



BULLETIN

The Association of Marian Helpers

A gift to the Church

Mercy Sunday worldwide focuses on receiving Sacraments, radiating mercy.

by Patrick Novecosky

[Contents](#)

[Features](#)

[Your magazine is getting BIGGER and Better](#)

[A gift to the Church](#)

[Institute teaches leaders message of mercy](#)

[A Marian of vision](#)

["Contemplate My wounds"](#)

[Divine Mercy basics](#)

[Come to Mary!](#)

[Columns](#)

[Father Joseph Writes](#)

[Mary's Way](#)

[Gift Notes](#)

[What Can I Do?](#)

[Departments](#)

[Words from Rome](#)

[Shrine News](#)

[Marians Around the World](#)

[Graces Received](#)

[Appreciation 2001](#)

[Marian Vocations](#)



After promoting the canonization cause of St. Faustina for over 20 years, Fr. Seraphim Michalenko, MIC, was gratified to see her remaining prophecy — Divine Mercy Sunday — fulfilled.

What really thrills the heart is an unexpected gift -- and that's exactly what the first worldwide celebration of Mercy Sunday will be, says Fr. Seraphim Michalenko, MIC, the priest who worked for St. Maria Faustina's canonization for more than 20 years.

When Pope John Paul II declared, during St. Faustina's canonization last year, that from now on the Second Sunday of Easter will be known as Divine Mercy Sunday, Fr. Michalenko says most of the nearly 250,000 people gathered in St. Peter's Square were surprised.

"The Holy Father caught many people off guard," Fr. Michalenko says. "We expected that he would fulfill the Lord's request to put the celebration on the Church calendar, but we didn't know how he would handle it or when he would do it."

The pope's announcement was followed by a decree from the Holy See's Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, officially adding to the "Second Sunday of Easter" the title: "Divine Mercy Sunday."

"Having Mercy Sunday as a universal celebration in the Church is a great gift to us and to the entire world," Fr. Michalenko explains. "In his homily at her canonization, the Holy Father called St. Faustina 'a gift of God to our time.' His declaration that Mercy Sunday will be celebrated worldwide is also the Lord's gift to us."

"It's the fulfillment of the prophecy St. Faustina made about the Lord's desire for Mercy Sunday to be celebrated throughout the whole Church," he says. "Every prophecy she made has now been fulfilled."

Dramatic increase in celebrations

Parishes across the United States and around the world have been celebrating Mercy Sunday publicly since 1979 -- after the Holy See in 1978 lifted its ban on spreading the Divine Mercy message according to the revelations St. Faustina received.

But, over the past five years, the number of American parishes marking the day has increased dramatically. In 1995, the John Paul II Institute of Divine Mercy tracked 125 U.S. parishes celebrating Mercy Sunday. In 2000, that number had grown to 908.

Archbishop Justin Rigali of St. Louis, MO, was one of the first American bishops to encourage the priests of his archdiocese to celebrate Mercy Sunday. He says the message of mercy is not something new for the Church, but something that is being renewed.



Before Mercy Sunday was established worldwide, Archbishop Justin Rigali was one of the first American bishops to encourage priests in his archdiocese to celebrate it.

"The message is very much the message of the Sacred Scriptures," he explains. "And in a very special way, it is explained in the Gospel of the Second Sunday of Easter, which is Mercy Sunday. We hear the wonderful Gospel of the forgiveness of sins and the institution of the Sacrament of Penance, which is the greatest vehicle of mercy."

Pope John Paul II's 1980 encyclical on mercy, "Dives in Misericordia," brought a renewed interest in mercy. With this influence and the readings proclaimed on the Sunday after Easter, many bishops are coming to see the importance of Mercy Sunday, Archbishop Rigali says.

"In the whole Church, the encyclical has produced an amazing openness to the message of mercy," he says. "In it, the Holy Father shows us that mercy is an essential scriptural message."

Mercy Sunday's roots

Following Christ's revelations of His mercy to St. Faustina during the 1930s and then after her death in 1938, the Polish people developed a great devotion to Jesus, The Divine Mercy. It grew in popularity there and then spread around the world -- especially in the United States and the Philippines. In 1995, the Holy See granted the Polish bishops' conference permission to celebrate Mercy Sunday nationwide. Now, in 2001, it will be celebrated throughout the universal Church for the first time.

Yet, the popularity of Divine Mercy Sunday -- and the entire "Divine Mercy movement" -- has come mainly from the grass-roots level of the Church, says Kansas City Archbishop James Keleher, who will be the main celebrant on Mercy Sunday, April 22, at the National Shrine of The Divine Mercy.



"It's been the people, our parishioners, who have gone to the priests and asked them to celebrate Divine Mercy Sunday," Archbishop Keleher says, noting that the number of parishes celebrating Mercy Sunday in his archdiocese has grown tremendously.

"In his homily at St. Faustina's canonization, the Holy Father spoke about the rays of mercy radiating from the Divine Mercy image, saying mercy will be a new splendor, a new light, in the Church," Fr.

Michalenko points out. "The blood and water that poured from the Savior's side on the cross are represented as light in the image, and the pope said this is going to be passed on to the new millennium."

Demands of mercy

The graces received at Mercy Sunday must translate into action, says Archbishop Rigali. "Divine Mercy is very demanding," he explains. "For those of us who have received mercy from God, the forgiveness of our sins, we must go out and show mercy to others. We must forgive."

When Jesus appeared to St. Faustina and spoke about Mercy Sunday, He called the day "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" ("Diary of St. Maria Faustina," 699).

To properly observe Mercy Sunday, the faithful are asked to prepare by going to Confession, preferably during Lent before Mercy Sunday. Then, they are asked to receive Holy Communion on Mercy Sunday and to venerate the Divine Mercy Image. As the Lord went on to tell St. Faustina, "The soul that will go to Confession and receive Holy Communion will obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment" ("Diary," 699).

With such extraordinary graces available to the faithful, Archbishop Keleher says that we must be compelled to reach out to those in our society who are hurting the most -- the poor, the disenfranchised, the elderly, and the unborn.

"This past century was certainly the most horrific the world has ever seen," he says. "One could become pessimistic about the future -- especially with the increased number of abortions in the Western world -- if one didn't believe that no matter how bad things are, Jesus, The Divine Mercy, is ready to forgive and start something new."



Displaying his own Divine Mercy prayercard, Archbishop Keleher delivers a Mercy Sunday homily on the grounds of the National Shrine of The Divine Mercy (1997). He returns to Eden Hill for Mercy Sunday 2001.

Mercy in the Sacraments

One of the key elements of Mercy Sunday, as pointed out in the Gospel proclaimed on that day, is the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Jesus instituted that sacrament when He told the apostles, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (John 20:23).

"The devotional practices that Christ revealed to St. Faustina are wonderful expressions of faith," Archbishop Rigali says. "But the main expression of our response to God's mercy is to accept His mercy in the Sacrament of Penance. In this sense, I think many bishops are very much apostles of Divine Mercy."

The Sacrament of Reconciliation, then, prepares the faithful to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion on Mercy Sunday. In fact, as more and more parishes in the Archdiocese of Kansas City celebrate Mercy Sunday, Archbishop Keleher says he's noticing a growing trend toward perpetual Eucharistic Adoration. "Mercy Sunday has a Eucharistic element to it as well," he explains. "Every year, I have one or two more parishes that begin perpetual adoration."

As priests and the laity are renewed in their faith through the Sacraments and the graces poured out by the Lord on Mercy Sunday, the Church as a whole will come to deepen its desire to serve the Lord, rooted in the basic message of the gospel, Archbishop Rigali says.

"The message of mercy is in two parts: Jesus teaches us to ask for mercy, then once we receive it, to show mercy. There can be no half way," says Archbishop Rigali. "That is the prayer we pray in the 'Our Father': 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.' "

Heart of the Gospel

Although Mercy Sunday is now an official day of celebration of the universal Church, it may take years before it is fully understood and celebrated in every parish on earth, says Archbishop Keleher. But even though people may not know the name "Mercy Sunday," mercy is now and has always been celebrated on the Sunday after Easter, he says.

"I think of Divine Mercy as an ancient treasure St. Faustina has uncovered for us," he explains. "It was always there. The Church has always celebrated the Second Sunday of Easter where Christ shows His wounds, calls for faith, and speaks of the power of forgiveness."

Father Michalenko agrees. "The Octave Day of Easter (the Sunday after Easter) has always held a very special place in the heart of the Church," he explains. "That has been fogged over for the longest time. Saint Faustina speaks about the celebration of Mercy Sunday as being 'dormant.'

"But mercy is the heart of the Gospel," he continues. "And Mercy Sunday is a hopeful sign that God knows we need mercy and forgiveness. If any generation does, it is ours. That gives us hope because mercy was granted before anyone asked or realized it was needed."

Helper promotes Mercy Sunday in New Orleans



**Margaret
Bieser**

Margaret Bieser became committed to promoting Divine Mercy Sunday four years after seeing God work a miracle.

Now, the Marian Helper from New Orleans, LA, has seen the celebration of Mercy Sunday grow by leaps and bounds in her city. She and her prayer group organized one of the first Divine Mercy celebrations there in 1987. It was held in a private home with 22 people attending.

"The Lord had touched my life so deeply that I knew we had to honor His wishes for a feast to be celebrated," she explains.

Four years earlier, Margaret's father had had a miraculous healing after nearly dying of a heart attack. Although she admits her faith was rather weak at that time, she asked the Lord to spare her father's life after her cousin gave her a Divine Mercy prayercard. She prayed the Chaplet, and her father recovered.

On the way home from the hospital, Margaret thanked the Lord for her father's healing and committed herself to spreading the message of Divine

Mercy.

After giving out many Divine Mercy prayercards and booklets about the devotion, she knew that something was missing: Mercy Sunday.

"Following the first celebration in 1987, our prayer group agreed that we needed to have the next Mercy Sunday in a church," she says. "There were 150-200 people at that Mass." The next year, the church was filled to overflowing. Then, with a little more planning, New Orleans's largest church, St. Joseph's, was filled to capacity for the fourth Divine Mercy Sunday celebration.



Thanks in part to the dedication of Margaret Bieser, St. Joseph Church of New Orleans, LA, is filled to capacity annually for Mercy Sunday. (Clarion Herald photo taken by Frank J. Methea, April 14, 1996.)

"We had 144 roses given to us for that celebration," she says. "It was amazing how that happened. I just had the idea to stop at a supermarket and ask. They were just about to throw out all these roses. We could really see God working!"

According to the John Paul II Institute of Divine Mercy, which tracks Mercy Sunday celebrations around the world, about 10 New Orleans-area parishes celebrated Mercy Sunday last year.

"We continue to encourage priests and prayer groups in the archdiocese to celebrate Mercy Sunday," she says. "The seminarians of the archdiocese have been assisting us with our celebrations since 1989. And some are now priests in key positions, so we're really excited about the future of Mercy Sunday here."

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