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The Tenacity of Popular Devotions in the Age of Vatican II: Learning from the Divine Mercy

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Abstract: Despite its global popularity in recent decades, the Divine Mercy devotion has received scant scrutiny from scholars. This article examines its historical development and evolving appeal, with an eye toward how this nuances our understanding of Catholic devotions in the “age of Vatican II.” The Divine Mercy first gained popularity during World War II and the early Cold War, an anxious era in which many Catholic devotions flourished. The Holy Office prohibited the active promotion of the Divine Mercy devotion in 1958, owing to a number of theological concerns. While often linked with the decline of Catholic devotional life generally, the Second Vatican Council helped set the stage for the eventual rehabilitation of the Divine Mercy devotion. The 1958 prohibition was finally lifted in 1978, and the Divine Mercy devotion has since gained a massive following around the world, benefiting in particular from the enthusiastic endorsement of Pope John Paul II. The testimonies of devotees reveal how the devotion’s appeal has changed over time. Originally understood as a method for escaping the torments of hell or purgatory, the devotion developed into a miraculous means to preserve life and, more recently, a therapeutic tool for various forms of malaise.

Keywords: Faustina Kowalska; Divine Mercy; Catholic Church; Vatican II; John Paul II; devotions; piety



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1. Introduction

Promulgated in 1963, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) is widely recognized as among the most consequential of the 16 documents issued at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). It articulates a program of reform of the liturgical life of the Catholic Church, with a particular focus on promoting “fully conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations” among all the faithful, lay and ordained alike (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963, sct. 14). This vision was deeply indebted to the liturgical movement, a more than century long effort to better understand the ancient roots of the church’s liturgical life and to bring these insights to bear on contemporary liturgical practice. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* paved the way for concrete changes, including the celebration of the Mass in the vernacular and a more active role for the laity, including spoken responses throughout the ceremony. Of all the changes to Catholic life inspired by the council, none were more palpable and broadly experienced than the reform of the liturgy.

Sacrosanctum Concilium also addresses popular devotions, the wide array of extralitururgical prayers and ritual activities that, prior to the council, were woven throughout the fabric of Catholic life and often practiced by the faithful during Mass itself. Voices affiliated with the liturgical movement long had lamented how such devotions could overshadow the signal importance of the liturgy. Such critics were therefore gratified by the principles set down in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. The document commends devotions in general, but it also calls for them to be kept in proper perspective: “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, in fact, the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963, sct. 13).

The practice of popular devotions was as strong as ever during the Second World War and the early years of the Cold War, buoyed in part by the heightened anxieties of these years (Kselman and Avella 1986; Orsi 1996; Scheer 2012). By the 1960s, however, at least in some parts of the Catholic world, enthusiasm for such devotions was in clear decline. In an oft-cited essay from 1965, Dan Herr describes what he perceived as a “piety void” unfolding in the United States. “For good or bad, many popular, so-called pious, devotions have been downgraded in recent years. The rosary, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, devotional confessions, novenas, missions, even retreats no longer have the force in the lives of many Catholics that they once had” (Herr 1965, p. 6). Joseph P. Chinnici observes that the “collapse of devotionism, the acceptance of the liturgical changes, and the reception of Vatican Council II occurred so simultaneously that they seemed causally connected” (Chinnici 2004, p.12). On closer inspection, there was evidence of the decline already in the latter half of the 1950s in the US and parts of Europe. In an article from 1959, Fr. Andrew Greeley, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago and trained sociologist, proclaims: “If popular devotions were ever ‘the enemy,’ they are a badly beaten enemy by now,” an outcome he attributes in part to American Catholics growing more sophisticated and better educated (Greeley 1959). In his study of laity in the Diocese of Pittsburgh in the years 1950–1972, Timothy Kelly demonstrates how the rich devotional culture that thrived in the interwar and early postwar era in the city went into gradual and then rapid decline in the 1950s (Kelly 2009).

If the appeal of devotions began softening prior to Vatican II, the process accelerated during and after the council. Chinnici argues that the devotional practices that had flourished in the 1940s and early 1950s “had encoded a social world that no longer existed” by the 1960s (Chinnici 2004, p. 83), one that was hierarchical, patriarchal, communitarian, and at risk of extinction by the forces of godless communism. Another factor was the new emphasis on lay participation during Mass, which disrupted what had been a more passive liturgical experience that many Catholics used for private devotions (Cosgrave 1996). The council also helped validate more personalized, less regimented forms of spiritual practice—contemplative prayer, spiritual direction, retreats, the charismatic renewal, etc.—that replaced popular devotions in the lives of some Catholics (Byrne 1975; Barry and Connolly 1982; Sheldrake 2013, pp. 183–201). Many Catholic elites, including large numbers of priests, had come to disdain popular devotions as vapid and superstitious, and they ceased promoting or even stifled their practice (Dolan 2002, pp. 239–40). Devotions also fell victim to a more generalized decline in Catholic identity and practice in the post-conciliar period, particularly in parts of Europe (McLeod 2010).

With the election of Pope John Paul II in 1978, the cause of popular devotions found a passionate advocate at the pinnacle of the Catholic Church. There is some evidence of a partial revival of devotional practices over the course of his long pontificate, particularly among more conservative Catholics who identified closely with him (Malloy 1998). In her 2002 work *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults Are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy* (Loyola Press), writer and journalist Colleen Carroll shares her research on a new generation of American Catholics who came of age in the 1980s and who manifest an affinity for more traditional aspects of Catholicism—including popular devotions—that their elders largely had dispensed with in the 1960s and 1970s. Kathleen A. Dugan uncovered a similar phenomenon in her research on a group of millennial Catholic missionaries in the US. “Devotionalism has not disappeared, nor has it calcified,” she argues. “It has, however, taken on new shapes and forms among a next generation of practitioners who have different life experiences and cultural expectations than previous generation Catholics” (Dugan 2016, p. 19). In her study of the revived interest in erecting and tending to wayside crosses in rural Quebec, Hillary Kaell describes how these practices have evolved to reflect the values of contemporary Quebecois Catholics: “Caretakers still pray at their crosses and maintain them, though they have come to view such acts differently from their parents. They rarely focus on communal devotions and never pray for protection against agricultural plagues and fires. Instead, they emphasize that their devotional labor is extralitururgical

and voluntary, in consonance with contemporary Catholicism's recognition of laypeople's personal responsibility for their faith. They have repositioned the wayside cross as fundamentally about an individual's relationship with God" (Kaell 2015, pp. 123–24).

Recent scholarship has enhanced our understanding of devotional life in the "age of Vatican II," but much work remains to be done. Scholarly interest in popular religious practices is still a rather young phenomenon. The subject is vast, and many of its particular manifestations have yet to receive thorough scrutiny. This article attempts to contribute to the field by examining the Divine Mercy devotion. Originating in Poland in the 1930s, the Divine Mercy has since found an enthusiastic reception among Catholics around the world. It is arguably the most successful popular devotion to have emerged over the past century. Despite its success, it has received surprisingly little scholarly attention outside of Poland.

This study begins with a brief review of the interior life of the Polish nun Faustina Kowalska in the 1930s, which inspired the core elements of the Divine Mercy devotion, including a new devotional image of Christ, the proposal for an additional feast day in the church's liturgical calendar, and distinctive modes of prayer. This paper then considers how the searing experiences of World War II ignited interest in this devotion and contributed to its evolution, both in Poland and abroad. This set the stage for explosive postwar growth, alongside mounting controversy, until the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office banned its propagation in 1958. Vatican II proved to be the unlikely context for the devotion's gradual rehabilitation, a process spearheaded by Archbishop Karol Wojtyła, which led to the lifting of the ban in April 1978. The study next explores the devotion's resurgence during the pontificate of John Paul II, and it considers the varied sources of its appeal. I conclude with some observations concerning how the historical trajectory of the Divine Mercy confirms and nuances our understanding of the recent history of popular devotions.

2. Interwar Origins

Helena Kowalska was born in 1905 to an impoverished peasant family in the small village of Głogowiec in a region of Poland controlled by Russia. Deeply pious and prone to mystical experiences even as a child, she felt drawn to religious life but was thwarted by her parents, who could not afford the dowry required by most women's communities. Kowalska ultimately defied her parents and affiliated with the Congregation of Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy (OLM) in 1925, where she took the religious name Maria Faustina. She spent the last 13 years of her short life as a member of this congregation, before dying from tuberculosis in 1938.

Like zealous Catholics throughout the church's history, Faustina was motivated to do all she could in life to achieve salvation and avoid the punishments of purgatory and hell, both for herself and others. Mystical experiences she had of the suffering of souls in purgatory only strengthened her resolve. Starting in 1931, she began perceiving messages of a grander scale, with Christ summoning her to work on behalf of a cluster of new tools designed to smooth the path to salvation. These tools—a holy image, a feast day, and specific methods of prayer—fit neatly into venerable patterns of popular devotional praxis.

On 22 February 1931, Christ appeared to Faustina in the evening as she was praying in her cell. As she describes it, "One hand [was] raised in a gesture of blessing, the other was touching the garment at the breast. From beneath the garment, slightly drawn aside at the breast, there were emanating two large rays, one red, the other pale." Jesus then gave her a command: **"Paint an image according to the pattern you see, with the signature: Jesus, I trust in You. I desire that this image be venerated . . . throughout the world."** He explained the remarkable power of this image: **"I promise that the soul that will venerate this image will not perish. I also promise victory over [its] enemies already here on earth, especially at the hour of death"** (Kowalska 2014, para. 47–48).

As if creating and generating global interest in a new devotional image were not enough, Christ also called Faustina to advocate for a new feast day in the church's liturgical calendar. **"I want this image . . . to be solemnly blessed on the first Sunday after Easter;**

that Sunday is to be the Feast of Mercy” (Kowalska 2014, para. 49). In a subsequent encounter in 1936, Christ explained the significance of this feast day: **“On that day that very depths of My tender mercy are open The soul that will go to Confession and receive Holy Communion shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment”** (Kowalska 2014, para. 699).

In other mystical encounters, Faustina learned of new and particularly efficacious modes of prayer. In 1935, an interior voice dictated an elaborate prayer cycle that has come to be known as the Divine Mercy chaplet. She was later assured by God that **“at the hour of their death, I defend as My own glory every soul that will say this chaplet; or when others say it for a dying person”** (Kowalska 2014, para. 811). She was also instructed to recite the chaplet daily for 9 days (the Divine Mercy novena). God promised her that **“by this novena, I will grant every possible grace to souls”** (Kowalska 2014, para. 796).

Toward the end of her life, Faustina recorded messages from Christ concerning the “hour of great mercy.” Starting at 3:00 p.m., the hour associated with Christ’s crucifixion, she was urged to pray for God’s mercy on behalf of sinners. **“This is the hour of great mercy for the whole world. I will allow you to enter into My mortal sorrow. In this hour, I will refuse nothing to the soul that makes a request of Me in virtue of My Passion”** (Kowalska 2014, para. 1320). Several months later, she received a similar communication: **“In this hour you can obtain everything for yourself and for others for the asking; it was the hour of grace for the whole world—mercy triumphed over justice”** (Kowalska 2014, para. 1572).

Faustina’s mystical encounters belong to a category of experience known in Catholic parlance as “private revelations.” The church long has acknowledged that God, angels, or saints occasionally communicate with individuals in order to share information of value to them or to a wider group of people in a particular period. At the same time, church leaders have been encouraged to approach claims of private revelations with considerable skepticism. As a result, only a small fraction of such claims—of which there have been a steady stream, including in the 20th century—have ever received formal recognition.

Faustina described her mystical experiences to a series of priests, most of whom were incredulous. A few came to believe in the divine origins of her visions, including Fr. Józef Andrasz, SJ, and, most notably, Fr. Michał Sopoćko, a priest of the Archdiocese of Vilnius, who made the promotion of her revelations his life’s work (Alvis 2020). His support helped Faustina gain credibility in her religious congregation. He commissioned the artist Eugeniusz Kazimirowski to commit her vision of Christ to canvas, which Sopoćko eventually displayed in St. Michael’s Church in Vilnius. He arranged for the printing of pamphlets and prayer cards containing reproductions of Kazimirowski’s painting along with the Divine Mercy chaplet. He sought to persuade the Polish bishops to lobby for a new feast day devoted to Divine Mercy. Despite his efforts and the support of the OLM sisters, as the 1930s drew to a close, Sr. Faustina and the Divine Mercy devotion she described remained mired in obscurity. That would begin to change during the Second World War.

3. Catastrophe as Catalyst

Poland was ground zero of World War II, and its population suffered grievously under German and Soviet occupation. It became increasingly impossible for Sopoćko and others to promote the Divine Mercy devotion in any systematic way. As it happens, this was not necessary. The boundless traumas of war prompted millions of Catholic Poles to turn to their faith for solace and the promise of miraculous assistance. In this context, Catholics who otherwise might have been skeptical of a local nun said to be favored by God with revelations, were more ready to believe in her visions and to pray for her intercession. Devotional practices oriented around God’s willingness to show mercy to his petitioners proved especially alluring. A school of thought known as Polish messianism—the idea that God had ordained the Polish people to play an outsized role in salvation history, including through their suffering (Chrostowski 1991)—provided a framework for believing that God might choose a humble Pole to articulate an idea of global relevance.

Word-of-mouth accounts of Faustina and the Divine Mercy devotion spread across occupied Poland, and the number of devotees began to mount. Vilnius was an early epicenter of the cult, owing to Sopoćko's efforts before he went into hiding in 1942, and in part to Kazimirowski's painting hanging in St. Michael's Church. The cult also blossomed around some of the convents of the OLM sisters, including the one in Łagiewniki, just south of Kraków, where Faustina had spent her final days and was buried. The sisters displayed in their chapel a new version of the Divine Mercy image executed by painter Adolf Hyla. In 1943, Fr. Andrzej began presiding over monthly devotions to Divine Mercy (Figure 1).

Faustina's accounts of her private revelations suggest that she understood the Divine Mercy image, feast day, chaplet, novena, and hour of great mercy primarily as tools to aid the soul, especially near death, preserving it from the torments of purgatory and hell. In the context of World War II—a kind of living hell for so many in Poland—the devotion gained a following among those seeking supernatural assistance for their earthly problems. Some experienced what they regarded as answers to their prayers, and they were often eager to testify in gratitude. By 1940, around 130 votives surrounded Kazimirowski's painting in Vilnius (Sopoćko 2015, p. 116), tangible signs of favors received. Others shared their stories with the OLM sisters, and the congregation carefully recorded these accounts, sensing their potential usefulness should Faustina's cause for canonization ever gain momentum. In one account, a woman named Barbara Kloss (1902–1981), suffering from spinal tuberculosis, prayed for a cure through the intercession of Faustina and eventually received one. In another account, an unnamed man managed to slip out of a Nazi-run prison in Warsaw, just avoiding execution, by virtue of a small image of the Divine Mercy that he had sewn into his blanket (Chróścichowski 1957, pp. 145–46).

The seeking after supernatural assistance helps account for much of the growth of the Divine Mercy devotion during the war, but this was not the only source of its appeal. Others, including some present and future leaders of the church in Poland, found spiritual consolation in its underlying message. Fr. Jacek Woroniecki, OP (1878–1949), a leading Catholic intellectual in the interwar era who weathered the war years in German-occupied Kraków, encountered the story of Faustina and her private revelations and was sufficiently moved to write a manuscript about the mercy of God. Also touched was the young Karol Wojtyła (1920–2005), who managed to survive the war in Kraków by performing essential labor at a chemical plant while engaging in underground seminary formation. Inspired by Faustina's story, he made a habit of visiting the chapel at Łagiewniki. Late in life, he reflected on the meaning of her message for Poles who endured the searing experiences of the war. "In those difficult years it was a particular support and an inexhaustible source of hope, not only for the people of Krakow but for the entire nation" (John Paul II 1997).

The pressures of war also contributed to the dissemination of the Divine Mercy devotion well beyond Poland's borders. The agents of this process were ordinary Poles who either fled Poland of their own volition, were sentenced to imprisonment and/or forced labor abroad, or were recruited into armies to fight against the Axis powers. Some brought with them accounts of Faustina and her private revelations, which they eagerly shared. One example is Józef Jarzębowski (1897–1964), a priest of the Congregation of Marians of the Immaculate Conception (MIC), who met Sopoćko early in the war and agreed to bring materials related to the Divine Mercy devotion with him on a daring attempt to emigrate to the US in 1941. After reaching his destination, he made contact with some fellow Polish Marians and won them over to the cause of propagating the cult. An unlikely incubator of the devotion was the concentration camp at Dachau in Bavaria, Germany. Here over 1700 Polish priests and religious were crowded into common cellblocks. They helped sustain each other with their shared faith, including the comforting message of Divine Mercy. Fr. Franciszek Cegielka (1908–2003), who learned the words of the chaplet from a fellow priest, wrote it down on a scrap of paper and recited it with his bunkmate every evening. "The chaplet to Divine Mercy, which was very well known, especially among the Polish priests in Dachau, became for me and the overwhelming

majority of Polish prisoners a shield of strength and hope,” he recalls (Cegiełka 1954, pp. 392–93).



Figure 1. The Divine Mercy image (Adolf Hyla) located in the convent chapel of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, Łagiewniki, Poland. Photograph by Robert E. Alvis. Note: This article has obtained the right to use this photo.

4. Postwar Growth and Controversy

World War II helped nurture a small army of Divine Mercy advocates. With the return of peace in 1945, they took advantage of new tools at their disposal to amplify the message that had so moved them. Over the next 13 years, the devotion set down strong roots across Poland. It also found a global audience, mediated primarily by the far-flung Polish diaspora. As it gained a public profile, it sparked mounting controversy that ultimately resulted in its suppression.

Taking advantage of the ability to publish, sympathizers of the devotion began issuing a stream of books, pamphlets, and prayer cards targeting a diverse audience. Woroniecki published his wartime manuscript *Tajemnica miłosierdzia Bożego* (The Mystery of Divine

Mercy) already in 1945, thereby lending the fledgling devotion the endorsement of an intellectual luminary. In 1947, Józef Andrasz published a short booklet intended for a more popular audience entitled *Miłosierdzie Boże . . . ufamy Tobie!* (Divine Mercy . . . We Trust in You!), in which he describes Faustina's message, comparing it to officially endorsed Marian apparitions at La Salette, Lourdes, and Fátima. The following encouragement captures how person-to-person communication was fundamental to the popularization of the devotion: "Let us pass out the prayer cards with the picture of the Merciful Saviour, let us pass out the novena prayers, the chaplet, and these booklets that explain the message of the Mercy of God. Let us, above all, recite the prayers ourselves, for . . . they are effective in staying the hand of the Just God and in saving the souls of sinners" (Andrasz 1948, p. 31). This booklet was destined to be reissued many times over in an array of languages, making it one of the most widely distributed publications on the topic.

After spending 2 years of the war in hiding, Michał Sopoćko returned to Vilnius in 1944, where he lived under a Soviet regime bent on cleansing the city of its Polish majority. He finally joined the exodus to Poland in 1947. Thereafter he published a series of books, articles, and pamphlets, ranging from the scholarly to the popular, designed to promote the establishment of a feast of Divine Mercy, devotion to the Divine Mercy image, and the praying of the chaplet and novena (Sopoćko 2005). During this time, he was contacted by a Pole living in England named Julian Chróściewski (1912–1976), who had become deeply convinced of the veracity of Faustina's private revelations and was eager to promote them. Working with materials and assistance from Sopoćko, Chróściewski published *Miłosierdzie Boże jedyną nadzieją ludzkości* (Divine Mercy, Humanity's Only Hope) in London in 1949. Released under Sopoćko's name but without his permission (Sopoćko 2015, p. 121), the short booklet would be reissued in a variety of languages many times over. It certainly helped broadcast the message of Divine Mercy, but it would eventually come to harm it.

New publications about Faustina and the Divine Mercy devotion emerged in the 1950s. Among the noteworthy efforts was a 1953 biography of Faustina written by Sykstus Szafraniec (1921–1982), a priest belonging to the Paulinist order (Szafraniec 1956). A year later, Franciszek Cegiełka, a Pallottine priest who had first encountered the Divine Mercy during his time at Dachau, published his own interpretation of Faustina and her message (Cegiełka 1954). Henryk Malak, a priest and fellow survivor of Dachau, published two works on the Divine Mercy in 1955 (Malak 1955a, 1955b).

The Divine Mercy devotion grew increasingly integral to the identity and work of several religious congregations that contributed significantly to its popularization. Their ranks included the OLM sisters, who honored the memory of the mystic recently in their midst and started laying the groundwork for a formal inquiry into Faustina's sanctity. They recorded memories of sisters, priests, and family members who had known Faustina, and they prepared a transcription of the diary Faustina maintained for 5 years in the 1930s.

The Society of the Catholic Apostolate (SAC), commonly known as the Pallottines, emerged as another pillar of support for the devotion, thanks in part to Pallottine priests who had encountered it during the war. Fr. Edmund Boniewicz (1919–2006) was instrumental in establishing a Pallottine community in Częstochowa, which became known as the Valley of Mercy. They erected a shrine focused on the Divine Mercy image, and they promoted theological research into the topic. Under the leadership of Fr. Alojzy Misiak (1914–2004), the Pallottines based in Osny, France, oversaw the Apostolate of Divine Mercy, an organization focused on winning adherents to the devotion. A number of Pallottine priests began assisting the OLM sisters in promoting Faustina's cause for sainthood.

Józef Jarzębowski's wartime efforts to win over his fellow Marian priests in the US yielded large dividends. Promoting the Divine Mercy devotion became the core work of the congregation's St. Stanislaus Kostka Province, based in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. The Marians established a Divine Mercy shrine in Stockbridge, founded the Association of Marian Helpers to support devotees, and established a publishing house. The province produced vast quantities of literature and imagery associated with the Divine Mercy, which they disseminated around the world.

Numerous diocesan clergy and bishops sympathized with Faustina's legacy and eagerly promoted it. They included Fr. Franciszek Jabłoński, who first learned about the Divine Mercy while imprisoned at Dachau. He vowed to erect a shrine in its honor if he survived the camp, and he eventually fulfilled that pledge, overseeing the construction of a new church named in honor of Divine Mercy. Stefan Cardinal Sapieha, archbishop of Kraków in the years 1925–1951, looked favorably on the efforts of the OLM sisters at Łagiewniki. In 1951, he granted them permission to honor the Divine Mercy on the second Sunday of Easter in their chapel, and he encouraged the faithful to attend by granting a 7-year indulgence.

The extensive promotion of the Divine Mercy devotion by priests and religious, while important, was not the only reason for the cult's robust growth in the immediate postwar era. The conditions of life in these years must also be taken into account. In Poland, the Soviets ushered in a communist dictatorship that maintained its grip on power by oppressing its rivals, including the Catholic Church. Compared to Western Europe, the economic recovery was a sluggish process, and life remained difficult for many. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, the late 1940s and early 1950s was a time of widespread anxiety, particularly on account of the looming threat of a future war of devastating proportions. In this climate, Catholics proved to be very receptive to devotional practices rooted in Faustina's private revelations, which were recognized by many as channels of divine assistance. Fr. Stanisław Skudrzyk (1901–1980), a Polish Jesuit who spent the war years in exile in Romania, first discovered the Divine Mercy by reading Andrasz's booklet on Faustina while ministering in postwar Austria. Deeply moved, he prepared a German translation and published it locally. It sold out quickly, leading to multiple reissues. Skudrzyk explained its appeal: "This extraordinary success is due primarily to the fact that so many practitioners of Sr. Faustina's devotion have experienced healings and have been rescued from great want. It has really happened, and I know of many such instances" (Skudrzyk 1968, pp. 176–77).

The Divine Mercy devotion spread throughout Poland in the 1950s. In his biography of Faustina, Szafraniec claims that Faustina was "at present known all over Poland" (Szafraniec 1956, p. 23). In 1957, Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński, primate of Poland, observed that that "in almost every church" of his archdiocese "one can find an image of Jesus of Mercy," and he acknowledged that the devotion was "widespread among the faithful" (Czaczkowska 2016, p. 47). The devotion also attracted a significant global following, albeit more diffuse and difficult to measure. After describing the many written accounts of the devotion published in more than a dozen languages and disseminated around the world, Chróściechowski boasted with considerable justification that the Divine Mercy cult was a "spectacular success," which he links to the threats posed by "godless communism." The devotion's popularity "all over the free world has proved that today mankind feels keenly that it is only the Mercy of God which can save us from the impending spiritual and physical catastrophe" (Chróściechowski 1957, pp. 143, 150).

As the Divine Mercy devotion rose to prominence in postwar Poland, it met increasing resistance rooted in a variety of concerns. Certain advocates of the Sacred Heart devotion, including Fr. Jan Rostworowski, SJ, dismissed the Divine Mercy devotion as derivative and unnecessary (Sopoćko 2015, pp. 124–25). The theologian Alfons Wolny objected to the proposal for a new feast day, which would further crowd the liturgical year and interfere with the Easter Octave (Wolny 1949). Some read into the Divine Mercy image an unholy mixing of Catholic piety and Polish national identity, citing how the red and white rays emanating from Christ's breast called to mind the colors of the Polish flag (Czaczkowska 2016, p. 34). Others expressed concern about the lack of iconographic consistency among the growing number of Divine Mercy images displayed throughout the country (Sopoćko and Chróściechowski 1969, pp. 43–44). Still others discerned spurious theology in certain passages of Faustina's diary (Chróściechowski 1976, p. 123). Sopoćko himself admitted that the diary contains "a lot of sentences that could raise dogmatic

reservations for those who did not interact with the author and discuss matters with her” (Sopoćko 2015, p. 122).

The most consequential opposition ultimately came from some within the Polish episcopate. Prompted by interior messages, Faustina asked Romuald Jałbrzykowski, archbishop of Vilnius (1926–1955), for permission to leave her congregation in order to found a new one, and he denied her both times (Kowalska 2014, paras. 473, 585), suggesting a skeptical reserve toward her mystical experiences that would prove long lasting. As Sopoćko was drawn ever deeper into the promotion of Faustina’s messages, his relationship with Jałbrzykowski grew frosty (Sopoćko 2015, p. 176), and the archbishop stymied Sopoćko’s efforts time and again. In 1951, as the devotion was clearly gaining momentum across Poland, Jałbrzykowski expressed his opposition to the devotion in a document addressed to his brother bishops. He references clauses in canon law that enjoin bishops to show great caution in approving new devotional practices, and he complains about the “improper manner” in which the Divine Mercy was being propagated (Socha 2000, pp. 115–16).

Rumblings against the Divine Mercy devotion eventually reached the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, the Vatican agency tasked with defending doctrine and investigating heresy. In January 1957, the Holy Office queried Wyszyński about the devotion, who in turn asked Poland’s bishops to complete questionnaires regarding the devotion and its presence in their respective dioceses. After receiving their answers, he forwarded the information to Rome. This data is not publicly accessible in full, but it is clear that the bishops were divided on the issue, and some echoed Jałbrzykowski’s skepticism (Czaczkowska 2016, p. 45).

As the Holy Office was proceeding with its work, Archbishop Antoni Baraniak (1904–1977) issued a broadside that likely shaped the direction of the inquiry. Baraniak had served for many years as a trusted advisor to August Cardinal Hlond, primate of Poland in the years 1926–1948, and was at his side when the cardinal died in 1948. He served Cardinal Wyszyński in a similar capacity before being appointed auxiliary bishop of Gniezno in 1951 and archbishop of Poznań in 1957. Around 1957, Baraniak came across an Italian translation of *Miłosierdzie Boże jedyną nadzieją ludzkości*, the book Chróściechowski had first published under Sopoćko’s name back in 1949. This version included the claim that Cardinal Hlond had endorsed the Divine Mercy devotion on his deathbed. Baraniak was furious at what he considered a bald fabrication and mischaracterization of his beloved mentor. In a sharply worded letter sent to Polish bishops and the Holy Office in March 1958, he rejected the claim and accused Sopoćko of lying (Sopoćko 2015, pp. 121–22, 133, 147).

On 19 November 1958, the Holy Office rendered its judgment in a decree issued to all of Poland’s bishops and heads of religious communities. The decree contained five essential points: Faustina’s private revelations did not come from a supernatural source; prayers and images derived from her private revelations should be withdrawn; bishops should exercise prudence in this regard, so as not to cause confusion among the faithful by condemning practices once encouraged by many clergy; a feast day devoted to Divine Mercy should not be established; and, finally, Sopoćko should be warned sternly not to continue promoting Faustina’s revelations (Sopoćko 2015, pp. 122–23).

5. Vatican II and Karol Wojtyła

The 1958 decree was a demoralizing blow to supporters of the Divine Mercy devotion. Efforts to promote Faustina’s cause for sainthood came to an abrupt end, and public manifestations of the cult began fading from view. Hope was not entirely lost, however. Support for the devotion was broad and deep, including within the several religious communities that had come to identify closely with it. A number of powerful prelates also remained sympathetic. This was especially true of Karol Wojtyła, who on 28 September 1958—just 2 months before the Holy Office issued its fateful decree—was consecrated auxiliary bishop of Kraków.

One month after Wojtyła's consecration, the College of Cardinals elected Angelo Cardinal Roncalli to succeed Pius XII as pope. Few expected the 77-year-old prelate to make a significant impact on the church, but Pope John XXIII surprised the world with the announcement in January 1959 of his intention to initiate a new ecumenical council. Such councils were exceedingly rare in the modern era, and the pope's announcement caused consternation among traditionalists within the Roman Curia, who were wary of such a complicated and potentially unpredictable event. In the years that followed, their fears would be realized. Spanning the years 1962–1965, the Second Vatican Council was an immense undertaking, engaging nearly 3000 prelates and theologians from around the world. The experience of the council and the official documents that emerged from it have exercised a profound influence on the subsequent development of the Catholic Church. Although it has come to be associated with the waning of popular devotional practice in parts of the Catholic world, the council actually helped set the stage for the rehabilitation of the reputations of both Faustina and the Divine Mercy devotion.

The trajectory of Vatican II was shaped in part by another of John XXIII's priorities: promoting dialogue across the Cold-War divide. This was a leading theme of his first encyclical *Ad Petri Cathedram* (29 June 1959), and he echoed it in a speech on 10 September 1959 (Fogarty 2016, pp. 27–28). The conciliatory tone emanating from the Vatican was favorably received by leaders in the Eastern Bloc, and it helps explain their relative liberality in allowing Catholic bishops in these states to attend the Second Vatican Council, including 61 Polish bishops (Kosicki 2016, p. 129).

As leaders of a vital branch of the Catholic Church oppressed by a hostile communist government, the Polish bishops evoked sympathy and fascination in Rome. Cardinal Wyszyński was something of a celebrity in the early years of the council, and he enjoyed a close relationship with John XXIII, who appointed the Polish primate to a number of prominent committees. Wojtyła, who was appointed archbishop of Kraków in 1964, gradually rose to prominence as well, and during the council's final two sessions he served as the official representative of the Polish bishops and spoke on the floor in their name. He made a strong impression on account of his relative youth, theological acuity, and uncommon charisma. Along the way, he forged lasting relationships with a number of leading prelates, including Giovanni Cardinal Montini, who in 1963 was elected to succeed John XXIII as pope, taking the name Paul VI (Kosicki 2016, pp. 184–89).

Wojtyła invested himself fully in the workings of council, convinced that it was a source of renewal inspired by the Holy Spirit. As he grew more comfortable in the corridors of the Vatican, he also dared to address another issue of personal concern: the 1958 decree that had cast a shadow over Faustina and the Divine Mercy devotion. In the fall of 1964, he secured a meeting with Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani (1890–1979), a leading conservative voice at the council and the head of the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office. There are two slightly different accounts of what transpired in this face-to-face meeting. Drawing from a personal conversation he had had with Wojtyła, Kazimierz Cardinal Nycz claims Wojtyła first asked Ottaviani if the ban on the Divine Mercy devotion might be lifted, a question that was met with a dismissive silence. Wojtyła then inquired about initiating an information process—the first stage in the larger canonization process—regarding Faustina. Ottaviani expressed encouragement (Czackowska 2016, p. 62). According to the journalist Jacek Moskwa, who had interviewed Wojtyła's close friend and Vatican insider Andrzej Cardinal Deskur, Wojtyła began the meeting by asking about initiating the information process into Faustina, and Ottaviani signaled his support of the same (Moskwa 2010, pp. 253–54). Whatever the exact course of events, Wojtyła saw an opportunity to restore the reputation of the Polish nun and her private revelations, and he took advantage of it.

Wojtyła formally launched the information process on 21 October 1965. With his encouragement, it proceeded with uncommon speed. In just 2 years, the officials tasked with the effort secured copies of Faustina's writings and interviewed 45 people who had known her in life. This material was dispatched to the Sacred Congregation of Rites on 24 January 1968. Benefitting from the endorsement of Wojtyła, whom Paul VI had elevated to

the rank of cardinal in 1967, it took the congregation just 1 week to review the material and initiate an inquiry into Faustina's possible beatification.

This inquiry called for the oversight of a postulator general, and, at Wojtyła's request, Fr. Antoni Mruk, SJ, (1914–2009) was tapped for the post. A Pole who had spent the war in German custody, including a stint at Auschwitz and years at Dachau, Mruk understood the Polish Catholic experience and sympathized with Faustina's cause. Mruk appointed two censors to review Faustina's writings, including Fr. Ignacy Różycki (1911–1983), a man who had taught Wojtyła in the 1940s and shared quarters with him for a time in the early 1950s. Różycki later confessed that he was reluctant to accept the assignment, as he had already heard about Faustina and harbored doubts about the veracity of her experiences. It is reasonable to assume that his awareness of Wojtyła's sympathies was a factor in the affirming assessment he ultimately offered concerning Faustina's writings (Różycki 2007).

Another hurdle was winning the endorsement of Poland's bishops. In the late 1950s, substantial opposition among bishops to Faustina and the Divine Mercy devotion prompted the Holy Office to issue the 1958 decree. In February of 1970, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints contacted Wyszyński to inquire whether the Conference of Polish Bishops believed it was appropriate to move the beatification process forward. The conference debated the matter at a meeting in March of that year. At the meeting, Wojtyła advocated on behalf of Faustina's cause, pointing to the favorable evaluations of her writings by the two censors appointed by Mruk. In the lively debate that followed, some remained opposed, including Antoni Baraniak. Aleksander Mościcki, bishop of Łomża, reminded his peers of the negative evaluation of Archbishop Jałbrzykowski. When the secret vote was finally taken among the 48 bishops, however, a clear majority voted in favor of advancing the beatification process (Czaczkowska 2016, p. 90).

As the cause for Faustina's beatification inched forward, Wojtyła's stature within the church continued to grow. In addition to granting him a cardinal's hat, Paul VI appointed him to serve as a member of the Synod of Bishops, the Congregation for the Clergy, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, and the Congregation for Catholic Education. Paul VI received Wojtyła 11 times in the years 1973–1975, and in 1976 the pope invited him to direct the Roman Curia's annual Lenten retreat, a rare honor.

On 4 November 1977, Wojtyła issued a letter to Franjo Cardinal Šeper, head of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the new name for the Holy Office), to inquire whether the 1958 decree might be lifted. As noted earlier, he likely had made a similar inquiry to Cardinal Ottaviani in 1964, back when he was a young, newly installed archbishop. Now a cardinal, a Vatican insider, and a clear favorite of the pope, he could point to the progress of Faustina's beatification cause, including a favorable endorsement of her writings and the support of most of Poland's bishops. Šeper agreed to revisit the matter, and on 15 April 1978, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued its judgment: "After taking into account numerous original documents unknown in 1959, and after considering the changed circumstances and the opinions of many Polish ordinaries, the Sacred Congregation announces that the prohibitions contained in . . . the notification are no longer binding" (Socha 2000, p. 122). After a 2-decade ban, the Divine Mercy devotion could now be promoted. Six months later, Wojtyła would be elected pope.

6. John Paul II and Divine Mercy

Pope John Paul II did not publicly discuss the Divine Mercy devotion in the early years of his pontificate. In retrospect, his reticence appears to have been rooted in his caution not to prejudice the ongoing inquiry into Faustina's beatification. At the same time, he was not entirely silent. Especially significant in this regard is his second encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia* (Rich in Mercy), released on 30 November 1980. In it he offers an extended reflection on God's mercy, "the greatest of the attributes and perfections of God" (John Paul II 1980, sc. 13). He highlights manifestations of this theme in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the church's theological tradition. He notes its particular relevance in the modern day, a time

of heightened anxiety and “decline of many fundamental values” (John Paul II 1980, sct. 12). The encyclical makes no mention of Faustina, but supporters of her legacy surely noticed its resemblance to the writings of early boosters like Sopoćko, Woroniecki, and Andrasz, who all highlighted how Faustina’s private revelations accorded with Scripture and tradition. The pope later acknowledged that he had been “thinking about [Faustina] for a long time” when he began working on the encyclical (Weigel 2005, p. 387).

If John Paul II was quiet about Faustina and the Divine Mercy devotion, it could be said that he promoted both causes by association. Unlike many Catholic elites of the post-conciliar era, he had a deeply personal appreciation of the popular devotional practices long at the heart of the Catholic experience. This was especially true of the cult of the saints. He authorized the streamlining of the canonization process early in his pontificate, and he beatified and canonized candidates at a faster rate than any of his predecessors. He encouraged by example the practice of numerous traditional devotions, including the rosary, Eucharistic adoration, and pilgrimage to shrines. He showed a lively interest in mystical phenomena, including the Marian apparitions at Fátima and the life of the Capuchin friar Padre Pio (1887–1968). Toward the end of his tenure as pope, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments published the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, which defended the intrinsic value of “popular piety” against “those who ignore it, or overlook it, or even disdain it” (Congregation for Divine Worship 2001, p. 61).

Faustina’s beatification cause reached a significant inflection point in 1992. On 7 March 1992, the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints issued a decree announcing that the nun’s heroic virtue had been established, thereby adding her to the ranks of the “venerable.” A subsequent decree on 21 December 1992 affirmed that, in the church’s determination, a woman named Maureen Digan was miraculously healed through Faustina’s intercession. With these final hurdles cleared, John Paul II presided over Faustina’s beatification on 18 April 1993—the second Sunday of Easter—before some 100,000 people gathered in St. Peter’s Square.

After her beatification, John Paul II spoke openly and often about his esteem for Faustina and the Divine Mercy devotion. He never failed to acknowledge her on the second Sunday of Easter. On 23 April 1995, for example, he noted the following in a homily: “The mystical experience of Blessed Kowalska and her cry to the merciful Christ are inscribed in the harsh context of our century’s history. As people of this century, which is now drawing to a close, we wish to thank the Lord for the message of Divine Mercy” (John Paul II 1995). During his 1997 trip to Poland, he visited the shrine at Łagiewniki and offered a highly personal endorsement: “The Message of Divine Mercy has always been near and dear to me. It is as if history had inscribed it in the tragic experience of the Second World War. In those difficult years it was a particular support and an inexhaustible source of hope, not only for the people of Krakow but for the entire nation. This was also my personal experience, which I took with me to the See of Peter and which in a sense forms the image of this Pontificate” (John Paul II 1997).

On 16 November 1999, the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints affirmed a second miracle linked to Faustina’s intercession—the healing of Fr. Ronald Pytel—thereby qualifying her for sainthood. During Mass in St. Peter’s Square on 30 April 2000, John Paul II announced both her canonization and the institution of Divine Mercy Sunday as a feast day to be celebrated by the entire Catholic Church. In his homily he declared: “And you, Faustina, a gift of God to our time, a gift from the land of Poland to the whole Church, obtain for us an awareness of the depth of divine mercy; help us to have a living experience of it and to bear witness to it among our brothers and sisters” (John Paul II 2000).

7. A Global Devotion

The lifting of the Holy Office’s 1958 decree initiated an impressive reflowering of the Divine Mercy devotion in Poland in the 1980s, where it had set down deep roots prior to the ban. The cause benefited from the unwavering commitment of several religious

congregations, including the OLM sisters and the Pallottine fathers and brothers. Both congregations resumed promoting the devotion at their shrines in Łagiewniki and Częstochowa respectively, and both organized symposia on the topic. The cause also enjoyed growing support within the Polish hierarchy. Franciszek Cardinal Macharski (1927–2016), Wojtyła’s successor as archbishop of Kraków, announced in 1985 that priests in the archdiocese were to honor the Divine Mercy on the second Sunday of Easter, an example that some other dioceses soon followed (Socha 2000, p. 130). A 1988 survey of 18 of the country’s 27 dioceses revealed that the Divine Mercy image was on display in 1620 churches and chapels across the country (Kisiel 1991, pp. 103–10).

Faustina and the Divine Mercy devotion also began developing a sizable following outside of Poland. John Paul II’s election sparked interest in his Polish heritage, and his sympathy for the mystical dimension of the faith, in conjunction with reports of Marian apparitions at Medjugorje in Yugoslavia, led many Catholics to a renewed appreciation of the supernatural. Both dynamics enhanced the profile of Faustina and her private revelations. Meanwhile, the Marian Fathers resumed their earlier efforts to promote the devotion in print. They were tasked with managing the publication of the authorized version of Faustina’s diary, which first appeared in 1981 and has since been translated into over two dozen languages and reissued many times over in response to global demand.

The backstories of the first two miracles officially attributed to Faustina’s intercession offer concrete examples of how Catholics outside of Poland gravitated to Faustina and the Divine Mercy devotion. In 1979, Bob Digan, a Boston-area Catholic, saw a flyer advertising the screening of a film about Faustina, which was possible again thanks to the lifting of the ban. The film inspired him to pray to Faustina to intercede before God on behalf of his wife, Maureen, who was suffering from a debilitating disease. He was also inspired to contact the Marians at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, who were promoting Faustina’s cause for canonization and interested in evidence of Faustina’s sanctity. A Marian priest named Seraphim Michalenko agreed to accompany the Digans to Łagiewniki, where they prayed before the Divine Mercy image, recited the Divine Mercy chaplet, and sought Faustina’s intercession. When Maureen’s condition improved, Michalenko was well positioned to make the case that a miraculous healing had taken place (Carroll 2013, pp. 17–32).

In 1987, Fr. Ronald Pytel, a priest of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, decided to take part in a pilgrimage to Medjugorje, which was emerging as a powerful magnet for Catholic pilgrims. While there, he heard fellow pilgrims tell of another instance of mystical intervention in Eastern Europe: the private revelations of Faustina Kowalska. He was intrigued, in part because he had encountered the Divine Mercy devotion as a youth growing up in the Polish-American Holy Rosary Parish in Baltimore. After the archdiocese reintroduced the devotion in 1991, Pytel, now serving as pastor at Holy Rosary, became an enthusiastic advocate. When he developed a serious heart condition in 1995 that threatened his life, he and his parishioners turned to Faustina for intercession. His subsequent recovery helped set the stage for Faustina’s canonization (Fortuin et al. 2009).

Interest in Faustina and the Divine Mercy increased markedly after her beatification in 1993 and her canonization in 2000. Both events signaled the church’s official endorsement of the mystic and her private revelations. John Paul II repeatedly affirmed his personal sympathy for the Divine Mercy and its special relevance in the contemporary age, messages that were not lost on bishops and lower ranks of clergy, not to mention the pope’s legions of admirers throughout the Catholic world. With the establishment of Divine Mercy Sunday in the year 2000, Catholics have been reminded annually that the devotion is significant enough to merit inclusion in the church’s liturgical calendar.

One measure of the Divine Mercy’s burgeoning appeal in recent decades is the flood of articles, books, and other forms of media devoted to the topic, which collectively signal a sizable audience for the same. The OLM sisters, the Pallottines, and the Marians all launched periodicals designed to promote the devotion, and dozens of books have followed, including biographies of Faustina, guides to integrating the Divine Mercy into one’s spiritual life, and testimonies to the devotion’s effectiveness. The 1994 Polish film

Faustina, directed by Jerzy Łukaszewicz, proved surprisingly popular to a global audience. Public sites dedicated to the devotion, ranging from displays of the image in parish churches to the establishment of national shrines, proliferated across the globe. John Paul II formally consecrated a massive new basilica at Łagiewniki in 2002, and by this time roughly 2 million pilgrims ventured to the site annually (Kurek and Pawlusiński 2009, p. 55). Benedict Groeschel describes the Divine Mercy devotion as “the most popular Catholic devotion to Christ by the end of the twentieth century,” touching the lives of some one hundred million people by his “modest estimate” (Groeschel 2010, pp. 547–48). According to one source, Faustina’s diary now ranks as “the world’s most published work of twentieth-century Christian mysticism” (Górny and Rosikoń 2014, p. 8).

Faustina’s beatification and canonization, along with John Paul II’s personal endorsement, have been critical to the growth of the Divine Mercy devotion in recent decades, but it would be erroneous to view it simply as a development imposed on the faithful from above. Published testimonies from devotees reveal the genuine grassroots appeal that has animated its expansion. These testimonies also highlight the numerous reasons that draw people to the devotion. Its multiple components—the image, the feast day, the chaplet, the novena, the hour of great mercy, Faustina’s diary—offer diverse points of entry, which is another secret of its success.

As noted earlier, Faustina understood the varied facets of the Divine Mercy devotion as sources of divine grace that protected the soul, especially at the hour of death, from the travails of purgatory and hell. This understanding, inscribed throughout her diary, continues to inform how large numbers of Catholics around the world approach the devotion. They recite the chaplet, complete the novena, honor the feast day, and pray during the hour of great mercy with an eye toward the spiritual state of their own souls or the souls of others. Some have elevated these practices into a vocation. Jay Hastings, a Divine Mercy devotee from Tennessee, was taken by the remarkable promises concerning the chaplet that Faustina describes in her diary. “I was able to understand the role we can all play as dispensers of God’s mercy,” he observes (Carroll 2013, p. 154). As a result, he founded the St. Faustina Society/Shrine 24-h Chaplet, a group whose members collectively pray the chaplet around the clock for a number of intentions, including the souls of the sick and the dying and people on the verge of committing serious sin. Silvano Tosso, an Italian businessman whose criminal practices led to imprisonment, found inspiration in Faustina’s practice of praying for the spiritual welfare of others, which he began to imitate. “I learned finally the importance that Jesus gives to each soul. He leaves 99 good souls to search for the missing one. He demanded souls and souls and souls from St. Faustina. There are so many single souls who are missing. Poor Jesus needs some help. So there is a lot to do, and as St. Faustina pointed out, so little time” (Carroll 2013, p. 60).

While Faustina was primarily focused on the salvation of souls, her admirers soon recognized her and the devotional practices she described as potential sources of miraculous power that could benefit the living. Such hopes flourished during the dark years of the Second World War, and they continue to resonate strongly for many contemporary devotees. As we have seen, Maureen Digan and Fr. Ronald Pytel sought Faustina’s intercession, and engaged in the Divine Mercy devotion, in the hope of cures for their intractable maladies. They are by no means exceptional in this regard. In a 2018 article, historian Alana Harris recounts interviews with numerous devotees of the Divine Mercy who traced their commitment back to what they regarded as miraculous cures. They include a Filipino woman in London who found freedom from a gambling addiction, as well as a Puerto Rican pilgrim to Łagiewniki who was facing the risk of blindness and managed to avoid it (Harris 2018, pp. 559, 563). The quest for miraculous healing long has been a primary motivation behind the practice of popular devotions, and this remains the case in countless contemporary instances. Despite remarkable advances in medical care in recent decades, humans still suffer from a host of grave afflictions for which there is no known cure, and the market for miracles remains robust.

In surveying testimonies from contemporary Divine Mercy devotees, particularly striking is what might be described as the devotion's psychic benefits. Many have gravitated to the devotion not out of concern for the soul after death or to stave off physical afflictions, but rather to enhance the quality of their lives. They have found in its practices an array of benefits, including inner peace, a clearer sense of meaning to life, and a feeling of connection with a higher power. This dimension of the devotion's appeal is in keeping with the "therapeutic turn" that numerous scholars have discerned in contemporary religion and culture in general (Rieff 1987; Moskowitz 2001; Illouz 2008).

For some, the Divine Mercy image has provided an avenue for gaining greater insight into God and God's will for their lives. A truck driver from Pennsylvania named Michael Kushner first encountered the image at a religious retreat in the late 1980s. "It captured me," he states. "It was as if I had been led to it all along." He was inspired to have the image painted on the side of his 18-wheeler as a kind of visual evangelization: "I want others to see Jesus, to help people understand that He is real" (Carroll 2006, p. 12). During a 2012 international conference on the Divine Mercy, a French Olympic athlete named Frédéric explained the image's capacity to lead people to a transformative encounter with Christ: "The Lord said 'I am meek and humble in heart.' Christ, my dear God, I can see that you are telling the truth, I have never seen such a face." This new understanding inspired him to become an advocate of the Divine Mercy devotion, including to prisoners (Harris 2018, p. 558). Dr. Scot Bateman, a Boston-based pediatrician, has offered his own testimony regarding the power of the image. A spiritual crisis prompted him to convert to Catholicism and transformed his understanding of medicine, leading him to integrate spiritual care into his approach to treating patients. The Divine Mercy image has been a source of inspiration for this new direction: "The Divine Mercy image shares a message that's so applicable in healthcare delivery—that image of sharing, Jesus sharing His light, sharing His love in a very active way You can almost feel it come on you when you see it. It's what we do in healthcare. That's the image we try to project" (Carroll 2013, p. 214).

Others have found peace of mind and a sense of purpose in the Divine Mercy chaplet. Colleen Carroll Campbell first encountered the Divine Mercy devotion while conducting research for her 2002 book *The New Faithful*. She was inspired to recite the chaplet, and she describes some of the benefits she experienced as a result in a subsequent book: "The chaplet's rhythmic, cross-focused refrains quieted the chattering in my head, allowing me to sink into stillness with God. I could feel my worries receding to the background as I worked my way through the prayer" (Campbell 2012, p. 80). This practice, along with Faustina's model of "blind trust in God" (Campbell 2012, p. 81), provided her with resources to navigate difficult decisions in her life. Katherine A. Dugan uncovered a similar response in her research on young Catholic missionaries working on college campuses in the US. "I find comfort in it," one of her subjects notes. "I have a tendency to be very critical of myself . . . so I think the Divine Mercy Chaplet helps me to remember God's mercy" (Dugan 2016, p. 12). A devotee named Michael, who prays the chaplet daily at 3:00 pm, hints vaguely at the personal importance of this routine: "I have been going through tremendous difficulties of late and if it were not for the chaplet I would not be able to make it through" (Graces Received n.d.).

Faustina's diary has offered yet another spiritual resource for devotees, providing timely guidance along one's spiritual journey and facilitating self-discovery. Alana Harris observes that the book is available with leather bindings and gilded edges, signaling its status as "a metaphysically powerful object" (Harris 2018, p. 562), and many of its most zealous readers regard it as such. After falling away from the Catholic faith in the 1970s, Angelina Steenstra gravitated back in the 1980s and was particularly transformed by reading the diary: "I would read these passages, . . . and it was as though God was speaking to me, telling me, 'Do not be afraid' of Him." This led her to engage in various forms of ministry, including the promotion of the Divine Mercy devotion (Carroll 2013, pp. 65–82, quote from p. 80). A devotee named Donna describes a similar experience: "Whenever I'm going through something difficult and not one person seems to be giving me the advice I

deeply need in my heart, I simply pick up her diary and 9 times out of 10 the conversing going on between St. Faustina and our Saviour is completely relevant to my own personal situation and I always feel so much better after reading it" ([Graces Received n.d.](#)). Bryan Thatcher, a successful if unfulfilled doctor, found a new sense of hope and purpose by reading Faustina's words: "I started to feel the intense presence of God helping me to understand that I am somebody . . . , not because of my educational achievements, position on the job, my income, or the type of car I drove, but because I was created in the image and likeness of God" ([Carroll 2013](#), p. 139).

8. Conclusions

The historical development and global popularity of the Divine Mercy devotion offers a window into the larger story of Catholic devotional life in the age of Vatican II. This conclusion highlights some of the more significant insights embedded in this history. In many respects, the trajectory of the devotion reinforces the findings of existing scholarship on the subject. At the same time, it nuances and even complicates some common assumptions.

Catholics had a wide array of officially sanctioned and time-tested devotions to choose from in the early decades of the period under review. The fact that so many gravitated to the new practices described by Faustina points to an important dynamic within Catholic devotionalism in general: It is at once highly traditional and open to innovation. Certain parameters have come to define licit Catholic devotions, and new devotional models, if they are to receive formal recognition by ecclesial authorities, must rhyme with what has come before. In the case of the Divine Mercy, its leading elements—the private revelations of a holy nun, a sacred image, an elaborate prayer cycle, a new feast day—reflected preexisting models. At the same time, Catholics have demonstrated a taste for novelty in their devotional lives. One advantage that new devotions seem to offer is a greater relevance to the present moment. In recalling his early attraction to the Divine Mercy, John Paul II captures this sentiment: "It is as if history had inscribed [the Divine Mercy] in the tragic experience of the Second World War" ([John Paul II 1997](#)). For Polish Catholics, the audacious notion that God would choose a humble Pole to introduce important practices relevant to the entire church made particular sense in light of the longer tradition of Polish messianism.

The rapid proliferation of the Divine Mercy devotion during World War II and the early Cold War fits neatly into wider trends. In this period of widespread suffering and acute anxiety, vast numbers of Catholics found in devotional practices security and the promise of supernatural assistance. The case of the Divine Mercy also highlights a less appreciated fact: The global conflicts of these years touched off human migration—both willing and forced—on a massive scale, which in some instances advanced the process of globalization, including within the Catholic Church. Polish Catholics were driven from their country in large numbers, and some brought the Divine Mercy devotion with them. In their new homelands, they often connected with preexisting pockets of the Polish diaspora, which provided a receptive audience for the new devotion and helped mediate it to the broader Catholic world.

For all of the vitality of Catholic devotional life in the 1940s and early 1950s, there were signs of flagging interest thereafter, at least in some parts of the Catholic world. This softening has been linked to changes in the life experiences of Catholics, including higher educational levels, expanding material prosperity, and lower levels of anxiety. The Divine Mercy devotion appears to have grown steadily more popular in Poland up to the 1958 decree from the Holy Office, but this in and of itself does not necessarily contradict signs of devotional decline elsewhere. It is important to remember that Poland trailed much of Western Europe and North America in terms of educational attainment and economic security in these years, and the church in Poland endured perpetual harassment from a hostile communist regime ([Alvis 2016](#), pp. 218–50). The vitality of the Divine Mercy

devotion in Poland underscores how waning interest in devotional practices in these years was, to repurpose a phrase, a “First-World problem” by and large.

The Second Vatican Council has been commonly, and somewhat unfairly, identified as the cause of the decline of popular devotions. While the council never condemned such devotions, its program of liturgical renewal did serve to justify the neglect or even suppression of devotional practice in many contexts. The history of the Divine Mercy devotion alerts us to another, unheralded consequence of the council: It helped launch Karol Wojtyła’s remarkable rise through the ranks of the ecclesial hierarchy, and it provided him the opportunity to restore the reputation of Faustina and her mystical experiences. In this respect, as in so many others, the council’s legacy defies easy definition.

The Divine Mercy devotion also reminds us of the enduring power of the modern papacy to shape Catholic devotional practice. Pope Pius IX (1846–1878) was a forceful advocate of the cult of the saints, Marian devotion, and the Sacred Heart, and he enhanced the appeal of these practices over the course of his long pontificate. Pope Pius X (1903–1914) was instrumental in promoting appreciation of the Eucharist and convincing the laity to take communion on a more regular basis. Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) smiled on the Marian apparitions at Fátima in 1917 and helped nurture Catholic enthusiasm for the topic during the early years of the Cold War. In a similar fashion, John Paul II actively modeled veneration to the saints (Mary above all), Eucharistic adoration, pilgrimage to shrines, and other devotional practices that had fallen out of favor with many Catholics. His greatest success in reviving interest in such practices may very well be the popularity of the Divine Mercy devotion, which he helped introduce to a global audience. Untold millions of Catholics around the world have felt a strong connection to this pope, and they have proven receptive to his counsel and example.

While it is important to acknowledge John Paul II’s role in promoting awareness of Faustina and the Divine Mercy, his efforts alone are not a sufficient explanation for the devotion’s success. Its global popularity challenges the notion that, with increased education and economic development, traditional Catholic devotions are destined to give way to “more sophisticated” practices like active participation in the Liturgy, Scripture study, spiritual direction, and the like. The tenacious appeal of devotional practices like the Divine Mercy suggests that they are more finely attuned than sometimes thought to enduring features of the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual lives of Catholics. Testimonies from devotees illustrate how devotions are also capable of being recalibrated by practitioners to meet changing needs.

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