

Understanding Divine Mercy Sunday



John Paul II Institute of Divine Mercy

Nihil Obstat

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Provincial Censor
November 19, 2002

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This booklet has been prepared by the John Paul II Institute of Divine Mercy,
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My daughter, tell the whole world about My inconceivable mercy. I desire that the Feast of Mercy be a refuge and shelter for all souls, and especially for poor sinners. On that day the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon those souls who approach the fount of My mercy. 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. My mercy is so great that no mind, be it of man or of angel, will be able to fathom it throughout all eternity. Everything that exists has come forth from the very depths of My most tender mercy. Every soul in its relation to Me will contemplate My love and mercy throughout eternity. The Feast of Mercy emerged from My very depths of tenderness. It is My desire that it be solemnly celebrated on the first Sunday after Easter. Mankind will not have peace until it turns to the Fount of My Mercy.

(Diary of St. Faustina Kowalska, # 699)

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I. Divine Mercy Sunday, the Pope, and St. Faustina

On the Second Sunday of Easter of the Jubilee Year 2000, at the Mass for the Canonization of St. Faustina Kowalska, Pope John Paul II proclaimed to the world that “from now on throughout the Church” this Sunday will be called “Divine Mercy Sunday.” Many of the Church’s pastors and liturgists were taken by surprise by this announcement. Some wondered: “Why is the Holy Father doing this? Is he simply creating a new feast because of the private revelations given to the Polish mystic St. Faustina Kowalska?”

To be sure, the Holy Father was well aware that the visions of Christ received by St. Faustina, and the messages and disciplines flowing from them, remain in the category of private revelations. The Church’s doctrine of Divine Mercy, and her liturgical practices are not based on St. Faustina’s revelations: they are based on Holy Scripture, the faith handed down by the apostles, and on liturgical traditions rooted in the worship life of the ancient, apostolic communities. St. Faustina’s revelations add nothing new to this deposit of Faith, nor anything novel to the official liturgy of the Church. Moreover, it is also true that the Holy See did not establish “Divine Mercy Sunday” to commemorate St. Faustina’s mystical experiences (see Appendix B below). Thus, it remains true that no one is *required* by the Holy See, on Mercy Sunday, to pray the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, or venerate the Image of The Divine Mercy, or do anything else that springs from St. Faustina’s revelations. No priest could be called a “heretic”, or in any way disobedient to liturgical law, for ignoring these things entirely. Nevertheless, what makes St. Faustina’s revelations striking is the way that they so powerfully express the central truths that lie at the heart of the Gospel: the merciful love of God, manifest especially in the Passion and Resurrection of His Son. Indeed, some of the devotional forms which spring from her “private revelations” (such as the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, and the veneration of the Image of The Divine Mercy) are especially vivid ways of contemplating the Paschal Mystery: the Mystery which lies at the very heart of the “public revelation” passed down to us from the apostles, as well as at the very heart of the ancient liturgical traditions for the Easter Octave.

In short, what is not *required*--i.e., not a matter of law or precept-- can still be a matter of good counsel. Given the fact that our chief shepherd and pastor, Pope John Paul II, has strongly encouraged the whole, universal Church, on several occasions, to pay heed to the messages and

revelations given to St. Faustina as a special call to our time to turn back to the God of merciful love – and given that the Pope has also recommended both the Image and the Chaplet as helpful means to that end -- it would surely be rash and imprudent to ignore those exhortations from the Vicar of Christ.

Just listen to what the Holy Father said about all this at St. Faustina’s tomb in Lagiewniki , Poland, in 1997:

“There is nothing that man needs more than Divine Mercy—that love which is benevolent, which is compassionate, which raises man above his weakness to the infinite heights of the holiness of God.

“In this place we become particularly aware of this. From here, in fact, went out the Message of Divine Mercy that Christ Himself chose to pass on to our generation through Blessed Faustina.

“And it is a message that is clear and understandable for everyone. Anyone can come here, look at this image of the merciful Jesus, His Heart radiating grace, and hear in the depths of his own soul what Blessed Faustina heard: “Fear nothing. I am with you always” (Diary, 586).

“And if this person responds with a sincere heart: “Jesus, I trust in you,” he will find comfort in all his anxieties and fears....

“I give thanks to divine Providence that I have been enabled to contribute personally to the fulfillment of Christ’s will, through the institution of the Feast of Divine Mercy. Here, near the relics of Blessed Faustina Kowalska, I give thanks also for the gift of her beatification. I pray unceasingly that God will have “mercy on us and on the whole world” [from the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, Diary, 476].

Again, listen to the words the Holy Father spoke in his homily on Mercy Sunday, 2001:

“We are celebrating the Second Sunday of Easter, which, since last year, the year of the Great Jubilee is also called “Divine Mercy Sunday.” It is a great joy for me to be able to join all of you, dear pilgrims and faithful who have come here from various nations to commemorate, after one year, the canonization of Sr. Faustina Kowalska, witness and messenger of the Lord’s

merciful love. *The elevation to the honours of the altar of this humble religious is not only a gift for Poland, but for all humanity.* Indeed the message she brought is the appropriate and incisive answer that God wanted to offer to the questions and expectations of human beings in our time, marked by terrible tragedies. Jesus said to Sr. Faustina one day: “Humanity will not have peace until it turns with trust to Divine Mercy” (Diary, 300). *Divine Mercy! This is the Easter gift that the Church receives from the risen Christ and offers to humanity at the dawn of the third millennium....*

“Today the Lord also shows us His glorious wounds and His heart, an inexhaustible source of light and truth, of love and forgiveness.... St. Faustina saw coming from this Heart that was overflowing with generous love, two rays of light which illuminated the world. “The two rays”, according to what Jesus Himself told her, “represent the blood and the water” (Diary, 299). The blood recalls the sacrifice of Golgotha, and the mystery of the Eucharist; the water, according to the rich symbolism of the Evangelist St. John, makes us think of Baptism and the Gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 3:5; 4:14).

“Through the mystery of this wounded heart, the restorative tide of God’s merciful love continues to spread over the men and women of our time. Here alone can those who long for true and lasting happiness find its secret.”

Why does the Pope so strongly recommend that we pay heed to the Divine Mercy message and devotion – even the Image and the Chaplet -- given to us through St. Faustina ? Clearly, he does so because he sees all this as more than just a collection of “private revelations”; rather, he sees them as *prophetic* revelations, in other words revelations given to us by God to proclaim the heart of the Gospel – the merciful love of God shining through the death, burial and resurrection of his Son – in a way especially suited to meet the needs of our era. The liturgy for the Easter Octave, therefore, and for the Octave Sunday itself, is not something that needs to be “protected” or “sealed off” from the alien influence of the “private revelations” of a Polish nun. On the contrary, the celebration of Mercy Sunday should be open to all the enhancement and amplification of the message of merciful love which prudent use of her devotions can bring to it.

Again, this does *not* mean that Divine Mercy Sunday is merely a new feast established to

celebrate St. Faustina's revelations. Indeed, it is not *primarily* about St. Faustina at all--nor is it altogether a *new* feast! As many commentators have pointed out, The Second Sunday of Easter was already a solemnity as the Octave Day of Easter; nevertheless, the title "Divine Mercy Sunday" does highlight and amplify the meaning of the day. In this way, it recovers an ancient liturgical tradition, reflected in a teaching attributed to St. Augustine about the Easter Octave, which he called "the days of mercy and pardon," and the Octave Day itself "the compendium of the days of mercy." For a deeper understanding of the place of the Octave Day of Easter in the ancient liturgical tradition, especially in the *Didache* and St. Gregory Nazianzen, see the essay by Rev. S. Seraphim Michalenko, M.I.C., in *Divine Mercy, the Heart of the Gospel*, published by the John Paul II Institute of Divine Mercy in 1999. Moreover, it is well known that the title "Divine Mercy Sunday" expresses the message of the prayers and readings traditionally appointed for this Octave Day. Liturgically the day has *always* been centered on the theme of Divine mercy and forgiveness. That is why in its decree establishing Divine Mercy Sunday, the Holy See insisted that the texts already assigned for that day in the Missal and the Liturgy of the Hours of the Roman Rite "are always to be used for the liturgical celebration of this Sunday."

The Octave Day of Easter, Divine Mercy Sunday, therefore point us to the merciful love of God that lies behind the whole Paschal Mystery – the whole mystery of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ – made present for us in the Eucharist. In this way, it also sums up the whole Easter Octave. As Pope John Paul II pointed out in his Regina Caeli address on Divine Mercy Sunday, 1995: "the whole octave of Easter is like a single day," and the Octave Sunday is meant to be the day of "thanksgiving for the goodness God has shown to man in the whole Easter mystery."

Given the liturgical appropriateness of the title "Divine Mercy Sunday" for the Octave Day of Easter, therefore, the Holy See did not give this title to the Second Sunday of Easter merely as an "option," for those dioceses who happen to like that sort of thing! Rather, the decree issued on May 5, 2000, by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and The Discipline of the Sacraments clearly states: "the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II has graciously determined that in the Roman Missal, after the title Second Sunday of Easter, there shall henceforth be added the appellation 'or [that is] Divine Mercy Sunday'...". Divine Mercy

Sunday, therefore, is not an *optional* title for this solemnity; rather, Divine Mercy is the second name for this Feast Day. In a similar way, the Octave Day of the Nativity of Our Lord was named by the Church “The Feast of the Mother of God.”

This means that preaching on God’s mercy is also not just an *option* for the clergy on that day — it is strongly encouraged. To fail to preach on God’s mercy on that day would mean largely to ignore the prayers, readings and psalms appointed for that day, as well as the title “Divine Mercy Sunday” now given to that day in the Roman Missal.

Clearly, the celebration of Mercy Sunday does not compete with, nor endanger the integrity of the Easter Season. After all, Mercy Sunday is the Octave Day of Easter, a day that celebrates the merciful love of God shining through the whole Easter Triduum and the whole Easter mystery.

Sometimes the fear is expressed that the recitation of St. Faustina’s Novena of Chaplets of The Divine Mercy from Good Friday until Mercy Sunday distracts us from the focus of the liturgy. But the Chaplet of Divine Mercy is an intercessory prayer on the basis of the Passion of Christ, and the Image of the Divine Mercy (before which the Novena is usually recited) is primarily a manifestation of the Risen Christ. The Novena of Chaplets (with the Image), therefore, focuses our minds and hearts on the Paschal Mystery – the death and resurrection of Christ. Nothing could be more appropriate at this time in the liturgical year! In a similar way, reciting the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday, and the Tre Ore devotions, which often include meditations on the seven last words of Christ – while in no way required by the Missal – are good liturgical customs that amplify the meaning of this important time in the Church’s liturgical year. They do not compete with, nor distract from, the official liturgy for Good Friday.

Some times the fear is expressed that the prominence of the Easter Candle as the chief visual symbol of Christ risen and living among us might be reduced by the display and veneration of the Image of The Divine Mercy on Mercy Sunday. But no such competition exists. The Paschal Candle is a *symbol* of the risen Christ. The Image of The Divine Mercy, on the other hand, is an *icon* or holy image, a pictorial representation of the risen Christ. As such, it is helpful to us in a different way. In a sense, we direct our prayers through an icon to the person

they represent (Catechism, 2132, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas: “The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as image, but tends toward that whose image it is.”). We do not, however, generally use symbols, such as the Easter Candle, in quite the same way. In other words, Easter *Candle* is an ancient and abiding symbol of the *presence* of the risen Christ, living among us, while the icon manifests in particular *the personal and merciful love* of the risen Christ for us, and thereby elicits a response of trust and of prayer.

In short, what the Holy Father has done by establishing “Divine Mercy Sunday” is not create an alternate theme or celebration for the Easter Season. All he has done is recover an ancient tradition of celebrating The Octave Day of Easter as a summary of the whole Paschal Mystery, and the merciful love of God that shines through that Mystery. In so far as the revelations and devotional forms given to St. Faustina direct us to, and amplify for us, this same Paschal Mystery, and this same merciful love, then her witness is an aid and not a hindrance to the People of God in their celebration of this great solemnity.

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II. Prophetic Revelations and Popular Devotions in the Life of the Church: Selected Texts

Karl Rahner on the role of private revelations helping the Church to live the Gospel here and now:

3. A private revelation as a mission to the Church signifies not so much an Indicative communicating something new (which would be difficult to reconcile with the essence of a private revelation directed to the *Church*), but an Imperative which, within the context of a particular historical situation of the Church, points out a particular course of action from among the many possible according to the universal and public revelation as the one most urgently needing to be realized. The new feature in such a private revelation consists therefore not in its particular material elements but in the imperative marking and shifting of accentuation within the possibilities of Christianity. An imperative of this kind is possible because, while in the *knowledge* of the faith many things at the same time can be true and good, in the *action* of the faith not everything that is true and good can be actuated at the same time, to the same degree and with the same intensity. Hence the private revelation as a mission to the Church can be conceived as a heavenly imperative interpretation of the particular situation of the Church at this time; it answers the question as to what is most urgently to be done *here and now* in accordance with the general principles of the faith.

(Karl Rahner, S.J., “Les Révélations Privées. Quelques Remarques Théologiques,” RAM XXV (1949), pp.506-514)

Father Walter Kern in his work “Updated Devotion to the Sacred Heart” (pp. 74, 75),, commenting upon Fr. Rahner’s statement, says: “Since public revelation is proposed for the obedience of faith on the authority of God, one must believe it — if he knows about it — to be pleasing to God and to assure his eternal salvation. Private revelations are to be accepted ‘with

an assent of human belief according to the rules of prudence, when these rules present them as probable and devoutly believable' (Pope Benedict XIV). Yet they are offered as a special grace for the good of men in general. One can save his or her soul without every special grace from God, but the fact that God offered it, because it is or was useful, must weigh heavily in one's judgment of it."

Some private revelations are actually "prophetic" revelations, intended for the whole Church.

In general we content ourselves with a distinction between the one "Public Revelation", that of the Gospel, and the many "private revelations", lumping them together in the second category all the supernatural communications made to the "mystics". And we usually add that only the first is of obligation, the second at the most being allowed to be accepted and held as true with a purely human faith.

Two very simple considerations show that that view is faulty. The first is that, among the supernatural communications being given to some at present, we must distinguish [between] those whose immediate object is the good and the management of their [own] souls, and those made to them to be communicated by them to the Church. That is the case at Fatima, at Lourdes and all the great Marian apparitions of modern times. The second reflection is that if it is true that the nature of the act of faith is determined by the motive on which the act rests, we should conclude that a human faith is one resting on human testimony, and that, inversely, where a supernatural testimony of divine origin appears, the act of faith required will also be marked with a supernatural character. It will not be theological faith which, by definition, can be demanded and founded only by the evangelical Revelation proposed by the Church. But neither will it be a purely human faith, left to each one's free choice. To put it in simple terms: from the moment it is established that God is speaking to us, by Himself or by a messenger, His word justifies an act of faith which belongs in a certain manner to the supernatural order. His word is the basis of it and demands it: there is an obligation to believe and therefore to obey.

For the question here is of prophecy. Now the function proper to prophecy, in the New Covenant as in the Old, is to bring back the one to whom it is addressed –king, priest, people of

God— to fulfil the duties of that Covenant. It does not take the place of the Covenant, even when it uncovers implications in it up to then hidden: it is rooted in it and entirely in its service. On the other hand, it could be that the prophet had to supply for weakness in the priest. But he, in the New Covenant, stays in possession of apostolic authority and is officially the one in charge of the Covenant. That is why the basic motive for his decision to act is always the word of the Covenant, that of the Gospel — as we have seen for the Popes we have quoted. But the immediate motive prompting the pastor to act and to go back to that fundamental motive could be the prophetic message addressed to him. The two motives corroborate one another and fuse into one in the mind of the hierarch and his decision.

That this economy is valid for the New as for the Old Covenant is stated clearly in the very forceful words by St. Paul. We recall just the two which follow: “The Church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2, 30), meaning the prophets of the New Testament, as is shown beyond the shadow of doubt in the context. And this one: “Extinguish not the spirit. Despise not prophecies. Hold fast that which is good.” (Thess. 5, 19-20). “Hold fast”: St. Paul is here giving an order.

That is why Saint Thomas Aquinas himself goes as far as saying that “Prophecy is necessary for the government of the people and (he adds in an emphatic way) *principally in what concerns divine worship*, for which nature is not adequate: grace is necessary.” Following Saint Augustine, he affirms also that “there has never been a lack of men possessing the spirit of prophecy; not to propose a new doctrine of faith but to direct man in his actions,” “so far as that was necessary for the salvation of the elect”. That necessity would have no meaning if it did not include the obligation to believe in prophecy.

The repeated invitation of the Second Vatican Council to respect charisms should open minds today to that theology of prophetic charism and to its essential function in the divine economy of the government of the Church. So, then, when the Popes consecrate the world to the Heart of Christ or to the Heart of Mary [or the Divine Mercy Feast!] at a request made to them by the prophetic route and after satisfying themselves that their action fits perfectly the requirements of the New Covenant — discernment of the charism presented to them having been duly exercised — the step they take is not just legitimate; it is the response to a duty of the supernatural order which is obligatory.

Reflections on the Act of Consecration at Fatima by
Joseph DeSainte-Marie, O.C.D., The Teresianum, Rome, 1983

St. Thomas on prophetic revelations

As regards the direction of human acts, prophetic revelation was diversified not according to the process of time, but according to the needs of circumstances; because, as is said in Proverbs, “Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint” (29:18). That is why at every period men were instructed by God about what they were to do, according as was expedient for the salvation of the elect. ... At each period there were always some who had the spirit of prophecy, not for the purpose of setting out new doctrine to be believed, but for the governance of human activities.

St. Thomas Aquinas (ST II-II, 176, 6)

Vatican II commends popular devotions

13. Popular devotions of the Christian people are warmly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church. Such is especially the case with devotions called for by the Apostolic See.

Devotions proper to individual churches also have a special dignity if they are conducted by mandate of the bishops in accord with customs or books lawfully approved.

Nevertheless these devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it, since the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them.

Second Vatican Council

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #13

The devotions to Jesus, The Divine Mercy, revealed to the Church through the recently canonized Polish mystic, Saint Maria Faustina (Kowalska) of The Most Blessed Sacrament, are perfectly in accord with this relevant directive of the Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

III. The Extraordinary Graces of Divine Mercy Sunday

According to St. Faustina's Diary, Jesus Christ made a special promise, which she was to communicate to the whole world (*Diary*, 699):

My daughter, tell the whole world about My inconceivable mercy. I desire that the Feast of Mercy be a refuge and shelter for all souls, and especially for poor sinners. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon those souls who approach the fount of My mercy.

In three places in her diary, St. Faustina records a promise from our Lord of specific, extraordinary graces He will make available through the devout reception of Holy Communion on this Feast Day; truly a "whole ocean of graces" is contained in these promises:

I want to grant a complete pardon to the souls that will go to Confession and receive Holy Communion on the Feast of My mercy (1109).

Whoever approaches the Fount of Life on this day will be granted complete forgiveness of sins and punishment (300).

The soul that will go to Confession and receive Holy Communion will obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment (699).

1. The Promise and the Liturgical Tradition

Why would our Lord promise to pour out such extraordinary graces on this particular Feast Day? On the one hand, we should note the liturgical appropriateness of this promise. If the

Octave Day of Easter is truly meant to be, as Pope John Paul II once said, a day of “thanksgiving for the goodness God has shown to man in the whole Easter mystery” (see Chapter I above), then we should not be surprised that He promised the most extraordinary spiritual benefits to those who come to Holy Communion on that day in a state of grace, and with the disposition of trust in His merciful love. After all, what better day could there be in the liturgical calendar for such a generous outpouring of divine grace than the day that recapitulates and completes the greatest annual celebration of the Paschal mystery? As Jesus said to St. Faustina, on this special day of the Church’s liturgical year “the very depths of my tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon these souls who approach the fount of My Mercy” (*Diary*, 699).

This would also be the reason why Christ asked the Church, through St. Faustina, publicly to venerate the Image of The Divine Mercy on this Feast Day. The Image of Jesus, The Divine Mercy, is to have a special place of honor on the Feast of Mercy because it is a visual reminder of all that Jesus did for us through His Passion, Death, and Resurrection, and a reminder, too, of what He asks of us in return — to trust in Him and be merciful to others:

I want the Image to be solemnly blessed on the first Sunday after Easter, and I want it to be venerated publicly so that every soul may know about it (*Diary*, 341).

In short, just as the Feast Day itself is a summary-celebration of the Paschal mystery, so the Image is the visual, iconic summary of the Paschal message. Pope John Paul II pointed this out in his homily for the canonization of St. Faustina:

From that Heart [of Christ], Sr. Faustina Kowalska, the blessed whom from now on we will call a saint, will see two rays of light shining from that heart and illuminating the world. “The two rays”, Jesus Himself explained to her one day, “represent blood and water” (*Diary*, entry 299).

Blood and water! We immediately think of the testimony given by the Evangelist John, who, when a soldier on Calvary pierced Christ’s side with his spear, sees blood and water flowing from it (see Jn 19:34). Moreover, if the blood recalls the sacrifice of the Cross and the gift of the Eucharist, the water, in Johannine

symbolism, represents not only Baptism but also the gift of the Holy Spirit (see Jn 3:5; 4:14; 7:37-39).

Clearly, the promise from our Lord of extraordinary graces for Divine Mercy Sunday, as well as this request to venerate the Image of Mercy on that day spring from the same source: His desire to make that day the summarizing *celebration, proclamation, and application* of the graces of His merciful love that flow to us from the Paschal mystery.

2. The Promise Draws us to the Sacraments

Rev. Seraphim Michalenko, MIC, explains to us clearly in his booklet *The Divine Mercy: Message and Devotion* another, pastoral intention that the Lord seems to have had in promising extraordinary graces on this Feast day:

Our Lord is also emphasizing, through this promise, the infinite value of Confession and Communion as miracles of mercy. He wants us to realize that since the Eucharist is His own Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity, it is the “Fountain of Life” (Diary, 300). The Eucharist is Jesus, Himself, the Living God, longing to pour Himself as Mercy into our hearts.

Why would Our Lord feel the need to emphasize this? Because so many people do not really understand it. They either see no need to receive Holy Communion, or they receive it simply out of habit. As St. Paul explains in his letter to the Corinthians, they eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord unworthily, “without recognizing the body of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27-29).

In His revelations to St. Faustina Our Lord makes it very clear what He is offering us in Holy Communion and how much it hurts Him when we treat His presence with indifference:

My great delight is to unite Myself with souls. ... When I come to a human heart in Holy Communion, My hands are full of all kinds of graces which I want to give to the soul. But souls do not even pay any attention to Me; they leave Me to Myself and busy themselves with other things. Oh, how

sad I am that souls do not recognize Love! They treat Me as a dead object
(1385; also see 1288 and 1447).

So, Our Lord's promise of complete forgiveness is both a reminder and a call. It is a reminder that He is truly present and truly alive in the Eucharist, filled with love for us and waiting for us to turn to Him with trust. And it is a call for us all to be washed clean in His Love through Confession and Holy Communion — no matter how terrible our sins — and begin our lives again. He is offering us a new start.

3. Theological Analysis of the Extraordinary Graces Promised for Mercy Sunday

The most in-depth analysis ever written of the graces of Divine Mercy Sunday was provided for the Vatican in the 1970's by Rev. Ignacy Rozycki, STD, a leading expert in Poland on the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, who also served as a member of the International Theological Commission for the Holy See. Fr. Rozycki devoted nearly ten years of his life to the task of making a thorough and systematic study of Sr. Faustina's writings. The results of his research were written in French: a massive tome of 500 pages which was presented to the Vatican as part of the official investigation into Sr. Faustina's life and virtues by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. We have provided below a translation of the entire section of Fr. Rozycki's work relating directly to the extraordinary graces of Divine Mercy Sunday (pp. 428-432):

In this matter four points are beyond all doubt: (a) The "special grace" was promised in the context of the Feast of Mercy. (b) It was directly attached to receiving Holy Communion on this day. (c) It consists in the total remission of sins and punishment. (d) It is theologically possible.

In the first place, Jesus promised the "special grace" because the purpose of the Feast is realized by this grace in an especially clear and striking manner.

Immediately preceding the promulgation of this promise, Jesus declared:

I desire that the Feast of Mercy be a refuge and shelter for all souls, and especially for poor sinners. On that day the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon those souls who approach the fount of My mercy ... On that day are open all the divine floodgates through which graces flow.

His intention seems clear from the words cited above: in order that the Feast truly be a refuge for all souls, the depths of the generosity of Jesus are entirely open on this day to pour out – without any reserve – graces of every kind and every degree, even the most extraordinary. Now, the promise of this extraordinary grace is a promise for all souls that the generosity of Jesus is really without any limit on this day. At the same time, it is for all souls a motivation for them to ask on this day of The Divine Mercy, with great and limitless trust, for all the graces that the Lord wants to lavish on this Sunday.

Secondly, the obtaining of the “special grace” is, according to the 13th revelation, dependent upon the reception of Holy Communion on the first Sunday after Easter: “to approach the Fount of Life” in this context can only mean “to receive Communion.” Of course, the 33rd revelation enumerates two conditions: Confession and Holy Communion as the proper norm, the stipulation for acquiring the full pardon. But Jesus surely desired that the greatest possible number of the faithful benefit from this grace and consequently, did not require that Communion as well as Confession be made on that same Sunday, since in the case of a large crowd it would be impossible, for example, in parishes with only one priest. It is permitted then to infer that He allows confession to be made several days before the Feast of Mercy; He insists, however, that one receive Holy Communion on the day of the Feast itself. By this requirement, He incorporates the Devotion into the sacramental life of the Church, because the end of the ordinary period for making Easter Communion falls on that Sunday!

Thirdly, the nature of this special grace was defined in the 13th and 33rd revelations in terms which do not leave any ambiguity: the complete remission of sins and punishment, as said before: it is a total remission of all sins – which have not yet been remitted – and of all punishment due for sins. As for the remission of sins, this grace is therefore equal to that of baptism.

Fourthly, the grace of the total remission of sins and punishment is theologically possible because neither this grace nor the conditions for obtaining it contradict revealed doctrine. *If God wants to bestow this grace by the sacrament of baptism, why would He not be able to bestow it – if He wants to – by the Eucharist which is the greatest sacrament?* And the requirement of trust, taught by the 13th as well as the 33rd revelation, and absolutely necessary to every act of the Devotion, is only a reminder of the exhortations of Holy Scripture. Even more, the immensity of this [promise of] grace is precisely the most natural way to revive in us the boundless trust that Jesus so much desires that we have on this day of the Feast of Mercy.

For Jesus does not limit His generosity this day only to the one special grace. On the contrary, He declares in the 33rd revelation that He desires

that the Feast of Mercy be a refuge and shelter for all souls, and especially for poor sinners.

He does not want this Feast to be one of many similar feasts, alongside others. Rather, to be truly the refuge and shelter for all souls will be its own property which distinguishes it from all other feasts. Thus, it is in this way that

on that day the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces on souls who approach the Fount of My mercy.

And Jesus piles up expressions which describe the intensity of His desire to lavish graces on this day:

On that day are open all the divine floodgates through which graces flow.

These words end by a call to trust:

Let no soul fear to draw near to me.

This saying consists of a correlation between mercy and trust: for the only reasonable response to the generosity of Mercy is unlimited trust.

The declarations of Jesus above: what practical direction do they have? It is necessary to interpret them in the context of the totality of the Devotion. We will notice first that Jesus did not say that the Feast is the only refuge and the only shelter. As we read in the 43rd revelation:

I am giving mankind the last hope of salvation; that is, recourse to My mercy.

There are, therefore, alongside the Feast, other ways of finding refuge in Mercy; these are the other forms of the Devotion, and above all, unwavering trust, which is the only means of drawing graces from the Fount of Mercy. [see Diary entry 1578: **The graces of My Mercy are drawn by means of one vessel only, and that is – trust. The more a souls trusts, the more it will receive.**] So, if the different forms of the Devotion are a recourse to Mercy, the declarations [of Jesus] above are able to have only one meaning: Jesus ardently desires that the Feast of Mercy be for all men without exception – and especially for sinners – the refuge “par excellence,” incomparably more efficacious than all the other forms of the Devotion.

The supreme excellence of this refuge is shown in three ways: first, by the universality of the divine offer. All men – even those who up until now have not practiced the Devotion, even sinners who convert on the day of the Feast – are called to participate in all the graces, in all their extent, that Jesus “prepared” for this feast. Secondly, it is manifest in the fact that all kinds of graces are offered this day to men; spiritual as well as temporal blessings, as much to individuals as to communities and to all humanity which “will not find peace until it turns to the fount of my Mercy.” Third, all degrees of graces are this day within the reach of

all, provided that with great trust they ask for great graces. Such an extraordinary abundance of graces are not attached to any other form of the Devotion. And since Mercy rejoices when it is able to give much, the heart of Jesus also delights in this feast. The extraordinary generosity that the Savior wants to show is also the reason why the practice of mercy is not necessarily required on this day itself in order to receive the special grace and the other promises. The Feast of Mercy will become for everyone truly the refuge “par excellence,” if we fulfill three conditions.

1. If we will bear in mind the extraordinary fervor with which Jesus wants to fill us with an abundance of graces on this day.

2. If we have the courage to bring to the Mercy of Jesus all our needs – known and unknown, temporal and spiritual, individual and communal – in all their real extent (which often lies beyond our knowledge).

3. If we will present [our needs] with a trust that is not only unwavering, but also boundless, because it is trust that opens up to us the treasures of Mercy.

In 1981, at a symposium in Cracow celebrating the 50th anniversary of the revelations given to Sr. Faustina, Fr. Rozycki delivered a lecture entitled *The Essential Features of the Devotion to The Divine Mercy* in which he summarized his analysis of the extraordinary graces of Divine Mercy Sunday. As the phrasing of this passage has given rise to misunderstanding on occasion, we will quote the passage below, and then provide clarification:

The most exceptional grace promised by Jesus for the Feast of the Divine Mercy is something considerably greater than a plenary indulgence. The latter consists only of the remission of temporal punishments for committed sins, but is never the remission of sins itself. The exceptional grace of [the Communion on] Divine Mercy Sunday is also greater than the graces of the other sacraments, with the exception of the Sacrament of Baptism, for the remission of all sins and punishment is found only in the sacramental grace of Baptism. In the promises

cited, Christ tied the remission of all sins and punishment to the reception of Holy Communion on the Feast of Divine Mercy. In other words, in this regard, He raised it to the rank of a “second Baptism.” It is obvious that in order to effect a complete forgiveness of sins and punishment the Holy Communion received on the Feast of Divine Mercy must not only be partaken of worthily, but it must also fulfill the basic requirements of the Divine Mercy devotion. ... However, received unworthily, without trust in Divine Mercy and devoid of some deed of mercy toward neighbor, it would be a contradiction of Devotion to the Divine Mercy. Instead of the exceptional grace, it would bring down upon the recipient the Divine Wrath. The spiritual good of the faithful demands that they know what graces they can obtain, and under what conditions through the reception of Holy Communion on the Feast of Divine Mercy.

We should note several things about Fr. Rozycki’s summary statement here:

1. By “second Baptism” Fr. Rozycki did not mean a repetition of baptism, or some kind of additional baptism (as though an eighth sacrament) but a *renewal* of grace in the soul akin to that enjoyed as a result of the reception of the sacrament of Baptism. That this was Fr. Rozycki’s meaning is clear from the longer text (quoted above) which he had prepared for the Vatican.

2. According to Jesus’ promise the extraordinary grace of the complete remission of sins and punishment is received *from the worthy reception of Holy Communion* on Mercy Sunday. It is not an extra-sacramental grace! This is clear from the longer text (quoted above) and from the shorter summary, (also quoted above) where Fr. Rozycki states this explicitly several times. Thus, when Fr. Rozycki writes in his shorter text that the exceptional grace of Divine Mercy Sunday “is also greater than the graces of the other sacraments, with the exception of the Sacrament of Baptism,” he does not mean to imply that this exceptional grace comes to us other than through the reception of Holy Communion on that day – rather, he is simply telling us that, ordinarily, only the sacrament of Baptism effects in the soul the “complete forgiveness of sins and punishment.” Reception of the Eucharist in a state of grace ordinarily remits only venial sin, while strengthening the soul against both venial and mortal sin (*Catechism*, 1394-1395). But on Mercy Sunday, according to Fr. Rozycki (based on our Lord’s words, to St. Faustina), reception

of Holy Communion pours out upon the soul a complete renewal of baptismal grace.

Of course, this immediately raises the question of whether it is proper to the nature of the Eucharist to be the source of such an extraordinary measure of grace. The answer is clear from the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas and of the magisterium itself. St. Thomas declares very clearly:

“Moreover, not only are all the other sacraments ordered toward the Eucharist, but they produce their proper grace only in virtue of their relationship to the Eucharist. The Eucharist St. Thomas elaborates further:

“This sacrament [of the Eucharist] has in itself the power to confer grace. No one has grace receiving this sacrament except by a certain desire (*votum*) to receive it, the person’s own desire in the case of an adult, or the Church’s desire in the case of infants, as has been said above (*Summa, III, q.73, art.3*). Accordingly it is from the effectiveness of its power that even from the mere desire to receive [this sacrament] a person obtains grace whereby he is spiritually alive. Still it is true that when the sacrament itself is actually received, grace is increased (*Summa, III, q.79, art.I ad I*. See also parallel passages).

Following St. Thomas on this matter, the Church clearly teaches that all the other sacraments are directed towards the Eucharist and draw their power from it. In the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* from the Second Vatican Council, for example, we read “Especially from the Eucharist, grace is poured forth upon us as from a fountain.” And, in the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, pastors are urged to “compare the Eucharist to a fountain and the other Sacraments to rivulets. For the Holy Eucharist is truly and necessarily to be called the fountain of all graces, containing, as it does, after an admirable manner, the fountain itself of celestial gifts and graces, and the Author of all the Sacraments, Christ our Lord, from whom, as from its source, is derived whatever of goodness and perfection the other sacraments possess.”

The centrality of the Eucharist as the fountain of all sacramental graces has also been clearly taught in the writings of great contemporary theologians. In *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*, for example, the great 20th century scholar Cyprian Vagaggini, OSB, argues persuasively that “the Eucharist, therefore [is the] sacrament and sacrifice, which realizes to the

full the common notion and end of all the sacraments.” He writes:

All that has been said of the sacraments, that they are ordained to the Eucharistic sacrifice, can be said with even greater reason about all those rites in the liturgy which are of ecclesiastical institution: ceremonies, sacramentals, prayers, and especially the divine office. The basic reason is the same: we know that all these liturgical rites of ecclesiastical origin have no other aim than divine worship in Christ and the sanctification of man in Christ. Moreover, both of these categories exist only as participation in the sacrifice of Golgotha and as derivations from it, a sacrifice which is continued sacramentally in the Mass. It is therefore only in the fact that they are dispositions, more or less immediate, to communion in the Eucharistic sacrifice, that all these rites have a significance.

Finally, we should bear in mind that theological analysis of Divine Mercy Sunday, and the extraordinary graces available on that day, has only just begun. In the future, no doubt, new perspectives will arise, both to extend the insights of Fr. Michalenko and Fr. Rozycki, and to supplement their work. For example, there is a theological tradition in the Church which states that a complete renewal of baptismal grace is available to the soul at *every sacramental confession*, if the soul comes to the Lord with perfect contrition, i.e., perfect love of God. St. Catherine of Siena, for example, writes in *The Dialogue* (no. 75) of how martyrdom, baptism by desire, and sacramental confession undertaken with a pure heart, all wash the soul as clean as baptism itself. Our Lord said to her:

By shedding both blood and water I showed you the holy baptism of water that you receive through the power of my blood. But I was also showing you the baptism of blood, and this in two ways. The first touches those who are baptized in their own blood poured out for me. Though they could not have the other baptism, their own blood has power because of mine. Others are baptized in fire when they lovingly desire baptism but cannot have it. ...

There is a second way the soul receives this baptism of blood, figuratively speaking. This my divine charity provided because I know how people sin

because of their weakness. Not that weakness or anything else can force them to sin if they do not want to, but being weak they do fall into deadly sin and lose the grace they had drawn from the power of the blood in holy baptism. So my divine charity had to leave them an ongoing baptism of blood accessible by heartfelt contrition and a holy confession as soon as they can confess to my ministers who hold the key to the blood. This blood the priest pours over the soul in absolution.

But if they cannot confess, heartfelt contrition is enough for the hand of my mercy to give them the fruit of this precious blood. ...

So you see, this baptism is ongoing, and the soul ought to be baptized in it right up to the end, in the way I have told you. In this baptism you experience that though my act of suffering on the cross was finite, the fruit of that suffering which you have received through me is infinite. This is because of the infinite divine nature joined with finite human nature [in Christ].

According to St. Catherine of Siena, therefore, the complete renewal of baptismal grace is available to the soul from the Mercy of God in a variety of ways, and a renewal of these graces should be a constant feature of the life of the soul journeying toward perfection. If so, then what is so “extraordinary” about the grace of baptismal renewal offered to souls on Divine Mercy Sunday? Is not such an extraordinary grace always available to us?

First, let us examine the nature of the extraordinary grace itself.

One can, theoretically, receive the complete remission of sins and punishment any time from the sacrament of Confession followed by Holy Communion, all undertaken with the perfect love of God. *But how many of the faithful ordinarily receive these sacraments with such a pure disposition?* Usually, the intentions of the penitent-communicant are more mixed, including fear of God as well as love, and, to some extent, with continuing attachment to their sins. As a result, while their sins are forgiven, there remains the temporal punishment due to sin (see Catechism 1472-1473). Of course, this temporal punishment can be completely taken away through a plenary indulgence, granted by the Church, for the devout performance of certain designated good works (such as the recitation of prayers, giving of alms, visiting of a shrine, etc.) — but,

again, if these works are not undertaken with pure love of God, then the indulgence is only partial, not plenary. The *complete* remission of sins *and* punishment, *ex opere operato*, is ordinary only available to the soul at baptism. What Jesus Christ has promised to the world, through St. Faustina, is that this complete renewal of this same baptismal grace — the complete remission of sins *and* punishment — is also available to the faithful through the reception in a state of grace of Holy Communion on Divine Mercy Sunday.

In other words, one could argue that what makes Mercy Sunday so extraordinary is not just the *eminence* of the graces offered, but also, uniquely, the *lesser requirement* for receiving them: the reception of Holy Communion by a heart filled only with trust in Divine Mercy. This “trust,” it might be said, is not yet an act of perfect love of God, not yet perfect contrition. For trust in God involves merely a cleaving to God because of His promised benefits. As such, it is, merely, a *precondition* for the formation, by divine grace, of perfect love in the soul: the pure, selfless love of God for His own sake. Trust is the opening of the soul by faith, hope, humility, and repentance, to receive all the most eminent graces – and especially the gift of perfect charity – from the Heart of the Savior. Fr. Rozycki describes trust in this way:

This same attitude of life is described by St. Paul and by the whole of Christian theology as hope, the divine virtue of hope which springs from a living faith in the infinity of God’s love and goodness towards us. It is indissolubly tied to humility, that is the sincere and deep conviction that all good within us and which we do is the work and gift of God; that we possess nothing except that which we have from God. This trust-hope constitutes the opening of a soul’s receiving Divine grace, and the requesting of it is an attitude of continuous and most effective prayer.

Truly, this very disposition – trust, and nothing more – is what the Lord asks us to bring to Divine Mercy Sunday, in order to receive the whole ocean of His mercy (diary entries 1520, and 1578):

I have opened My Heart as a living fountain of mercy. Let all souls draw life from it. Let them approach this sea of mercy with great trust. ... The

more a soul trusts, the more it will receive.

Still, one might well ask: why are the “floodgates” of Divine Mercy said to be fully open, on this basis, only on one particular Feast Day, rather than at every Holy Communion?

This objection seems much like the objection of some of the radical Protestant reformers of the 16th and 17th centuries to the claim that Holy Communion imparts special graces to souls, in a unique and more intimate manner than is normally available to souls from the practice of communal prayer. Why do we limit God’s Mercy in this way? The answer is that we do not intend to limit God’s Mercy — He is always free to pour out His Mercy in any way, at any time — but we do intend to believe His promises. From Holy Scripture we know that the Father promised that a unique and intimate communion with His Son can be obtained through the Holy Eucharist, and from Christ’s prophetic revelations to St. Faustina, we know (that is, we know by “prophetic” rather than “theological faith”) that He has promised an exceptional abundance of graces — a complete renewal of Baptism — to those who receive Holy Communion in a state of grace, with great trust in His Mercy, on Divine Mercy Sunday. This is not because Christ is “stingy,” or withholds such plenary grace at other times, but because His own divine way is to bestow His graces in a manner and time which best enables us to receive them. For example, to creatures made up of soul and body, He willed to impart spiritual graces in a bodily manner: through consecrated, transubstantiated bread and wine. The manner of the gift was thereby suited to the nature and needs of its intended recipients. Similarly, to souls struggling to accept the Love of Christ, and to love Him in return (that is, to all of us) our Lord promised that the most extraordinary graces of His Mercy could be obtained merely through reception of Holy Communion, with trust in The Divine Mercy, at the very time — indeed on the very day — in the liturgical cycle best suited to maximize and predispose souls to trust in Him: the culmination and summary of the celebration of the Paschal Mystery, the very Octave Day of Easter.

IV. The Celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday

1. Preparing for Divine Mercy Sunday

Given that the disposition of trust is absolutely essential for the devout soul to be able to receive all the graces that our Lord desires to lavish upon it on Mercy Sunday, it can be said that the whole time of preparation for this Feast, as well as the liturgical celebration of the Feast itself, should be geared toward the strengthening of trust in Divine Mercy by the faithful. Here again, the exposition and veneration of the Image plays an important role. For in a way that speaks to the heart on a level deeper than mere words, the Image, like any good icon, confronts the praying and worshiping soul with the merciful love of Christ, and its very inscription – “Jesus, I trust in You” – encourages the soul to respond to His invitation with confidence.

For this reason, it is highly recommended that the Image of the Divine Mercy be exposed well before the Feast Day itself, or, even better, that such an image might be on permanent display in each and every church, for the edification of the faithful. Alternatively, or in addition, pastors could pass out to their congregations holy cards bearing the Image of Mercy, for use as an aid to prayer and devotion in preparation for the Feast (such holy cards are always available from the Marian Helpers Center, telephone 1-800-462-7426). Pastors also should be sure to explain to their people well in advance of the Feast Day both the extraordinary graces, and the new indulgences available to them (see Section 3 below), on Divine Mercy Sunday.

As Fr. Rozycki stated in his analysis of St. Faustina’s *Diary* (quoted above), Christ never specifically asked for the faithful to go to Confession on the day of the Feast itself (which, practically speaking, would be an impossible burden upon most pastors). In fact, St. Faustina herself made her confession on the Saturday before Mercy Sunday (diary entry 1072). Whenever times of Confession may be offered, the important thing is for the faithful to be encouraged to come to Mercy Sunday in a state of grace, having confessed at least all mortal sins, and trusting in the Mercy of God.

Fr. Seraphim Michalenko, MIC, rounds out for us the other important aspects of the

proper preparation for this Feast in the booklet, *The Divine Mercy: Message and Devotion*, (p. 54-55):

Going to Confession is not the only way we should prepare ourselves for Divine Mercy Sunday. As Cardinal Francis Macharski, Archbishop of Cracow, Poland, explains in a 1985 pastoral letter, we are not simply called to ask for God's mercy with trust. We are also called to be merciful:

“Our own merciful attitude is likewise a preparation. Without deeds of mercy, our devotion would not be real. For Christ does not only reveal the mercy of God, but at the same time He places before people the demand that they conduct themselves in life with love and mercy. The Holy Father states that this requirement constitutes the very heart of the Gospel ethos (*Rich in Mercy*, 3) — it is the commandment of love and the promise: ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy’ (Mt 5:7). Let it be a mercy that is forgiving and true, and universal, with good words, deeds, and prayer for others!”

Our Lord's words to St. Faustina about this requirement to be merciful are very strong and leave no room for misinterpretation:

Yes, the first Sunday after Easter is the Feast of Mercy, but there must also be acts of mercy. ... I demand from you deeds of mercy, which are to arise out of love for Me. You are to show mercy to your neighbors always and everywhere. You must not shrink from this or try to excuse or absolve yourself from it (742).

Thus, to fittingly observe the Feast of Mercy, we should:

1. Celebrate the Feast on the Sunday after Easter;
2. Sincerely repent of all our sins;
3. Place our complete trust in Jesus;
4. Go to Confession, preferably before that Sunday;
5. Receive Holy Communion on the day of the Feast;
6. Venerate* the Image of The Divine Mercy;

7. Be merciful to others, through our actions, words, and prayers on their behalf.

*To venerate a sacred image or statue simply means to perform some act or make some gesture of deep religious respect toward it because of the person whom it represents — in this case, our Most Merciful Savior.

2. Celebrating Divine Mercy Sunday

Just as with the preparation for Divine Mercy Sunday, the celebration of the Feast itself should focus on strengthening the disposition of trust in every soul, so that each and every one can be ready to receive all the graces Christ desires to pour out upon souls on this special day.

We can divide this subject into two parts: the “Essential Celebration” (the minimum required of celebrants and homilists) and the “Enhanced Celebration” (various liturgical and devotional acts that can be provided for the faithful to amplify the meaning of this great day).

(a) Essential Celebration

The essential celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday consists in the celebration of the liturgy of the Second Sunday of Easter, during which the homily should focus on the scriptural readings of the day. It should be noted that the three cycles of scriptural readings and liturgical prayers are all centered on the forgiveness of sins and God’s infinite mercy, which endures forever.

In addition, it is necessary that the day publicly be called by its proper name, “Divine Mercy Sunday.” The Decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments of May 5, 2000, which added this title to the Second Sunday of Easter, did not intend to leave this as an optional title. The Latin of the original decree literally states that “in the Roman Missal, after the title ‘Second Sunday of Easter,’ there shall henceforth be added the appellation ‘*that is, Divine Mercy Sunday.*’ ” Unfortunately, the English version in official use translates the phrase ambiguously: “*or Divine Mercy Sunday.*” But the Latin is clear: “*seu,*” in

other words, “namely,” or “that is.” Moreover, this was the Holy Father’s intention in granting this title to the Octave Day of Easter; it is clear from his own public announcement during the homily for St. Faustina’s canonization, when he stated: “It is important then that we accept the whole message that comes to us from the word of God on this Second Sunday of Easter, *which from now on throughout the Church will be called ‘Divine Mercy Sunday.’*” In his Regina Caeli address on Divine Mercy Sunday, 2001, the Holy Father thanked God that he was able “to proclaim the Second Sunday of Easter as the feast of Divine Mercy *for the entire Church.*”

(b) Enhanced Celebration

It is highly recommended that bishops and pastors:

- Arrange for special diocesan and parish celebrations of Divine Mercy Sunday.
- Invite participation in the special celebrations of Divine Mercy Sunday through diocesan publications, parish bulletins and mass media.
- Encourage parishes and schools to obtain and make available Divine Mercy video and audio tapes and literature related to the Divine Mercy. A variety of such materials are available from the Marian Helpers Center, telephone: 800-462-7426.
- Encourage the practice of Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy as a way of life.

Celebrations of Divine Mercy Sunday may be as varied as the individuals planning them.

For example:

1. An afternoon celebration of Holy Eucharist, with an appropriate homily, ending with the praying of the Divine Mercy Chaplet at the Hour of Great Mercy.
2. A Divine Mercy Holy Hour with Exposition and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, a homily, the praying of the Divine Mercy Chaplet, and ending with Benediction during the Hour of Great Mercy, 3:00 o’clock in the afternoon.
3. Veneration of the Divine Mercy Image with a procession, appropriate hymns and The Divine Mercy Chaplet, followed by a blessing with the Image.

3. Indulgences available to the Faithful for Mercy Sunday Devotions

On June 29, 2002, in a decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary, the Holy Father Pope John Paul II granted a plenary and a partial indulgence to the devout observance of the Second Sunday of Easter, "Divine Mercy Sunday." The decree offers:

a plenary indulgence, granted under the usual conditions (sacramental confession, Eucharistic communion and prayer for the intentions of Supreme Pontiff) to the faithful who, on the Second Sunday of Easter or Divine Mercy Sunday, in any church or chapel, in a spirit that is completely detached from the affection for a sin, even a venial sin, take part in the prayers and devotions held in honour of Divine Mercy, or who, in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament exposed or reserved in the tabernacle, recite the *Our Father* and the *Creed*, adding a devout prayer to the merciful Lord Jesus (e.g. Merciful Jesus, I trust in you!);

A partial indulgence, granted to the faithful who, at least with a contrite heart, pray to the merciful Lord Jesus a legitimately approved invocation.

For those who cannot go to Church, especially the seriously ill, there were special, compassionate provisions for the obtaining of these indulgences. In addition, the Holy Father encouraged priests on Divine Mercy Sunday to lead the recitation of the prayers for the plenary indulgence, and he exhorted them to "gently encourage the faithful to practice works of charity or mercy as often as they can, following the example of, and obeying the commandment of Christ..."

Why did the Pope make this decree of a plenary indulgence for special acts of devotion to The Divine Mercy on Divine Mercy Sunday? The decree itself clearly explains that the Holy See wanted to ensure that the faithful could experience the Mercy of the Lord in a special way on this Feast Day, in the hope that then they might be inspired to be more merciful to others, as God is

merciful to us (cf. Lk. 6:36):

To ensure that the faithful would observe this day with intense devotion, the Supreme Pontiff himself established that this Sunday be enriched by a plenary indulgence, ... so that the faithful might receive in great abundance the gift of the consolation of the Holy Spirit. In this way, they can foster a growing love for God and for their neighbour, and after they have obtained God's pardon, they in turn might be persuaded to show a prompt pardon to their brothers and sisters.

It is important to note that the Church's provision of these indulgences for Mercy Sunday devotions does not constitute either a substitute for, nor an official endorsement of, the extraordinary graces promised by our Lord to St. Faustina for those who receive Holy Communion with trust in God's mercy on that day. As explained above (see Chapter IV, section 3), the complete renewal of baptismal grace promised by our Lord to St. Faustina — the “extraordinary grace” par excellence of Divine Mercy Sunday — is something even greater than a plenary indulgence. This new plenary indulgence offered by the Church is therefore an opportunity to receive *additional* graces on this extraordinary feast day!

Ideally, the faithful would seek to obtain the plenary indulgence on this day for the sake of souls suffering in purgatory, even while, at one and the same time, they are receiving for themselves the “extraordinary grace” of Holy Communion on Divine Mercy Sunday, in accordance with our Lord's promises to St. Faustina. What a tremendous opportunity this is to receive a special outpouring of God's mercy, both upon oneself and for others, all on the same day!

In order to assist priests in the task of explaining to their people the rationale behind the Church's offer of “indulgences,” we have appended to this text an article written by Fr. John Horgan of the Archdiocese of Vancouver, which can be freely reprinted and distributed.

A beautiful pastoral statement on the celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday appeared in a letter written by Archbishop Justin Rigali of St. Louis to all the priests of his diocese on April 1, 1998. There is no better way to end this essay on “Understanding Divine Mercy Sunday” than to quote the text of this letter in full: a truly profound summary of the essential meaning of the

Feast of Mercy by a successor of the apostles.

ARCHDIOCESE OF ST. LOUIS
Office of the Archbishop

4445 Lindell Boulevard
St. Louis, Missouri 63108-2497
314-533-1887
314-533-9954 (fax)

April 1, 1998

Dear brother priest,

“God is rich in mercy; because of his great love for us, he brought us to life with Christ when we were dead in sin” (Eph 2:4-5). As we approach the Sacred Triduum of Easter, celebrating our salvation in Jesus Christ, I draw your attention to this passage from the Letter to the Ephesians and invite you to reflect with me on the mercy of God.

In his 1980 encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (Rich in Mercy), Pope John Paul II rehearses the sacred history of God’s revelation of himself as mercy, a revelation culminating in Jesus Christ. The Pope teaches, “Making the Father present as love and mercy is, in Christ’s own consciousness, the fundamental touchstone of his mission as the Messiah.” This mission passes on into the Church, who “must consider it one of her principal duties – at every stage of history and especially in our modern age – to proclaim and to introduce into life the mystery of mercy, supremely revealed in Jesus Christ.”

The Holy Father tells us that focusing on the mercy of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, is especially important in the present moment of history, and that doing so constitutes a timely challenge to the Church:

The truth, revealed in Christ, about God the “Father of mercies,” enables us to “see” him as particularly close to man, especially when man is suffering, when he is under threat at the very heart of his existence and dignity. And this is why, in the situation of the Church and the world today, many individuals and groups guided by a lively sense of faith are turning, I would say almost spontaneously, to the mercy of God. They are certainly being moved to do this by Christ himself, who through his Spirit works within human hearts. For the mystery of God the

“Father of mercies” revealed by Christ becomes, in the context of today’s threats to man, as it were, a unique appeal addressed to the Church.

Today I invite you to join me in responding to this appeal. In particular, I ask that each of our Archdiocesan parishes observe the Second Sunday of Easter, the octave day of Easter, as a celebration of Divine Mercy. While there are many ways in which to mark this observance of Divine Mercy Sunday, and I will address some of these ways shortly, 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 Holy Father explains this link:

The more the human conscience succumbs to secularization, loses its sense of the very meaning of the word “mercy,” moves away from God and distances itself from the mystery of mercy, the more the Church has the right and the duty to appeal to the God of mercy, “with loud cries.” These “loud cries” should be the mark of the Church of our times, cries uttered to God to implore his mercy, the certain manifestation of which she professes and proclaims as having already come in Jesus crucified and risen, that is, in the Paschal Mystery. It is this mystery which bears within itself the most complete revelation of mercy, that is, of the love which is more powerful than death, more powerful than sin and every evil, the love which lifts man up when he falls into the abyss and frees him from the greatest threats.

The Scripture readings for the Second Sunday of Easter lend themselves to linking Easter and Divine Mercy since the texts highlight the forgiveness of sins. The Gospel is of Jesus appearing in the upper room and bestowing the authority to forgive sins, and the responsorial psalm for the day is the great Easter Psalm 118 which sings of the mercy of God enduring forever. The other texts speak of healing and give the assurance that there is nothing to fear.

Through focusing our observance of Divine Mercy Sunday on the celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy with special attention in the homily on Divine Mercy, we begin responding

to what the Pope calls “that unique appeal addressed to the Church”:

The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy – the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer – and when she brings people close to the sources of the Savior’s mercy, of which she is the trustee and dispenser. Of great significance in this area is constant meditation on the word of God, and above all conscious and mature participation in the Eucharist and in the sacrament of penance or reconciliation.

Mention of the sacrament of reconciliation leads me to comment on additional ways parishes might observe Divine Mercy Sunday. In recent years, some parishes of the Archdiocese by additional liturgical and devotional practices have been able to prolong throughout the day the principal celebration of Divine Mercy in the Mass. Thus some parishes have Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament through the afternoon and occasional prayers in honor of Divine Mercy, sometimes concluding the octave day of Easter with a solemn Evening Prayer and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Above all, as the Pope suggests, provision is made through the afternoon for celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Easter gift of Christ to his Church.

I appreciate how demanding Sundays can already be for you, especially when you so diligently work to ensure that the Sunday Masses really foster the full, active and conscious participation of all the faithful in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. I do not want to add an additional expectation to your Sunday. That is why I am requesting that the principal focus of our observance of Divine Mercy Sunday be the Eucharistic Liturgy itself, highlighting the message of Divine Mercy in our preaching that day. At the same time, however, I want to encourage and support parishes or groupings of parishes which can find a way to prolong the celebration through the day, especially through Eucharistic adoration and through opportunities for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Despite all our efforts during Lent we realize that so many of our people will still need Confession. This wonderful Sacrament – we must never forget – was presented to the Church by Christ Himself on the day of His Resurrection. By its very nature it leads us to a more intimate sharing in Christ’s new life. Hence, this Sacrament of Mercy is supremely relevant also in the Easter season.

“Mercy,” says Pope John Paul, “is an indispensable dimension of love; it is, as it were, love’s second name and, at the same time, the specific manner in which love is revealed and effected vis-a-vis the reality of the evil that is in the world, affecting and besieging man, insinuating itself even into his heart.” In the face of all the manifestations of physical and moral evil, before all the threats that cloud the whole horizon of the life of humanity today, the Church – professing mercy and remaining always faithful to it – has the right and the duty to call upon the mercy of God. During this second year of spiritual preparation for the millennium celebration, there is no better occasion for focusing the attention of the Archdiocese on the great mystery of Divine Mercy than the Easter celebration of new life in Christ.

United together, bishops and priests, and joined to Jesus Christ the personal revelation and incarnation of God’s mercy, let us, who have personally received God’s mercy repeatedly, boldly proclaim to our communities that “God is rich in mercy; because of his great love for us, he brought us to life with Christ when we were dead in sin” (Eph 2:4-4). May Mary, Mother of the Crucified and Risen One and our most merciful Mother too, “continue by her manifold intercession to obtain for us the graces of eternal salvation” (*Lumen Gentium*, 62).

Fraternally in Christ,
Most Reverend Justin Rigali
Archbishop of St. Louis

Appendix A:
The Church's Teaching on Indulgences
by Rev. John Horgan, Archdiocese of Vancouver

What Are the Effects of Sin?

Our Church teaches that serious sins must be forgiven through the Sacrament of Penance. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, sin has a double consequence. Grave or mortal sin deprives us of our communion and friendship with God. It makes us incapable of eternal life (*Catechism*, #1472). When our sins are absolved, this “eternal punishment” is forgiven. But there is another kind of debt or liability for sin that must be recognized too. We call this “temporal punishment.”

How Does this Conversion and Purification Happen in My Life?

It is easy to recognize that many of our sins affect our relationships with other people. For example, it is clear that sins of injustice, like stealing, demand reparation or repayment. If we have deprived another person of her reputation by gossip, we have to atone for that sin by trying to restore her good name. Sins which damage the property of others also involve responsibilities and liabilities. For instance, when a child is forgiven for breaking something, he may still have to replace the broken article in some way. Atoning for our wrongs and sins restores the balance of justice and re-affirms the truth of our relationships.

In much the same way, the Church tells us that all sins have such temporal consequences from which we must be purified. Instead of thinking of such temporal punishment as a kind of vengeance coming from God, we should see that it comes from the very nature of sin itself. Whatever the sin may be, it always involves division and separation from our God, our neighbor and even our own self. Only perfect conversion, a whole-hearted turning away from sin and a complete turning towards God can attain this total purification for us and free us from the binding consequences of our sins.

Every sin, whether grave or venial, involves an unhealthy attachment to created things which we have chosen in preference to God or the needs of our neighbour. We need to be

cleansed of these attachments and their consequences, too.

When we bear the sufferings and trials of this life with patience, viewing even our own death with serenity and trust, we are engaged in the purification of the temporal debt of sin. When we invoke God's mercy, love and protection while fulfilling our day-to-day responsibilities, we are atoning for our sins. When we place ourselves and our possessions, our time and our talents, at the service of others, we are growing in love and "clothing ourselves" in Christ. Almsgiving, voluntary penances (giving up something), and giving witness to the truth of Christ in word and deed remit the consequences of sin too.

In these ways, we atone for our sins throughout our life and grow stronger in the love of God. Gradually, we are freed from our attachment and inclination to sinfulness as well as to the particular sins we have committed. Christian charity, growing and increasing within us, radiates from our lives into the lives of others, healing relationships that have been damaged by sin. Before we can enter the Kingdom of Heaven and be with God, we must be completely detached from sin and freed from our debts. If this cleansing by love has not been finished before we die, it is completed after death in the spiritual purification we call "Purgatory."

The Communion of Saints

As the Jubilee helps us to understand the oneness of the human family, so it should deepen our understanding of the communion between the Church in Heaven and the Church on earth. On earth, Christ calls us to be one people, one family, through Baptism and the Eucharist; while from heaven, the Church triumphant looks on us with love and prays for our complete conversion and sanctification. The saints want to work with us and for us so that we can achieve the vision of the Trinity that they now enjoy. Our communion with them even extends to their assisting us to atone for our sins and be freed from the debt of our attachments. One of the ways in which this is accomplished is the Church's gift of indulgences.

What is an Indulgence?

The *Catechism* explains that:

An indulgence is obtained through the Church, who by virtue of the power of

binding an loosing granted to her by Christ Jesus, intervenes in favour of individual Christians and opens for them the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal punishments due for their sins. Thus the Church does not want simply to come to the aid of these Christians, but also to spur them to work of devotion, penance and charity (*Catechism*, #1478).

So, an indulgence is a way in which the Church, with the power of the Keys which Our Lord gave to St. Peter and his successors, joins our good works to the merits of the saints in Paradise and to Our Lord's own sacrifice. Like a parent who supplements a child's allowance to pay for a broken window, the spiritual treasury of the saints is opened up for us through the Church's loving ministry. In this way, the holiness of the blessed profits and heals us in ways that go far beyond the damage that our sins have caused. Just as the parent's act in paying the damages for the child should make the child more aware of his parents' love and the requirements of justice and virtue, so the Church's gift of indulgences is meant to be a personal experience of the solidarity of love and grace; they are not magic or "automatic forgiveness."

The Church distinguishes between partial and plenary indulgences. A plenary indulgence removes all the temporal punishment due to sin, while a partial indulgence removes only part of the debt. The Church makes this distinction because some of our good acts have the potential to be "life-changing" acts of conversion, while others represent smaller but still very important aspects of the journey of conversion. As the Church unites our acts and efforts to the grace of Jesus and the works and merits of the saints, she calls us to persevere day by day in our path to holiness.

Both forms of indulgence are gifts of transforming love. We can obtain them for ourselves or for the sake of the faithful departed, who are completing their final purification in Purgatory. (We can offer up an indulgenced good work on behalf of a particular soul, but it is always up to God to determine when and how it will be applied.)

To receive an indulgence, one must be in the state of grace, through a good sacramental Confession and receive Holy Communion, preferably on the day when the indulgenced work in

performed. Union with Jesus through grace and the Church's sacraments is the foundation of all growth in holiness. We must turn away from sin before we can eliminate the consequences of our sins.

Since a Plenary Indulgence can be received every day, a person does not have to go to Confession every time he/she wants to perform an indulgenced work. But since the indulgence is part of a journey of conversion, we should go to Confession frequently as part of this growing in the Lord. And when we perform the indulgenced work, it is always joined to our prayer in faith, as members of the Church.

Appendix B:

Proclamation of Divine Mercy Sunday

By virtue of a Decree issued on May 5, 2000 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the Holy See proclaimed the Second Sunday of Easter also as Divine Mercy Sunday.

Decree

Merciful and gracious is the Lord (Ps. 111:4), who, out of great love with which He loved us (Eph. 2:4) and [out of] unspeakable goodness, gave us his Only-begotten Son as our Redeemer, so that through the Death and Resurrection of this Son He might open the way to eternal life for the human race, and that the adopted children who received his mercy within his temple might lift up his praise to the ends of the earth.

In our times, the Christian faithful in many parts of the world wish to praise the divine mercy in divine worship, particularly in the celebration of the Paschal Mystery, in which God's loving kindness especially shines forth.

Acceding to these wishes, the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II has graciously determined that in the Roman Missal, after the title "Second Sunday of Easter," there shall henceforth be added the appellation "(or *Divine Mercy Sunday*)", and has prescribed that the texts assigned for that day in the same Missal and the Liturgy of the Hours of the Roman Rite are always to be used for the liturgical celebration of this Sunday.

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments now publishes these decisions of the Supreme Pontiff so that they may take effect.

Anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Cardinal Jorge A. Medina Esteves

Prefect

+Francesco Pio Tamburrino

Archbishop Secretary