



A GIFT FROM GOD **FOR OUR TIMES**

Sr. M. Elżbieta Siepak



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THE LIFE AND MISSION
OF ST. FAUSTINA



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Introduction

Apostle of Divine Mercy, Prophet of Our Times, Great Mystic, Mistress of Spiritual Life – these are the epithets usually appended to the name of Sister Faustyna Kowalska, St. Faustyna (Faustina), of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy. Sister Faustina is one of the Church's most popular and widely known saints. She is generally associated with goodness and mercy, and an exceptionally strong power of intercession with the Divine Majesty. Her writings are read both by scholars and ordinary people for the depth of her union with God and the mystery of His Merciful Love for Man, which is portrayed in her *Diary* through her personal mystical experience. Her school of spirituality finds a following not only in those who discover in themselves the charism of spreading God's Merciful Love in the world, but also those who have lost

their way and are trying to find a light in the darkness and hope for a better, more meaningful life.

Sister Faustina's principal task was to pass on to the Church and world the Message of Mercy, a recapitulation of the Biblical truth of God's Merciful Love for every human being, and a calling to each of us to entrust our lives to Him and to actively love our neighbour. Jesus not only revealed the depth of His Mercy to St. Faustina, but also gave her new forms of worship: the picture inscribed *Jesus, I trust in You*, the Feast of Divine Mercy, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, and the Prayer in the Hour of His Death on the Cross, the Hour of Mercy. To each of these forms of worship, as well as to the preaching of the message of Mercy through the testimony of our life, works, words, and prayer, He attached great promises, on condition that we put our trust in His will and show mercy to our neighbours. In his book *Memory and Identity* the Holy Father John Paul II wrote that in the age of totalitarianisms Sister Faustina became the ambassador of the message that the only power strong enough to counteract their evil is the truth of God's Mercy. He called her *Diary* "a Gospel of Mercy written from a 20th-century perspective," which has helped people to survive the extremely painful experiences of these times. "This message," Pope Benedict XVI

has said, “the message of Mercy as the Divine Power, as God putting a check on all the world’s evil, is indeed the chief message precisely for our times.”

This book shows St. Faustina’s life and mission in a simple and straightforward way on the basis of source materials from the archives of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy. It has been written in response to the needs of the pilgrims who come to the Shrine of the Divine Mercy at Łagiewniki, Kraków, for those who wish to learn about the “Gift of God for our times,” as John Paul II has called Sister Faustina.

1.

A Blessed Child

There was nothing unusual to show that the child that came into the world at Głogowiec on 25th August 1905 had been chosen by God for a special mission. Though Marianna Kowalska claimed that she considered the very easy birth, after the two previous ones in which she had nearly lost her life, to be such a sign. She had had to wait ten years for her first child. “That blessed child sanctified my womb,” she said years later. All her subsequent children – another seven – were born with no further trouble.

Stanisław Kowalski married his wife at Dąbie on the River Ner. He had three brothers, lived in Kraski, and worked in a brewery at Mniewo, where he met his wife Marianna, the only child of the Babel family. After the wedding they bought a few acres of farmland in the village of Głogowiec, far away

from towns and busy thoroughfares. The houses of the local smallholders lined one side of the country road, and a flat landscape of fields and meadows closed off on the horizon by a stretch of pinewood spread out on the other side. The Kowalski household, with a single-storey cottage in white brickwork and farm buildings typical for the area, soon joined the others.

The nearest church, at Świnice Warckie, was about 2 km away along a country road. All the Kowalski children were baptised in the Parish Church of St. Casimir; here they made their First Holy Communion and attended Mass on Sundays and holy days. The parish priest, Father Józef Chodyński, made the following entry for 27 August 1905 in the parish register: “On this day, 27 August 1905, at one o’clock in the afternoon, Stanisław Kowalski, farmer, aged 45 years, came accompanied by Franciszek Bednarek, aged 35 years, and Józef Stasiak, farmers of Głogowiec, presenting to us an infant of the female sex, born of his wife Marianna née Babel, aged 35, at eight o’clock in the morning of 25 August 1905 in the village of Głogowiec. The child received the name Helena in Holy Baptism administered on this day, and the godparents were Konstanty Bednarek and Marianna Szewczyk (Szczepaniak).”

Life in the Kowalski household went on at a tranquil pace marked out first by prayer and then work, never the other way round. God came first, not only on Sundays and family occasions, but every day. In the early morning Father would sing the Hours or other hymns, and when Mother rebuked him that he would wake the children, he replied that they had to learn from their youngest years that God was the most important. There were holy pictures on the walls, and a little altar stood in the middle of the bedroom, with a crucifix and two holy statues, the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which Father had bought in Częstochowa. At night the whole family would kneel for evening prayers, in May they would sing the Loreto Litany in front of the outdoor chapel outside the house, and in October recite the rosary. On Sunday afternoons Father would take out the Lives of the Saints from the bookcase and read aloud.

To keep his large family Father supplemented his income from the farm with work as a carpenter. He was strict with himself and his children and did not tolerate even the slightest misdemeanour. When little Stasio picked some willow branches from a neighbour's tree, he was sternly reprimanded to make him remember to treat other people's property as if it were his own. Mother ran the house and

brought the children up. With her inborn gentleness, she trained them from their youngest years in jobs about the house and farm, and responsibility in carrying out their duties. Although she could not read she was the one who instructed them in the faith and the principles of morality, and prepared them for their First Holy Communion. All the parish priest had to do was to test their religious knowledge before admitting them to the Sacrament.

That was the family atmosphere of little Helenka, God's chosen one to be the prophet of our times. But there was something that set her apart from the rest of the children in the village. Her mother noticed that she loved to pray and would even get up at night and kneel down. When she tried to curb her daughter's enthusiasm saying, "You'll go mad if you keep getting up in the middle of the night," Helenka told her, "Mummy, it must be an angel that wakes me up for prayers." At the age of seven she had her first undeniable experience of God's love. "Once, when I was seven years old, at a Vesper Service, conducted before the Lord Jesus in the monstrance, the love of God was imparted to me for the first time and filled my little heart; and the Lord gave me understanding of divine things." She prepared with deep reverence for her First Holy Communion, which was administered to her by

Father Roman Pawłowski during a ceremony in the Parish Church. She returned home aware of the Divine Visitor in her soul. When a friend asked her why she was walking alone, not with the other girls, she said, "I'm not alone, I'm walking with Jesus." Her friend was happy that she had a fine new dress, but Helenka said she was happy because for the first time in her life she had received Jesus. Her awareness of the presence of God in her soul could be observed already in childhood, and grew throughout her life, just as did her responsiveness to the needs of others.

When she was still a little girl she already had a palpable "sense of mercy." She would notice the poor people and those in need around her, who came into the village for a piece of bread and a donation of any kind. Not only did she notice them, but she would also think of ways to help them. One day she held a lottery, another time she put on her mother's old clothes and went from house to house begging. She gave the money she had collected to the parish priest for the poor. She was eager to help her parents and so as not to make them unhappy would do even those chores her siblings had shirked. "Everyone loved her, "her mother recalled, "she was chosen, the best of the children. She was modest and quiet, ready to do any chore and help any-

one, but at the same time cheerful and always with a smile on her face.”

Not only her parents noticed little Helenka’s goodness, and her open attitude to God and other people. “You have a good, humble and such an innocent child,” a neighbour, Marianna Berezińska, praised Helenka. “Kowalska has such a blessed child!” she used to say in the village. Her siblings and peers also saw that Helenka was someone with a different mentality, who did not go to village dances and liked to pray and read the lives of the saints. “From her youngest years she would tell us about the saints, pilgrims, and hermits who fed only on roots, berries and forest honey,” her brother Stanisław recalled. “When she wanted to please her father she would take the Lives of the Saints or some other religious book from our modest bookcase and read aloud. She memorised the stories of the hermits and missionaries, and the next day while out grazing the cattle would recite them word for word to us and others. She told us children that when she grew up she would enter a convent, but we laughed. We did not understand her.”

Helenka went to school in 1917, aged twelve, when the area was liberated from Russian occupation and a primary school was established in Świnice Warckie. Her father had already taught her to

read, but at school she had the opportunity to learn more. She was an able pupil and a keen learner, but had to leave after just three years to make room for the younger children. The family was not well off, so like her older sisters she went into domestic service.

2.

Extraordinary Light

At the age of sixteen Helenka bade farewell to her parents, brothers and sisters and left home for Aleksandrów Łódzki, a town where Kazimierz Bryszewski and his wife Leokadia, relatives of Marcin Ługowski, a family acquaintance from nearby Rogów, had a bakery and shop at No. 30 in the Parzęczewska (now 1 Maja 7). They were not absolute strangers, but for those times it was quite far from home. The Bryszewski couple needed help with the housework and looking after their only son Zenek, who was six. “Mummy served customers in the shop,” he recalled years later, “and Helenka tidied up, helped with the cooking, and had to wash up, carry out the refuse and bring water as there was no running water. She also brought in food for employees who were provided with meals by my parents. If time allowed she would play with me.

She had a lot of work, as there were four rooms in the house, the shop, and the bakery.”

She had servant's quarters in the kitchen, which had a window onto the bakery yard. One day she saw an extraordinary light there. Her commonsense told her it must be a fire and she started shouting just when the bakers were putting the loaves into the oven. They ran out, but it turned out to be a false alarm. There was no fire in the yard. But Helenka took it so badly a doctor had to be called and her parents informed. They were so worried they sent their eldest daughter Józefa to find out what had happened. But all Helenka said was that she had seen a great light. She asked her sister to tell her parents that she was not stupid but would not be staying much longer in the house.

She returned to Głogowiec to ask her parents' permission to enter a convent. Though they were god-fearing, the Kowalskis were reluctant to give up their best child. They gave an excuse of not being able to afford a dowry and refused permission. Helenka tried to persuade them that it was not a question of money, as Jesus would settle that problem, but her father was adamant. He did not even listen to the parish priest's advice to sell a cow and let the girl enter a convent, since God was calling her. Helenka did not want to enter without her parents' consent,

so she went into service again, this time in Łódź. She stayed at the house of her uncle Michał Rapacki, at No. 9 in the Krośnieńska, and worked for three ladies who were Tertiaries of St. Francis. When she started the job she asked to be allowed time for daily Mass, visiting the sick and dying, and using the ministry of her mistresses' confessor.

On 2 February 1923 Helenka was sent by an employment agency to the house of Mrs. Marcjanna Sadowska, who had a shop at No. 29 in the Abramowskiego and needed a child-minder for her three children. When she saw a smartly dressed girl on her doorstep she thought the girl would be no good as a servant and reduced the wages offered. But Helenka was not discouraged and took up the job, living in with her employer. "Whenever I left the house," Mrs. Sadowska said of her maid years later, "I could rest assured. She was better at keeping the house than I was. She was kind, courteous, and hard-working. I've absolutely nothing to hold against her, she was just so good. Words cannot describe how good she was." Helenka looked after her employer's children and also after those in need, of whom there was no shortage. A sick man lived in a lumber room under the stairs in the house. Helenka cared for him, bringing food and a priest to look after his salvation.

When she was eighteen she once again asked her parents' permission to enter a convent and again was refused. "After this refusal, I turned myself over to the vain things of life, paying no attention to the call of grace, although my soul found no satisfaction in any of these things. The incessant call of grace caused me much anguish;" she wrote in her diary, "I tried, however, to stifle it with amusements. Interiorly, I shunned God, turning with all my heart to creatures." So she did not turn down an invitation to a dance in the Wenecja Park. There were three sisters from the Kowalski family in service at the time in Łódź, each in a different house: Helenka and Gienia in opposite houses on the same street, and Natalka on the Nawrot. They usually met on Sundays after Mass in the cathedral for a chat, which they had no time for during the week. Gienia, who liked dancing, knew there were dances in the Wenecja Park, which was privately owned and was an entertainment centre for the people of Łódź and its environs. In the mornings it served as a children's playground; on Sundays and holiday afternoons bands played in the open-air concert precinct, and in the evenings there would be dances and shows with stuntmen. The three sisters and a friend, Lucyna Strzelecka, another maid who later became Sister Julita, an Ursuline, went to one of these dances. "Helenka was in

a pink cotton dress with frills at the side,” Natalka recalled, “and her hair was arranged in a plait as thick as her arm at the back of her head. She had a good figure and was a cheerful and attractive girl. When we reached the dance, Gienia was at once asked to dance and we were left behind. Then two young men came up and one of them asked Helenka. She tried to excuse herself, saying that she was not a good dancer, but he said he would lead. When they finished the piece Helenka said she had to leave. I did not really understand what she meant and asked her if she wasn’t imagining things, but she answered that she would not stay any longer and left.”

Later Helenka shed light on her behaviour, which seemed strange at the time, at that extraordinary dance, to which Jesus “came” to speak to His chosen one and make His intentions plain to her, saying, “How long shall I suffer you and how long will you keep putting Me off?” She said she had a headache and quickly left the company, making her way to the nearest church, the Cathedral of St. Stanisław Kostka. There, ignoring the people who were present, she prostrated herself on the floor and spread her arms out in the shape of a cross before the Blessed Sacrament and begged the Lord to tell her what she was to do next. “Go at once to Warsaw;” came the answer, “you will enter a convent there.”

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