the first days following his death. The shock and pain caused by the Pope's passing away were intertwined with a need to experience the mourning together, in a community, as well as with a wish to create something

to prove our dedication to and our respect for this greatest of Poles. We started thinking about how to commemorate John Paul II in our town on the Dunajec River.

As soon as April 14, 2005, a founding meeting took place to create a movement called the BUILT FROM THE HEART Social Initiative. In the presence of the councillors of Nowy Sącz, representatives of non-governmental organisations and various people who wanted to join this initiative, the programme objectives were presented. The objectives emphasized the gratitude to God for the gift of the late Pope's great pontificate as well as obligations arising from the specific highlanders' kinship which we, Southern Małopolska residents, shared with Karol Wojtyła. The main goals before the Initiative included prayer for John Paul II which he had requested in his testament, as well as the undertaking of various actions which inspired human solidarity, served the development of spiritual life, introduced religious, philosophical and humanistic motifs in education, served to increase our sensitivity to beauty and finally, actions which were aimed at symbolically commemorating the person of John Paul II and his presence in the land of Nowy Sącz. *Great works originate from the greatness of hearts and their needs. Therefore, we call our initiative 'BUILT FROM THE HEART,'* these words were written in the founding charter. Four associations from Nowy Sącz, namely, Klub Inteligencji Katolickiej [Catholic Intelligentsia Club], Towarzystwo Gimnastyczne Sokół [Sokół Gymnastic Society], Związek Sądeczan [Nowy Sącz Residents' Union] and Civitas Christiana, were the main signatories of the charter. Also two non-governmental institutions namely KANA Catholic Youth Education Society and SOKÓŁ Małopolska Culture Centre, joined the initiative, with the latter providing a venue for meetings and celebrations organised by the BUILT FROM THE HEART Social Initiative.

The main goal of the Initiative was to preserve the memory of the person and spiritual heritage of John Paul II among the town residents by delving into his teachings, and reflecting on the words which he had uttered in various corners of the world, in particular, those words addressed to Poles during his pilgrimages to his homeland. As a response to this need a special project titled "Don't forget about me – John Paul II" was launched, consisting in organising gatherings on the second day of each month. The feelings of longing and sorrow inspired by the death of our Pope could only be alleviated by the hope for his near beatification. The BUILT FROM THE HEART Social Initiative resolved that its members would be praying on a regular basis for this intention. This plan was welcomed by Rev. Jan Siedlarz, parish priest from St. Casimir's Parish who offered his spiritual

support. Father Siedlarz participated in the initiative from its very beginnings; he was its chaplain and he himself initiated several actions.

It was felt that a place was needed where Nowy Sącz residents could meet and which would commemorate John Paul II. The Initiative members felt that the late Pope should also be commemorated by a symbolic act to emphasise his role and contribution to our lives as well as to serve as the sign of his constant presence in our thoughts. Therefore, the idea to use a boulder taken from the Dunajec river-bed, along which Karol Wojtyła must have passed on one of his canoeing trips which he so colourfully described during his visit to Stary Sącz, was enthusiastically received. At the same time, the place where the boulder was chosen to be laid, was equally symbolic as the boulder itself. The boulder was to be laid in the Municipal Park in Nowy Sącz next to the Oak of Freedom planted in 1918. John Paul II, who helped Poland regain its independence, who contributed to the ending of the communist enslavement of our minds and who provided enormous support, was the rock upon which we could build our dreams of freedom.

The rock, weighing twenty tonnes, was taken from the Dunajec river on June 5, 2005. A day later, it was transported to the Municipal Park and laid at its designated place in a complicated operation. The date of its unveiling was scheduled for June 15, 2005 to coincide with the sixth anniversary of the late Pope's historic visit to Stary Sącz. The ceremony started with an opening of an unusual exhibition at SOKÓŁ Art Gallery consisting of more than 200 private photographs belonging to Nowy Sącz residents and documenting their meetings with John Paul II. In the evening, the rock was officially unveiled in the Municipal Park. When the veil was removed, the audience gathered at the ceremony could see the Boulder bearing an unusual inscription: "And we have come back to Sącz again." These words had a symbolic meaning to the members of the Initiative because they had been uttered by John Paul II in Stary Sącz while he reminisced about his past hiking and canoeing trips in the area of Nowy Sącz. This quotation emphasised that here, in Nowy Sącz, we felt an everlasting unity with the greatest of Poles. Thus, since June 16, 2005, Nowy Sącz has had a place where one can come to remember our Pope, to pray for a while and to feel his presence. When one looked at this rock, one was reminded of the words "You are Peter, the rock." This may have been the reason why the residents of Nowy Sącz soon started calling it Peter's Rock...

The first meetings in the series "Don't forget about me – John Paul II" had taken place before Peter's Rock was laid in the Municipal Park, namely on May 2 and June 2, 2005. They proceeded according to the previously planned agenda

and were initiated by a holy mass at St. Casimir's Church with the special prayer intention being the beatification of John Paul II. Next, there were presentations related to the teachings and works of John Paul II. Each month, a new guest was invited who discussed topics related to the person, teachings and testimony of the Pope. Among the guests who appeared at these meetings were Marek Lasota of the Institute of National Remembrance, Father Krzysztof Ołdakowski from the religious programmes desk at the Polish national TV, numerous Catholic journalists and activists of social movements inspired by the teachings of John Paul II. Thanks to this project, residents of Nowy Sącz had an opportunity to listen to the unusual personal testimonies of Wanda Półtawska, who had been a long-time friend of Karol Wojtyła, and of Adam Bujak, a renowned photographer who had documented in his photographs many important events concerning the Pope. These meetings were always accompanied by an artistic part. Developing spirituality by making people more sensitive to beauty and richness of expressions had always been of vital importance to John Paul II, who was himself a poet and an actor. These meetings were also occasions to remember important historic events. In September 2005, a philosophical symposium "On the Essence of Solidarity" was held. In order to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the founding of the 'Solidarity' movement, the Initiative chose a quotation from the teachings of the spiritual father of Solidarity: "There is no Freedom without solidarity." This inscription was positioned at the base of Peter's Rock on which candles have been burning since then.

Jasna Góra Appeals held at Peter's Rock in the conclusion of the monthly meetings developed into another beautiful and touching tradition. Nowy Sącz residents prayed together in that venue until 9:37 P.M. as many as seventy-four times. Every month, a group consisting of from twenty to several hundred people gathered there. The singing of the Jasna Góra Appeal followed by the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, the reading of excerpts from John Paul II's works, the prayer for the beatification of John Paul II and the blessing by our chaplain and the singing of "Barka", the late Pope's favourite song – all of these had soon become a ritual. For many people these meetings at the foot of Peter's Rock became an important element of their spiritual lives. Everyone welcomed the participation of children who were brought regularly by their parents or grandparents to these meetings even in harsh weather conditions. All the adults present showed the children a lot of warmth probably hoping that they would remember their joint prayer and that one day they would continue the work initiated by the BUILT FROM THE HEART Initiative.

At the very beginning, it was assumed that the monthly meetings on the second day of each month would continue only for a year until the first anniversary of the Pope's death. However, when the year passed and it became clear that we would have to wait longer for the beatification, which we had naively expected to happen "subito", the members of the Initiative resolved to continue the meetings until the moment John Paul II would be beatified. No one knew then how long it would take but we managed to keep our resolve!

During the subsequent five years of regular meetings, year after year, month after month, the Initiative managed to implement many various projects. The most important and the most satisfying was a series of events accompanying the anniversaries of the Pope's death. Every year, the BUILT FROM THE HEART Initiative invited the Nowy Sącz population to participate in interesting cultural events. These events included, for example, Mozart's "Requiem" performed by the Lviv Choir and Orchestra, the presentation of the works of Leszek Mądzik, an eminent Polish theatre director, and "Job", based on the play by Karol Wojtyła, performed by "Woskresinnie" Theatre from Lviv. Several memorable concerts were also held including "The Roman Triptych", the poetry by John Paul II in Stanisław Soyka's rendition.

There were also other initiatives and projects. In 2006, the BUILT FROM THE HEART Initiative printed the Letter of John Paul II to Children, in which the Head of the Roman Catholic Church addressed the youngest generation for the first time in history. The booklet, published on the International Children's Day celebrated on June 1, was distributed among all schoolchildren and nursery school children in Nowy Sącz. The publication was illustrated by drawings – the winners of the drawing competition for children organised by the Initiative together with a local daily *Dziennik Polski*.

The year 2007 saw the emergence of a new tradition related to Palm Sunday. Crepe paper flowers and ribbons, which are elements of Easter decorative palms from the Nowy Sącz region, reminded the Initiative members of Zofia Flisówna, a prominent resident of Nowy Sącz who used to decorate VIPs arriving in Nowy Sącz with hand-made straw-and-crepe paper compositions. Bearing this in mind, we decided to name – in her memory – the campaign of 'planting' the colourful Easter decorative palms around Peter's Rock. Since then, every year on Palm Sunday, the Zofia Flisówna Palm Forest has grown in this place.

In the patriotic and historical spirit, the BUILT FROM THE HEART Initiative managed to revive an old tradition of the communal singing of patriotic songs around the Oak of Freedom on the Independence Day. During the Christmas season, the Initiative always held carol singing sessions in this place during

which carollers wished one another Merry Christmas and sang the most beautiful Polish carols.

We will also remember joint trips: in May 2006, Nowy Sacz residents travelled to Rome to pray at the tomb of John Paul II. In 2009, we visited Vilnius to pay tribute to Saint Casimir, the patron saint of the parish which, from the very start, had assumed spiritual protection over the Initiative and provided various kinds of support.

Finally, the long-awaited day came when Benedict XVI signed the decree recognising the miracle obtained through the intercession of John Paul II and scheduled the beatification date for May 1, 2011. Members of the BUILT FROM THE HEART Initiative rejoiced at this fact believing that their persistent prayers provided a substantive contribution to the overall exclamation “santo subito”. The Initiative decided to organise a pilgrimage to Rome for the beatification ceremony. Naturally, not everyone could travel. But those who stood on St. Peter’s Square on that special day, prayed for all those people who had attended the meetings at Peter’s Rock, including those Initiative members who had passed away. It is difficult to express with words the spiritual experiences and emotions inspired by the participation in the beatification celebrations. Each person experienced this event in their own individual way despite the fact that we found ourselves in a huge multinational crowd. This gathering of people who had arrived from all over the world to pay homage to our countryman, was a visible sign of the popularity of his cult. Our hearts were filled with hope, verging on the certainty, that in the near future the Catholic Church and then the whole world would address John Paul II as a saint.

The world, which admired John Paul II and which reveres him today, is looking at us – the late Pope’s compatriots. It is up to us how we will remember him. The way future generations, those who will not have been fortunate enough to have witnessed his life also depends on our attitude towards the heritage of the Pope from Małopolska. This is our great task. There is a group of people in Nowy Sacz who created the BUILT FROM THE HEART Initiative and inspired it by their dedication. By doing so, they have proved that inspiring values trigger a potential in people which we can and want to use well.