NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Beatification Q&A #4: What's the Divine Mercy connection?

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 28, 2011 NCR Today

ROME -- For the wider world, this Sunday will be remarkable as the day when Pope John Paul II is beatified. But John Paul himself would probably insist that it?s even more significant as ?Divine Mercy Sunday,? a liturgical feast based on the teachings of an early 20th century Polish nun and visionary named St. Faustina Kowalska.

tJohn Paul II died on April 2, 2005, just after a vigil Mass for Divine Mercy Sunday, and six years later, he?s being beatified on the day itself.

John Paul, of course, always had an exquisite sense of timing, and the intersection between his death and beatification, and the Divine Mercy feast which he established in 2000, is a classic expression of it. Fr. Slawomir Oder, postulator of the sainthood cause, has written: ?Of the thousands of women and men of God that [John Paul] beatified and canonized, the figure most dear to him was probably the Polish sister Faustina Kowalska, apostle of the Divine Mercy devotion.?

tWhat was it about the teachings of Kowalska, who died of tuberculosis in 1938 at the age of 33, which so appealed to the late pope? In effect, her message and her life story stirred three deep currents in John Paul?s soul:

- His strong mystical streak
- His insistence on God as the only alternative to tyranny, especially Nazism and Communism
- His Polish nationalism

Faustina Kowalska was born in August 1905 to a peasant family in Poland, the third of ten children. She only attended school for three years until she was compelled to seek work as a housekeeper to support her family. At the age of 20 she entered a convent of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, where she spent the next 13 years toiling as a cook, gardener and porter.

That surface quiet, however, masked a remarkable interior life.

From 1931 to her death in 1938, Faustina reported a staggering range of spiritual experiences, including visions, a hidden stigmata, bilocation, the reading of human souls, prophecy, as well as mystical engagement and marriage. She also believed that Jesus, Mary and several saints, such as Teresa, delivered private revelations to her on a regular basis, which she recorded in a diary that eventually stretched over more than 600 pages. (It was later published with the title, *Divine Mercy in My Soul*.)

The basic message is that humans should be merciful as God is merciful. Put another way, it?s that human beings cannot be merciful to one another unless they first acknowledge their dependence on God?s mercy.

Faustina?s spiritual director commissioned an artist to render a painting of Christ as he appeared in her visions,

which has become a well-known image of Jesus with two rays of light streaming from his heart, with the motto ?Jesus, I Trust in You.? (The red represents the blood that flowed from Christ?s side when struck with a spear on the cross, the white the water). Faustina also devised various prayers and spiritual acts which have become the basis for the ?Divine Mercy? devotion as many Catholics practice it today.

John Paul II was palpably, unmistakably devoted to Faustina and her message.

He first developed a strong attachment to her and to the Divine Mercy devotion as a young seminarian. Later, as the Archbishop of Krakow in 1965, he opened Faustina?s cause for sainthood. As pope, John Paul?s 1980 encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* was heavily influenced by Kowalska?s teaching, although he didn?t mention her by name in the text. John Paul beatified Faustina in 1993 and canonized her in 2000, making her the first saint of the new millennium. In the same year, he established ?Divine Mercy Sunday? as a feast of the universal church on the first Sunday after Easter.

To be sure, both the Divine Mercy devotion, as well as John Paul?s powerful attachment to it, have their critics. Some see Faustina?s insistence on human unworthiness as excessive. Others object to the way the feast of Divine Mercy was placed within the Easter season (in compliance with Jesus? instructions to Faustina), hence ?disrupting,? they say, the peak period on the liturgical calendar. Still others say the pope shouldn?t have used his office to foist his personal spirituality on the rest of the church.

John Paul was aware of that criticism, and yet plowed ahead. Why so?

First, the Divine Mercy phenomenon appealed to John Paul?s mystical streak. This was, after all, a pope who once contemplated a vocation as a Carmelite because he was so impressed with St. John of the Cross and his mystical theology. John Paul would spend long hours lost in prayer in chapels around the world, often lying on the chapel floor in the form of the cross. This, too, was a pope profoundly convinced that the Virgin Mary altered the flight path of a bullet on May 13, 1981 ? the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, and the day Mehmet Ali A?ca shot him in St. Peter?s Square ? in order to save his life.

In other words, John Paul believed there is a cosmic drama churning underneath the observable events of human experience, and was impressed with the idea that an unknown and basically unlettered nun could be a pivotal actor.

Second, it always struck John Paul II as deeply significant that this message of mercy was revealed between the two World Wars, as the two great tyrannies of the 20th century were taking shape: Nazism and Communism. To John Paul, it seemed that in that historical hour of supreme mercilessness, God had reminded humanity of the only real alternative ? an insight that became part of the basis for his own spiritual resistance to totalitarianism.

In *Memory and Identity*, John Paul?s last book as pope, he wrote that Kowalska?s message constituted ?a response to the ideologies of Nazism and Communism ? the only truth capable of countering those ideologies was that God is merciful.?

Finally, the fact that God chose a daughter of Poland also could not help but capture the imagination of John Paul II.

At one point, Faustina reported that Jesus had told her: ?I love Poland in a special way, and, if it will be obedient to my will, I will raise it in power and holiness. From Poland will come the spark that prepares the world for my last coming.?

tDespite becoming a citizen of the world, John Paul famously remained attached to his Polish roots, and his enthusiasm for Kowalska and the Divine Mercy devotion is also an expression of that national pride.

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tFor anyone tempted to recall John Paul II as a rigid authoritarian, there?s a final element of the Faustina story worth recording.

For almost 20 years, from 1959 to 1978, Faustina?s diary and her divine mercy devotion were officially banned by the Holy Office, today?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. They were suppressed one year after the young Karol Wojtyla became an auxiliary bishop in Krakow.

Initially, according to historian Andrea Riccardi, it was the legendary Cardinal Stefan Wyszinski and a few other Polish bishops who pushed for the ban, in part because they found some of her claims tough to swallow, and in part because of a misunderstanding about the Divine Mercy image. Red and white, of course, are the colors of the Polish flag, and some Poles saw the image of Jesus with red and white streaming from his heart as a provocation directed at the Communist regime ? a headache that some bishops apparently felt they didn?t need.

Working from what is today recognized as a faulty Italian translation of her diary, the Holy Office in the Vatican decided that Faustina?s private revelations were quirky and effectively silenced her movement.

It was thus a minor bit of defiance for Archbishop Karol Wojtyla to open canonization proceedings for Faustina on October 21, 1965, given that her lifework was still officially censored in Rome. The ban on the Divine Mercy devotion not formally lifted until April 15, 1978, just six months before Wojtyla became pope.

tAll this goes to show that even John Paul II, who had no problem exercising authority when he felt the situation called for it, was also capable of subtly pushing back when he thought it was wrong. That, too, is part of the John Paul legacy.

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