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## **Pilgrimages to the Shrine of the Divine Mercy at Cracow-Łagiewniki**

**T**he Shrine of the Divine Mercy at Cracow-Łagiewniki has become a permanent element of the history of the town, and the map of Polish and European pilgrimage centres. It is increasingly more often visited by pilgrims from other continents, from such far countries as: the Philippines, Korea, Australia, Canada or Chile. Everyday, hundreds of pilgrims come here, and pray in a small chapel, in front of the image of the Merciful Jesus and the relics of Sister Faustina, seeking strength, support, or spiritual rebirth. This is because the message announced from this place is so unusual, the message of great Divine Love and Mercy to people, even to greatest sinners. In her *Diary*, Sister Faustina wrote the words passed on to her by Jesus: “[May] greatest sinners have hope in My Mercy. They have the right to trust in My Boundless Mercy more than others. My daughter, write about My Mercy for souls in misery. Souls that ask for My Mercy are a delight to Me. Such souls are granted grace beyond their wish. I cannot punish, despite someone’s being most committed to his sins, if he addresses My mercy, but I make excuses for his out of My boundless and incomprehensible mercy” (D. 1146). And one more quotation from Sister Faustina’s *Diary*, which now relates directly to the shrine at Cracow-Łagiewniki: “Today, I started the novena to the Divine Mercy. It means I spiritually come in front of this image, and I say the chaplet that the Lord taught me. On the second day of the novena, I saw the image as if live, covered with votes, and I saw crowds of people coming here, I saw many of them comforted...” (D. 851).

### **1. History**

For the believers, each shrine is a special and sacred place, chosen by God. According to the definition of a shrine, as understood by the Catholic Church, it is “a church or other sacral place visited by pilgrims on the approval of the regional Bishop, to show their religiousness.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in order for a shrine to exist, pilgrimages are necessary. This article is to present this aspect of the operation of the shrine at Cracow-Łagiewniki.

According to the aforementioned definition of a shrine, its founding requires the approval of the regional bishop. On November, 1<sup>st</sup> 1992, Cardinal Franciszek Macharski issued a decree approving the convent chapel of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful at Cracow-Łagiewniki as the Shrine of the Divine Mercy. Much earlier, on June, 22<sup>nd</sup> 1968, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła inscribed the place on the list of diocesan shrines. However, pilgrimages to the centre at Cracow-Łagiewniki date even further back, as they started soon after Sister Faustina's death, during World War II. It was then that the convent chapel was opened to the general public. Many people started visiting Sister Faustina's tomb at the convent cemetery. In 1943, on the second Sunday of Easter, the image of the Merciful Jesus by Adolf Hyla was consecrated in the chapel. Since then, on the initiative of Fr. Andrasz, devotion to Divine Mercy has been said, attended by inhabitants of Cracow, and of the Łagiewniki district (then a village). In the *Convent Chronicles*, there is an entry saying: "April, 16<sup>th</sup> 1944. Day of the Divine Mercy, White Sunday. The devotion was great, many people came, even from Cracow, there were also many confessions and Communions, as if at a sort of feast."<sup>2</sup> Apart from the White Sunday, devotion to Divine Mercy was held on every third Sunday of the month. The image of the Merciful Jesus was then moved from the side wall into the altar of the Heart of Jesus, and during the White Sunday, to the main altar. After the end of the war, the worship kept spreading. The *Convent Chronicles* have an entry on the White Sunday of 1949: "incredible crowds as for our chapel... Many people came from Silesia and Łódź...."<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of 1950s, Łagiewniki became visited also by some foreign pilgrims. The time after the issue of the Notification of 1959, forbidding the popularisation of the devotion to Divine Mercy, was a difficult period in the centre's history. The sisters, however, remember that pilgrims kept coming to the place, although in a smaller number. On approval of archbishop Baziak, the image of the Merciful Jesus remained in the side altar of the chapel, and the devotion to the Divine Mercy was still said. The number of pilgrims visibly increased in the late 1960s, after the information process of Sister Faustina (who died as a presumed saint) was started by Cracow archbishop Karol Wojtyła, and after her remains were moved from the cemetery to the convent chapel. In 1968, the Congregation addressed the Archbishop Curia in Cracow with a request for including the convent chapel devoted to St. Joseph in the list of shrines and pilgrimage centres. The request was answered positively, and since then the chapel with Sister Faustina's tomb has been treated as a shrine, despite of the lack of an official decree. In 1978, the Notification of 1959 was revoked, which definitely helped to increase the number of pilgrims coming to Cracow-Łagiewniki, just as the beatification of Sister Faustina in 1993. By a decree issued by Cardinal Franciszek Macharski in 1992, the chapel's title was changed from "St. Joseph' Chapel" to "the Shrine of the Divine Mercy."

## 2. Analysis of pilgrimage movement

The pilgrimage Books, held in the Shrine since 1970, allow for analysis of the dynamics of the pilgrimage movement to this centre within the last thirty years, and for presenting the quantitative and spatial development of the phenomenon. The fact of the increasing inflow of pilgrims to the shrine is obvious, even without any detailed research or analyses. Every day, especially during the Hour of Mercy, the chapel is filled with pilgrims, and in front of the convent gate one may see numerous coaches, often with foreign registration plates. The office receives many letters from worshippers of the Divine Mercy from all over the world. When observing the people who come here, another thought comes to one's mind: hardly ever does one see people driven by curiosity, or simply tourists. It may be said without much exaggeration that the shrine is a centre of a "living" prayer, a place for meeting God.

As mentioned above, the Sisters started to register pilgrims systematically in 1970. First, entries were made personally by visitors, often contained intentions for prayers, as well as private reflections and comments. In the early 1990s, due to

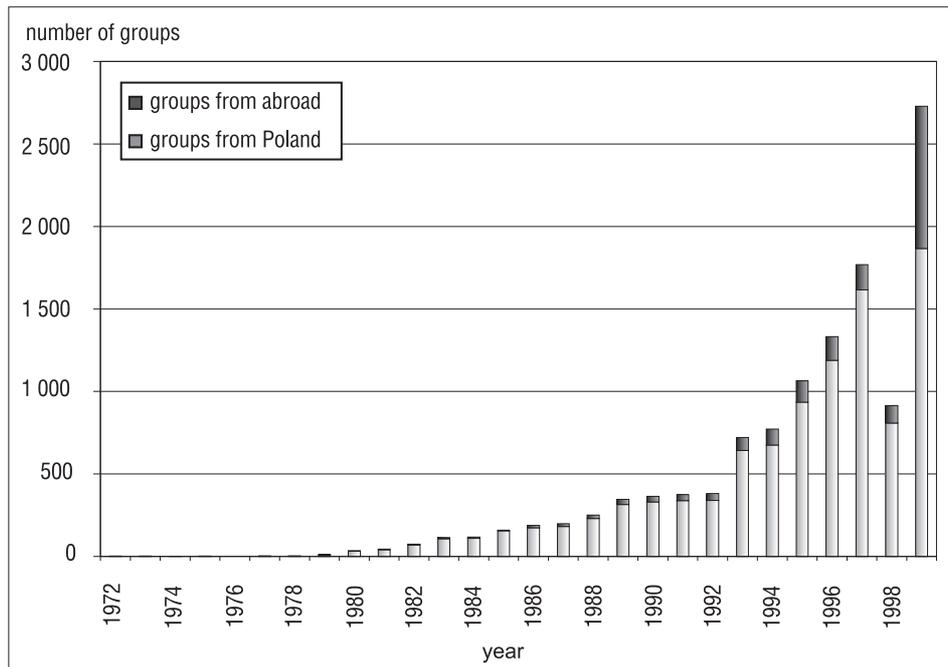


Fig. 1.

Pilgrim groups coming to Cracow-Łagiewniki in the years 1972-1999

Source: Own analysis based on *Pilgrimage Books*.

the increasing number of pilgrims, this manner of documentation was abandoned, and Sisters themselves began registering visitors (especially all the pilgrimage groups are noted, while the number of individual pilgrims is given based on estimates). Since June 1998, the register of Polish and foreign pilgrims has been kept separate. Mainly the groups are registered, which ask Sisters to organise a presentation for them. It may be assumed that the registered pilgrimage movement consists in 20-25% of the total number of believers coming to the shrine. Pilgrimage Books of 1970s show the majority of individual pilgrim, noting only several Polish groups in particular years, and very rare visits of foreign groups. The number of Polish groups highly increased since the beatification of Sister Faustina, therefore since 1993, and has continued until now with an exception of a small decrease in 1998. In 1999, almost 2000 groups were registered. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the number of foreign pilgrim groups has been increasing as well, with the record number of 843 groups in 1999, which is five times the number of the previous years. Another factor confirming the high dynamics of the pilgrim movement to the shrine is the total number of pilgrims coming to the centre in particular years. Even a few years ago, the number amounted to several thousand visitors a year. In 1999, the shrine was visited by 800 000 pilgrims, and in the present year (2000), it is estimated that due to the canonisation of Sister Faustina, the number may total over one million. Individual pilgrims form over two thirds of the total number of visitors.

Starting from 1970s, the popularity of the shrine has been spreading. Now the interest has covered the entire territory of Poland; in 1999 there was no diocese which would abstain from organising a pilgrimage to Cracow-Łagiewniki. For comparison, in 1970s, pilgrims came mainly from the then Cracow diocese and neighbouring Katowice and Tarnów dioceses, as well as from the Przemyśl, Opole, Gdańsk and Warsaw diocese. Even in 1980s, pilgrims from north and north-east Poland were very rare. It must also be realised that the awareness of the worship of Divine Mercy in the forms proposed by Sister Faustina was not as widespread as it is now. The Pilgrimage Book of 1987 contains the following entry by a group from Rymaków: *"Some of the pilgrims had heard of Sister Faustina before, but some have learnt about the Sister only now."*<sup>4</sup>

When analysing the map presenting the popularity of the Shrine of the Divine Mercy in 1999, one may see the leading position of the Cracow diocese, from which over 20% of the total number of registered pilgrim groups came. The following dioceses include: Przemyśl (11%), Tarnów (8.8%), Katowice (7.9%), Rzeszów (5%), Kielce (4.6%), Warsaw<sup>5</sup> (4.2%) and Bielsk-Żywiec (4.2%). The high number of pilgrimages from the Cracow diocese was related to the fact of pilgrimages of particular parishes of the diocese to the shrine, within the constant novena before the Jubilee of the Year 2000. The novena was started on December, 28<sup>th</sup> 1996, by Cardinal Franciszek Macharski and lasted over three years, until the year 2000. It consisted of everyday mass, held after the devotion at the Hour of Mercy, with the intentions coming from the novena to the Divine Mercy, passed on to Sister Faustina by the Lord Jesus. On the tenth day after each novena, a mass was held for the



Fig. 2.

Organised pilgrimages to the Shrine of the Divine Mercy at Cracow-Łagiewniki in the years 1972-1979 (in the present diocese borders)

Source: Based on MA dissertation of K. Matusik, *Sanktuarium Miłosierdzia Bożego w Krakowie-Łagiewnikach jako ośrodek kultu Jezusa Miłosiernego i Błogosławionej Siostry Faustyny Kowalskiej*, Cracow 1998.

pope and the college of the bishops. Such prayer form was initiated by an American living in Mexico, Oscar Delgado, who devoted the prize won in 1992 for the popularisation of the Message of Mercy. Simultaneously with the novena at Cracow-Łagiewniki, a similar novena was said in twelve churches of the Puebla archdiocese in Mexico. Oscar Delgado visited the shrine at Cracow-Łagiewniki in February 1996.

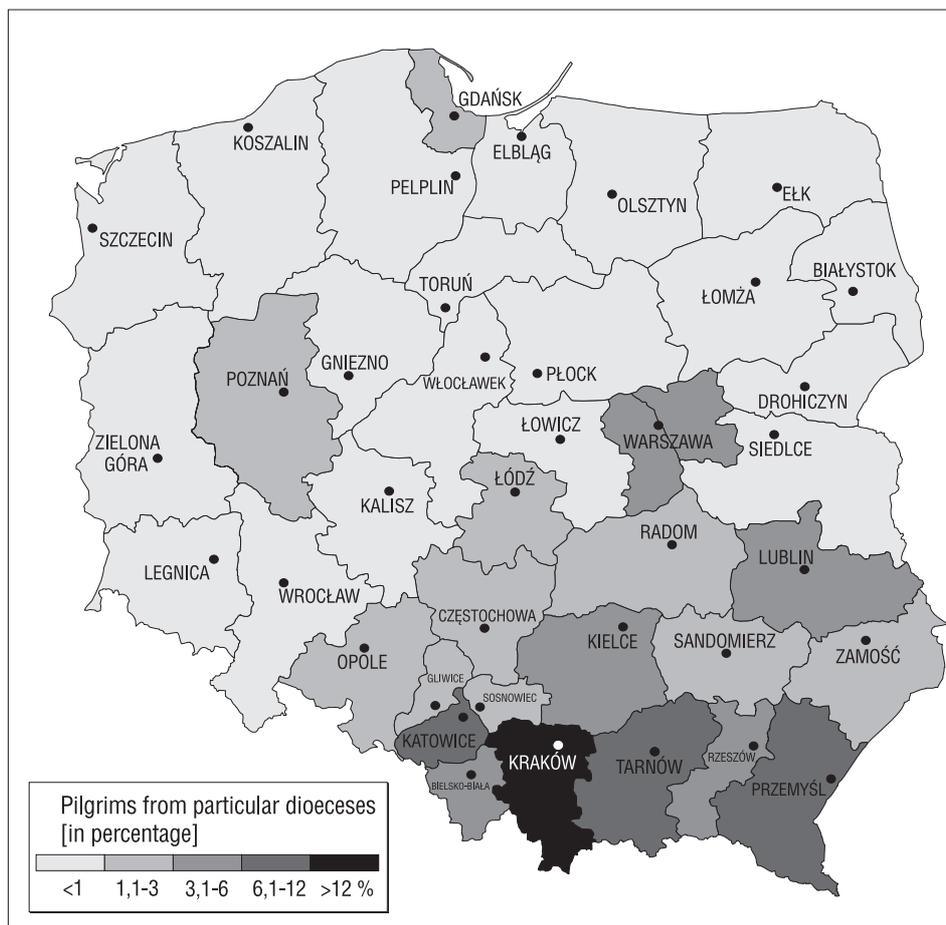


Fig. 3.

Organised pilgrimages to the Shrine of the Divine Mercy at Cracow-Łagiewniki in 1999.

Source: Own analysis based on *Pilgrimage Book* of 1999.

The Shrine of the Divine Mercy at Cracow-Łagiewniki is a pilgrimage centre not only for Polish pilgrims, but also for many foreigners. Foreign pilgrims consist in 6-7% total visitors to the shrine, which is quite a high number as for a new centre which is still developing. It is estimated that in 1999, the group totalled 50 000 people. The *Pilgrimage Book* of that year, listing only the groups asking for presentations, registered almost 11 000 foreign visitors. All the continents are represented, with the majority of visitors coming from Europe (77.8%), and North America (15.5%), while other continents are less numerously represented: South America

(1.6%), Asia (4%), Africa (0.5%) and Australia (0.6%). By the end of 1999, visitors to this place include citizens of all European countries except Bulgaria and Greece. The greatest numbers of pilgrims come from Slovakia (about 20% of the total number of foreign visitors in 1999), Germany (13%) and Czech Republic (7%). Among non-European countries the United States of America prevail. It must be stressed that it was the healing of Americans: Mrs Maureen Digan of 1981, and Fr. Ronald Pytel of 1995; that were recognised by the Church authorities, and served for beatification of Sister Faustina in the first case, and for her canonisation in the second case. During her visit to the shrine at Cracow-Łagiewniki, Maureen Digan from Boston had the grace of conversion and the healing of her only leg in danger of amputation (Mrs Digan had been suffering for years from lymphadenia, lymphatic carcinoma) According to her sworn testimony, on March, 28<sup>th</sup> in the chapel she heard the following words in her heart: "Ask me for help and I shall help you." Convinced that it was the voice of Sister Faustina, she answered: "OK, Faustina, well, help me. You called me here, I did not want to come here." After these words, her ill leg was healed, which was confirmed by American doctors after her return to the United States. Mr and Mrs Digan came again to Cracow-Łagiewniki centre on June, 7<sup>th</sup> 1997 to meet the Pope John Paul II. The miraculous healing of Fr. Ronald Pytel from a serious heart disease took place in Baltimore in the USA, during his prayer in this intention, at a local shrine of the Divine Mercy.

Foreign pilgrims are offered presentations in English, French, German and Italian. The number of countries from which pilgrims come is still increasing. Visitors from Asia include mainly people from the Philippines and Korea, but also from Kazakhstan, Georgia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore. Pilgrims from Africa consist mainly in missionaries working on this continent. In 1999, the most largest group from this part of the world was the one of Sisters Servants of Zambia (25 persons). Many priests and monks also come from Latin America (mainly from Brazil, Columbia and Mexico). The picture is completed by pilgrims from Australia and New Zealand, who have been coming here for years (from several to several hundred people).

Despite the fact that pilgrims visit the shrine during the entire year, most of them come during the Divine Mercy Sunday (first Sunday after Easter) and October, 5<sup>th</sup>, on the anniversary of Sister Faustina's death. Due to the high number

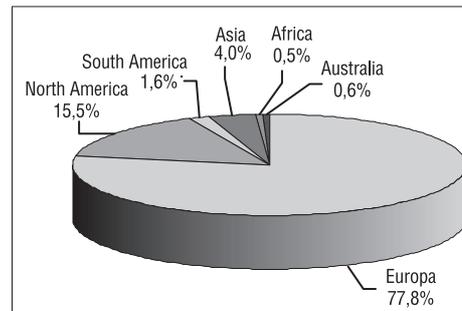


Fig. 4.  
Foreign pilgrims at the Shrine of the Divine Mercy at Cracow-Łagiewniki in 1999, acc. to continents.

Source: Own analysis based on *Pilgrimage Book* of 1999.

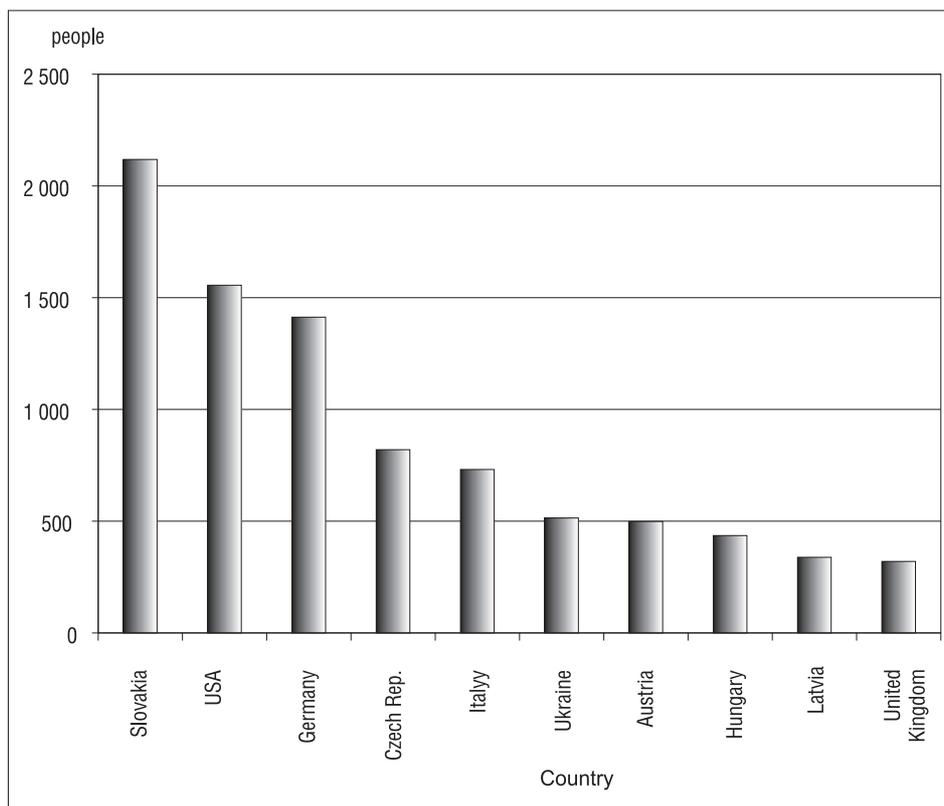


Fig. 5.  
Foreign pilgrims at the Shrine of the Divine Mercy in 1999 acc. to countries

Source: Own analysis based on *Pilgrimage Book* of 1999.

of visitors, the Sisters do not maintain a detailed registration of believers during those feasts. It is known that increasingly more people take part in those feasts, both from Poland and abroad. As an example, in 1980s the Divine Mercy Sunday was celebrated by several hundred people, while in the early 1990s the number grew to several thousand people, and in the last few years it exceeded one hundred thousand. In the year 2000, when the Divine Mercy Sunday coincided with the canonisation of Sister Faustina, the centre at Cracow-Łagiewniki welcomed over 150 thousand pilgrims. It may be presumed that in future, due to the introduction of Divine Mercy Sunday in the entire Catholic Church, the number of pilgrims visiting the shrine will highly increase on that day.

The picture of pilgrimages to the shrine at Cracow-Łagiewniki would not be complete without the information of the adopted practices and behaviour

of the pilgrims. For years, people coming to the shrine collected petals from flowers growing on Sister Faustina's tomb, believing in their special powers. Now that the access to the flowers has been made difficult, Sisters dry them and distribute to pilgrims in need. Another growing tradition consists in kneeling to the altar with the image of the Merciful Jesus and Sister Faustina's relics. A group of pilgrims from Indonesia travelled to this place bare footed. The believers not only kiss Sister Faustina's relics, but also touch them with pictures, rosaries, and other items they consider precious (like wedding rings). The items of devotion are also placed at the grave at the convent cemetery, which enclosed Sister Faustina's relics until 1966.

These comments on the pilgrimages to the Shrine of the Divine Mercy at Cracow-Łagiewniki may be concluded with two quotations, one of them coming from Sister Faustina's *Diary*, while the other from the speech of Pope John Paul II, proclaimed at Cracow-Łagiewniki in 1997, which best describe the essence and the meaning of the shrine and the driving force for thousands of pilgrims of all over the world:

*"My daughter, write that the greater the misery, the more right to My Mercy, and [convince] all souls to trusting in My incomprehensible and boundless mercy, as I wish to save them all. The spring of My Mercy for all souls was wide opened with the piercing lance on the cross – I have not excluded anyone"* (D. 1182).

*"Nothing is as much needed by a man than the Divine Mercy – the charitable, compassionate love, bringing a man over his weakness, towards the boundless holiness of God. Here, we realise this in a special way. This place originated the Message of the Divine Mercy, which Christ Himself wished to pass on to our generation through Blessed Sister Faustina. And it is a message clear and legible to everyone. Everyone may come here, look at the image of the Merciful Jesus, at His Heart beaming with grace, and deep inside one's heart hear the same as the Blessed heard: «Do not fear anything, I am always with you»"* (from the speech of Pope John Paul II proclaimed at Cracow-Łagiewniki on June, 7<sup>th</sup> 1997).

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Canon Law Code, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Chronicle of the Cracow House of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful, April, 16th 1944. Archives of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful at Cracow-Łagiewniki. Quote from the Chronicles after MA thesis of S. Szwejer *Rozwój kultu Miłosierdzia Bożego na przykładzie sanktuarium w Krakowie-Łagiewnikach (studium patronackie)*, Katowice, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Chronicle of the Cracow House of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful, as above.

<sup>4</sup> Pilgrimage Book (from August, 18th 1987 to June, 26th 1988), entry with the date August, 18th 1987. Archives of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady the Merciful at Cracow-Łagiewniki.

<sup>5</sup> Because pilgrims did not often state whether they came from the Warsaw diocese or the Warsaw-Praga diocese, the data is given for both dioceses together.

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