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## **The Holy Mount of Grabarka – the Heart of the Polish Orthodox Church**

**T**here is a long pilgrimage tradition among the faithful of the Orthodox Church in Poland. Like in the whole Orthodox world such religious journeys in Poland have been related to icon revelations (especially of the Virgin Mary) and to the worship of local saints. In many cases the object of worship has been related to monasteries or hermitages.

Today the Orthodox Church has one international centre, i.e. Grabarka, one national centre, i.e. Jableczna and about 15 regional centres. Almost all sanctuaries are located within the borders of the historical area of Podlasie, and especially around the city of Białystok. Each year over 100 thousand Orthodox faithful participate in pilgrimages to worship centres in Poland, which makes almost 15% of all Orthodox Church believers. Main indulgence ceremonies and church fetes in all centres attract considerable numbers of pilgrims.

The biggest and the most important pilgrimage centre (of international significance) of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church is the Holy Mount of Grabarka called the Częstochowa (Polish centre of the Virgin Mary's worship) of the Orthodox Church or a Hill of the Penitent. It is often described as "the most miraculous of miraculous places for the Polish Orthodox Church." The Holy Mount of Grabarka (170 m above sea level) is situated in Podlasie Voivodship, in the southern part of Northern Podlasie Lowland [Nizina Północno Podlaska] on Drohicka Plateau, 2 kilometres south-east of the village of the same name. It lies between two historic towns of Mielnik and Drohiczyń. From the point of view of jurisdiction, this sanctuary belongs to Siemiatycze district of Warsaw-Bielsko Archdiocese of the Polish Autocephalic Orthodox Church. The sanctuary consists of the Orthodox church dedicated to Our Lord's Transformation, a convent dedicated to Sisters Martha and Mary (1947), the winter Orthodox church dedicated to Our Lady, a Helper and Guardian (1956), as well as the cemetery.

The centre has considerably grown in importance since the World War II, though the place's sacredness has been well established in the Eastern Church believers' consciousness for centuries. One should therefore remember that betwe-

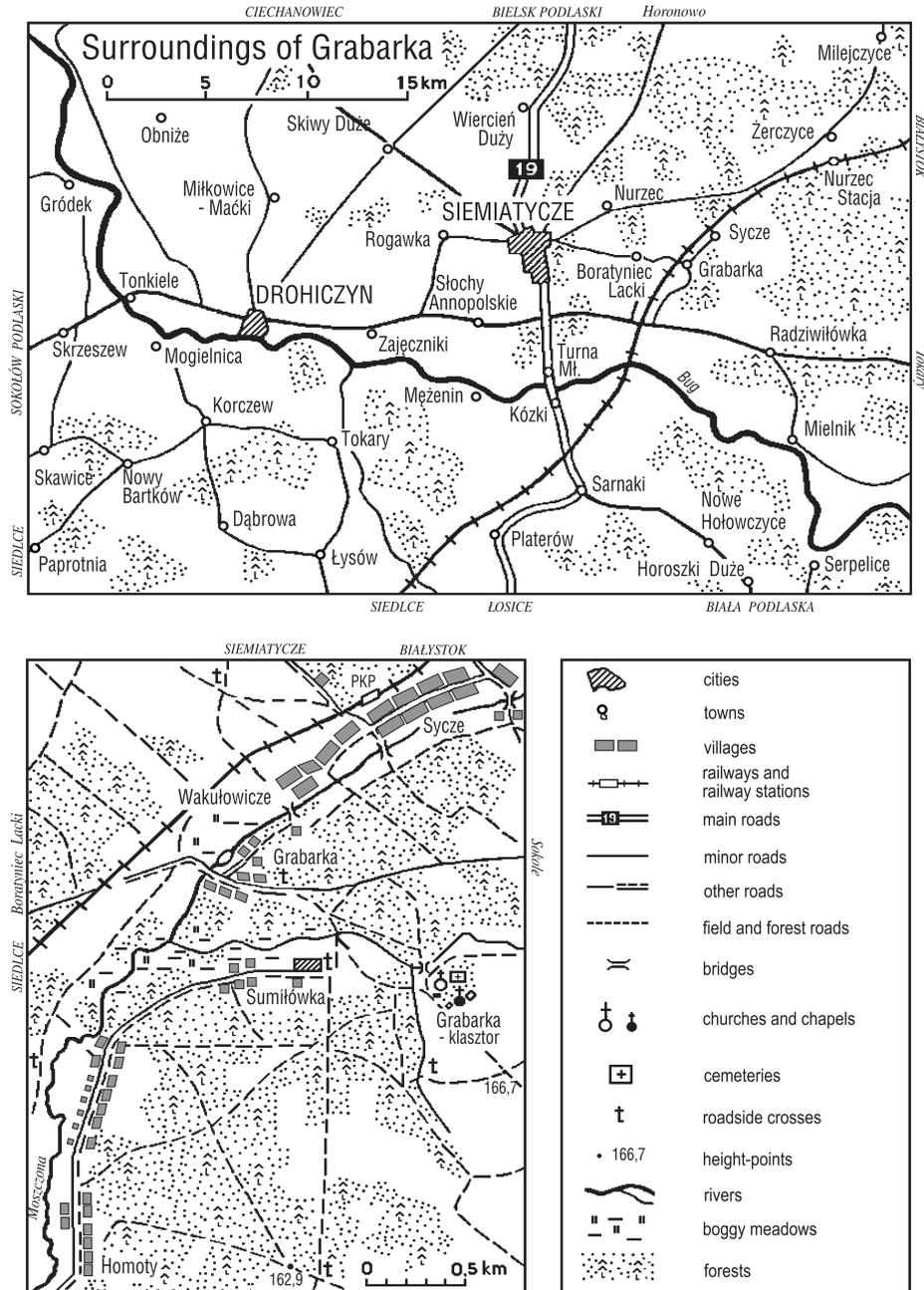


Fig. 1  
Surroundings of Mountain Grabarka

en World War I and II the Orthodox Church had numerous sanctuaries within the borders of the Second Republic of Poland that were located a /o in Poczajów, Żyrowice, Jabłeczna, Korc near Żytomierz, and earlier, before World War I also in Wirów near Sokołów Podlaski, in Supraśl or in Turkowice. Between World War I and II there were 9 monasteries and 5 convents. In the pre-war Poland there were about 5 million Orthodox Church believers. After World War II some of the sanctuaries found themselves in the East, i.e. on the grounds taken over by the Soviet Union, some other ones were closed down. Hence the greater importance of the centres remaining within the Polish borders. In such circumstances the Holy Mount of Grabarka gained special meaning.

After the war the number of the Orthodox Church believers dropped to about 250 thousand in 1954. Today there are 600 thousand of them. Only one monastery remained in the post-war Poland and it was the one in Jabłeczna. Hence the decision to create a convent that was opened in 1947 on the Holy Mount of Grabarka (up to 1993 this was the only Orthodox convent in Poland). From the moment it was established on service has been held here every day. The faithful believe it is thanks to the service, which at times gathers crowds of pilgrims that the pilgrimage tradition was revived among the Orthodox believers in Poland. The morning service starts at five and lasts four hours. It covers morning prayers, canonical hours and the holy Liturgy. The lives of the saints are read always at lunch. In the evening there is an evening service. Before the nuns go to rest they read evening prayers and they all ask mutual forgiveness of their faults. Apart from Friday and Wednesday the nuns fast also on Monday which is a day of angels and all heavenly hosts. The nuns never eat meat. The congregation is based on St. Basil the Great's rule.

The date and circumstances of the Holy Mount sanctuary's foundation are not really known. There are two parallel traditions related to the fact. One is connected to the worship of the miraculous icon of Christ the Saviour. The tradition says the icon (no longer in existence) used to be kept on the Mount of Grabarka for centu-



Fig.2  
Major Orthodox pilgrimage centres in Poland

ries. Let us mention that the beginnings of Christianity in this area were closely related to the Eastern order and influenced by Ruthenian – Byzantine culture. Christianity reached Podlasie first via the State of Kiev. At the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries the land was in the hands of Ruthenian dukes. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century Ruthenian settlements sprang up between the rivers of Bug and Narew. The towns of Drohiczyn, Mielnik, Bielsk and Suraz became important Eastern Christian Church centres. Since the area played a significant role in the development of the Orthodox Church the historians of the Church suggest that it is not a coincidence that the Holy Mount is located just here. The Orthodox Church faithful believe that the beginnings of the place date back to the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. A legend of that time mentions a Virgin Mary Orthodox church existing already in 1240 in the nearby town of Mielnik (about 30 km south-east of today's Mount of Grabarka). In the church there was a miraculous icon allegedly fished out from the River of Bug. The icon depicts the Transfiguration of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Let us remember that in the Eastern tradition the Holiday of Christ's Transfiguration is celebrated particularly solemnly. It is one of "the twelve great holidays" of the year. In 1259 the land was invaded by the Tartars who destroyed settlements and robbed and murdered people. At that time the faithful gathered at the miraculous icon to beg for rescue. Even King Daniel of Halich with his court came then to the icon of Christ the Saviour. The townsmen escaping from the Tartars found shelter in the Mielnicka Primeval Forest. They took the miraculous icon with them. The legend goes on to say that the icon was miraculously carried to the Mount of Grabarka and hidden there. In effect there are suppositions that there must have been a monastery or a hermitage at Grabarka at the time. The hypothesis concerning the miraculous icon's being kept here is indirectly corroborated by the fact that the Orthodox church erected here got the name of the Transfiguration of Christ and the holiday of Christ the Saviour has for centuries been the major indulgence fete celebrated in the sanctuary. Moreover, there is no doubt that in 14<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the worship of the icon of the Saviour was very popular along the banks of the River of Bug. The lot of the miraculous icon itself is not known. The image has probably vanished. But the grace of God is still present at the Holy Mount of Grabarka.

The other tradition says the centre dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is related to the cholera epidemic that broke out in the nearby Siemiatycze in 1710 (historians point rather to the plague epidemic that smote Polish land at the time, brought by the troops fighting in the Northern War of 1700-1721). Thus a citizen of the town of Siemiatycze, a member of the Uniate Church, is said to have had a vision while asleep from which he found out that he could be saved from death if he made a great cross and carried it to the nearby hill and if he drank water from the spring up there. The local rector took his parishioner's dream for God's revelation and brought the townsmen up the hill covered with pine trees. There was a stream at the foot of the hill. Those who drank of the water did not die of cholera. They were the only survivors from the epidemic. To thank God for the salvation and for his grace the faithful built an Uniate church at the site and called it a Chapel of

Christ the Saviour. Today it is difficult to establish what and to what extent influenced the selection of the place as one famous for miracles. Should it be true that in the old days people used to bury the victims of Tartar invasions and of the epidemic here, the mountain became a place where prayers for the dead were offered. In this way it became a sacred place and the local people still believe in the past existence of a worship centre here. An analysis of many legends of Podlasie area provides us with certain motifs – prophecies that played an important role in the creation of the places of worship. It is usually a mountain – a place of revelation – with some typical attributes like water, stream – a symbol of purity, purification from sins, and cross as a symbol of Christ's Passion. It was a desolate area at the time. Archaeological research and historical sources point to the fact that up till the 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> century there were no settlements in the vicinity of the today's Mount Grabarka. The first document to mention a chapel on Grabarka dates back only to 1789 and it concerns the then newly erected structure in the place of the old temple. The village of Grabarka from which the Holy Mount and the Uniate church derive their name was probably set up at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Its name stems from the Ruthenian word "*hrabar*" – digger, gravedigger.



The Holy Mount of Grabarka  
– the New Orthodox Church

In 1789 the old Uniate church was replaced by a new sacred building. Until the liquidations by the Brest Union in 1839 the church was a branch of a Uniate Church parish in Siemiatycze. After 1839 the temple became the property of the Orthodox Church. However, it was gradually falling into disrepair. Its renovation and extension was done only between the years 1884-1895. Already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Holy Mount was a famous worship centre which gathered numerous believers, especially during the Transfiguration Holiday. It was at that time that the tradition of pilgrimage with penitent crosses was established. Hence the other name of the place: the Hill of the Penitent. Both the faithful of the Latin and the Eastern order took part in the pilgrimages during the Transfiguration Holiday. The votive crosses they brought, varying in size, were consecrated and put down around the temple. They gave rise to the present "forest of crosses." Thus the crosses became

a characteristic differentiating symbol of Grabarka. Between World War I and II the Orthodox church on the Hill of the Penitent played the role of a chapel for the cemetery that existed here already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1947, after the convent was set up, the church became its temple. In 1982 a parish was established at the convent and it encompassed 9 neighbouring villages. Unfortunately the historic Orthodox church was put on fire on July 12, 1990 and it burnt to the ground. A rich collection of icons (a / o an icon of the Holy Trinity of the 17<sup>th</sup> century), an the altar of the Holy Trinity dating back to the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as well as liturgical books were all burnt. The bells melted. The only object to be rescued was a Baroque Evangelarium of 1735 printed in Moscow, the most valuable book on Grabarka, and the icon of St. Nicholas the Wonder-Worker. The same year, during the Transfiguration Holiday on August 19, a cornerstone was laid under a new church which was rebuilt as a brick building. The Catholics joined the Orthodox community in the effort to reconstruct the temple. Pope John Paul II did also donate some funds for the purpose. The church's reconstruction was a difficult task as there was no complete documentation of the object. The new Orthodox church is thus not an accurate "repetition" of the old one. It is just its "approximation." The outer appearance of the church changed little. To refer to the architecture of the old church the outer new brick walls were covered with wood.

South of the Holy Mount's top, behind the "forest of crosses" there is a monastic complex of St. Martha and Magdalene's monastery. The small wooden winter church under the invocation of the Mother of God's icon "Joy for All the Downhearted" (*Wsiech Skorbiaszczych Radost*) was built in 1956. The new monastery together with the refectory and St. Barbara's chapel were built between 1978-1980. Within the last dozen or so years a spacious brick building was erected. It encompasses a presbytery and a new refectory as well as a pilgrim's house (1989). The monastic complex includes also two cemeteries.

The "forest of crosses" surrounding the church from three sides (from the North, East and South) has fortunately survived the fire. The peculiar "forest" is made up of rows of crosses of various size, both Catholic and Orthodox, partly hidden among the trees. Most of the crosses are made of wood but there are also stone or metal ones. The "forest" is very dense and the number of crosses is estimated at over six thousand. Hence Grabarka's another name – the "Mount of Six Thousand Crosses." The oldest preserved ones date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Each year pilgrims put down about a hundred new crosses. They vary in size as, according to the tradition, the size of cross depended on the "size" of one's illness, suffering or thankfulness. The crosses have the same function as the Catholic votive offerings. The cross of the Eastern Church has three crossbeams. There used to be the Pilat's verdict "*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*" on the upper beam. The bottom one was a footstool that was to support the hanged person's feet for the purpose of prolonging the torment. The bottom beam slants. According to the tradition the footstool tilted at Christ's death. A cross should be made from the whole cut tree as it symbolises sacrifice which it can not be incomplete. The choice



The Holy Mount of Grabarka – the Hill of the Crosses

of the tree can not be random either. For instance, a cross can not be made of aspen as this was the tree on which, according to the tradition, Judas hang himself. In the past crosses were tall, up to several meters. They were prepared by the whole community of a given place. Today they are rather short. They are often nailed to trees. Usually there is a votive inscription on such a cross. There are beautiful epitaphs written in the Cyrillic alphabet. Some crosses have little glassed indentations containing a photograph, a holy picture or a piece of paper with a prayer intention on it. A number of crosses are girded with colourful bands. According to the Orthodox tradition they symbolise Mary's tying Christ hanging on the cross with a colourful cloth. There are instances, though scarcer and scarcer, of tying to the crosses pieces of white linen with some patterns cut out. It is a custom dating back to pagan times and it symbolises a fee for the dead person's soul. It should be mentioned that the colourful bands grace also the grave crosses on the cemetery located on the hill. The "forest of crosses" on the Holy Mount of Grabarka is the only place of the type in Poland where there are otherwise so many of these religious symbols.

The faithful come to the Holy Mount of Grabarka all year long. However, the most important ceremonies relate to the Christ's Transfiguration Holiday which is

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held on August 19 (according to the Julian calendar on August 6). The ceremony starts on the holiday's eve at 6 p.m. and lasts all night and day. The members of the Synod of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church with their Metropolitan come here for the ceremony. Each year the indulgence fete gathers several dozen thousand pilgrims from all around Poland and recently also from abroad (mainly from Belarus, Ukraine, Finland, Hungary.) There are also Uniate Church and Catholic Church believers. The folk name of the holiday is *Spas*. According to the legend God sent two saints from heaven: St. Roch and St. Spas. Roch was to go to the Polish and Spas to the Ruthenian. Roch came down to the earth on August 16 and became the patron of animals and Spas came on August 19 and became the patron of people. To commemorate the event August 19 was declared a holiday. The pilgrims coming to the Holy Mount of Grabarka head first for the miraculous spring at the mountain's foot, where they drink of the water and make a sign of cross before and after drinking. They also draw the miraculous water to bottles and take it home. They wash their faces and sore places with special linen handkerchiefs soaked in the water from a nearby stream. The tradition says the water from the stream does not only heal but it also purifies from sins. That is why the pilgrims leave the used wet handkerchiefs on the riverside, thus leaving there their illnesses and sins behind. After this ritual ablution usually accompanied by prayers the pilgrims go up (often on their knees and with a cross on their back) the hill, towards the Orthodox church. Before they put down their cross many people walk around the church three times. While the people put down their cross the priest prays and then consecrates their cross and the pilgrims themselves. After he goes away the pilgrim stays at the cross for a while and offers thankful or imploring prayers. In the solemn procession, apart from the crosses, the faithful bring icons worshiped by the Orthodox believers.

Because of the small capacity of the church all the holiday services are held outside. The faithful stand around the temple on the Holy Mount's slopes, among the crosses and trees, on the cemetery. On August 18 solemn Vespers open the Transfiguration Holiday indulgence fete. They start at 6 p.m. (according to the Bible day starts after the sunset). They last more or less for two hours and are usually held by the Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church in Poland accompanied by bishops and numerous clergymen. According to a very old tradition a solemn service is held at midnight at the graves in the graveyard (*Panichida*). This is a way to emphasise the unity of the world of the living and the world of the dead. The faithful sing „*Hospodi, miłosti nieizreczennaja, upokoj duszu usopszych rab Two-ich*” (“Most merciful Lord let your souls rest in peace”). Then they pray for the dead patriarchs, metropolitans, bishops, presbyters, deacons, as well as suicides and those who are forgotten by all. Then there are subsequent holy Liturgies during which thousands of believers take the holy Communion. In between the services the pilgrims sit around the church, among the crosses on which there are small candles burning. They tend to sit in groups that often correspond to their village or

family communities. After a short meal they sing hymns related to the Transfiguration Holiday, the Holy Mount of Grabarka, the cult of the Virgin Mary, the legends about the saints, hymns prophesising the end of the world or hymns about God's goodness. The whole hill changes at the time into a great temple gathering several dozen thousand believers. At the temple itself there are confession tables with the Gospel and Cross (the visible signs of God's omnipresence) for those who want to take the holy Communion during the Great Liturgy and to whom the pilgrimage to the Holy Mount is often a way of repentance for their sins. During the intermission the pilgrims prepare cards with the names of their relatives who are dead and give them to the ministers to mention the persons during the prayers. For many pilgrims that "holy night" is the most important part of the indulgence ceremonies connected with the Holiday of Spas. They spend it on prayers, contemplation and vigil.

From the theological point of view the most important event during the ceremony is the Great Liturgy (*obiednia*) – the holy mass (*Suma*) lasting from 10 a.m. till 2 p.m. It is celebrated by the Metropolitan and bishops. The liturgical hymns convey all the events on the Mount of Tabor: Christ praying, the apostles falling asleep, the shining figure of the Saviour, Moses and Elijah talking to Christ, the disciples' fear, the voice of God the Father. Fruit and cereal ears brought by farmers are consecrated during the ceremony. It is a very old custom whose equivalent in the Roman Catholic Church in Poland is the ceremony related to the Virgin Mary the Floral (August 15, The Virgin Mary Assumption Day) The faithful try to keep the folk custom allowing them to eat the fruit only after the Lord's Transfiguration Holiday. The holy mass ends with a sermon by the Metropolitan on the essence of the participation in the pilgrimage to the Holy Mount of Grabarka and blessing given to all the pilgrims.

The Lord's Transfiguration Holiday on Grabarka is not only about religious but also about secular ceremonies. At the mountain's foot, behind the stream traders put up their stalls and sell devotional articles, publications, sweets, fruit, toys. For many people this is an opportunity to socialise and play. Thus Grabarka is a typical example of two parallel spheres functioning side by side: *sacrum* and *profanum*, accompanied by religious and folk traditions.

From 1986 on more and more foot pilgrimages come to celebrate the Transfiguration Holiday here. The first pilgrimage took off from Zabudłów. Since 1988 people come here on foot from Białystok (over 100 km), and since 1993 from the Orthodox town of Jabłeczna (a place second to Grabarka in terms of religious worship of the Orthodox believers in Poland.) Foot pilgrimages come here also from other towns and villages in the Eastern Poland (a /o from Lublin) as well as from the Belarussian towns of Grodno and Minsk.

The course of the August pilgrimage has not changed much for over one hundred years. In 1866 chronicler Kwiercetuś described the Lord's Transfiguration ceremony on Grabarka in *Litovskije Jeparchalnyje Viedomosti* magazine in the following way:



The Pilgrimages on the Holy Mount of Grabarka

*“Several thousand people: the weak, suffering, ill and healthy both Orthodox and Catholic come here on August 6 [according to the Julian calendar; nowadays it is August 19], the Lord’s Transfiguration Holiday, and many (if they come with true faith) are healed. This is a sacred place.”*

And he goes on to say: *“There are thousands of the faithful around the temple but there is no hum or shout. [...] Around the church (because of the lack of room) the Orthodox clergy from the neighbouring parishes, full of reverence and fear of God, offers molebens, akathists [special prayers] for health for the living and for peace of soul for the dead. The Liturgy in the church itself lasts from 10 o’clock till 1 o’clock. The forest echoes the church hymns. It is next to impossible to get into the church. It is better to come earlier and take a seat.”* And he adds: *„The church is wooden, very poor but famous for its agedness and miraculous healings from various ailments among those who come here with faith.”*<sup>2</sup> Between World War I and II services on the Holy Mount of Grabarka were held several times a year, and especially during Spas.

In the past the majority of pilgrims to the Holy Mount of Grabarka were elderly people. However for over 20 years more and more young Orthodox believers have taken part in the pilgrimages. Thanks to the activity of the Theologian Circle of the Orthodox Theological Schools and the Orthodox Youth Guild young people come to the Holy Mount of Grabarka several times a year. The meetings aim at young people’s integration and they include religious discussion and com-

mon prayer. The most famous is the meeting held at the end of May and it usually coincides with the annual Days of Orthodox Church Music in the nearby town of Hajnówka. Hundreds of young people from Poland and other European countries come to the Holy Mount at the time. For twenty years the May pilgrimage has developed its specific pattern. It starts with the Friday Vespers (*wieczernia*) and the consecration of water at the well. Friday night is also the time to put down and consecrate a votive cross. Then a service is held at the graves of the dead (*panichida*). Saturday starts with the liturgy and ends with the Vespers and a great common bonfire. The climax of the meeting is the Sunday Eucharist. During the intermissions there are discussions or artistic performances. Foreign participants of the pilgrimage come from many European countries and some of them happen to come even from other continents. Thanks to the participation of the Catholic and Protestant youth the meetings are ecumenical in nature.

In addition many faithful come here on November 6 for the Holiday of the Mother of God's icon *Joy for All the Downhearted* and on January 19 for the water consecration ceremony, the so-called Jordan to commemorate the Lord's baptism.

The Holy Mount of Grabarka is the heart of the Polish Orthodox Church. More and more often it becomes a special place for those who seek silence, who desire to understand their place in the world. Contemporary pilgrims identify Grabarka with a "symbol of prayer and conversation with God." The majority of participants treat the pilgrimage as an expression of their faith and beliefs, and most of all as an opportunity to commune in this special place with the *sacrum*. A young girl says: "Grabarka has such an irresistible charm. When you come here you leave your problems behind. Everything here gets in a way a different dimension."

Despite many adversities this holy place has remained a place of God's presence and of reconciliation among men. Like centuries ago the ill, the sorrowful and those who seek reassurance and consolation will keep on coming here in the future with thankful prayers. They will carry their crosses to put them down on the Holy Mount for various intentions. The monastery's chronicle records many human tragedies written with somebody's hand and the same number of joy and thanksgiving for the miracle of God's grace. Grace that the people in need experience regardless of their religious denomination.

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<sup>1</sup> The Biblical Holiday of Transfiguration is related to the Mount of Tabor where apostles Peter, Jacob and John saw Christ talking to Moses and Elijah.

<sup>2</sup> M. Dolecki, A. Radziukiewicz, *Święta Góra Grabarka* [The Holy Mount of Grabarka], Białystok 1995 Orthdruk pp. 15-16.

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