

Vilnius in the history of devotion to divine mercy

“God has ordained all this in a mysterious way, because this was begun in Vilnius, and now God’s will has so directed the circumstances that this matter is being continued in Krakow.” (Diary 1301).

On the day of the canonization of St. Faustina, St. John Paul II called on the residents of Vilnius, Warsaw, Plock and Krakow for a particular mission: “Today, as I name the cities who’s patron is the new saint, I entrust their residents with a particular task to carry out the apostolic mission of Divine Mercy.” (April 30, 2000, Regina Coeli, from Liberia Editrice Vaticana).

WARSAW is the city where St. Faustina’s monastic journey of unwavering trust in God began.

The city of Plock tells us a story about the start of St. Faustina’s mission, when she was asked to have the image painted.

KRAKOW was destined to become the center of the message of Divine Mercy. It is in this city where St. Faustina is buried. St. John Paul II, who proclaimed the message of Mercy to the world from the VATICAN, had his origins here as well.

BIALYOK is known as a place of residence of Bl. Sopocko, who lived there between 1947-1975. His remains are buried in the Church of Divine Mercy, in Bialystok. In this city the artist E. Kazimirowski spent the last three years of his life, and is buried there as well.

VILNIUS bears the origins of the devotion to Divine Mercy. It is in this city, where the requests of Jesus were fulfilled, and the forms of devotion to Divine Mercy were established to help people ask for God’s mercy for themselves and others. The pilgrim route in Vilnius encompasses places associated with St. Faustina’s and Bl. Sopocko’s lives and activities, the story of painting the image of Divine Mercy, and the work of God’s Providence through ordinary people, who live trusting in God. These places help to better illustrate the environment and the development of the message of Divine Mercy.

St. Faustina – the Secretary of Divine Mercy

Saint Faustina (Helena Kowalska, 1905-1938) was born in Glogowiec village (parish of St. Casimir) in Poland. At the age of twenty she entered the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy in Warsaw and took the religious name of Sister Maria Faustina. On the surface, St. Faustina’s life tending to a monastery garden and kitchen, or working as a doorwoman, seemed quite ordinary. However, God had blessed her with vast graces: deep knowledge of the mystery of Divine Mercy, invisible stigmata, the gifts of prophecy and understanding of the human soul. It was Faustina, a simple nun who had only three years of education, but who possessed an immense trust in God, who Lord Jesus asked to relate the message of Divine Mercy to the world: *“You are the secretary of My mercy; I have chosen you for that office in this life and the next life”* (Diary 1605).

Jesus made specific requests regarding the manner and circumstances by which the message of Divine Mercy should reach the world. To Faustina these tasks seemed difficult to accomplish, and to her spiritual guides and superiors at the convent they were difficult to understand and even suspicious. Faustina herself, at times, wondered whether her mystical experiences were just a figment of her imagination. Despite that, she wrote in her diary: *“But the goodness of Jesus is infinite; he had promised me visible help here on Earth, and a little while later I received it in Vilnius in the person of Father Sopocko. I had already known him before coming to Vilnius, thanks to an interior vision. <...> I suddenly heard a voice in my soul say: <...> He will help you carry out My will on Earth.”* (Diary 53).

Blessed Michael Sopocko – a priest after God’s heart

Fr. Michael Sopocko (Michał Sopoćko, 1888–1975) was born in Juszevščyzna, in the county of Asmena (present-day Belarus). Since childhood, however, Vilnius was Blessed Sopocko’s town. According to his memoirs, he often visited Vilnius’ churches with his parents, he received the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Vilnius Cathedral, and was ordained a priest there as well. In Warsaw, he studied theology and pedagogy. In 1924, Fr. Sopocko received an invitation from the Archbishop of Vilnius, Blessed Jurgis Matulaitis, to return to Vilnius. He taught at the university, was actively involved in pastoral care of the academic community, the seminary and the army, and also served as the confessor and spiritual director of the nuns.

After meeting Sister Faustina in Vilnius, Father Sopocko dedicated the rest of his life to spreading the message of Divine Mercy. In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI beatified Fr. Sopocko.



FOR PILGRIMS:

- SAINT IGNATIUS CHURCH (Sv. Ignoto St. 6). *Bl. M. Sopocko served here as army chaplain.*
- CHURCH OF ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL IN TABARISKES (Tabariskes, Vilnius region). *For a few years after his ordination Fr. Sopocko worked as assistant pastor at St. Michael's, where he established himself as a caring and devoted priest.*
- CHURCH AND THE HOUSE OF BLESSED MICHAEL SOPOCKO IN JUODSILIAI (Juodsiliai, Vilnius region). *Bl. Sopocko lived in Juodsiliai from 1942 to 1944, where he was in hiding from the Nazis. During that time he worked as a carpenter and used the name Vaclovas Rodzievicius. The house where he lived survives to this day. In 2016, the church in Juodsiliai was the first to be named after Bl. M. Sopocko.*

Fateful meeting in Vilnius

After making her perpetual vows in May of 1933, Sr. Faustina arrived in Vilnius – a city of St. Casimir, where she spent three years at the convent of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy. In Vilnius Sr. Faustina met Fr. M. Sopocko, who became her confessor and spiritual director, and who also helped to fulfill the requests of Jesus, experienced by Sr. Faustina in her visions.

Fr. Sopocko acknowledged that it took him a few years to understand Sr. Faustina's spiritual experiences and the importance of spreading the message of Divine Mercy to the world.

Father Sopocko wanted to help Sr. Faustina to gain a better understanding of her visions. The priest encouraged Sr. Faustina to record a diary, which has become one of the most renowned contemporary books about one soul's dialogue with God. He also found an artist, who in 1934, painted the image of Divine Mercy according to Sr. Faustina's instructions. Fr. Sopocko initiated the first celebrations of the Feast of Divine Mercy at the Gate of Dawn Chapel and Sts. Johns Church. He encouraged devotion of the faithful to Divine Mercy, and worked on founding a new congregation, which today is known as the Congregation of Sisters of Merciful Jesus.

It is helpful to examine the history of Vilnius to understand in what context the message of Divine Mercy is spreading.

Why did God choose to bless Vilnius with the mystery of Divine Mercy?

Since its founding in the beginning of the 14th century, Vilnius served as a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures, and, as a result, is the site of many battles. 15th century Vilnius was the capital of one of the largest European states, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and later, one of the main cities of the Republic of Two Nations, the Polish Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Because of these circumstances Vilnius became a city of multiple ethnic groups and diverse religions. Due to its many synagogues and a very high level of Torah studies, Jews referred to Vilnius as the "Jerusalem of the North". The abundance of houses of worship of many religions: Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Eastern Catholics, Protestants and Jews, with their towers and roofs rising to the heavens, created the impression that Vilnius was a sacred city.

Since the end of 15th century Vilnius has been known as the city of St. Casimir because Prince Casimir spent the last several years of his life in Lithuania, and because he is buried in Vilnius Cathedral. Veneration of St. Casimir has been very important in Poland and Lithuania. One might call it coincidence, but four hundred years later St. Faustina was born and grew up in St. Casimir's parish in Poland.

In the middle of the 18th century, devotion to Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn, whose image hung on the city gate, began increasing. Mary of the Gate of Dawn was referred by the faithful as the Protector of the City and the Gateway to Heavenly Jerusalem. The current title of Our Lady of Mercy was bestowed on this image in 1927, when it was adorned with papal crowns.

After World War I a conflict arose between Poland and Lithuania over possession of the city of Vilnius and its surrounding region. During the interwar period, for almost 20 years, the most important city for Lithuanians belonged to the Republic of Poland. During that time, Sr. Faustina, a nun of the congregation of Our Lady of Mercy, arrived in Vilnius, and the message of Divine Mercy began spreading there, as if to unify the two conflicting, but very close Lithuanian and Polish peoples for an important mission of God.

During and after World War II, Vilnius, just like Warsaw and Krakow, directly suffered the madness of two totalitarian regimes - Fascist and Communist - and through their martyrs attested to the victory of Divine Mercy to the world. For almost 50 years, Lithuania and its capital Vilnius were occupied by the Soviet Union. During this time the first image of Divine Mercy remained behind the "Iron Curtain". As a result, the faithful of the world, for whom the devotion to Divine Mercy is important, are still discovering the first image of Divine Mercy and Vilnius as a City of Mercy.



The Image of Divine Mercy

“By means of this image I shall grant many graces to souls. It is to be a reminder of the demands of My mercy, because even the strongest faith is of no avail without works.” (Diary 742).

St. Faustina saw the vision of the image in 1931, in her convent cell, in Plock:

“In the evening, when I was in my cell, I saw the Lord Jesus clothed in a white garment. One hand [was] raised in the gesture of blessing, the other was touching the garment at the breast. From beneath the garment, slightly drawn aside at the breast, there were emanating two large rays, one red, the other pale. <...> After a while, Jesus said to me, paint an image according to the pattern you see, with the signature: Jesus, I trust in You.” (Diary 47).

In Vilnius Fr. Sopocko asked the artist Eugeniusz Kazimirowski to paint an image according to Sr. Faustina’s visions. It was completed in 1934, and it is the only image of Divine Mercy whose creation was carefully supervised by Sr. Faustina herself.

“<...> My confessor told me to ask the Lord Jesus the meaning of the two rays in the image <...>. During prayer I heard these words within me: The two rays denote Blood and Water. The pale ray stands for the Water which makes souls righteous. The red ray stands for the Blood which is the life of souls... These two rays issued forth from the very depths of My tender mercy when My agonized Heart was opened by a lance on the Cross.” (Diary 299).

At first, public veneration of the image was forbidden. Subsequently, the image was transferred from one church to another, secretly purchased to keep it safe, and hidden during World War II and the Soviet occupation. In 2005, on the initiative of Cardinal Audrys Juozas Backis, the painting was transferred to the re-consecrated Shrine of Divine Mercy in the Old Town of Vilnius. This shrine is located at the site of the former Holy Trinity Church, which was permanently closed after World War II, in 1947. The last pastor of this church was Blessed Fr. M. Sopocko, who due to the Soviet occupation of Vilnius, fled to Poland. Finally, almost 70 years later, the doors of this church were opened again, this time as the Shrine of Divine Mercy.

FOR PILGRIMS:

- THE CONVENT OF SISTERS OF MERCIFUL JESUS (Rasu St. 6). Bl. M. Sopocko lived in this building between 1932-1934. Artist E. Kazimirowski had his studio here as well, where in 1934 he painted the image of Divine Mercy. At that time the building belonged to the Sisters of Visitation.
- THE SHRINE OF DIVINE MERCY (Dominikonu St. 12). The first image of Divine Mercy, which was painted in Vilnius, is venerated here since 2005.
- HOLY SPIRIT CHURCH (Dominikonu St. 8). The image of Divine Mercy was venerated here between 1986 and 2005.
- SAINT ARCHANGEL MICHAEL CHURCH (currently Church Heritage Museum, St. Mykolo St. 9). This is the first location, where between 1937 and 1951 the image of Divine Mercy was permanently displayed for public veneration, and which helped strengthen the devotion to Divine Mercy.

The origins of Divine Mercy Sunday

Numerous times Jesus spoke to St. Faustina of His desire that the Sunday after Easter be celebrated by the entire Catholic Church as the Feast of Divine Mercy (Diary 49, 299, 300, 699, 742, 965, 1517):

“Ask of my faithful servant [Father Sopocko] that, on this day, he tell the whole world of My great mercy; that whoever approaches the Fount of Life on this day will be granted complete remission of sins and punishment.” (Diary 300).

In 1935 on the Sunday after Easter, Blessed M. Sopocko used the image of Divine Mercy as an illustration for his homily about Divine Mercy. The image was displayed in the Gate of Dawn staircase gallery window. During that time, St. Faustina had visions of Jesus rising above the city, cutting nets which were covering it, and finally blessing the city with a huge sign of the cross. During the homily about Divine Mercy, St. Faustina saw a vision of the image coming to life, with rays of light penetrating the hearts of the faithful (Diary 416-417). On the Sunday after Easter, at the end of Holy Mass, she saw Jesus, as He is represented in the image, giving His blessing. Its rays extended over the entire world (Diary 420). These events are considered the origins of Divine Mercy Sunday.

In 1946, Servant of God Archbishop of Vilnius Mieczislovas Reinsys gave his permission for the first time to officially celebrate the Sunday after Easter as Divine Mercy Sunday at Sts. Johns Church. In 2000, St. John Paul II declared the First Sunday after Easter – Divine Mercy Sunday.



FOR PILGRIMS:

- OUR LADY OF MERCY GATE OF DAWN CHAPEL (Ausros Vartu St. 14). *Beginning in 1935, the Sunday after Easter has been considered the origin of Divine Mercy Sunday, because on that date for the first time the image of Divine Mercy was displayed in the Gate of Dawn Chapel gallery window for public veneration as an illustration for Bl. M. Sopocko's homily about Divine Mercy. At this chapel, St. Faustina experienced visions of Jesus blessing the city, with rays extending over the entire world.*
- SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST AND SAINT JOHN THE APOSTLE AND EVANGELIST CHURCH (Sv. Jono St. 12). *Bl. M. Sopocko worked at this church as a Vilnius University professor. In 1946, with the permission of Vilnius Archbishop Mecislovas Reinys, for the first time the Sunday after Easter was officially celebrated as Divine Mercy Sunday.*

Chaplet of Divine Mercy

"Through the chaplet you will obtain everything, if what you ask for is compatible with My will." (Diary 1731).

On September 13th and 14th, 1935, Jesus dictated to St. Faustina at the convent in Vilnius the Chaplet of Divine Mercy (Diary 475-476) – a prayer as a shield in the face of death and an opportunity to entrust one's life to Divine Mercy – to St. Faustina at the convent in Vilnius:

"Whoever will recite it will receive great mercy at the hour of death. Priests will recommend it to sinners as their last hope of salvation. Even if there were a sinner most hardened, if he were to recite this chaplet only once, he would receive grace from My infinite mercy." (Diary 687).

The Chaplet is said using Rosary beads.

At the beginning we pray: the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary and the Apostle's Creed.

On the larger beads we pray (1 x):

Eternal Father, I offer You the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Your Dearly Beloved Son, Our Lord, Jesus Christ, in atonement for our sins and those of the whole world.

On the small beads we pray (10 x):

For the sake of His sorrowful Passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

Conclude with reciting (3 x):

Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

FOR PILGRIMS:

- SAINT FAUSTINA'S HOUSE (V. Grybo St. 29 a). *The only building of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy surviving to this day. St. Faustina lived here in 1929 and between 1933-1936. At this house she started her Diary and the Chaplet of Mercy was dictated to her in 1935.*

Spreading the message of Divine Mercy

"Souls who spread the honor of My mercy I shield through their entire lives as a tender mother her infant, and at the hour of death I will not be a Judge for them, but the Merciful Savior." (Diary 1075).

Spreading of the message of God's Mercy and living that message by actions, words and prayer are essential to the spirituality of Divine Mercy. The last wish that Jesus related through St. Faustina was a request to establish a new congregation, which would spread the message of Divine Mercy and pray for God's mercy to the world (Diary 435-438). Presently, there are thousands of cenacles of the Eucharistic Apostles of Divine Mercy, as well as many communities and monastic orders around the world living in the spirit of Divine Mercy.



Fr. M. Sopocko provided the groundwork for the establishment of the first religious order in Vilnius. However, because of World War II, the Congregation of Sisters of Merciful Jesus was only officially approved by a bishop in 1955 in Poland, with papal approval given to the congregation in 2008. Before his death Fr. Sopocko expressed his desire for the sisters to return to Vilnius. They arrived there in 2001, and settled near the former Sacred Heart Church. As part of their mission the sisters in Vilnius are spreading the message of Divine Mercy, taking part in the ministry of children and youth, serving at the Shrine of Divine Mercy, and operating a hospice where they care for the dying and give comfort to their loved ones.

FOR PILGRIMS:

- THE CONGREGATION OF SISTERS OF MERCIFUL JESUS (Rasu St. 6). *Pilgrims may visit the chapel of the congregation located at the former studio of artist E. Kazimirowski, where the first image of Divine Mercy was painted. The congregation offers accommodations for pilgrims as well as opportunities for personal retreat.*



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