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The Mysticism of Sister Faustina Kowalska Against the Background of the Western Christian Tradition

The person of Sister Faustina Kowalska fascinates us with her nowadays unusual simplicity of speaking about God, and her profound experience of the unity with Christ Crucified. Sister Fasutina, known as the Apostle of the Divine Mercy, shows the world the mystery of God who is rich in Mercy and looks with understanding on human weaknesses. At the turn of the third millennium of Christianity, her person reminds us of the truth revealed in the Bible, which had been expressed in the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. The truth says that God has not ceased to love man, despite his weakness and sins. In her experiencing God in the mystery of His mercy, Sister Faustina relates to great Christian mystics, who became a sign of the Church's hope in particular periods.

Owing to her experiencing God, described in her *Diary*, Sister Faustina can be placed among the most outstanding Christian mystics who influenced the history of the Church, shaping the spirituality of the faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ. A special feature of Sister Faustina's experience of God was the discovery of the mystery of Divine Mercy, and passing the Message of Mercy to the world; the message which reminds us of the truth about God's boundless love of man. Due to the Message of Mercy, the worship of Divine Mercy develops in Cracow, Poland and the entire Catholic Church, using the forms of devotion described by Sister Faustina in her *Diary*.

1. At the Convent of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful

Helena Kowalska was born on August, 25th 1905 at the village of Głogowiec, parish of Świnice Warckie, Voivodeship of Łódź, as the third of ten children. Her parents, Marianna and Stanisław Kowalski, taught her the faith in God, fidelity to the commandments, and love of work. In her family home, Helena learnt to love God and to treat Divine issues as the most important. She attended school only for about three years (1917-1920), and helped her parents on the farm from her early

childhood. From 1921, she worked as a servant girl in Aleksandrów, and later in Łódź, helping to support her family.

Sister Faustina's spiritual life experienced a breakthrough on her joining the Convent of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful, which implemented the charismata of the Divine Mercy by taking care of girls and fallen women. The Convent derives from the French religious order, founded in the 19th century by Therese de Lamourours (1754-1836) in Bordeaux; and continued by Therese Rondeau (1793-1866) in Laval. The Convent's charismata were transferred to Poland by Ewa Potocka (1814-1881), who completed the novitiate period at Laval, and founded the first "House of Mercy" in Warsaw in 1862. In 1922 the Convent's houses in Poland were separated from the French province. First convent rules, written by Mother Therese Rondeau, which applied during Sister Faustina's times, stressed that the law of the Convent was the "inner law of love and mercy", and sisters' aim should be personal sanctity and showing the richness of the Divine Mercy to lost souls, through prayer and acts of charity. Implementing the charismata, sisters contemplated the presence of mercy in the act of Creation and Redemption, as well as its presence in human souls, attempting to reflect the boundless Divine Mercy in their lives.

From her early childhood, Sister Faustina experienced the wish to fulfil God's will and join the convent, which was expressed in the form of an inner voice of Jesus' calling:

"When I was seven, for the first time I heard the voice of God in my soul, or the invitation to a more perfect life, yet I did not always obey the voice of grace. I did not meet anyone who could explain these things to me". (D. 7).

Brought up in the spirit of obedience to God, Helena tried to answer the calling despite the obstacles, especially on the part of her parents, who first opposed her decision to join the convent (D. 8). The vision of "*Jesus in pain, naked, His body in wounds*", who hastened her to follow the calling, became a critical moment for her (D. 9). Open to inner inspirations, Sister Faustina prayed before making the decision, and later sought help from her confessor, who confirmed the righteousness of this choice.

On August, 1st 1925, Helena Kowalska joined the Convent of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful in Warsaw at St. Żytnia 3/9. As a novice, in Cracow, she intensely formed her spirituality, learning the prayer, rules of the convent, the charismata, and the work which filled her entire later life in the convent. During the ceremony of taking the habit, she adopted the name of Maria Faustina of the Holy Sacrament. On May, 1st 1933, in Cracow, she took the vows during. The year later she sacrificed herself as a holocaust for sinners.

At the Convent, Sister Faustina performed various functions, working as an assistant at the bakery and bakery shop, as a cook, gardener, and gatekeeper in the houses in Warsaw, Płock, Vilnius, and Cracow. She performed the simplest servi-

ces with great involvement, trying to discover God's love in simple tasks, and to answer it with her personal commitment. In Vilnius, it became evident that she suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis, which gradually infected the entire organism, causing great suffering and, finally, death. During her illness, Sister Faustina was hospitalised many times, and also spent a lot of time in the convent infirmary. Despite her illness, she undertook her duties at the convent, overcoming illness and suffering with her will and great love of Jesus. She died in the Cracow convent house on October, 5th 1938, and was buried at the convent cemetery.

She contained the report from her spiritual life in her *Diary*, written on the request of Fr Michał Sopoćko, her confessor in Vilnius. In her spiritual autobiography, she described fascinating meetings with God, present in her soul and speaking through her heart, leading to the mystical union with God and to discovering the mystery of Divine life to her. In His great love, Jesus passed on to her the mission to announce the truth of the Divine Mercy to the world.

The mystic of Cracow was also granted grace accompanying her unity with God. Jesus spoke to her through visions, appearing as the Merciful Jesus in the brilliance of the Glory of the Risen Jesus, with rays – pale and red – coming from his wounded side. Apart from visions, Sister Faustina was granted the gift of the spiritual stigmata, learning the condition of souls and foretelling future. All these instances of grace served her discovery of the Divine Mercy, which had been fully revealed in the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ, and showed how she could take part in this saving mission. In co-operation with her confessor and superiors, Sister Faustina passed the Message of the Merciful Jesus, expressed in the trusting attitude, acts of mercy, and new forms of worship: the worship of the image, Chaplet of Divine Mercy, Divine Mercy Sunday, and Novena to Divine Mercy.

Sister Faustina, or the Apostle of Divine Mercy, nowadays reminds all the world that God is the Father of Mercy, who loves every man showing him a chance of salvation from the misery of sin.

2. Passion mysticism

Sister Faustina's mysticism has the nature of Passion, and is focused on experiencing the mystery of Christ's Passion and Death. In this way, the mystic of Cracow falls into the long tradition of Passion mysticism, theologically defined by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and practically implemented by St. Francis of Assisi.¹ A characteristic feature of such a spiritual experience is the meeting with Christ in His suffering. Sister Faustina, similarly to mystics from Helfta – Elisabeth of Schönau, Gertrude the Great, and Mechtild of Hackeborn – used every occasion to meditate the Lord's Passion, accompanying Jesus in His prayer on the Mount of Olives. She was with Him in the dark place, when He suffered humiliation and during His hearings in front of Sanhedrin. She used her imagination to experience the Saviour's pain during whipping and bearing the Cross, as well as in the moments of Death at the

Golgotha. Feeling the nature of Christ's wounds led to her participation in His suffering: *"Then my lips went silent and I sensed dying, and I felt that no one could comfort me except the One who brought me into that state"* (D. 445). Such a proximity made her discover the most profound mysteries of Jesus.

The source of Sister Faustina's power to undertake the mission of proclaiming the Divine Mercy to the world lay in prayer which led to the union with Jesus in the mystery of His Passion. It involved the daily Mass, prayers, meditation on the Passion and acts of faith. The prayer was complemented with suffering, which became an occasion for participation in Christ saving mission.

2.1. Prayer

Sister Faustina learnt to pray in her family home taking example from her parents, who every day, in the morning and evening, said prayers consisting of the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, the Apostles' Creed, Rosary, chaplets and songs. The example of parents was the best school of the faithful, trustful and persistent prayer.

At the Convent of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful, Sister Faustina learnt about all the richness of prayer in the Christian tradition, from the Mistress of the novitiate, who introduced her into this conversation with God, and from the priests who preach sermons and conducted retreats in the houses of the Convent. The highlight of the day was the Holy Mass, held every morning, experienced in the community, and with the Holy Communion. The fundamental prayers in the convent included the Breviary, complemented with "prayer practices" obligatory for each sister, the morning meditation, private adoration of the Holy Sacrament, a part of the Rosary, the Way of the Cross, Canonical Hours to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the prayer at 3 PM related to the meditation on the death of Jesus. Every Thursday, she prayed the "Holy Hour", during which she considered the Lord's Passion, accompanying Jesus from the Last Supper, through the Mount of Olives, dark room, Pilate's judgment, passage through the streets of Jerusalem, to His death on the cross. In the nightly adorations of the Holy Sacrament, Sister Faustina asked God for mercy to the world. According to the Convent's charismata, the prayers often focused on the Passion of Jesus, accompanying the Saviour in His Passion on the Cross, in which He fully revealed the truth on Divine Mercy.

The consideration of the Lord's Passion helped Sister Faustina to approach the suffering Jesus. She meditated the descriptions of Christ's Passion contained in the Gospels, she willingly returned to the Song of the Lord from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah showing the Messiah in pain. In meditation of the Lord's Passion and experiencing union with the suffering Jesus, Sister Faustina resembled the medieval mystics – Hildegard of Blingen, Elisabeth of Schönau, Gertrude of Helfta, Mechtilde of Hackeborn, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Catherine of Ricci – who experienced Christ in His pain.² While praying, the Apostle of Divine Mercy became closer to Jesus, expressing her love and wish to suffer together with the Savio-

ur: *"I am getting crazy for the love of You, Jesus, as described by the prophet, as if he could not perceive the human person in You, for the intensity of pain. In such condition I am getting crazy for the love of You. O, eternal and boundless God, what love has made of You!"* (D. 267; Cf. Isaiah 53, 2-7).

Every day, the meditation focused on the events of Jesus' life brought the Apostle of Divine Mercy to the condition characterised by complete suspension of mental and spiritual control, and by calm being with God. Contemplating the magnitude of God and His love, allowed her to forget about her illness and other difficulties, and to unite with Jesus: *"It happens to me during the meditation that one word causes my stronger union with the Lord, and I do not know what Father says. I know that I am near the Holy Heart of Jesus, my soul immersed in Him, and in one moment I learn more than during long hours of reasoning and meditation"* (D. 733).

The contemplation prayer led Sister Faustina to close being with Jesus, suffering with Him and discovering the mystery of mercy.

2.2. Suffering

The experience of union with the suffering Jesus during the prayer and the Eucharist, was complemented with the pain, which was not spared to Sister Faustina. Her suffering was mainly caused by the tuberculosis which devastated her organism causing weakness, fainting, haemorrhages, and often the pain of dying.

When describing her inner experiences, which consisted in tests of her faith, feeling of being abandoned by God, loneliness and misunderstanding related to the proclamation of the Message of Divine Mercy, Sister Faustina used expressions which can be found in the works of the most outstanding Christian mystic – St. John of the Cross (*Way to Carmel Mount, A Dark Night, Spiritual Song and Living Flame of Love*). She had moments of doubts during her prayer, and experienced the darkness in her soul due to the feeling of being rejected by God: *"The worst suffering for me was the feeling that my prayers were not so pleasant to God, and neither were my good actions. I did not dare to look at the sky. This caused great pain"* (D. 68). Her inner purification, giving up her identity, complete trust in God and fidelity in fulfilling God's will, have all the features of *the passive night of senses and spirit*, where God acts, and the co-operation of man consists in patient submission. Yet without knowing the works of St. John of the Cross, the mystic of Cracow described *"the dark night of the faith"*, through which God led her to the discovery of the mystery of the Holy Trinity. She described the manner of *"God's presence in her soul"*, revealing the beauty of human soul where God is present: *"I feel You are present in me with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Or rather I live in You, O incomprehensible God"* (D. 748). Discovering God in her soul led Sister Faustina to *"the ecstasy of love"*, which not only is love, readiness to sacrifice, and the feeling of great Divine Power acting through man.

In these experiences, the Apostle of the Divine Mercy soon discovered a chance for meeting Jesus suffering and dying on the cross. Facing the deadly fear caused by the attacks of tuberculosis, she felt like Jesus dying on the cross, she sensed His proximity, which gave her strength and courage: *“Jesus, You know that I love the suffering and I desire to drink this cup of suffering to the last drop, yet I shivered and feared, and then my trust in the Divine Mercy rose with all the power, and everything had to vanish, as the shadow vanishes with a ray of light”* (D. 697).

Consciously accepting the cross, she carried it together with Christ, discovering the truth that she also could participate in Salvation: *“Jesus let me know that in this way I participated in His torment in the garden, and that He allowed for this suffering as atonement for souls murdered in mothers’ wombs”* (D. 1276).

In her union with the suffering Christ, the mystic of Cracow is closely related to Gertrude the Great from Helfta, who had conversations with the crucified Christ, and accepted His suffering, thus participating in the Salvation. For Sister Faustina, the Passion was like ‘a book’ from which she learnt to love God and other people, to consciously make sacrifices, and to participate in the Redemption. In her visions, Jesus taught her that the acceptance of suffering helped Him to save souls: *“...Know, My daughter, that your daily quiet martyrdom with complete submission to My Will, brings many souls to heaven...”* (D. 1184). For the Apostle of the Divine Mercy, such suffering with Jesus, became a school where she learnt to follow Jesus, experience His proximity, endure together with Him, and pass on the Message of Mercy.

Through suffering, she realized that she proclaimed the mystery of mercy without speaking, as in this way she begged for mercy for people in need. In this union with Christ’s Passion, He became the only Master and Teacher, revealing to her the greatest mystery of God, the Father of Mercy.

The union with Jesus in His Passion let the Apostle of the Divine Mercy understand that suffering is the most certain way of becoming like the Lord and of participating in His mission of saving man from the misery of sin. Therefore she did not seek Christ in “the sky”, but followed His steps, accepted the suffering and reflected His attributes in her life. Sister Faustina, just as St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena and St. Gemma Galgani, discovered Jesus suffering on the Way of the Cross, enduring His pain, loneliness and abandonment. This experience became the source of strength for proclaiming the Message of Mercy to the world. Through suffering with Jesus, she discovered the boundless Divine love, and learnt to love people.

2.3. The Eucharist

Among the ordinary days at the convent, and the constant pain caused by her illness and spiritual difficulties, the daily Mass and the Holy Communion were experiences which entered to Sister Faustina’s soul like a ray of sunlight, bringing hope and joy, as well as love.

Experiencing the Holy Sacrifice became an occasion for meeting Christ in His Passion, accepting God's will, and offering herself as a holocaust. The Holy Mass experienced as a sacramental presence of the Offering, introduced her to the mystery of the Golgotha, and became an occasion for a private conversation, and discovering His pain: *"During the Mass, Jesus let me know the pain of His soul, and I clearly felt how these hymns, Hosanna, painfully echoed in His Holy Heart. My soul was immersed in pain, and every Hosanna pierced my heart like a knife. My entire soul was driven in the proximity of Jesus"* (D. 1657).

Uniting with Jesus in His Passion, Sister Faustina understood that His sacrifice consisted in the act of absolute obedience to His Father. When participating in the Saviour's cup of pain, she tried to fulfil God's will expressed by her superiors, and to obey her inner inspirations. Daily meetings with Jesus in the Communion were joyful moments, where the Beloved came to her heart, choosing it as His dwelling place. Jesus present in the "palace" of her soul revealed to her Divine mysteries of Fatherly love for each man: *"Jesus, there is one more mystery in my life – the most profound, yet the most pleasant – it is You in the substance of Bread, when You come to my heart. This is the mystery of my sanctity. Here my heart unites with Yours; here, there are no mysteries, as all that is Yours becomes mine, and what is mine is Yours"* (D. 1489).

The Eucharist, perceived by Sister Faustina as "the bread of the strong", united her with Jesus, giving her strength to proclaim the Message found in her heart.

3. Union in the faith, hope and love

On the way to union with God, Sister Faustina passed through the stage of purification of her senses and spirit, which led to a more profound discovery of herself and God revealed through the faith. The process of maturing had the nature of painful experiences of transfer from the understanding God through the senses, to the spiritual insight in the mysteries of God, who is love. Her description of the way of purification and unification with God strikingly resembles the doctrine of St. John of the Cross. The mystic of Cracow, despite of her lack of direct knowledge of his works, used the terminology typical of descriptions of the 'night of the faith' and mystical union.

3.1. The "night of the faith"

Leading Sister Faustina through pain and austerity in prayer, Jesus called her to mystical life.

The first signs of "the night of the faith" appeared already during her novitiate, causing dissatisfaction with herself, inner anxiety and spiritual pain. Her fear was similar to the distress of a small child who, not perceiving his mother, senses danger and initiates desperate search: *"At the end of the first year of my novitiate,*

my soul began to become darker. I do not feel any comfort in prayer, meditation comes with great difficulty, I begin to fear. I go deeper inside me and I see nothing but misery. I also see clearly the great Holiness of God, I do not dare to raise my eyes to Him, but I fall like dust under His feet and beg for mercy” (D. 23).

The Apostle of the Divine Mercy tried to pray even more, she wanted to fast and make penance, convinced that in this way she would convince God and receive comfort. The cry of her soul was like a cry of a baby who desperately seeks its mother. Her heart longed for God, while she experienced coldness and discouragement to fulfil God’s will. She thought she had lost God forever. In the darkness of faith, she found doubts not to be explained by reason. All the comforts on the part of her confessor and superior seemed hollow, and her heart was like ‘a stone’. She had doubts as to the truth revealed, the existence of God, and the possibility of His inspiration in a soul.

The temptations took the form of blasphemous thoughts and whispering of Satan telling her that God was not interested in her. There was complete darkness in Sister Faustina’s heart, where she could only perceive her sins, and became convinced that she would be doomed: *“Often, during entire Mass I fought against blasphemous thoughts I wanted to say aloud. I felt resentment to the Sacraments. It seemed to me I did not benefit from the Sacraments. I took the Sacraments only due to the obedience to my confessor, and this obedience was the only way I could take and the only way of helping me out” (D. 77).*

The spiritual pain which accompanied the feeling of darkness and abandonment by God were a form of spiritual torment leading to despair and doubt. Sister Faustina’s soul was burnt by inner fire which transformed her perception from cognition through senses to the spiritual insight into reality. This process resembled the ‘night of the senses and spirit’ described by St. John of the Cross, who called the experience “the night of the faith.” Through this experience, God led His disciple to the union, revealing the most profound truths of the faith to her.

Feeling helpless and abandoned, Sister Faustina devoted herself trustfully to God, certain that He could not really abandon her. She cried out of her trust: *“Although You kill me, I shall trust in You” (D. 77).*

The first effect of the “night of the faith” was experiencing God in her ordinary life, in the surrounding world and people. The discovery of God resulted in joy and new incentive to search for Him and serve Him. In the act of faith, Sister Faustina discovered the magnitude of God and His love: *“The great light of the enlightened reason lets us know the magnitude of God, not that I learn His particular attributes, as before, no – this is different: in one moment I learn the entire Essence of God. At the same moment my soul immerses in Him and experiences such joy, as the chosen do in Heaven” (D. 770-771).*

In the “night of the faith”, the pain was interlaced with the great joy of discovering God and being close to Him. In such moments, Sister Faustina loved God

with all her heart and this gave her strength to overcome her weaknesses. The faith became a transparent veil through which God allowed her to learn His mysteries.

3.2. The love of sacrifice

The love of God resulted in the desire to make an offering of her own life to unite with the Sacrifice of Christ. The love of Jesus brought the readiness to the greatest sacrifices for her Beloved: *"I love You, Jesus, with every drop of my blood, and I would give this blood for You, as a proof of my sincere love"* (D. 57).

In the spirit of a holocaust, she desired to become a *sacrificial host*, devastating herself in private, out of love, similarly to Jesus crucified. She therefore asked Jesus to make her heart resemble His Heart, filling it with the same love which accompanied His Sacrifice. At the same time, Sister Faustina experienced the "tremors of the Heart of Jesus" when identifying with Jesus in Passion: *"Even if the pain did not concern myself, I would suffer less, but when I look at the One I love with all my heart, I see that He suffers, and I cannot alleviate this, my heart is broken in love and pain"* (D. 1054). Living through the agony and dying with Jesus, she experienced joy and happiness of being close to her Beloved. When the love grew to the utmost limits, she was convinced that God helped her with His power.

The wish to love Jesus was Sister Faustina's only desire, causing all other requests to melt in this only longing. The desire became *eternal*, involving the most profound layers of her soul, driving her to God: *"I am dying of a desire to reach Him, to immerse in Him forever. My spirit drives to Him with all its force, and there is nothing in the world that could comfort me"* (D. 469). The desire for love (*appetitus infinitus*), analysed in the mystical works of St. Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Denys the Areopagite, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. John of the Cross, points to the internal dynamics of grace which encompassed the whole man, turning him towards God.³

In Sister Faustina's case, the desire for love was boundless, just like the magnitude of God. The desire for love was a kind of suffering to her, which could not be comforted, that is why she compared it to the "agony" of soul. In this way, Christ opened *"the boundless love"* in her heart, which became the bleeding *"wound of the heart"*: *"Love and suffering are together, yet I would not exchange this pain caused by You for any treasures of this world, as this is the pain of incomprehensible joy, and the wounds are given by a loving hand"* (D. 843). In her comparison of a desire for love to a *"bleeding wound"*, Sister Faustina related to the symbols of St. John of the Cross, for whom *"the wound of love"* is a sign of love inspired by God in a human heart. The wound is at the same time a sign of great agony and incomprehensible joy.⁴

Temporary instances of Divine Love did not satisfy her desire, but inflamed the *"wound of heart"*, expressing the sudden request for seeing God. The desire

for love was at its peak in a dramatic desire for death in order to meet God as soon as possible: ...*“O take me to Yourself, Lord, if that is Your will. You know that I am dying, and dying of the longing for You, yet I cannot die. Death, where are you?”* (D. 841). God, experienced by Sister Faustina, drove her to Himself, revealing His mysteries, and at the same time remained God in the darkness, as in the life of Abraham and Jacob.

Granting His love to Sister Faustina, God opened a *“dungeon of love and desire”*, which could not be satisfied in her earthly living. The *“dungeons”* of desire resemble the *“caves of the senses and spirit”*, described by the Spanish mystic, which instils love into a soul, preparing it for acceptance of the boundless God.⁵ The great and incomprehensible desire for God opened an inner area, inspiring a longing for God, and letting her know the taste of His Majesty. This experience of God’s love was expressed as a *“wave of love”* or a *“flame of love”*, which filled her heart with unusual fire, a desire to act and a great joy.

The *“flame of love”*, expressing Sister Faustina’s longing for God, burnt her inside, purifying her from all imperfection and attachment to worldly things. The flame of love was at the same time a clear indication of the love of Christ, which flows into a soul, evokes love and gives insight into the Divine mysteries: *“You chase me, O Lord, with Your love; as a ray of sunlight you penetrate me, and turn the darkness of my soul into Your light”* (D. 507). The symbol of the *“flame of love”*, as if directly taken from St. John of the Cross, brings Sister Faustina closer to the his doctrine, where love simultaneously inflames and enlightens the soul in discovery of God and in fulfilling His will.⁶

The acts of love, or *“arrows of love”*, as Sister Faustina called them, inflamed her soul with a *“a great fire”* of love, causing the feeling of complete immersing in God (D. 1082). These instances of love, wounding the soul in its very essence, led to *mystical wedding*, which, according to the Carmelite mysticism, forecast the unity with God in the faith, hope and love.⁷

The mystic of Cracow experienced the union with God through love, describing the condition with a language where Jesus is called the Groom, and she is His bride. When describing this love, Sister Faustina uses the language of *The Song of Songs*, as Mechtild of Magdeburg and St. Catherine of Siena had done, calling the union with God a *mystical marriage*: *“O my Divine Beloved, for You is the flower of my heart, and the fragrance of pure love. My soul immerses in You, eternal God; since the moment when You drove me to You, O Jesus, the more I have discovered You, the more I have desired You”* (D. 591). The mysticism of spiritual marriage, also called nuptial mysticism, indicates that the spiritual union is so direct that a soul, while loving God, discovers His deepest mysteries: *“My soul learns this clearly and as if without a curtain, she wishes to run to God, yet she feels a child; she knows it is beyond her, that is why He descends to her and unites with her”* (D. 767). Love is so great that it helps to survive all suffering and courageously testify to Divine Mercy: *“I only know that I love and I am loved. This*

is enough for me. I try to be faithful to the Holy Spirit during the day, and to meet His requirements" (D. 1828). It was from the Divine love that Sister Faustina had the power to proclaim the truth of the Divine Mercy.

The mystical wedding described by the author of the *Diary* was an inner act, sensed in the essence of her soul through the new quality of Grace which cannot be described by the human language. Sister Faustina was aware that the beloved was present in her heart, allowing her to be with Him all the time. The Divine Love, which filled her, became the driving force for living in the world, following Jesus only, and proclaiming the truth of the Divine Mercy. The mystic of Cracow, like the bride from the *Song of Songs*, wished to conceal her feeling in order to belong exclusively and completely to the Divine Groom. In the act of wedding, she offered Jesus her 'virgin love', the one and only, which filled her heart. The truth of the union was expressed in the image of the Holy Blood, a symbol of Christ's love which circulated in her body, inflaming her with Divine Love: "I feel it well, as Your Divine Blood flows in my heart; there is no doubt that with this Holy Blood of Yours, Your purest love entered my heart" (D. 478). That moment was the beginning of happiness and peace, which she compared to a feast of two friends, rejoicing their proximity and awaiting complete union in the *mystical marriage*.

Love, granted by Jesus to His disciple, introduced Sister Faustina into a new life, a taste of complete union with God, and insight into His mysteries: "Lord, I see the brightness of the eternal auroras. My entire soul wants to run to You, Lord, nothing withholds me or links me to earth" (D. 1365). The mystic of Cracow spontaneously used the terminology of St. John of the Cross, not knowing his works directly, pointing to the "aurora", which, in the doctrine of St. John of the Cross, symbolises the exit from the "dark night" and rejoicing the proximity of God in "mystical marriage". It is a condition, where Christ as the Groom, and the soul as the bride, exchange gifts, which allows the soul to participate in His life.⁸

The union in love, as described in the *Diary*, takes place "inside the soul", which is also called "the palace of the soul", encompassing a great and magnificent inner world, which is forbidden to everyone but the soul and the Beloved (D. 582). God discovered in her heart first blinded the soul, causing fear. Yet after the period of purification during the "dark night of the faith", He introduced Sister Faustina into the mysteries: "No external issues may interrupt my being with God; even if I used the strongest words, this would not even be a shadow of how my soul is dissolved in happiness and incomprehensible love – so great and pure as its source, that is God Himself" (D. 582). The condition of the soul's union with God through the faith, where the soul and its Creator are one, is called "transfiguration" here (D. 771). She then learns Divine mysteries through love, participating in the life of the Holy Trinity.⁹

Love, as the foundation of the union, did not, however, erase the difference between Sister Faustina and her Maker. The mystic of Cracow, in the spirit of St. John of the Cross, understood the union as participation in the life of God, through love which enlightens the mind, allowing to comprehend the mystery of Creation, Incar-

nation of the Son of God, and Redemption, which was done through death and Resurrection. Through her love, Sister Faustina as if went back to the beginning of her existence, uniting with the Son of God: “*I saw the joy of the Word Incarnate, and I was immersed in the Divine Trinity*” (D. 1121). In this union of love, which is the greatest gift of God for a soul, Sister Faustina was aware that God transformed her into Himself. No suffering could stop her from the desire for the only love, which was a taste of what awaited her in Heaven.

The decision to become an offering through fulfilling God’s will, made her a bride of Christ who led her as a child to God the Father.

3.3. The attitude of trust

During the “*dark night*”, which revealed the truth of God concealed behind the curtain of the faith, Sister Faustina experienced the proximity of the Father, supporting her in the difficult moments of purification. The darkness and the light of Knowing God let her discover the truth that she was a child of God, who, as a Father, bent over this helpless creature, giving her safety and peace. In experiencing this *spiritual childhood*, Sister Faustina shows resemblance to St. Teresa of Lisieux, whose writings were familiar to her, and the mystic of Cracow consciously followed her path of complete trust in God.¹⁰

The way of spiritual childhood as a way to holiness was chosen by Sister Faustina at the beginning of her stay at the convent of Our Lady the Merciful, when in a mysterious vision, she asked St. Teresa of Lisieux to let her be a saint. In experiencing the proximity of God the Father, to whom she entrusted her fate, the mystic of Cracow differed from the author of the *History of a Soul*, not only in her style of expression, but also in the manner of achieving proximity to God. Sister Faustina discovered the goodness of the Father through Christ, who let her discover the mystery of His cross in pain. She understood her being a child in God’s hands as appreciation of her nothingness and weakness of a creature, and as submissive acceptance of rejoicing and painful experiences, trusting that the Father may not wish anything evil for His child.

The experience of spiritual childhood developed during Sister Faustina’s first “*nights of the faith*”, when she sensed rejection by God. She then made a courageous decision to follow Christ when she took the vows and accepted the command to proclaim the Message of Mercy to the world. By accepting the pain, she experienced the proximity of the Father, who gave her the feeling of safety and joy: “*I could sense I was immersed in the Divine light. Since then I have been with God, as a child is with its beloved Father*” (D. 27). Turning to the Father was then an expression of destitution which became a virtue allowing for trusting in God in every situation, regardless of the situation.

The mystic of Cracow experienced the proximity of God, just as a child senses the presence of the mother, to whom it turns with “*simplicity and love*”, with faith

and trust. These attributes opened the space for direct contacts with God, becoming a foundation for safety: “*I shall share everything with You, as a child with the beloved mother – sharing its joy and pain – everything*” (D. 230). The experience of magnitude and love of God resulted in a childlike confession: “*You are like a mother to me*” (D. 249), which allowed Sister Faustina, conscious of her weaknesses and nothingness, to fall into the arms of the good Father.

For Sister Faustina, spiritual childhood was a way to be with God. By adopting an attitude of a child towards her Father, she experienced a close contact with Christ, who was her Master and her Groom, discovered in the mystery of Passion and death. God, to whom she surrendered with the trust of a small child, became a caring mother, who gives safety, peace and joy to her child.

4. The Grace

For the mystic of Cracow, an important role in experiencing the unity with God was played by the extraordinary states granted to her by God. They involved the ability to learn the condition of souls, visions, spiritual stigmata, and foreseeing the future. These experiences played an important role in the adoption of the message of the Merciful Jesus and in passing it on to the world. Experiencing God and the accompanying extraordinary states may be compared to the spiritual experiences of such outstanding Christian mystics, as the German mystics: Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Elisabeth of Schönau (1129-1165), Gertrude the Great of Helfta (1256-1302), Mechtild of Hackeborn (1241-1299), and Mechtild of Magdeburg (1208-1282), the Italian mystics like St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), St. Catherine de' Ricci (1522-1589), St. Gemma Galgani (1878-1903), and the French mystic, St Marguerite-Marie Alacoque (1647-1690).¹¹

Pointing to the magnitude of Sister Faustina's mysticism, which places her among the greatest Christian mystics, it must not be forgotten that she was also a great visionary through whom the Message of Mercy was passed. The vision of Jesus suffering, whipped, in the crown of thorns, crucified, with His side pierced, so visibly present in Sister Faustina's *Diary*, appeared much earlier in the writings of the mystics of Helfta: St. Gertrude the Great¹², Mechtild of Hackeborn¹³ and Mechtild of Magdeburg.¹⁴ These mystics, meditating on the mystery of Christ's humanity, achieved the condition of a mystical union with Christ crucified, with whom they conversed. They also participated in His Passion, sensing pain in their hands, feet and side, resembling the wounds of Christ. Supernatural phenomena mark a significant reference point for the analysis of Sister Faustina's experiences, confirming the possibility and credibility of such sensations.

An important context of Sister Faustina's visions of the Merciful Jesus may be found in the visions of St. Catherine of Siena, who directed by inner inspirations reminded the world of the Divine Providence, and advised the popes to end the “We-

stem Schism.”¹⁵ Another great visionary, St. Catherine de Ricci, often talked with Jesus crucified.¹⁶ The visions of the Holy Heart of Jesus, experienced by St. Marguerite-Marie Alacoque, containing a message on the opportunities of redeeming one’s own sins and the sins of others¹⁷, had a similar character. Contemporary visionaries include an Italian stigmatised Gemma Galgani¹⁸, and Sister Lucia of Fatima.

Apart from the vision of the Merciful Jesus, the author of the *Diary* also had the visions of the Holy Trinity, Our Lady, saints and souls from Purgatory, Hell, and of Satan. All the visions were to help her in understanding the truth of the Divine Mercy, and to proclaim it to the world. Undoubtedly, in the case of Sister Faustina, the most important are the visions of the Merciful Jesus, in which Jesus personally taught His disciple about Divine Mercy, and passed to her the devotion to Divine Mercy, through which everyone can adore God and ask for mercy. The visions are based on developed imagination, ability to get emotionally involved, and unusual obedience to God.

Images or aural impressions, which often accompanied Sister Faustina of prayer, work, or rest, often had the character of inner “intellectual” or imaginary visions, which allowed her to perform her activities in real life. Visions have always been accompanied with the feeling of God’s presence: “*Often during the Mass, I see the Lord in my soul, I feel His presence which overwhelms me. I feel His Divine look, we exchange many words without speaking, I know what His Divine Heart wishes and I always do what He pleases*” (D. 411). The visions were often of a purely spiritual nature, expressed by direct inflow of Divine knowledge into the soul, without any image. This was like an intuitive and holistic insight into the Divine truth (D. 882).

Sister Faustina’s unusual visions caused her serious difficulties, which she discussed with her confessor. The ‘Voice’ heard in her soul, and the visions of her imagination required an objective assessment of the Church authority. A special problem was brought about by the command to proclaim the Message of Divine Mercy, which was repeated in the visions showing the Merciful Jesus to the end of her life.

The first vision of the Merciful Jesus took place on February, 22nd 1931, in the cell of the convent in Płock (D. 47). It showed Lord Jesus in a white garment, one hand raised “*as if for blessing*”, the other touched the garment slightly open on His chest, from where came two rays: a pale and a red one. The image of Christ in a white garment, showing the marks of His Passion resembles the Gospel image of the Risen Christ, who appeared to the Apostles in the Upper Room after the Resurrection (cf. John 20, 19-29), and the Son of Man, as described by John the Apostle in his Revelation (Rev. 1, 13-18).

The vision did not only involve the sense of vision. Sister Faustina contemplated the image with wonder. At the same time she heard the words of Jesus: “*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 in-*

scription: *Jesus, I trust in You*» (D. 47). The vision initiated the entire series of visions of the Merciful Jesus, characterised by the person of Jesus with the marks of His Passion and two rays. The sensation was accompanied with the awareness of God's presence and the fear of such proximity of the Maker, as well as by the discovery of the Divine Mercy and the mission to proclaim the truth about the Merciful God to the world.

The mystic often saw the adored Jesus in pain, who revealed to her the rules for spiritual development, and the truth of the union with God through love. All visions of Jesus, Our Lady, saints and souls from Purgatory, helped Sister Faustina to discover the mystery of God and to perform the mission of proclaiming the truth of Divine Mercy.

Sister Faustina Kowalska, being one of the great Christian mystics, is an example of a very personal meeting of a faithful man with God. She pointed to the way in which a 20th century person may pass from the simplest forms of prayer to the union with God in love. Granted the unusual visions, spiritual stigmata, insight into the condition of human souls, and into the future, the mystic remains a mistress of spiritual life, revealing the truth of the experiences of the faith, which consist in painful purifications, yet which lead to experiencing of the presence of God and to discovery of His mysteries. She is one of the outstanding women of the Church, who reminds the world that God is the Father of mercy, and who passes on the devotion based on the attitude of trust in God and performance of the acts of charity. The Apostle of the Divine Mercy speaks to the world in a simple language about the greatest mystery of God, performing the mission passed on to her by Jesus in her visions.

Notes:

¹ Cf. P. Bourgy, *Teologia e spiritualité dell' Incarnazione*, Vicenza 1964; J. Machniak, *Doświadczenie Boga w tajemnicy Jego miłosierdzia u bł. Siostry Faustyny Kowalskiej*, Kraków 1998, pp. 143-171; S. Nowak, *Duchowość Siostry Faustyny Kowalskiej w świetle jej Pism*, in: *Mistyka chrześcijańska*, ed. J. Machniak, Kraków 1995, pp. 89-99.

² J. Misiurek, *Wielkie mistyczki Kościoła*, Lublin 1996.

³ Cf. *Désir* in: DSAM, III, pp. 606-623.

⁴ Cf. St. John of the Cross, *A Spiritual Song* 9,3; *The Living Flame of Love*, II, 8.

⁵ Cf. John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, III, 18-20.

⁶ Cf. John of the Cross, *Dark Night*, II, 12,5; *Living Flame of Love*, I, 16.

⁷ Cf. St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Song*, 14-15, 1 and following; St. Theresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, VI, 1-5; Cf. S. Urbański, *Życie mistyczne błogostawionej Faustyny Kowalskiej*, op. cit., pp. 139-171.

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- ⁸ St. John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, 22,2 and following.
- ⁹ St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night*, II, 17,2.
- ¹⁰ St Teresa of Lisieux, *History of a Soul*, C, 2, 3.
- ¹¹ Cf. J. Aumann OP, *Zarys historii duchowości*, Kielce 1993; J. Machniak, *Doświadczenie Boga w tajemnicy Jego miłosierdzia u bł. Siostry Faustyny Kowalskiej*, op. cit., pp. 298-304; K. Rahner, *Visioni e profezie*, Milano 1995.
- ¹² Giovanna della Croce, *Gertrude di Helfta*, in: *Nuovo Dizionario di Spiritualità* (NDS), vol. 2, pp. 1257-1258.
- ¹³ M. Schmidt, *Mechtilde de Hackeborn*, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité Ascétique et Mystique* (DSAM), vol. X, pp. 873-877.
- ¹⁴ M. Schmidt, *Mechtilde de Magdeburg*, in: *DSAM*, vol. X, pp. 877-885.
- ¹⁵ E. Ancilli OCD – D. De Pablo Maroto, *Catherina de Siena*, in: *NDS*, vol. 1, pp. 483-488.
- ¹⁶ G. Di Agresti, *Caterina de' Ricci*, in: *NDS*, vol. 1, pp. 480-483.
- ¹⁷ J. Le Brun, *Marguerite-Marie Alacoque*, in: *DSAM*, vol. X, pp. 349-355.
- ¹⁸ H. Fros, F. Sowa, *Twoje imię*, Kraków, 1975, p. 247.

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