

St. Faustina Kowalska

BORN 1905; DIED 1938
VIRGIN AND RELIGIOUS
FEAST DAY: OCTOBER 5

GOD usually chooses his messengers from the humble, those who are unknown to the world. In the case of his message of Divine Mercy, he chose St. Faustina Kowalska, a nearly illiterate Polish nun whose life was one of humility and obedience.

Faustina's parents, Stanislaw Kowalski and Marianna Babel, lived in Glogowiec, a village in central Poland west of Lodz. They were poor peasants who worked poor land; Faustina's father also worked as a handyman and carpenter to make ends meet. Childless for the first ten years of their marriage, they eventually had three sons and seven daughters, of whom two died in infancy. Faustina was the third child in the family. Her father was a strict parent, while her mother was pious and taught the faith to her children. Faustina's siblings were unruly and disobedient, so Faustina stood out among them as the only obedient child. Even as a young child she was prayerful and compassionate to those even poorer than herself. Because her father had taught her to read, Faustina was able to learn about missionaries, whose stories she repeated to the other children in the village. Her early ambition was to be a missionary, and the children all wanted to follow her. She frequently wanted to be in church near the Blessed Sacrament, and first felt called to the life of a nun when she was seven.

Although an excellent student, Faustina was permitted to attend school for only three years, from the ages of twelve to fourteen. Many times during this period she experienced the humiliation of poverty. She and her two older sisters had only one dress among them, so only one could go to church at a time. At one point in Faustina's childhood, when her father found his children unwilling to do the farm work, he said that the one allowed to go to church would be the one who

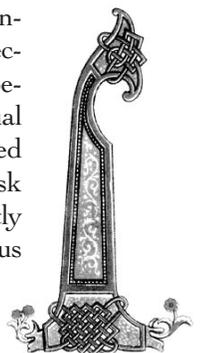
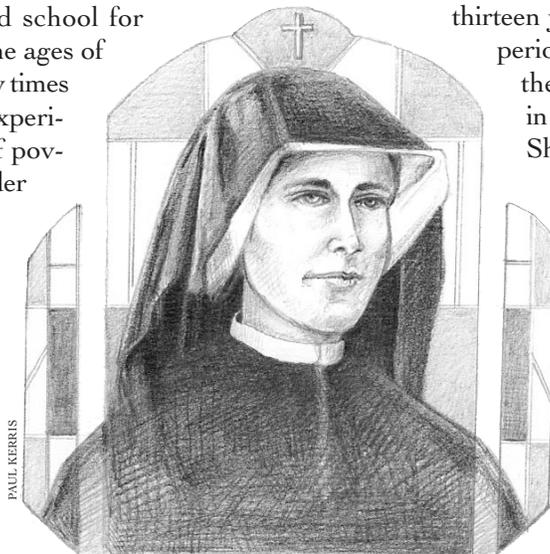
led the cows to pasture. Faustina rose at night and took the cows out. When her father discovered the cows gone, he at first thought that Faustina had allowed them to ruin his wheat and rye crops and intended to spank her with a belt, until he found that the cows had followed her neatly between the fields, damaging nothing.

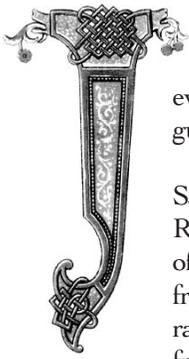
At fifteen, Faustina left home to work as a domestic servant to support herself and help her parents. Twice, when she was sixteen and eighteen, she asked permission from her parents to enter a convent, but both times they refused. She then decided to suppress her vocation. On one occasion, when she was nineteen, she went with two of her sisters and a friend to a dance in a park. There she saw a vision of a disgraced, naked Jesus, his body covered in wounds, who sternly called her to follow her vocation at any cost. She realized in horror what she had been doing, left the dance, went to the cathedral, asked Jesus what she should do, and was instructed to go to Warsaw to enter a convent. She did so immediately, living with a family while she sought admission. Refused by several orders, she was finally admitted to the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy in Warsaw. She then worked for nearly a year to amass the required modest dowry, and entered a few weeks before her twentieth birthday.

Although the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy specialized in helping troubled and disadvantaged girls, Faustina never participated directly in this work, for she was viewed as unqualified. Instead, she served as cook and gardener in the various convents to which she was assigned over the next

thirteen years, living for the longest periods of time in Vilnius (now the capital of Lithuania) and in Plock and Krakow, Poland.

She performed her assigned tasks with great dedication, faithfully observed the rule of the convent, and was known to be full of kindness. She was unaffected, serene, and recollected. When she became too ill for manual labor, she was assigned as a gate-keeper, a task that allowed her directly to practice charity. Jesus





even came once to the gate of the convent, in the guise of a poor young man.

Faustina was especially devoted to the Blessed Sacrament, Mary Immaculate, and the sacrament of Reconciliation. At twenty-five, she received the first of several messages concerning God's divine mercy from Jesus, seeing him dressed in a white robe with rays of white and red — water and blood — flowing from his Sacred Heart. Jesus told her that she was to be his "apostle and secretary" of divine mercy, instructing her to spread this message throughout the world. At the command of her spiritual director, she kept a diary, eventually seven hundred pages long, of her visions and mystical experiences. Her extremely limited schooling resulted in her writing phonetically and in not using punctuation or quotation marks.

The mission of Faustina, as given by Jesus, was threefold. The first part was proclaiming and spreading the truth revealed in Scriptures about the merciful love of God for every person. The second part was imploring God's mercy for the world, especially for sinners, through four new forms of devotion. The first devotion was veneration of an image of Divine Mercy with the inscription "Jesus, I Trust in You." In 1935 she commissioned a painting of the image, only to be disappointed with the result since it failed to measure up to her vision of him. However, Jesus assured her that the quality of the painting was not important. The second devotion was the establishment of a Feast of Divine Mercy. The third devotion was a prayer at the Hour of Mercy — 3:00 p.m., the hour when Jesus died — which preferentially would be the Stations of the Cross, but could also be adoration of Jesus' Sacred Heart in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, or even a simple, short prayer at that time. The final devotion was the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, a prescribed set of prayers said on a rosary. Jesus attached numerous promises to these devotions, provided that they were accompanied by entrustment of one's life to God and the practice of active love of neighbor.

The third part of Faustina's mission was beginning an apostolic movement of Divine Mercy to carry out the task of proclaiming and imploring God's mercy for the world and to live lives of Christian perfection in imitation of her virtues. This meant seeking to fulfill God's will with an attitude of childlike trust in God and of mercy to one's neighbor. Jesus asked her to be model of mercy to others and to live the remainder of her life as sacrifice. Some of her sisters in religion, who saw only the poorly-educated peasant, ridiculed and laughed at her because of her visions. She also suffered physical pain for years, including the stigmata (the wounds of Jesus'

crucifixion), visible only to her, and long years of illness before her death. She accepted this suffering as her sacrifice to God for the sake of sinners.

In addition to visions and private revelations, Faustina received many of the gifts God grants to mystics, including mystical marriage to Jesus and an ability to read souls, to prophesy, and to bilocate (be in two places at once). Yet she did not see these gifts as the means of her sanctification: "Neither graces, nor revelations, nor raptures, nor gifts granted to a soul make it perfect, but rather the intimate union of the soul with God. These gifts are merely ornaments of the soul, but constitute neither its essence nor its perfection. My sanctity and perfection consist in the close union of my will with the will of God."

Devotion to the Divine Mercy spread in the cities in which Faustina lived during her lifetime. One of her trials was her superiors' refusal to allow her to follow all of Jesus' commands. She always obeyed her superiors, which Jesus told her was immensely pleasing to him. Among the things she was not permitted to do was to leave her convent to found a new religious order. Instead, she left a rule to be implemented after her death, and the Institute of Divine Mercy was founded in 1941. Today, religious congregations and brotherhoods, lay institutes and associations, and individuals carry out Jesus' instructions to spread devotion to his Divine Mercy throughout the world.

In 1958, a bad translation of Faustina's diary (which is entitled *Divine Mercy in My Soul*) was made as a result of the translator's difficulty in understanding her non-standard spelling and unpunctuated sentences. The diary was labeled heretical by the Vatican, causing the Divine Mercy devotions to be suppressed. When Karol Wojtyla became Archbishop of Krakow, he was besieged by people asking him to reopen an evaluation of Faustina's diary. He ordered that a new translation be done and sent this to Rome for re-evaluation. The Vatican found that there was indeed nothing heretical in it. This opened the way not only to Faustina's canonization by Karol Wojtyla, who had become Pope John Paul II, but also to his dedication of the Second Sunday of Easter (the Sunday immediately following Easter) perpetually as Divine Mercy Sunday in 2000, the last year of the twentieth century.

God does nothing by accident. Between the two most destructive wars in the history of the world, in the heart of a Europe which had begun so much of the warfare and had as well been the most horrifying of the killing fields of the twentieth century, Jesus had told Faustina: "Humanity will not find peace until it turns trustfully to divine mercy."

