

**Franciszek Mróz**

# Following St. Faustina Kowalska's Route

## 1. Introduction

**Y**ou are the witness of My Mercy, you will always stand in front of My throne as a living witness of My Mercy<sup>1</sup> - these were the words Sister Faustina Kowalska heard in April 1935, when praying at the Pointed Gate, at the feet of Our lady the Merciful and the image "*Jesus, I trust in You.*"

When two years ago I went on a pilgrimage from Suwałki to Vilnius, and stood in front of the miraculous image of Our Lady at the Pointed Gate, just like Sister Faustina Kowalska in 1935, I had not even suspected that there, in the city of the Divine Mercy, I would meet places related to her life. It was from Lithuania that I started my pilgrimage, following the traces of then the blessed Apostle of the Divine Mercy. It led through Głogowiec, Świnice Warckie, Warsaw, Płock, Kalisz, Częstochowa, and finally to the Shrine of the Divine Mercy in Cracow-Łagiewniki. Here, on April 30, 2000, at the tomb of Sister Faustina, owing to the satellite broadcast, I was able to participate in the canonization Mass held by Pope John Paul II.

This article is a proposal of a pilgrimage following the traces of the first Polish saint. It aims at presenting places where several dozen years ago Sister Faustina Kowalska was born, brought up, or simply stayed at the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful.

## 2. Family home

Helena Kowalska was born on August 25, 1905, in the village of Głogowiec (Świnice Warckie parish), in the Włocławek diocese. She was the third of ten children of Marianna and Stanisław Kowalski.

Fig. 1.  
Sanctuaries of the Divine Mercy in Poland and other places connected with Sister  
Faustina Kowalska

The faith was an important element in the life of the Kowalski family. Daily prayer, morning singing of the *Canonical Hours to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, observing fasts, participation in Church feasts, and work filled Helena's life from her earliest years.

The atmosphere of her family home was best described in the words from her *Diary*, after her last visit in Głogowiec, on February 15, 1935, when she met her ill mother: "After the greetings, we all fell to our knees to thank God for the grace

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to have been able to see each other once more in our lives. When I saw my father at prayer, I was ashamed that I myself, after all those years at the convent, could not pray so honestly and so ardently, therefore I constantly thank God for such parents".<sup>2</sup>

The Kowalski family made a living on a small farm and carpentry done by the father. Sister Faustina's parents brought up their children in a great love of God and other people, teaching them to work hard.

This family atmosphere of prayer, work, respect and love for other people, had a great impact on the religious life of young Helena. In her *Diary*, she later described her first personal contact with God, which took place when she was seven: "At the age of seven, for the first time I heard the voice of God in my soul, or an invitation to a more perfect life, yet I have not always been obedient to the voice of grace".<sup>3</sup>

At the age of nine, she made her first confession and took her first Communion at the parish church in Świnice. Since then, the Eucharist taken on Sundays was the most important element of her life. Helena stood out from her brothers and sisters as well as from children of her age, due to her religiousness, obedience and hardworking.

At the age of twelve, she began education at school in Świnice Warckie, yet she attended it only for three years, as she had to make room for younger brothers and sisters.

In Głogowiec, situated 2 km south of Świnice Warckie, there is a small modest house of the Kowalski family, the place where Sister Faustina was born. Built ca. 1890 of Rożniatów rock, since 1983 it has belonged to the parish of Świnice Warckie. Owing to the activities of the parish priest, Stefan Spsychalski, in the years 1992-1993, it was renovated, and a museum of Sister Faustina's relics was organised there. It houses many items and pieces of furniture from the time of her childhood and youth.

Special attention must be given to a room to the left of the entry, which now houses the bed: here, the third child of the Kowalski family, Helena, was born. Nowadays, at one of the walls there is the image "Jesus, I trust in You", which had hung in the parish church in the years 1955-1983. In another room we may see carpenter's workshop of Sister Faustina's father, who supplemented his income from a farm with his carpentry work. For many years, the workshop had been stored by son, Stanisław, in Łódź. After his death, it returned to its original place.

The museum supervised by Fr Spsychalski, is willingly visited by a number of pilgrims both from Poland and abroad, who say a special prayer there, and sign the *Book of Pilgrimage*.

Two days after her birth, Helena Kowalska was baptised at the parish church in Świnice Warckie, a small village in the Kolska Valley<sup>4</sup>, in Łódź Voivodeship, west of Łęczyca. The original documents of baptism in Russian and in Polish are now stored at the parish of Świnice.

The present parish church of St. Casimir in Świnice Warckie (consecrated in 1882), was built of stone in 1859 replacing an earlier wooden church. The church was founded by Kazimierz Karwowski, the landowner of the village. This was the church where Sister Faustina was baptised, here her enlightenment took place, here she experienced her first confession and Communion, and spent many hours at prayer and adoration of Jesus in the Holy Sacrament until she was seventeen: “O how I could pray at this little church!, she wrote in her *Diary* after her visit at home in February 1935. *I remembered all the instances of grace I was granted there, and which I did not understand then, and misused them*”.<sup>5</sup>

The interior of the church presents three altars, including the high altar where the large painting “*Jesus, I trust in You*”, was placed in 1983. It was painted by the artist from Kalisz, Bronisław Owczarek, and has a characteristic background and the crown of glory in the form of the shining cross. The side altars contain a copy of the icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa (which was in the high altar until 1983), and St. Casimir, the Prince (the patron of the church).

Following the beatification of Sister Faustina, a painting with her image, painted in 1993 by the artist from Łódź, Janina Kwiatkowska, was placed in the church together with her relics (a piece of her right rib), which have been exposed in a wall altar, at the baptistery. Among six stained-glass windows of the church, I must mention the window made according to Sister Faustina’s vision of Jesus, designed by Professor Władysław Kiliana.

Since 1983, every first Sunday of July has seen a celebration of the Divine Mercy, and since the beatification, also of the Blessed Sister Faustina, at her Baptistery. The time was chosen by the parish priest of Świnice Warckie, Fr Stefan Spychalski, who has held his office for 18 years, and approved by the Diocesan Curia in Włocławek; the feast is related to the celebration of the Most Precious Blood of Lord Jesus, which used to be celebrated on July, 1<sup>st</sup>.

Implementing the idea of Pope John Paul II, expressed in his Bull *Incarnationis Mysterium*, establishing the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the Bishop of Włocławek, Bronisław Dembowski, proclaimed the church as a station of the Way of the Cross.

Since the day of canonisation, according to the parish priest, the number of pilgrims visiting the shrine has risen. The parish house at Świnice stores a thick *Book of Pilgrims*, which already has two volumes, where Fr Spychalski records all the groups of pilgrims. As he says: “*pilgrims coming to the church of baptism, take the example from Pope John Paul II at his family church in Wadowice, and kiss the baptistery where Helena Kowalska was baptised. They also kiss the relics by which the priest blesses them*”. Apart from the baptistery, pilgrims are also attracted by the confessional where Helena benefited from the grace of the sacrament of reconciliation.

By the way from Świnice Warckie to Głogów, frequently taken by Helena Kowalska several dozen years ago, the villagers established a road-shrine with a sta-

tue of the Merciful Jesus as a votive for her canonisation, which is now called "Welcome to Pilgrims".

On the first Sunday of July, Świnice organised the thanksgiving for the canonisation of Sister Faustina, attended by eleven dioceses of central Poland. The concelebrated Mass was conducted by Archbishop Władysław Ziótek, and the homily was presented by the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Józef Glemp.

According to Fr Spsychalski, "Lord's calling was always present near Sister Faustina. She was personally selected by Jesus for a special mission. Certainly, this can be related to the mission imposed on the Apostles: «Go forth to every part of the world, and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation [...]» (Mark, 16,15), as after 2000 years, the Saviour prepared, directed, and sent Sister Faustina with a saving act of mercy: Now, I am sending You to the entire humanity with My Mercy...".

### 3. "Vanity of life"

At the age of sixteen, Helena left her family home and went to Aleksandrów Łódzki, where she worked as a servant of Leokadia Bryszewska, owner of a bakery and a shop. According to her, Helena was a good, hardworking girl. The Bryszewski family were satisfied with her work. One day, Helena experienced a mysterious vision of "brightness" there, after which she returned home, asking her parents for a permission to enter the convent.

Probably during this several-month stay in Aleksandrów Łódzki, she received the sacrament of confirmation in the local parish church.

After Helena's return from Aleksandrów, the parents, not wishing to lose their best child, refused her the permission to enter the convent, pointing to the lack of money for her dowry.

In September, 1993, the parish priest and inhabitants of Aleksandrów Łódzki founded the plaque placed on the house at 1 Maja Street, where Sister Faustina lived and worked for several months, which reads: "This is the house where, in the apartment of Leokadia and Kazimierz Bryszewski, in 1921 Helena Kowalska worked as a servant, later known as Sister Maria Faustina in the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful. Beatified on April, 18<sup>th</sup> 1993 in Rome".

In autumn 1922, Helena left again to serve in Łódź. She stayed with her uncle Rapacki's family, and worked for the Franciscan Sisters. After a few months, she again begged her parents to permit her enter the convent, and again she was refused. After that refusal, as she wrote later, "I turned to the vanity of life, disregarding the voice of grace, although my soul could not find satisfaction. The constant calling of grace was a great pain for me, yet I tried to suppress it with entertainment. I avoided God internally, and all my soul inclined to creatures".<sup>6</sup>

By the “vanity of life”, Helena Kowalska meant the ordinary life of people in the world where not much attention is given to the inner inspiration of the grace.<sup>7</sup>

From February, 2<sup>nd</sup> 1923 to July, 1<sup>st</sup> 1924, she stayed at the house of Marcjanna Sadowska, owner of the shop at 29, Abramowskiego Street in Łódź, where she worked as a housekeeper and took care of the children. As her employer said later, Helena “was nice, polite and hardworking. [...] So good that it cannot be described”.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4. “Divine Grace triumphed in her soul”**

“Still, the Divine Grace triumphed in her soul” – during the folkdances in July 1924, Helena saw Jesus in pain, asking her “How long will I suffer, and how long will you delude me?” Shaken by the vision, she immediately left her friends and two sisters, and went to the cathedral of St. Stanislaus Kostka to pray that God tells her what she should do. As she wrote “It was beginning to get dark, there were few people in the cathedral; disregarding everything around me, I prostrated myself on the floor in front of the Holy Sacrament, and asked God to tell me what to do”.<sup>9</sup> Hearing the words: “Go to Warsaw, there you shall enter the convent”, “in one dress, without anything else” she left for the capital.

The folkdances attended then by Helena took place in ‘Wenecja’ (or Słowacki) Park in Łódź, situated about 1 km away from the cathedral. This event, a breakthrough in the life of then nineteen-year-old Helena, has been commemorated by a metal plaque attached to a tree, which reads: “In 1924, in this park, during folkdances, Lord Jesus appeared to 19-year-old Helena Kowalska, and called her to the convent life. At the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful, she was given the mission to proclaim the truth of God’s merciful love and to pass on the new forms of devotion to Divine Mercy. Nowadays, Sister Faustina is known as the Apostle of the Divine Mercy.”

On the outer wall of the Cathedral of St Stanislaus Kostka in Łódź, where Helena often prayed, attended the Mass and received the command to go to Warsaw, a bronze plaque was placed with the inscription: “In the years 1922-24, this cathedral was the place of prayers and the decision to enter the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful of Helena Kowalska – the Blessed Sister Faustina, Apostle of the Divine Mercy.”

#### **5. Entering the convent**

After she came to Warsaw, Helena went to St. James’ Church at Grójecka Street in Ochota district. There parish priest, Jakub Dąbrowski, gave her the address of Aldona Lipszycowa in Ostrówek (commune of Klembów, county of Radzymin), where she could stay. “At that time, she wrote in her *Diary*, I looked for

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*a convent, yet wherever I knocked, they refused me. My heart was in pain and I said to Jesus: Help me, do not leave me alone*".<sup>10</sup>

At last she knocked on the gate of the Convent of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful at 3/9 Żytnia Street. "When Mother Superior [came] to see me, the present Mother General Michaela, she wrote in her Diary, after a short conversation commanded me to go to the house of the Lord and to ask whether He accepted me. I immediately understood that I was to ask Lord Jesus. I went to the chapel with a great joy and asked Jesus: Lord of this house, do you accept me? – That is what one of the sisters commanded me to ask You. And I heard the voice: I accept you, you are in My Heart. When I returned from the chapel, Mother Superior first asked: So, has the Lord accepted you? I answered yes. If the Lord has accepted you, so will".<sup>11</sup>

The chapel where Helena Kowalska began her way to holiness at the Congregation of the Sisters of Our lady the Merciful, was situated in a separate building, also in Żytnia Street, next to the Sisters' house.

The history of this chapel, the present Church of the Divine Mercy, is related to the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful, called the Magdalenes, which was founded in Warsaw in 1862 to take care of the fallen girls and women. The convent at Żytnia Street was the first house of the Congregation in Poland. In 1872, in place of the wooden chapel, a small stone church was erected, designed by Władysław Kosmowski, on a rectangular plan with an apse. As the construction was performed at the time of Russian oppression, from the side of Żytnia Street, the church was hidden behind the façade of a residential house, and the entrance was situated from the side of the nuns' garden. In the times of Sister Faustina's stay at the convent, the chapel served only for the nuns and girls of the convent, therefore it was not used by lay people.<sup>12</sup> In the years 1936-38, when the convent was enlarged, the Church was expanded by adding an aisle, and a bell-tower at the main entrance, the sanctuary was also extended. During World War II, the church faced the walls of the Jewish ghetto, becoming a place of refuge and help for the Jews, especially Jewish youth. During the Warsaw Uprising, it was one of the main points of resistance. In August 1944, the church and other Congregation buildings were burnt, and the majority of sisters and girls were taken to the concentration camp.

In the after-war period, the communist authorities did not allow for the restoration of the chapel and the convent of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful for years.

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, in his act of December, 15<sup>th</sup> 1980, erected the parish of the Divine Mercy, and granted it the former chapel of the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful as the parish church.

The Church of Divine Mercy in Żytnia Street is the only sacral building in Warsaw which has not been restored after the war.

In the high altar is the image of the Merciful Jesus, consecrated on April, 19<sup>th</sup> 1998 by Cardinal Józef Glemp. The image has visited all parishes of the Warsaw

Archdiocese. With the celebration of Christ the King of the Universe (November, 21<sup>st</sup>) in 1999, it returned to the church for good.

In the chapel devoted to Sister Faustina, next to her image, one may find a bronze plaque, unveiled on Divine Mercy Sunday in 2000, which reads: *“To the Merciful God with humble adoration and gratitude for the grace of the canonisation of Sister Faustina. Followers of the Divine Mercy”*.

On the fourth Sunday of a month, the church celebrates the Hour of Mercy, while every Friday and Saturday the chaplet of Divine Mercy is said. Nowadays, the parish, headed by Fr Tadeusz Polak since 1997, is dedicated to the Divine Mercy and Saint Sister Faustina.

Mother Superior, Michaela Moraczewska, promised to accept Helena to the convent, yet only after collecting a modest dowry. That is why for the following year, Helena worked as a servant girl for Aldona Lipszycowa in Ostrówek.

On August, 1<sup>st</sup> 1925, on the Eve of Our Lady of the Angels, Helena Kowalska again entered the convent in Żytnia Street and was finally accepted to the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful. It was a great joy for her, as testified by the sentence of her *Diary*: *“It seemed to me that I had entered Paradise”*.<sup>13</sup>

## **6. “I have called you here and nowhere else”**

Only after three weeks of staying at the convent of the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful, she decided to “*join a stricter convent,*” as there was “*little time for prayer*” here. Yet during the prayer in her cell, she saw the suffering face of Jesus, who said to her: “*You hurt me a lot if you leave this Convent. I have called you here and nowhere else, and I have prepared many instances of grace for you*”.<sup>14</sup> From that moment, she felt very happy being at the convent of Our Lady the Merciful.

Helena Kowalska spent first months of her convent life at the house in Żytnia Street in Warsaw. The convent, as has been mentioned before, was the first house of the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful in Poland, and its consecration, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary House for Girls, took place on November, 1<sup>st</sup> 1862.<sup>15</sup> As the convent chapel was in a separate building, another small chapel was made on the first floor of the house. The chapel, where the *Sanctissimum* was kept, and Mass was held from time to time, was popularly called “the small chapel” or “Little Lord Jesus”.<sup>16</sup>

The change of her lifestyle and spiritual experiences caused Helena, a young postulant, to be sent for medical treatment to Skolimów.

On January, 23<sup>rd</sup> 1926, she left for the convent in Cracow-Łagiewniki, where she completed her postulancy. In this house, on April, 30<sup>th</sup> 1926, she took the habit and the name Maria Faustina. After the end of the two-year novitiate and eight days of retreat, she took her first temporary vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.

On October, 31<sup>st</sup> 1928, Sister Faustina left again for the house in Warsaw in Żytnia Street, to work in the kitchen.

In February 1929, her superiors sent her to Vilnius, where until June she substituted for a sister who was on her third probation; and in August that year – to the convent in Kiekrz, a small village near Poznań, with 500 inhabitants, where in turn she substituted for a sick sister in the kitchen.

The beginnings of the house in Kiekrz date back to 1928. The convent is situated outside the village, 2.5 km away from the parish church. Since 1987 Kiekrz has formed a part of Poznań.<sup>17</sup> Her stay at this house was described in the *Diary* as follows: “*When I was in Kiekrz, to substitute for a sister for a short period of time, one day in the afternoon I went across the garden and stood at the lake, and I meditated on this element. Suddenly, I saw Lord Jesus beside me, saying to me gracefully: I have made all this for you, my beloved, and know that all the beauties are nothing if compared to what I have prepared for you in eternity*”.<sup>18</sup>

## 7. “Paint the image”

Probably in May or June 1930, Sister Faustina came to the convent in Płock. She remained there until October, 1932. Here she worked first in the bakery, then in the kitchen and the bakery shop. Here, on February, 22<sup>nd</sup> 1931, when she was in her cell on the first floor, she had the vision of Jesus Christ. As she later wrote in her *Diary*, she saw: “*Lord Jesus in a white garment. One hand raised for blessing, and the other touched the garment at the chest. From the opening of the garment emanated two rays, one red and the other pale. I looked at the Lord, while my soul was full of fear and great joy. After a while Jesus said to me: «Paint the image according to the vision you see, with an inscription: Jesus, I trust in You. I want this image to be worshipped in your chapel, and then in the entire world »*”.<sup>19</sup>

The beginnings of the convent of Our Lady the Merciful in Płock are related to the person of Jakobina Łabanowska and Fr Antoni Julian Nowowiejski, later Bishop of Płock. In autumn 1889, Łabanowska came to Płock in order to found a house of the Congregation of the Servitors of Jesus, to take care of servants. Yet instead of working with servants, the sisters devoted their time to fallen women. With the help of Fr Nowowiejski, the House of the Guardian Angel was founded, and a congregation with a diocesan status, called the Institute of “Divine Love”, approved by the Bishop of Płock, Michał Nowodworski.<sup>20</sup> Fr Nowowiejski, knowing the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful, established contacts with it, and some time later influenced the sisters of the Institute of “Divine Love” to merge with the congregation of Warsaw, which occurred in 1899 on approval of the Church authorities.<sup>21</sup> All sisters took vows and became members of the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful.

The House of the Guardian Angel and the convent house in Płock were abolished in 1950, by the decision of the Board of the Regional Council in Warsaw. All nuns were moved to the convent in Biała. As Sister Petronela said, communist authorities forbade the nuns to come near the building of the former convent. The nuns, however, whenever they could, showed the house where Sister Faustina used to live to the believers. In the 1980s, as Sister Petronela said, the house “*went into ruin from day to day*”. And it seemed as if someone was devastating it on purpose. The remains of the convent where the Apostle of the Divine Mercy lived consist of parts of the foundations. In the place of her cell where Lord Jesus commanded her to paint His image, there is a statue of Jesus, consecrated on October, 30<sup>th</sup> 1991 by Bishop Roman Marcinkowski.

The chapel of the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful at the Old Square in Płock was proclaimed the diocesan Shrine of the Divine Mercy on April, 30<sup>th</sup> 2000. The decision to erect the shrine was announced by the Bishop of Płock, Stanisław Wielgus, during the thanksgiving Mass for the canonisation of Sister Faustina, celebrated with 30 priests in the court of the convent. The chapel is also a Jubilee shrine where one may receive a plenary indulgence. The 22<sup>nd</sup> of each month is a special day here, devoted to the Divine Mercy to commemorate the revelation of February, 22<sup>nd</sup> 1931. On such occasions, the chapel is full of people. Before the Mass, during the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, pleas and expressions of gratitude, written by pilgrims within an entire month, are read aloud.

The chapel boasts the relics of Sister Faustina’s thumb, placed behind glass in a special case. Above, on the wall, hangs an image of the Apostle of the Divine Mercy, painted by Elżbieta Hoffman. When painting the image, the artist used the photograph in the Sister Faustina’s documents.

In the high altar is the image of the Merciful Jesus “*Jesus, I trust in You*”, also painted by Elżbieta Hoffman. The painting was consecrated by Pope John Paul II, during his visit to Płock. From June, 7<sup>th</sup> 1992 the painting peregrinated in the entire Płock diocese. The image’s stay at parishes was accompanied with retreats or mercy missions. The solemn completion of the peregrination took place on May, 7<sup>th</sup> 2000, before the Płock cathedral, during the main celebration of the Jubilee. Then the painting was taken to the chapel, the Diocesan Shrine of the Divine Mercy at the Old Square. It must be stressed that for the first time, the image of the Merciful Jesus was hung in the chapel as early as 1939, and it was painted by one of the graduates of the House of the Guardian Angel.

The chapel of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful in Płock is open to visitors and pilgrims all day. It is for them that the Holy Sacrament is exhibited, and every day the Hour of Mercy is celebrated. All pilgrim groups coming to the shrine are recorded in the *Book of Pilgrims*. Apart from the chapel, pilgrims may also visit the bakery where Sister Faustina worked, with the preserved stove from her times.

During her stay in Płock, Sister Faustina also visited Biała, then a village near Płock, where the convent bought the buildings of a former manor, and converted

them into a rest house for nuns and girls. Sisters' apartments were situated in a small mansion in a garden, the main entrance from the side of the garden.<sup>22</sup> The house in Biała was consecrated in 1929, therefore two years before Sister Faustina's stay.

Sister Faustina was sent to Biała for treatment. There she had "*the honour to adorn the chapel with flowers*". Also there, when she picked a bunch of beautiful roses "in order to adorn the room of a certain person", she saw Lord Jesus, who, as she wrote in her *Diary*: "*asked gracefully: My daughter, for whom are you carrying these flowers? My silence was the answer to the Lord*, she continued, *as in that one moment I realised that I had a very subtle relation with that person that I had not perceived before. At that moment Jesus disappeared. Immediately, I dropped the flowers and went in front of the Holy Sacrament with my heart full of gratitude for the grace of learning about myself*".<sup>23</sup>

In November 1932, she left for Warsaw for the third probation (which lasted five months) before taking the final vows. Earlier, she had been on a retreat in Walendów (which lasted eight days), during which she wrote: "*My spirit was in God, despite my external conversations and even despite my visit to Derdy*".<sup>24</sup>

Derdy, situated 21 km away from Warsaw, was the third house of the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful in Poland. In the language of the congregation, it was called the House of St. Joseph, or Józefów.<sup>25</sup> A portion of a field, forest and some farm buildings in Derdy were donated to the Congregation by Duchess Czetwertyńska, in order to establish a house for morally endangered orphans. In turn, Count Gustaw Przeździecki, seeing the development of the house in Derdy, in 1896 donated to it the estate of Walendów, situated 1.5 km away from Derdy. In 1908 the construction of the house for children began, and later of the house for the sisters, who moved there in April 1913.

On April, 18<sup>th</sup> 1933 Sister Faustina left for Cracow for an eight-day retreat before her final vows, which she took on May, 1<sup>st</sup> 1933 (celebration conducted by Bishop Stanisław Rospond). "*I am in Him, and He is in me. In the moment, when the Bishop put the ring on my finger, she wrote after her vows, God penetrated my entire soul [...]*".<sup>26</sup>

## 8. In Vilnius

By the decision of Mother General, Michaela Moraczewska, after taking her vows, Sister Faustina left for Vilnius on May, 27<sup>th</sup> 1933. On her way, she stopped at Częstochowa, at the feet of Our Lady of Jasna Góra, Mother and Queen. "*For the first time I saw the Mother of God, she wrote later, when I went at five o'clock in the morning to see the image revealed. I prayed without a break until eleven o'clock, and it seemed to me that I had only just come*".<sup>27</sup>

The house of the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful in Vilnius, at Antokol, was purchased owing to the kindness of Duchess Maria Michałowa Radziwiłł to

mother Aniela Popławska, then Mother Superior at Derdy. The sisters moved in on May, 17<sup>th</sup> 1908.<sup>28</sup>

Sister Faustina wrote about the Vilnius house, where she stayed with short breaks until March, 21<sup>st</sup> 1936. *“Small buildings, scattered, form the convent. It seems a bit strange after the buildings of Józefów. [...] A small house, but a great life of the community”*.<sup>29</sup>

The Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful in Vilnius placed three commemorative plaques on the outer wall of their house in the memory of Sister Faustina. One of them reads: *“This house, in the years 1929, 1933-1936, was a place of residence of the Blessed Sister Faustina Kowalska from the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful, known as the Apostle of the Divine Mercy. Here Lord Jesus dictated to her the words of the Chaplet of Divine Mercy. He requested a prayer for the entire world and proclamation of the truth about the merciful love of God for man to the contemporary generations”*.

The request directed to Sister Faustina by Jesus, during her revelation in Płock, concerning the painting of His merciful image, was satisfied only in Vilnius. It was in that town where the image of Our Lady the Merciful is venerated, that Sister Faustina met Fr Michał Sopoćko, who asked the artist Eugeniusz Kazimirowski (1873-1939) to paint the image of the Merciful Jesus. On January, 2<sup>nd</sup> 1934, Sister Faustina first visited the artist. In the summer of 1934, after the artist's long consultation with Sister Faustina, the painting was finished. Unfortunately, Sister Faustina was not satisfied with it. Disappointed, she cried praying in the chapel: *“Who can paint You as beautiful as You are?”* She then heard the words of Jesus: *“The greatness of this painting lies not in the beauty of the paint or the brush, but in My Mercy”*.<sup>30</sup> From the artist's workshop, the painting first went to Fr Sopoćko's apartment. Next, it was placed behind the enclosure, in the corridor of the Bernardine convent, at St. Michael's Church, where Fr Sopoćko was the Rector, and where Sister Faustina used to pray. Owing to Fr Sopoćko, during the celebration of the end of the Jubilee Salvation Year, from April, 26<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> 1935, the image first received public adoration at the Pointed Gate (Ostra Brama).

Sister Faustina also took part in this celebration, describing it in her *Diary*: *“[...] April, 26<sup>th</sup>. On Friday, when I was at the Pointed Gate during this celebration where the image was presented, I was at the sermon given by my confessor; the sermon was about the Divine Mercy, it was the first thing demanded by Jesus for so long. When he started speaking of this great Lord's mercy, the image became a live person, and the beams of His grace penetrated the hearts of people gathered there [...]”*.<sup>31</sup>

In December 1935, during her vision, Jesus said to Sister Faustina: *“I make you the Caretaker of My Mercy. Tell your confessor that the image must be placed in a church, not behind the enclosure of this convent. Through that image I shall grant grace to souls, therefore let every soul have access to it”*.<sup>32</sup> On approval from Archbishop Romuald Jałbrzykowski, on April, 4<sup>th</sup> 1937,

Fr Sopoćko consecrated the image and placed the painting next to the high altar of St. Michael's Church. The image soon became popular in the entire Vilnius region, where it was publicly venerated. After the closure of St. Michael's Church in 1948, the image was transferred to the Church of the Holy Spirit. Owing to Fr Józef Grasiwicz, it was taken away from Vilnius, and placed in a small village church in Nowa Ruda, near the border with Poland. After the closure of the church by the Soviet authorities in 1970, the faithful kept praying in front of it, asking God to have the Mass restored to the church. The image secretly returned to Vilnius in autumn 1986. It was placed in the Church of the Holy Spirit, where the Masses are said only in Polish.

It must be stressed that the Vilnius image of the Merciful Jesus at the Church of the Holy Spirit is greatly venerated, especially by Poles living in Lithuania, as well as by pilgrims coming to the Pointed Gate.

## **9. Difficulties and suffering, placed "as a rose" at the feet of Jesus**

On March, 21<sup>st</sup> 1936, Sister Faustina left Vilnius and went to Warsaw. Mother General directed her to Walendów, and in April 1936 to the house at Derdy.

On May, 11<sup>th</sup> 1936, she left Derdy and went to Cracow to remain there. On September, 19<sup>th</sup> 1936, she was examined at the hospital in Cracow-Prądnik (presently the John Paul II Hospital). "*When we came out from the doctor's room, and went into the sanatorium chapel for a moment, she wrote in her Diary, I heard these words in my soul: My child, a few more drops in the cup, it will not be long*".<sup>33</sup> During another visit at the hospital, the doctor stated a serious pulmonary tuberculosis, and directed that she be separated from other sisters.

From December 1936 to September 1938, the Apostle of the Divine Mercy was treated in the hospital in Cracow-Prądnik several times (about eight months altogether). This fact is commemorated by the plaque placed on the left side of the chapel.

## **10. Towards complete life with God**

In order to take care of her health, on July, 29<sup>th</sup> 1938, her superiors sent her to the resort of Rabka. She stayed there, however, only until August, 10<sup>th</sup> 1938, because, as she wrote, "*she felt so poor*" that she "*was forced to stay in bed.*" After her return to Cracow, Sister Faustina's health got increasingly worse. Therefore, in April, 1938, she was again directed to the hospital in Cracow-Prądnik. From there, four months later, she wrote to Mother General, Michaela Moraczewska: "*Dear Mother, it seems to be our last conversation on earth. I feel very weak and I am writing with a trembling hand. I suffer as much as I can bear. Jesus does not allow it beyond my capacity. If the suffering is great, the Divine*

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*Grace is also powerful. I completely entrust myself to God and His Divine Will. [...] Goodbye, Dearest Mother, we shall see each other at the feet of the throne of God".<sup>34</sup>*

She returned from hospital to the convent in Cracow-Łagiewniki on September, 17<sup>th</sup> 1938. According to the rule, she asked all the sisters to come to her, to thank them for all favours, ask forgiveness for possible mistakes, and to say goodbye.

Sister Faustina Kowalska died on October, 5<sup>th</sup> 1938 at 10.45 PM, at the convent of the Congregation of Our Lady the Merciful in Cracow-Łagiewniki. The funeral took place two days later, on the liturgical commemoration of Our Lady of the Rosary, and on the first Friday of the month. Her body was buried in a common tomb at the convent cemetery in the garden of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful.

On October, 21<sup>st</sup> 1965, in the Cracow Archdiocese, information process was started aiming at the beatification of Sister Faustina. In November 1966 her corpse was exhumed, transported to the chapel in Cracow-Łagiewniki and placed under the floor, to the right of the entrance.

On March, 25<sup>th</sup> 1993, translation was performed, that is the final transportation of Sister Faustina's remains. They were placed in a small coffin-reliquary, made of sandal wood, specially imported by Cardinal Franciszek Macharski from Rome. The coffin was placed in the altar, under the image of the Merciful Jesus, known for the grace it bestows; while the tombstone from the former grave was placed under the altar mensa. The presentation of the coffin with the relics of Sister Faustina was performed just after the announcement of the beatification act by Pope John Paul II on April, 18<sup>th</sup> 1993.

Owing to the increasing number of the pilgrims to the Shrine in Cracow-Łagiewniki, in 1995, a marble praying desk was placed in front of the altar of the Divine Mercy with a relic of Sister Faustina placed behind glass (bone from the spine).

By a decree of November, 1<sup>st</sup> 1992, Cardinal Franciszek Macharski officially proclaimed the convent chapel in Cracow-Łagiewniki as the Shrine of the Divine Mercy. On June, 29<sup>th</sup> 1996, Cardinal Macharski established the *Foundation for the Shrine of the Divine Mercy*, with the purpose of the construction of the Basilica of the Divine Mercy. The Foundation has been collecting funds since January 1997, and directs the works related to the construction.

## 11. Conclusions

Among many pilgrimage routes in Poland, the recent years brought the appearance of the route of Sister Faustina. Nowadays, already over a million pilgrims follow that route every year, venerating the Divine Mercy, and praying through the

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intercession of the Apostle of the Divine Mercy. They mainly visit the Shrine of the Divine Mercy in Cracow-Łagiewniki, Płock, Częstochowa, as well as the Sanctuary of Baptism in Świnice Warckie. It is expected that due to Sister Faustina's canonisation, the pilgrimage movement following the route proposed by the author in this article will largely increase, as, according to Pope John Paul II in his homily at the canonisation Mass, Sister Faustina is "a gift of God for our era, a gift of Polish land for the entire Church."

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<sup>1</sup> Sister Faustina Kowalska, 1995, *Dzienniczek, Miłosierdzie Boże w duszy mojej* (Diary), Wyd. Ks. Marianów, Warszawa, p. 150, No 417.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 145, No 397-398.

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- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 25, No 7.
- <sup>4</sup> M. I. Mileska, 1992, *Słownik Geograficzno-Krajoznawczy Polski*, PWN, Warszawa, p. 738.
- <sup>5</sup> *Diary*, op. cit. p. 145, No 400.
- <sup>6</sup> *Diary*, op. cit., p. 24, No 8.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 488, footnote 4.
- <sup>8</sup> Elżbieta Siepak ZMBM, 1993, *Błogosławiona siostra Faustyna*, Warszawa-Kraków, p. 14.
- <sup>9</sup> *Diary*, op. cit., p. 24, No 8-9.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 25, No 13.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 25, No 14
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 493, footnote 38.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 26, No 17.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 27, No 19.
- <sup>15</sup> J. R. Bar, 1966, *Zgromadzenie Matki Bożej Miłosierdzia*, Akademia Teologii Katolickiej, Warszawa, p. 45.
- <sup>16</sup> *Diary*, op. cit., p. 490, footnote 17.
- <sup>17</sup> M. I. Mileska, 1992, *Słownik...*, op. cit., p. 265.
- <sup>18</sup> *Diary*, p. 80, No 158.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 36, No 47.
- <sup>20</sup> A. Nowowiejski, *Dzieje Instytutu Matki Bożej Miłosierdzia (1818-1907)*
- <sup>21</sup> J. R. Bar, 1966, *Zgromadzenie Matki*, op. cit., p. 75.
- <sup>22</sup> *Diary*, op. cit. P. 494, footnote 63.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 45, No 75.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 88, No 177.
- <sup>25</sup> J. R. Bar, 1966, *Zgromadzenie Matki*, op. cit., p. 71.
- <sup>26</sup> *Diary*, op. cit., p. 107, 254.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 109, No 260.
- <sup>28</sup> J. R. Bar, 1966, *Zgromadzenie Matki*, op. cit., pp. 82-83.
- <sup>29</sup> *Diary*, op. cit., p. 109, No 261.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 121, No 314.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 150, No 417.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 192, No 570.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 222, No 694.

<sup>34</sup> E. Siepak ZMBM, 1993, *Błogosławiona...*, op. cit., p. 44.

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