

Brothers and Sisters,

Today is Divine Mercy Sunday. It has only been called that for 25 years. Why was the name changed? Why does the Church celebrate it? What does it have to do with us here at OLR? It all goes back to an obscure peasant girl from Poland named Helena Kowalska, who became the world famous St. Maria Faustina Kowalska of the Blessed Sacrament. Let me give you some background on Divine Mercy.

Helena Kowalska was born in Głogowiec, Poland in 1905. A vision of the suffering Christ invited Helena to leave the frivolities of the world and dedicate her life to Him as a religious. Eventually, despite not having advanced education or a dowry, she was received into the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy in Krakow and took the name Maria Faustina. During her life with the sisters, Faustina experienced many mystical graces: visions, hidden stigmata, divine union, and the ability to read souls. But most of all, she perceived her calling as one who would, in cooperation with God, share his message of Divine Mercy for the salvation of souls.

Jesus Christ gave St. Faustina the task of being his apostle and “secretary” of Divine Mercy to the world. Our Lord requested that His image of Divine Mercy, given to St. Faustina through a vision, be painted for veneration with the inscription “Jesus I Trust in You.” This is the image at the center of the Divine Mercy shrine in the lower church. A new devotion, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, was also offered by Jesus as a powerful mercy, especially for the dying, and the Feast of the Divine Mercy was established, as well as prayer at the Hour of Mercy (3 p.m.) every day. St. Faustina recorded within her diary her reactions on Divine Mercy and all her mystical encounters with Christ. She endured much suffering from tuberculosis toward the last years of her life, which she offered to God for the sake of sinners. She died at the age of 33.

Because of faulty translations, theologians suppressed her writings and the Divine Mercy devotion for many years, believing them to be in error. However, when a Polish Pope came to St. Peter’s throne in 1978, he reopened the situation for further examination, with the result of clearing up the previous misunderstandings. Her writings, and the devotion, were given official approval. Although the devotion is based upon a private revelation, and no Catholic is required to accept or believe it as an infallible article of faith, nevertheless the Church has determined that it does not violate Catholic doctrine on matters of Faith and Morals and in fact

is helpful and useful for the sanctification of souls, and can be believed and used as long as it is approached with theological prudence.

Pope St. John Paul II declared Faustina a saint 25 years ago on April 30 in the Jubilee year 2000, and also established the Second Sunday of Easter as the feast of Divine Mercy for the universal Church. In doing so, the Pope emphasized Jesus' words to St. Faustina that: "Humanity will never find peace until it turns with trust to Divine Mercy. Divine Mercy! This is the Easter gift that the Church receives from the risen Christ and offers to humanity."

As part of the observance of this Sunday, the faithful will be especially interested in two particular aspects of the feast: (1) the special graces that St. Faustina said were promised by Jesus on Divine Mercy Sunday; and (2) the plenary indulgence given by the Church. What is the difference between the plenary indulgence and the promise of Jesus made through St. Faustina?

In the Diary of St. Faustina, "Mercy in My Soul," paragraph 699, Jesus gives an extraordinary promise: "The soul that will go to confession and receive Holy Communion shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment. On that day all the divine floodgates through which graces flow are opened. Let no soul fear to draw near to me, even though its sins be as scarlet."

To receive this grace, the only condition is to receive Holy Communion worthily on Divine Mercy Sunday (or the Vigil celebration) by making a good confession, by already being and staying in the state of grace on that day, and by trusting in Divine Mercy. The Holy See's Apostolic Penitentiary has decreed that the required confession can be made within twenty days either before or after Divine Mercy Sunday.

It is important to note that this special grace promised by Jesus on Divine Mercy Sunday does not remit the punishment of eternal damnation. Mortal sin is not forgiven through this special grace. That must be accomplished through the normal means of grace established by Christ for His Church, and this is sacramental confession, or else an act of perfect contrition with the resolution to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation as soon as possible.

What the special grace does is provide all the benefits normally associated with gaining a plenary indulgence, but without the necessity - or difficulty - of fulfilling the usual requirements stipulated by the Church. Even a soul that has imperfect love for God, or imperfect contrition, or imperfect intentions can still receive this

grace. It flows solely from the mercy of Jesus, and is not dependent upon any other conditions. As such, the special grace removes all the temporal punishment that we deserve because of our sins. Temporal punishment refers to punishment that takes place in time on earth, or in purgatory. The special grace of this day positions the soul, should it leave this world at that moment, to enter immediately into heaven without the necessity of experiencing purgatory. It “resets the clock,” so to speak, so that the soul thus gifted has no punishment of sin left to eradicate. The special grace on Divine Mercy Sunday can only be obtained for one’s self.

In addition, the Church offers a plenary indulgence on this day from the authority granted to it by Jesus to remit the temporal punishment due to sin through the power of the keys, the authority to "bind and loose" (Mt 16:17-19) under the usual requirements: prayer for the Holy Father's intentions, confession and Holy Communion, carrying out the special indulgenced work (participating in public devotions to the Divine Mercy, or in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament exposed or reserved in the tabernacle, reciting the Our Father and the Creed, adding a devout prayer to the merciful Lord Jesus (e.g. Merciful Jesus, I trust in you!")), and having no affection for or attachment to any sin whatsoever, even venial. Unlike the special grace, the plenary indulgence can be obtained for one’s self, or for the souls in purgatory. Provision is also made for those who cannot go to church, or for the seriously ill who cannot participate in the public devotions, to also receive the indulgence.

In all cases, Divine Mercy Sunday is rich and replete with promises of graces from our Lord. As Jesus said to St. Faustina, this feast day is to be a special "refuge and shelter for the consolation of souls.” So, let us with faith, hope, and trust rely upon the Divine Mercy and have confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ! I hope you will be able to join us this afternoon for our special Divine Mercy Sunday program (details in the bulletin).

Fr. Richard Ballard
Parochial Vicar