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CHAPTER 1

St. Faustina, Apostle of *Divine Mercy*



**How long shall I put up with you and how long
will you keep putting Me off? (9)**

“Faustina, please,” I (Michele) told the cab driver, pointing to a small picture of Jesus hanging from his rearview mirror as my friends and I clambered into the back seat.

He nodded.

I had traveled to Kraków, Poland, for a weekend trip during my college semester abroad at the Franciscan University of Gaming, Austria. Although I spoke no Polish, the cab driver knew from my request exactly where to take us. He knew I had come to visit the shrine of the great saint Sr. Maria Faustina Kowalska. She was

a young Polish religious sister who in the 1930s experienced extraordinary visions of Jesus and his mother. Although Faustina was not very well known in the United States at the time of my visit to Kraków, she was widely celebrated in Poland.

Hanging from the cab's mirror was a distinctive picture known as the Image of Divine Mercy; it was painted at the direction of St. Faustina to portray Jesus as she had seen him in her visions. Devotion to the Image was already very popular among the Polish people and in recent times has surged in popularity in the United States, where the Image hangs in many Catholic homes and parishes, especially on the Sunday after Easter (Divine Mercy Sunday).

As the cab driver headed for the Shrine of The Divine Mercy in Kraków-Łagiewniki, the monastery of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy where Faustina had once lived, I tried to soak in as much as I could through the windows. He drove us through the streets of a cold, dark city that had languished for many years behind the Iron Curtain. I had spent the day before touring the concentration camps at Auschwitz, and I was still trying to process all I had witnessed there. Because of my Polish heritage, this trip had deep personal significance to me and the entire semester studying abroad was a time of great soul searching.

I am a cradle Catholic. My parents had a very devout faith life, yet mine was still growing. My parents, along with fourteen years of Catholic schools, had taught me the Faith that I knew was the truth—I just wasn't quite ready to give up my "ways of the world" yet.

I had agreed to attend Franciscan University—a small liberal arts college in Steubenville, Ohio, known for its orthodox teaching in the Catholic faith—in no small part because I was intrigued by their study abroad program. I wanted to have fun and be with my friends. I thought that allowing Jesus to be the king of my life was a ticket straight to the convent, and I wanted no part in that. I told Jesus I needed a few more years of enjoying myself and then I would be on the straight and narrow. I would later understand that the unsettled feeling inside of me was a call to a deeper relationship with him and that the only way to true peace was to place my full trust in him and to put my life in his hands.

Sisters wearing long black habits and black veils with protruding white bills welcomed us upon our arrival at the convent. Faustina had once worn a habit just like theirs, an outward symbol of the community's commitment to Christ. As they showed us the convent and the grounds, the nuns shared the story of Faustina's life with us, as well as some of the many miraculous stories of healing attributed to her intercession.

Just before three o'clock, they led us to a beautiful chapel with a wooden side altar, above which hangs the full-sized Divine Mercy Image: a painting of the risen Christ in a white robe, one hand raised in blessing and the other touching his heart. Two rays of light stream from Jesus's chest, one red and one white. Underneath the Image is written *Jezu ufam Tobie* ("Jesus, I trust in You"). St. Faustina directed an artist to paint the original image on a canvas exactly as Jesus had instructed in a vision, promising that many graces would be received through it.¹ Below the painting I

saw the small, white coffin that holds the tomb and the relics of St. Faustina. Along the walls are displayed hundreds of ornaments representing favors asked and graces received by pilgrims who have visited the shrine.

At three o'clock, all the sisters living in the convent gathered in the chapel to pray together the Chaplet of Divine Mercy to commemorate the hour of Christ's death on the Cross. With rosary beads in one hand, the sisters stretched their arms out as Our Lord did during the crucifixion, joining Jesus in his suffering, and began chanting a series of prayers in Polish:

**For the sake of His sorrowful Passion have mercy
on us and on the whole world. (476)**

This was a powerful moment for me—to witness this well-known prayer right where it had originated in that small convent. I prayed first for all the family and friends I could think of. Then I began to pray about my vocation in life. I so longed for God to speak to me audibly, as he did to St. Faustina, or even to send me a letter. Instead I read the words at the bottom of the Image again and said them like I meant them:

“Jesus, I trust in you.” As I placed my life in his hands, I felt at peace.

Twenty years later as I write this book, I can see clearly the graces that have flowed from this pilgrimage. It was during that semester abroad that I finally accepted my faith as my own rather than my parents', began seeking a real relationship with Jesus, and experienced his great mercy.

St. Faustina Kowalska and Divine Mercy: A Short History

If you have never before heard of the Divine Mercy devotion or St. Faustina, you may be wondering what is so amazing about this little uneducated nun and why St. John Paul II named her the “Apostle of Divine Mercy” at her canonization in 2000, encouraging the faithful to read her *Diary* and proclaiming Divine Mercy Sunday as a universal feast.

What did the saintly pope see in this cloistered sister that many of her contemporaries did not? And what does her canonization say to us about the beautiful providence of God, whose timing is often so different from our own?

Sr. Maria Faustina was born Helen Kowalska in 1905 to a poor family in Głogowiec, Poland, the third of ten children. She was a very pious and prayerful young girl and had a special place in her heart for the sufferings of others.

Young Helen knew she was called to religious life as early as age seven. She grew in holiness despite the fact she couldn’t always attend Sunday Mass; the family only owned one Sunday dress, which was shared by the girls. Helen learned to read and write from her father and later went to school. Although she was a good student, she was forced to leave school after only two years to make room for younger students. At fourteen she moved in with another family to become a domestic servant. It was there she received a vision of a bright light and felt called to join the convent.

Her parents at first did not want her to join the convent, so she went back to work as a housekeeper. But

Jesus was persistent in his call: when she was eighteen, Helen experienced a vision of Jesus, who asked of her **“How long shall I put up with you and how long will you keep putting Me off?”** (9). After being refused by several orders, Helen was accepted into the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy in Warsaw in 1925; it was then that she took her religious name: Sr. Maria Faustina of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

Initially she felt called to leave this order to join a stricter order, but Jesus made it clear to her that she was where he wanted her to be. Faustina made her vows with the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy and served as a cook, gardener, and doorkeeper. She stayed in several different convents, but mainly at the convents in Kraków, Płock, and Wilno (now Vilnius, capital of Lithuania). During much of her life in the convent she was in ill health, as she suffered from tuberculosis, a terrible disease of the lungs. However she never complained about her suffering, instead offering it to Jesus for the poor souls in purgatory. She had a very meek and humble manner, and the sisters described her as always having “childlike joy on her face.”²

In 1931, she was staying at the convent in Vilnius when she received the vision of Jesus as described above. Jesus instructed her to have him painted as she saw him and to see that the portrait was spread around the world.³ When she first reported this request to her confessor, he told Faustina that Jesus just wanted her to paint his image in her soul. However, in another vision Jesus confirmed that he wanted a material image created.

Faustina asked a sister in the convent to paint the likeness for her. This sister declined, but word spread

around the convent that Faustina was receiving visions. While a few of the sisters believed in her extraordinary experiences, St. Faustina wrote in the *Diary* that many “began to speak openly about me and to regard me as a hysteric and a fantasist, and the rumors began to grow louder” (125). Some of the sisters were very cruel and humiliated her publicly, but Faustina kept her peace and never uttered anything in her defense. She was soon blessed with a spiritual advisor, Fr. Michael Sopoćko, who would help her fulfill her mission.

After a doctor evaluated Faustina’s physical and mental health and vouched for her sanity, Fr. Sopoćko helped find an artist, Eugeniusz Kazimirowski, to paint the picture under Faustina’s direction. She visited the artist each weekend to instruct him and was dissatisfied with his first efforts. The painting was changed several times by Kazimirowski. In 1934, the painting was almost finished, but Sr. Faustina was still not pleased. She went to the chapel and cried. “Who will paint You as beautiful as You are?” she asked Jesus. In response she heard, **“Not in the beauty of the color, nor of the brush lies the greatness of this image, but in My grace”** (313). Sr. Faustina accepted the painting, saying, “It is not what it should be, but that’s how it must remain.”⁴ The Divine Mercy Image was first displayed publicly on the Friday after Easter in 1935 at the Shrine of Our Lady of Ostra Brama in Vilnius, where Fr. Sopoćko gave a sermon about Divine Mercy. While he was preaching, Sr. Faustina saw the Image come alive, and the “rays pierced the hearts of the people gathered there”(417).

Jesus continued to appear to St. Faustina and reveal his mission for her to spread the message of his mercy

throughout the world. There were no external signs of her great mysticism; she was obedient and cheerful and did her daily tasks with great love. St. Faustina also suffered greatly. She underwent a great “dark night of the soul,” a deep spiritual pain experienced by some as they grow in spiritual maturity and union with God. What we know of her experiences is recorded in her *Diary*, which she continued to write until she died in 1938 from tuberculosis. She was only thirty-three.⁵

Spreading the Message

Today Faustina’s message of God’s mercy and love continues to spread throughout the world, especially through the *Diary* in which she recorded over six hundred pages of revelations. It has sold almost a million copies to date. The essence of the message is that we should receive and trust in God’s mercy and give mercifully to our neighbors.

The message of Divine Mercy is a private revelation, distinct from the public revelation gathered in Holy Scripture and Sacred Tradition and from the dogmas of the Church that derive from Holy Scripture. This means that the communications from Jesus and Mary that Faustina recorded in her *Diary* are not binding on believers (CCC 67). And yet, throughout the ages God has sent us prophets and mystics to give timely messages to our world that has forgotten his love. We can see many examples of prophets in the Old Testament and can look to John the Baptist in the New Testament. Jesus called his Apostles and other disciples during his lifetime and sent them out, and God continues to give us great and holy men and women to strengthen our Church. In declaring Faustina a saint,

the Church affirmed that her life and her writing are consistent with the Gospel; by declaring Divine Mercy Sunday, St. John Paul II “baptized” the message of Divine Mercy and its Image as a trustworthy source of grace to be shared with the world.

The message of Divine Mercy is certainly needed during our time, and the last three popes have placed great emphasis on mercy as well as the devotion to Divine Mercy. St. John Paul II especially stressed the importance of this devotion to him personally and to our Church. He called the *Diary* “a particular Gospel of Divine Mercy written from a twentieth-century perspective.”⁶

In his Regina Caeli Address for Divine Mercy in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI said that “Divine Mercy is not a secondary devotion, but an integral dimension of a Christian’s faith and prayer.”⁷

Pope Francis has continued to spread the message. He emphasizes that in our wounded world we need mercy, which allows people to experience the truth about God—that through this experience of mercy, the world will receive healing and conversion. In his first Angelus address Pope Francis proclaimed that mercy “is the best thing we can feel: it changes the world.”⁸

Experiencing Divine Mercy has certainly transformed my life. The mercies I have received have helped me understand how to be more loving and more compassionate and have opened my eyes to the sufferings of others. As I have learned more about St. Faustina’s childlike trust in God and her desire to grow in holiness by being merciful to her neighbor, I have grown in my desire to be an active witness of mercy.

Respond to God's Call in Deed, Word, and Prayer

Deed: Is the story of St. Faustina new to you? Consider reading a story about her with your children, and have them draw their own version of the Image. Links to free resources can be found on divinemercyformoms.com. Alternatively, get a copy of the Image from your local Catholic bookstore or online to display in your home. For beautiful images on a budget, visit www.divinemercyart.org.

Word: This week, make a phone call or send a text message to a friend in need. Share God's mercy with the person; you may even incorporate a message from the *Diary* or from Scripture. For example:

From your heart: "I'm thinking of you and praying for you."

From the Diary: **"Before I made the world, I loved you with the love your heart is experiencing today and, throughout the centuries, My love will never change"** (1754).

Prayer: One of our favorite passages from the *Diary* is a prayer in the "General Exercises" section. If you are ready for Divine Mercy to change you, we invite you join us in prayer with these words of St. Faustina:

St. Faustina's Prayer for Divine Transformation from Within (163)⁹

+ O Most Holy Trinity! . . . I want to be completely transformed into Your mercy and to be Your living reflection, O Lord. . . .

Help me, O Lord, that my eyes may be merciful, so that I may never suspect or judge from appearances, but look for what is beautiful in my neighbors' souls and come to their rescue.

Help me, that my ears may be merciful, so that I may give heed to my neighbors' needs and not be indifferent to their pains and moanings.

Help me, O Lord, that my tongue may be merciful, so that I should never speak negatively of my neighbor, but have a word of comfort and forgiveness for all.

Help me, O Lord, that my hands may be merciful and filled with good deeds, so that I may do only good to my neighbors and take upon myself the more difficult and toilsome tasks.

Help me, that my feet may be merciful, so that I may hurry to assist my neighbor, overcoming my own fatigue and weariness. My true rest is in the service of my neighbor.

Help me, O Lord, that my heart may be merciful so that I myself may feel all the sufferings of my neighbor. . . . May Your mercy, O Lord, rest upon me.