



Divine Mercy Sunday Letter

from Most Rev. John O. Barres on April 19, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Twenty years ago, on April 30, 2000, Pope Saint John Paul II canonized Saint Faustina Kowalska, the humble messenger of Divine Mercy. During his homily at the Mass of her canonization, while reflecting on the timeliness of the message of mercy for the twentieth century, the Polish pontiff pondered what humanity's future might be like. He answered plainly. "We are not given to know. However, it is certain that in addition to new progress there will unfortunately be no lack of painful experiences."¹

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted families, parishes, and communities across Long Island and beyond, stands today as one of those painful experiences. What Pope Saint John Paul II knew vaguely to be on the horizon then is sadly ours to experience firsthand now. The devastating effects of the coronavirus – death, illness, fear, uncertainty, isolation, unemployment, financial distress – have invaded our lives. The weight of this Cross has fallen on our shoulders.

Although Pope Saint John Paul II could not have foreseen the particularities of the pain we are enduring, he knew the soothing balm that would bring us peace. He understood what would "illuminate

the way" during this time, namely, "the light of divine mercy," the supernatural gift that uplifts every generation.² What he proposed to humanity in his homily two decades ago, he still proposes from "the window of the Father's house"³ today: A radical receptivity of God's "great and unfathomable mercy."⁴



This Divine Mercy Sunday 2020, encouraged by Pope Saint John Paul II who points to merciful light in the midst of darkness, the Diocese of Rockville Centre receives anew the message of mercy entrusted to Saint Faustina. Together, on this Second Sunday of Easter, we look upon the Image of the Divine Mercy. In contemplating this serene painting of Our Lord, we discover again three aids for these days of crisis: Christ's gaze, His action, and a timely prayer.

First, beginning at the top of the Image, we encounter the gaze of mercy. There, the Lord's eyes look upon us. How good this is to hear and know

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Homily at the Mass for the Canonization of Sr. Mary Faustina Kowalska*, April 30, 2000.

² *Ibid.*

³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Homily at the Funeral Mass of the Roman Pontiff John Paul II*, April 8, 2005.

⁴ Faustina Kowalska, *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2007) no. 570.

again! Jesus looks at us. He sees us as we are, laden, especially now, with the anxieties, burdens, and challenges of life. He sees us just as he saw those Gospel figures whom we met this Lent - the Samaritan woman at the well, the man born blind, and Martha and Mary, the grieving sisters of Lazarus. He loves us as He loved them. When feelings of loneliness or discouragement arise, when questions pervade our hearts or perplexities disturb our peace, the Image reminds us that we can look to the Lord and always find Him looking at us. In his eyes, we can discover “the look of love which [we] crave.”⁵ There, we can meet mercy, “the greatest attribute of God,” which “no mind, be it of man or of angel, will be able to fathom it throughout all eternity.”⁶

Second, in contemplating the Image of the Divine Mercy, we note the two rays emanating from Our Lord’s breast, one red and one pale. As the Lord told Saint Faustina, “The pale ray stands for the Water which makes souls righteous. The red ray stands for the Blood which is the life of souls.”⁷ With the Church through centuries, we see in them the sacraments, Baptism and Eucharist, and we trace these gifts of life back to their source, His pierced side (cf. Jn. 19:34). These glorious rays flow from woundedness. Their origin is in the victory of the Cross. They highlight an act of love, a total gift of self. This pale ray and red ray remind us that the Lord has acted for us. Undeserving though we were, he loved us to the end (cf. Jn. 13:1) and laid down his life for us. “God is love, and Mercy is His deed.”⁸ And we are the beneficiaries of that mercy. In these weeks, when God might seem unmoved or distant, these rays proclaim again the tender mercy shown from the Cross. They profess that God has acted and that He still acts with a mercy that sustains the world.

Third, we read the “signature” at the bottom of the Image, “Jesus, I trust in you.”⁹ On this year’s Feast

of the Divine Mercy, the familiar line is more striking. Its five words formulate perfectly a prayer in the midst of so much uncertainty. How good is the Lord! He still teaches his disciples how to pray (cf. Lk. 11:1), and He invites us to make these words the signature of our lives. This prayer is not offered blindly. It is said after having met the Lord’s gaze and having been vivified in His life-giving rays. Our bold placing of trust arises from “the ocean of mercy” He has shown to us and from which we have received.¹⁰

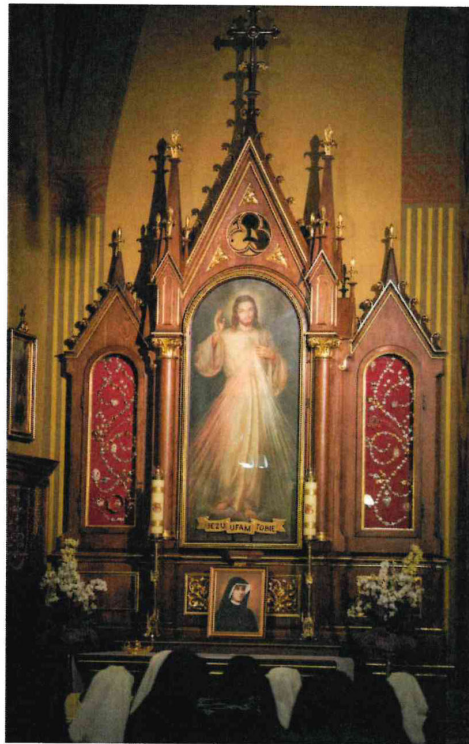
Through our contemplation of the Image, we recall that God has moved towards us, that He has loved us, and that He has shown mercy to us, and therefore, we know it is reasonable to say, “*Jesus, I trust in you.*”

The Lord’s look, His love, and that brief prayer are special gifts this year. They offer consolation. They provide peace.

The Image of the Divine Mercy also serves as “a reminder of the demands of [His] mercy.”¹¹ As Pope Saint John Paul II said in his second encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia* (*Rich in Mercy*), “Jesus Christ taught that man not only receives and experiences the mercy of God,

but that he is also called ‘to practice mercy’ towards others.”¹² In short, we who have received mercy are called to give mercy.

In these weeks, the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy are being lived radiantly. Witnesses of mercy are in our midst, and our gratitude flows to the many who are sharing what they have received.



⁵ See Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, 18.

⁶ Kowalska, *Diary*, nos. 301 and 699.

⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 299.

⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 651.

⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 1319.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 742.

¹² Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Dives in Misericordia*, 14.

We call to mind the heroic virtue and tender mercy alive in our families and among our neighbors. With Pope Francis, we think, too, of those women and men who are “writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, deacons, religious men and women and so very many others.”¹³ In this challenging time, mercy is on display.

Divine Mercy Sunday falls this year between two notable anniversaries in the life and pontificate of Pope Saint John Paul II. Both of which provide insight and wisdom for our present situation.

The first anniversary occurred on March 25th, when we marked twenty-five years since the release of Pope Saint John Paul II’s encyclical letter on the Gospel of Life (*Evangelium Vitae*). That letter shone the light of the Divine Mercy on threats against life. It articulated the good news of life, a gift from God that leads to eternal life with God, and it called every person to “respect,

protect, love and serve life.”¹⁴ The truth and beauty of the encyclical is underscored in these days when our fragility is before us and society is united in its concern for life.

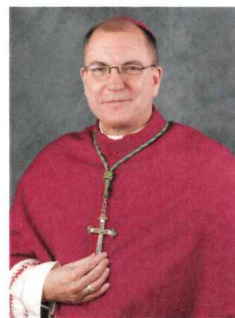
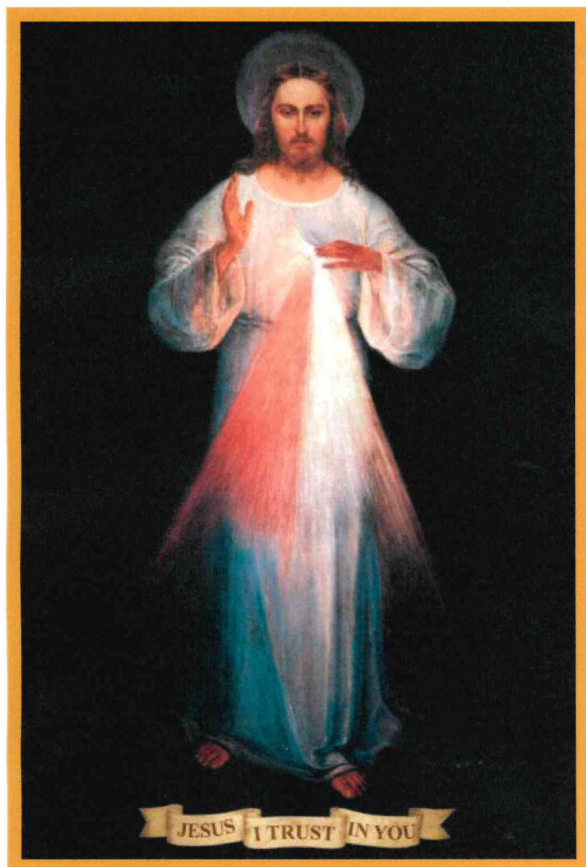
The second anniversary falls on May 18th, when we will celebrate the centenary of Pope Saint John Paul II’s birth. Spending time with this indefatigable preacher of mercy, it is good to remember that his life was not immune to crisis and turmoil. He witnessed and experienced much that could have weighed him down. However, throughout his journey, he turned to the Lord and sought to know His mercy. May he help us invite the Divine Mercy into our lives, especially in these days.

Together with Pope Saint John Paul II and Saint Faustina, let us implore Almighty God:

*I fly to Your mercy, Compassionate God, who alone are good. Although my misery is great, and my offenses are many, I trust in Your mercy, because You are the God of mercy; and, from time immemorial, it has never been heard of, nor do heaven or earth remember, that a soul trusting in Your mercy has been disappointed.*¹⁵

Let us pray for the souls of those who have died from the coronavirus and for the solace of their families. We entrust them to the Divine Mercy.

And whatever may come, let us never fail to say, *Jesus, I trust in you.*



Sincerely in Christ,

+ John O. Barres

Most Reverend John O. Barres
Bishop of Rockville Centre

¹³ Pope Francis, *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer*, March 27, 2020.

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Evangelium Vitae*, March 25, 1995, 5.

¹⁵ Kowalska, *Diary*, no. 1730.

