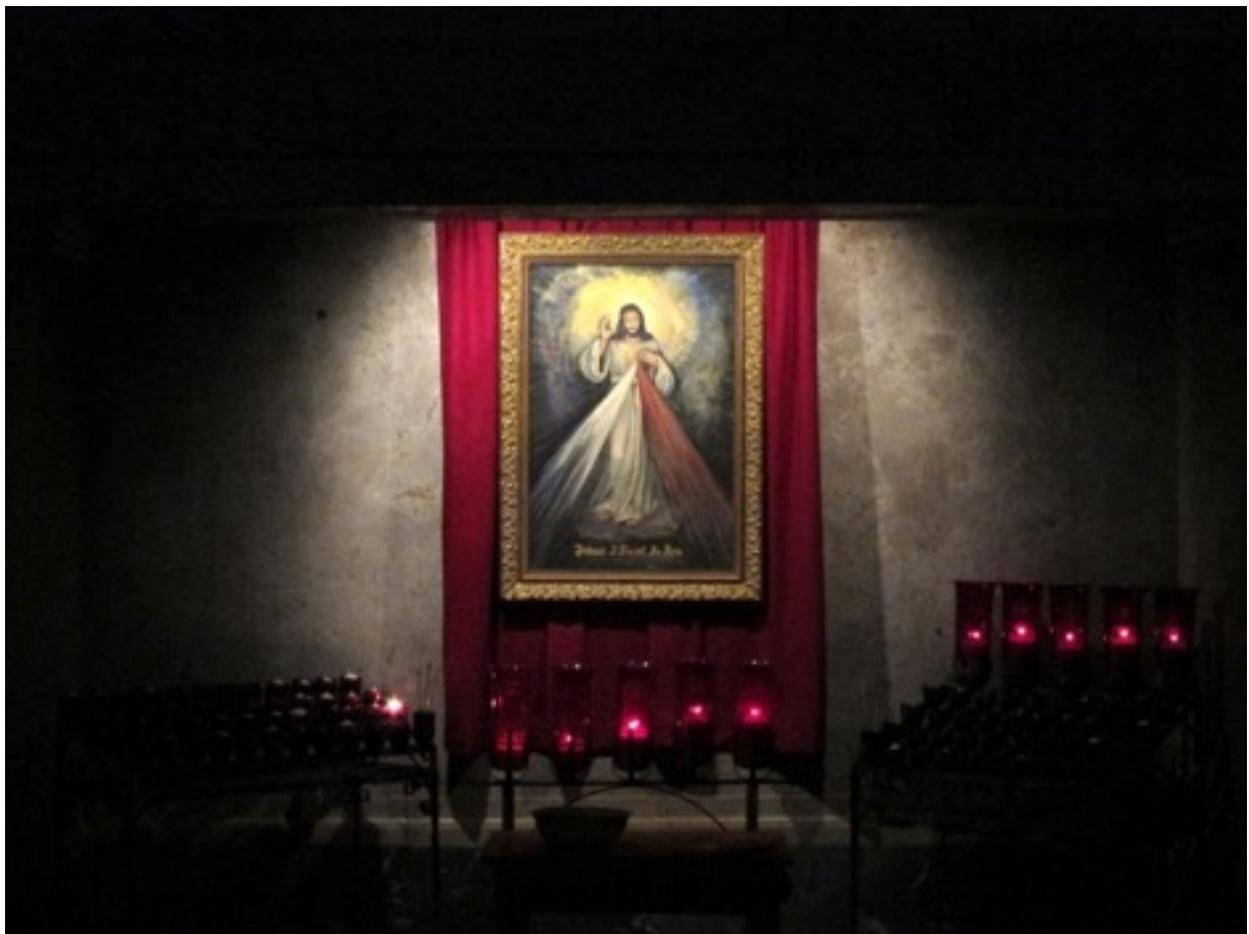


Why Catholics Celebrate Divine Mercy Sunday

Post by [Guest Author](#)



Pope John Paul—now Saint John Paul II—had actively promoted the message of Saint Faustina. In his 1980 encyclical on God’s mercy, *Rich in Mercy*, he developed a scriptural and doctrinal basis for our faith in the mercy of God. By linking the revealed truth about God’s mercy to one of the most solemn Sundays after Easter itself, he illumined the fact that the

liturgy already proclaimed the divine mercy. The truth has been embedded for two millennia in the worship of the Church. Once again we see an illustration of the ancient saying, “The law of faith is the law of prayer.”

On the Second Sunday of Easter, the responsorial psalm and Gospel for Cycles A, B and C center on the theme of mercy. In Psalm 118 we sing three times, “His mercy endures forever.” The Gospel, from John 20:19-31, begins with the risen Christ appearing to the apostles on Easter night. Jesus calms his disciples by saying and giving them “Peace.” He shows them the scars of his Passion, his wounded hands and side. His glorified body retains the evidence of his saving work through his suffering, death and resurrection.

He fills them with joy and again says to them—and produces in them —“Peace.” Then he breathes on them and explains what the divine breathing means with the words, “Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” He gives the apostles the power of God’s mercy for the sinner, the gift of forgiving sins from God’s treasury of mercy. The other texts speak of healing and give the assurance there is nothing to fear.

From Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday to the Eighth Day of Easter, the divine love song of mercy is chanted amid abundant alleluias. For centuries in liturgy the Church has proclaimed the mercy of God through the Word of God and the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. The tables of Word and Sacrament are heaped with the promises of Divine Mercy and its grand effect in the lives of millions. The liturgy is the storehouse of the wisdom of God and a treasure chest for all the worshipers.

‘I Spoke as a Brother’

A TIME magazine issue in 1984 presented a startling cover. It pictured a prison cell where two men sat on metal folding chairs. The young man wore a black turtleneck sweater, blue jeans and white running shoes. The older man was dressed in a white robe and had a white skullcap on his head. They sat facing one another, up close and personal. They spoke quietly so as to keep others from hearing the conversation. The young man was Mehmet Ali Agca, the pope’s attempted assassin; the other man was Pope

John Paul II, the intended victim. The pope held the hand that had held the gun whose bullet tore into the pope's body.

In the cell, unseen in the picture, were the pope's secretary and two security agents, along with a still photographer and videographer. John Paul wanted this scene to be shown around a world filled with nuclear arsenals and unforgiving hatreds. The Church has always used paintings, sculpture and architecture to communicate spiritual meanings. This was a living icon of mercy.

The Church was celebrating the 1,950th anniversary of Christ's death and Christian redemption. The pope had been preaching forgiveness and reconciliation constantly. His deed with Ali Agca spoke a thousand words. John Paul's forgiveness was deeply Christian. He embraced his enemy and pardoned him. At the end of their 20-minute meeting, Ali Agca raised the pope's hand to his forehead as a sign of respect. John Paul shook Ali Agca's hand tenderly.

When the pope left the cell he said, "What we talked about must remain a secret between us. I spoke to him as a brother whom I have pardoned and who has my complete trust." This is an example of God's divine mercy, the same divine mercy whose message Saint Faustina witnessed.

Ways to Observe Divine Mercy Sunday

With a relatively new liturgical celebration like Divine Mercy Sunday, the Church will look among its members for ways to celebrate. When he was archbishop of St. Louis, in 1998, Cardinal Justin Rigali wrote a pastoral letter to his priests in which he urged them to preach on the mystery of the riches of God's mercy on Divine Mercy Sunday:

I ask that each of our Archdiocesan parishes observe the Second Sunday of Easter as a celebration of Divine Mercy. . . . I ask that the principal focus of our observance be the Eucharistic Liturgy itself, with special attention given in the homily to preaching on Divine Mercy. The link between Divine Mercy and the Easter celebration, especially on the Second Sunday of Easter, exists on many levels The Scripture readings lend themselves to linking Easter and Divine Mercy since the texts highlight the forgiveness of sins.

The disposition of trust in God's mercy is essential for receiving the graces God wants us to have. The time of preparation for the Divine Mercy Sunday is meant to strengthen our people's trust in God's mercy. Artwork or holy cards related to Divine Mercy can play an important role. There is one image of Faustina that speaks to many hearts in a way that is deeper than words. Like a good icon, it confronts the praying and worshiping person with the merciful love of Christ, and its inscription, "Jesus, I trust in you," encourages the believer to respond to this invitation with greater confidence.

One way the Church celebrates God's mercy throughout the year is through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Cardinal Rigali notes, "This beautiful Sacrament was presented to the Church by Christ himself on the day of his Resurrection, hence this Sacrament of Mercy is supremely relevant also in this Easter season." The cardinal also suggests that finding times for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is another good way to observe Divine Mercy.

Saint Faustina Kowalska: Apostle of Divine Mercy

The story of Saint Faustina Kowalska reveals the inspiration behind the Divine Mercy devotion. Helena Kowalska was born in Poland on August 25, 1905. She was the third child of a devout Catholic family. As a small child she reported seeing bright lights during her night prayers. At age 16 she went to work as a servant in a neighboring city. She soon resigned after a fainting spell, even though a doctor said she was healthy.

Helena told her parents that she wanted to enter religious life but failed to obtain her father's permission because he felt she was too young. She took another post as a servant and made friends with a circle of young women. At a dance, she experienced a vision of Christ suffering that touched her conscience and revived her desire to be a nun. She soon left her job and sought entrance in a religious congregation.

In 1925, she entered the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, taking the name Faustina. She served as a cook, gardener and doorkeeper in Krakow and several other community convents. The sisters liked her but did not appreciate or understand her deep interior life, which included visions and prophecies. On February 22, 1931, Sister Faustina

experienced a new and life-changing vision of Christ. She saw him wearing a white robe and raising his right hand in blessing with his left hand resting on his heart from which flowed two rays of light. Jesus told her, “Paint an image according to the pattern you see, with the prayer, Jesus, I trust in you.”

Faustina could not paint, and struggled to convince her incredulous sisters about the truth of her vision. Ultimately she persuaded her spiritual director, Father Michael Sopocko, that the vision was real. He found an artist to create the painting that was named *The Divine Mercy* and shown to the world for the first time on April 28, 1935.

Father Sopocko advised Sister Faustina to record her visions in a diary. At one point she wrote that “Jesus said I was his secretary and an apostle of his divine mercy.” She devoted the rest of her life to spreading the message of divine mercy and the growth of popular devotion to it. Her mystical writings have been translated into many languages. She died of tuberculosis at age 33. Pope John Paul II canonized her on April 30, 2000.

The revelations experienced by Saint Faustina were of a private nature, which are not essential to anyone’s acceptance of the Catholic faith. These types of visions and revelations are described in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Throughout the ages, there have been so-called ‘private’ revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ’s definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history” (#67).

In another section, the *Catechism* describes popular piety, which helps us to put Saint Faustina’s revelations into a broader context: “The religious sense of the Christian people has always found expression in various forms of piety surrounding the Church’s sacramental life, such as veneration of relics, visits to sanctuaries, pilgrimages, processions, the stations of the cross, religious dances, the rosary, medals, etc. These expressions of piety extend the liturgical life of the Church, but do not replace it....Pastoral discernment is needed to sustain and support popular piety” (#1674-76).

So we see that devotion to divine mercy in no way replaces any of our rich liturgical traditions. The Divine Mercy devotion fosters the virtue of trust in

God's mercy that finds its fulfillment in the liturgy of Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist. Popular piety animates the faith attitudes that make participation in the sacraments more vital and fruitful.

Mercy in the Midst of Tragedy

The news is filled with illustrations of mercy—or the need for mercy—in our world. One of the most moving stories came to us on October 6, 2006, when an armed man entered an Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. He chased out the little boys and lined up the 10 little girls in front of the blackboard. He shot all of them and then killed himself. Five of the girls died. After the medics and police left, the families of the fallen came and carried their slain children home. They removed their bloody clothes and washed the bodies. In each home they emptied a room of furniture except for a table and chairs. They sat for a time and mourned their beloved children.

After a while they walked to the home of the man who killed their children. They told his widow they forgave her husband for what he had done, and they consoled her for the loss of her spouse. They buried their anger before they buried their children.

On the wall of the local firehouse is a watercolor of the schoolyard painted by a local artist, Elsie Beiler. Its title is "Happier Days," and it depicts the Amish children playing without a care before the shooting. Five birds, which some say represent the dead girls, circle the blue sky above.

Amish Christians teach us that forgiveness is central. They believe in a real sense that God's forgiveness depends on their extending forgiveness to other people. That's what the mercy of God is all about. That mercy is why we celebrate Divine Mercy Sunday.

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