

*Memories and Recollections
of Saint Faustina*

*of the Congregation of the Sisters
of Our Lady of Mercy*



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Sister Faustina in Płock, 1931

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Translated from the Polish by Teresa Bałuk-Ulewiczowa

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Introduction

St. Faustina Kowalska, a professed religious of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, and her life and mission, has engaged the attention and fascination of millions around the world – priests, consecrated persons, and laypeople, writers, journalists, theologians, artists, internet users, people from all walks of life, including the young, who see her as a role model, a recipe for a happy and fulfilled life experienced through the love of God and mankind. Sent into the world by Jesus with the message of Divine Mercy, Sr. Faustina is continuing to carry out her mission today through her “congregation,” the Apostleship of Divine Mercy, comprising contemplative and active religious orders, confraternities, associations, apostolic movements, a variety of communities and individuals committed to spreading the message of Mercy by the witness of their lives, words, deeds, and prayer. Thanks to this, Sr. Faustina has endowed the world at large with the message of Divine mercy and the devotions to the Divine Mercy left in her legacy (the holy picture of Jesus with the inscription “Jesus, I trust in You,” the Feast of Mercy, the Chaplet of the Divine Mercy, and dissemination of the worship of Divine Mercy), reaching not only Catholics on all the continents and even on tiny islands in the middle of the oceans, but also members of other religions. And it’s not at all surprising, because the message of Mercy Jesus entrusted to her is addressed to the whole world, the whole of humankind.

Even though such a lot has been said and written about St. Faustina already, although her Diary has been translated into many languages already and is being distributed in huge print runs, although thousands of books, articles, films, TV programmes and radio broadcasts about her have been created, she continues to arouse as much interest as ever – people are looking out for new releases on her life and prophetic mission. All who want to know more about the life of St. Faustina, as well as writers and scholars interested in her have to look into the sources of information on her. One of these sources are the memories and recollections of the Secretary of Divine Mercy which those who had the good fortune to meet and know her in their lives have

left us. We have collected these memories and are putting them into a book to present the story of the everyday life of one of the greatest mystics in the history of the Church, as recalled by eyewitnesses. Their view of the Apostle of Divine Mercy presents only the external picture, because her deep spiritual life, full of revelations and special graces, as well as her extraordinary, loving relationship with God was something most of the persons who left these recollections (except for her confessors and superiors) never saw at all. Perhaps that's what makes these memories so interesting, giving an insight into Sr. Faustina as a person whose ordinary, everyday life was transformed by God's grace and turned her into the Apostle of Mercy.

The recollections we are publishing in this volume come from the Archives of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy. Some have already appeared in our quarterly magazine *Orędzie Miłosierdzia*; now we have supplemented all the contributions with footnotes and short biographical notes about the authors as well as their photographs if available. We have arranged the entries chronologically with respect to Sr. Faustina's life, her childhood and adolescence in her family home, the years when she worked as a domestic help, and her life in the Congregation. To help readers find their way around the volume, we have also grouped entries together by the profession of their authors and their relationship with Sr. Faustina: the priests who knew her, her superiors in the Congregation, her fellow Sisters in the Congregation, Sisters from other congregations, and old girls who were pupils of the educational institutions run by the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy.

We hope this book will encourage readers to follow in the footsteps of St. Faustina, who made her ordinary, everyday life extraordinary by putting all her trust in God and by an active love of her neighbour.

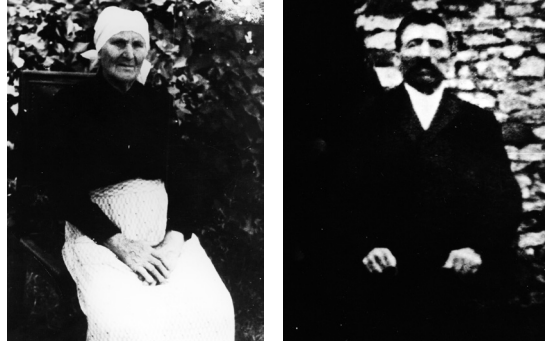
Sr. M.* Elżbieta Siepak ISMM

* The initial M stands for "Maria", the first part of the name in religion each of the Sisters in the Congregation is given on the day she takes the veil.

**Memories of
Sr. Faustina's childhood and youth**

Marianna Kowalska

Sr. Faustina's mother



Marianna Kowalska, née Babel, born on 8 March 1875 at Mniewo, daughter of Michał Bawej aka Babel and his wife Marcjanna née Ławniczak. Later she and her father and step-mother moved to Dąbie-on-Ner, where she married Stanisław Kowalski on 9 November 1892. The newlyweds bought a small plot of land at Głogowiec and in 1900 built a cottage on it. They had ten children, two of whom died in infancy. Marianna Kowalska took part in the diocesan beatification process for her daughter Helena (Sr. Faustina). She died on 17 February 1965 and was buried in Świnice Warckie graveyard.

She was special, the best of my children. She used to have visions ever since childhood, she'd have dreams or see things, and I'd tell her, "What do you mean? You're always seeing things." But that was before her First Holy Communion. She changed after she made her First Communion, she was different, she avoided company, she never returned from church with the rest, she kept away from people. I remember how one day when Helenka was coming home after receiving Holy Communion she asked one of her friends if she was happy that day, as she [Helenka] felt such a lot of happiness in her heart because God was in her soul.

She grew in this, so much so that all she ever wanted to do was to go to church but I didn't let her because she had to graze the cows. When she went to Confession, first she would come and apologise to her parents. I didn't let her go as often as she wanted because the children were small and her father had such a lot of work to do. But when Sunday came, she'd be up at the crack of dawn and slip out through the window so as not to wake anyone and take the cows out into the field. When her father rose to take the cows out he'd find they were no longer in the byre. Helenka had finished grazing them before it was time to go to Mass. Sometimes when she could not go to church she'd take the prayer book and sit in a corner to say all the prayers. I'd get cross, and then she'd say sweetly, "Mummy, don't be angry with me, Jesus would be more upset if I didn't do it."

Sometimes when she came back from church I let her go and play with the other girls. She gladly said that yes, she'd go but instead she'd go into the garden and make a little altar and say prayers there. She had a holy statue in the house and she'd look after it and deck it with flowers, and then she'd call in the other girls for joint prayers. Sometimes the others would try to get her to go to a village dance but she'd always say that she had to ask her father for permission. Often I'd ask her, "Why don't you like music or dancing?" and she'd reply that she had other things on her mind, "Mummy, I'll go on a long pilgrimage." "No, you won't go anywhere," her father or I told her, but she didn't like that.

One day, our elder daughter said, "Come on, Helenka, let's go on the May outing, we can watch." Helenka went and even had a couple of dances, but as soon as she was back, her father asked, "Where have you been?" He was very strict. They owned up. "Who let you?" There was silence. He took his belt. Helenka at once jumped into bed to hide, but her father was unrelenting and said, "See, you're such a good daughter, but you went there?" "Father, I'll never do that again," she said and was so sorry that her father was cross with her, she couldn't get over it. That's what she was like until her thirteenth birthday. Sometimes she'd say to her elder sister, "Look, when I leave, they'll never see me again."

When she was coming up to fifteen, first she went into service with Mrs. Bryzewska in Aleksandrów.²¹ She said to her father, "Father, you won't be cross with me again, you'll be proud of me." She was there for about a year, and saw a big brightness, which frightened her so much that she got a terrible headache and a doctor was called. After a year there, she went to the city of Łódź and worked for some Tertiary ladies but made an arrangement with them that she could visit the sick and the poor. They would let her do that and go to church, and she would work hard and do her best. I don't know the names of these ladies. She spent a year with them. While she was there, she used to go to Confession and told her confessor she wanted to enter a convent but didn't know which one to go to. The priest told her he knew a congregation in Warsaw and would write to tell her which convent to enter, as she later told Gienia. After a year, she left these ladies and moved to her uncle's house,²² but never came home again.

21 Helenka Kowalska went into service with the Bryzewski family at the age of fifteen.

22 On 1 February 1923 Helenka Kowalska moved from the house of her uncle Michał Ra-packi to Mrs. Sadowska (later Wiczorek, on her second marriage), to work as a house help.

sides of the street, Abramowskiego, and I was in a house on Nawrot. On Sundays we met for Mass in the same church, the Cathedral, and had a chat when Mass was over.

Gienia liked to go out and have a good time when she had time off. Helenka preferred to look around for people she could help and always found someone who was in need of help. In the house where she worked there was a cubby-hole under the stairs and a man who was sick and had no family lived in it. Helenka used to bring him something to eat, washed and comforted him, telling him about God, and in the end she brought a priest to hear his Confession and give him Holy Communion. I was there when the priest came; that man was very, very poorly but Helenka was happy that he managed to make his reconciliation with God before he died, which happened on the very next day. She always wanted to bring people to God.

One day Gienia said that a prize raffle was to be held in Wenecja Park and persuaded us to go with her, perhaps we would win a prize or have a few dances. She even bought a ticket for Helenka, who wanted to leave almost as soon as she arrived. She was wearing a pink cotton dress with frills along one of the sides. She wore her hair in a thick plait as long as her arm. She was a very graceful, cheerful, and attractive girl. As soon as we arrived someone asked Gienia for a dance, and Helenka and I were left standing there. After some time, two young men came up to us and one of them asked Helenka for a dance. She tried to make excuses, saying that she was not much good at dancing, but he said he would take the lead. When they had finished that dance, she said she had to leave, I didn't really understand what she meant by that and asked if she had seen something, but she only said she couldn't stay there any longer and left. Later it turned out that she went to the Cathedral, and then to Warsaw to look for a convent, and after a time entered.

I lost touch with her after she entered. I didn't see her when she was travelling from Vilnius, I think, and came to visit Mother, who was very ill. I was living in Łódź at the time, at No. 189 on Piotrkowska and didn't know she would be coming. People kept coming from the village to see her; she spoke to them about God and prayed a lot. When she found I wasn't living in Głogowiec any more, she stopped in Łódź to see me on her way back to the convent. She waited a long time for me to come home from work, as a neighbour told me, and in the end she put three roses behind my door knob to show she had been.

I didn't know that she caught TB in the convent. She never wrote about her illness in her letters home, and no one ever mentioned it. We didn't learn of her funeral, either. One of the Sisters told us that she did not want them

**The recollections of
Sr. Faustina's chaplains**

Father Michał Sopoćko

Sr. Faustina's Vilnian confessor and spiritual director



Father Michał Sopoćko was born on 1 November 1888 at Juszewszczyzna, a small place near Oszmiana (Oshmyany, then in the Russian Empire, now Belarus). He was the youngest son of Wincenty Sopoćko and his wife Emilia née Pawłowicz. In 1910 he entered the Vilnius Seminary. He was ordained in 1914 and worked for the next four years as curate of the parish of Taboryszki. In 1919–1924 he served as a Polish army chaplain in Warsaw and attended a specialist course of study at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Warsaw and the Institute of Education. In 1924 he was transferred to Vilnius, where he continued to minister as an army chaplain until 1932. In 1928 he was appointed Assistant Professor for Pastoral Theology at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Vilnius. In 1927–1932 he served as spiritual father to the seminary students and heard the confessions of members of the city's religious orders, including the Congregation of Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy. During the Second World War he had to go into hiding at a place called Czarny Bór. In 1947, following the westward shift of the Polish–Soviet border, he moved to Białystok and was appointed to a post in the city's seminary, where he lectured until 1962. His work in the priesthood covered a broad range of activities, from pastoral ministry in parishes and as a catechist, university and seminary teaching and lecturing, serving as chaplain and confessor to seminarians, priests, and nuns, serving as an army chaplain, to service in organisations promoting teetotalism, and church–building. He died on 15 February 1975 in Białystok and was beatified in the same city on 28 September 2008. His relics repose in the Church of the Divine Mercy in Białystok, which has been elevated to the rank of a diocesan sanctuary.

There are some truths of the Catholic faith which we think we know and often mention, but don't really understand them well or apply them in our lives. That was my situation concerning the truth about Divine mercy. I had thought about it so many times in my meditations, especially during retreats; I had preached about it many a time in sermons and mentioned it in my prayers, yet I never delved into its deeper meaning, especially into its meaning for spiritual life. I did not appreciate, or even could not admit that Divine mercy is the supreme attribute of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. I needed a simple and saintly soul intimately united with God to tell me this thanks to God's inspiration, as I believe, and encourage me to take the matter up as

a subject of study and profound consideration. It was the late Sr. Faustina (Helena) Kowalska of the Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of Mercy;³⁹ it was that simple and saintly soul who gradually convinced me that the dissemination of the worship of the Divine Mercy, especially the institution of the Feast of Divine Mercy on the first Sunday after Easter should be one of the main goals of my life.

I first met Sr. Faustina in the summer (July or August) of 1933.⁴⁰ She was one of my penitents from the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy at No. 25, Senatorska, Wilno [the city is now the capital of Lithuania and known as Vilnius – translator’s note], where I served as ordinary confessor. The exceptional subtlety of her conscience and close union with God attracted my attention. Usually, she did not confess anything that needed absolution, and she never offended God by committing a mortal sin. At the very outset, she told me that she knew me from an incident that had happened a long time ago, in which she learned that I was to be her spiritual director and had to accomplish certain plans ordained by God of which she would inform me. I disregarded this story and put her to a test which led to her seeking another confessor, having obtained permission from her Mother Superior to do so. After a time, she came back to Confession with me and declared that she would put up with everything and would not give up using my services as her confessor. I cannot give, or in fact disclose all the details of our conversations, some of which are described in the Diary I instructed her to keep when I ordered her not to use Confession to tell me about her experiences.

When I got to know Sr. Faustina better, I realised that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were working in her in a hidden way, but at some moments, fairly often, they became more overt, endowing her with an intuition which filled her soul and excited a love of sublime, heroic acts of devotion and self-sacrifice. Some of the most frequent phenomena I observed in Sr. Faustina were the practical effects of a wisdom and facility to understand which helped her to see how puny the things of this world are and the importance of suffering and humbling oneself. She had a direct perception of the attributes of God, above all His infinite mercy; often she would gaze into, and keep her eyes fixed on an inaccessible luminosity which made her happy and from which

39 The correct form of the Congregation’s name is “The Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy”.

40 Father Sopoćko first met Sr. Faustina Kowalska in June 1933, in the Congregation’s house in the Antokol (Antakalnis) district of Vilnius, where he served as the community’s ordinary confessor and came once a week to hear confessions.

the figure of Christ walked out, blessing the world with His right hand, and with His left hand lifting up a fold in His robe in the area of His heart, from where two rays emerged, a white ray and a red ray.⁴¹ For several years already Sr. Faustina had been experiencing revelations of this and other kinds, affecting the senses or her mental faculties; and she received oral messages of a supernatural kind, the words of which she either heard orally, or registered in her mind or imagination.

I was apprehensive that Sr. Faustina might be suffering from delusions, hallucinations, or figments of the imagination, so I asked her superior, Mother Irena, for more information about Sr. Faustina and the opinion she enjoyed in the community and with her superiors. I also asked for her mental and physical health to be examined. When I was given an opinion which was favourable in every respect, I still tarried for a certain time, not fully convinced, considering the situation, praying and probing into the matter, asking the advice of a few priests who were knowledgeable on such issues what to do but without disclosing the identity of the exact matter and person concerned. The matter at issue was, of course, carrying out Our Lord's purported orders to have a painting made of the vision Sr. Faustina was seeing and to institute the Feast of the Divine Mercy, which was to be celebrated on the first Sunday after Easter. Finally, impelled by curiosity to see what sort of a painting it would be rather than convinced that Sr. Faustina's visions were genuine, I approached Eugeniusz Kazimierowski,⁴² an artist who lived in the same house as I, and asked him to paint the picture. He agreed, asking for a certain fee. I also talked to Mother Superior, who allowed Sr. Faustina to see the artist twice a week and give particulars what the picture was to be like.

Work on the painting went on for a few months, and finally, in June or July 1934, it was finished. Sr. Faustina complained that it was not as fine as what she had seen in her visions, but Our Lord consoled her and said that it would do, and added, "I am giving people a vessel with which they are to come to

41 See No. 47 in *The Diary*.

42 The painter's name was Kazimirowski. Eugeniusz Kazimierowski (1873–1939), the son of August Kazimierowski and his wife Maria née Kossakowska, studied at the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts and lived in Kraków until 1914. He spent the summer months in Ukraine and the Vilnius region, staying with friends at their country residences and earning extra income by painting landscapes and portraits. In 1915 he was a tutor in a teacher's training college and a designer for two Vilnius theatres, Teatr Wielki and Teatr Polski. In 1934 he painted the first picture of the Merciful Jesus, on commission from Father Sopoćko, following instructions from Sr. Faustina. In 1936 he moved to Białystok, and died on 23 September 1939.

These memories and recollections of people who knew Sister Faustina during her lifetime show what kind of person she was, what she looked like and what her character was like. They are authentic records; their authors are candid, straightforward, and do not try to hide their likes and dislikes about Sister Faustina. This book is a fascinating read, giving a vivid picture of the everyday life of a woman who would become a saint. It takes its readers on an unforgettable journey in time and space, for a unique meeting with the Apostle of Divine Mercy.

From the review by Father Stanisław Ziemiański SJ



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