

Our Lady Of Mercy



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on the basis of:

- John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*.

- Fr. Andrzej Krupa: *Rola Maryi jako Matki Miłosierdzia w planach Miłosierdzia Bożego* (The Role of Mary as Mother of Mercy in the Plans of Divine Mercy), in: *...Bo Jego miłosierdzie na wieki* (... for His mercy endures for ever), Poznań-Warszawa 1972, pp. 217-237.

- Fr. Andrzej L. Krupa, *Maryja Matką miłosierdzia*, w: *Ewangelia miłosierdzia* (Mary, Mother of Mercy, in the Gospel of Mercy), Pallottinum, Poznań-Warszawa 1970, pp. 113-173.

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Our Lady Of Mercy

Mary is the one who obtained mercy in a particular and exceptional way, as no other person has. At the same time, still in an exceptional way, she made possible with the sacrifice of her heart her own sharing in revealing God's mercy. Mary, then, is the one who has the deepest knowledge of the mystery of God's mercy. She knows its price, she knows how great it is. In this sense, we call her the Mother of mercy: our Lady of mercy, or Mother of divine mercy; in each one of these titles there is a deep theological meaning, for they express the special preparation of her soul, of her whole personality, so that she was able to perceive, through the complex events, first of Israel, then of every individual and of the whole of humanity, that mercy of which "from generation to generation" people become sharers according to the eternal design of the most Holy Trinity. (Dives in Misericordia, 9)

Title: Mother of Mercy

In the Bible

It must be admitted that Sacred Scripture contains no direct references to Mary as Mother of Mercy, Our Lady of Mercy, Mother of Divine Mercy, or the merciful Mother. There are, however, Biblical texts that perfectly describe these titles and the reality hidden behind them. A similar situation occurs with regard to Jesus as Incarnated Mercy. There is no such expression in the Bible; yet, there are plenty of passages, which clearly speak of the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity (John 1:14, Philippians 2:6n) and emphasize His mercy (healings, e.g. Mt 9:27n, resurrections, e.g. a boy of Nain, Luke 7:13n, or the Redemption of man). Therefore, calling Jesus the Incarnate Mercy is fully justified, since this term, used by Saint Faustina, contains the essence of the life and mission of Jesus. This involved the adoption of the human body, so that He could reveal to the world the life, word and deeds of the Father, Who is rich in mercy. Jesus is indeed "mercy itself". He referred to himself directly in this way in the visions of Saint Faustina. He repeatedly said **"I am Love and Mercy itself"** (*Diary 1074, 1273, 1486, 1739, 1775, 1780*) and thus Sister Faustina spoke about him in this way (*Diary 383, 950, 1264, 1552, 1574, 1751*).

The same sort of situation occurs in the case of the titles of Mary as Mother of Mercy, Our Lady of Mercy or Mother of Divine Mercy, etc. Each of these titles reveals a specific reality associated with the life of Mary and her unusual mission as the Jesus' Mother, who actively participates in the Redemption. In considering the mystery of mercy in relation to her, one has to take into account two fundamental dimensions. Firstly, Mary as Mother of Mercy Incarnate, endowed by God with the fullness of grace (Immaculate), who gave birth to the Son of God in human flesh (Bethlehem), and who participated in the manifestation of God's mercy to the world until the fiat of Golgotha. Secondly, Mary as the merciful Mother of mankind, who performed mercy through acts of which the first and greatest is giving the Son of God to the world (the visit to Elizabeth), through words (the Magnificat), and through prayer (the wedding in Cana, or the prayer with the apostles in the Cenacle).

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, in the description of the genealogy of Jesus, the evangelist points out that Mary is the Mother of Jesus, who is called the Messiah (Mt 1:16).

Matthew points out this fact nearly ten times (especially in Mt 2 and 12:46-47). The same statement can be found in other gospels (e.g. Mark 3:32, Luke 1:43, 2:51; John 2:1-12; 6:42), as well as in Acts 1:14. It is thus clear that Mary is the Mother of Jesus.

One can confidently say that Mary is the Mother of God. John the Evangelist directly calls Jesus God: "The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him" (John 1:18) and directly describes Mary as the Mother of Jesus (e.g. John 2:1). Thus, the logical conclusion which arises from the two above conditions is that Mary is the Mother of the Son of God.

What, however, is the basis of calling Mary the Mother of Mercy? Are there biblical grounds for such a title of Mary, apart from the existential experience of believers?

Sacred Scripture clearly shows the mercy of Jesus (e.g. Luke 7:11-17, 18, 35-43) and calls him 'mercy' in 2 Corinthians 1:3. This passage will now be considered, for its understanding is crucial to the title of Mary as the Mother of Mercy: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merciful Father and the God who gives every possible encouragement" (2 Co 1:3) whereas the Polish translation states "the Father of mercy".

Taking into account the original text (written in the Greek dialect *Koine*) of the passage, together with its grammar record, Semitic style and analysis of the context in which these words were written, one can easily conclude that the words 'encouragement' and 'mercy' refer to Jesus Christ. Consequently, if Mary is the Mother of Jesus and Jesus is Mercy, then Mary is the Mother of Mercy, mercy in the deepest understanding of the word, namely mercy which revealed most of its light in the Redemption of mankind from the bondage of sin and death. The truth of God's mercy was most fully revealed in Jesus and through Jesus. **He is, as St. Faustina says, Mercy Incarnate, and his mother is consequently Mother of Mercy.**

The title of Mary as Mother of Mercy cannot be restricted to a purely literal one, or only to the biological, natural dimension. Mary, because she gave birth to Jesus – Mercy, is His Mother for natural reasons, or Mother of Mercy. But the title has a wider meaning. Calling Mary Mother of Mercy points to the reality of her experiencing the mystery of mercy associated with her Son. As the mother of Jesus, Mary becomes the most credible witness to the Son's revelation of the mystery of God's mercy. One may say that Mary is the first Missionary of Mercy, Mother of all who proclaim her Son – Mercy (cf. John 19:26). It manifests in the Marian hymn of praise in honor of Divine Mercy (cf. Magnificat and particularly Luke 1:50-54) in connection with the conception in her of the promised Messiah – Jesus. The name means 'Yahweh saves' and the salvation is the revelation and proof of God's merciful love. Thus Mary can be said to be Mother of Mercy because she lives the mystery of God who is Mercy. She is thinking about Him, pondering His words and deeds in her heart (Luke 2:19). She not only carries Mercy Incarnate when going to her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:42n), but also gives it to the whole world.

Mary reaches the peak of this beauty and at the same time the difficulty of her maternity of mercy when she is standing at the Cross. She is Mother of Mercy not only because of blood ties, but also through empathy with her Son, who in his passion fully reveals the power of God's merciful love. Mary precedes all who have ever since been involved in this work of revelation and realization of God's mercy in the world. In some way Mary spiritually shares the fate of the Son and also becomes the most perfect disciple of Jesus in His "school of mercy."

Mary becomes the mother of every man through the attitude of her heart's total adherence to Mercy, which manifested with particular force on the Cross (John 19:27).

Therefore this individual act of the adoption of humanity by Mary does not only result from the fact that, since Mary is the Mother of Jesus, and the Son is our brother (because He restored us to being God's children), then Mary (logically speaking) is also our Mother. Well, her motherhood for us also lies in describing Mary as Mother of Mercy. Indeed, by the sacrifice of Her heart, Mary in the most complete way united Her suffering with the Passion of Christ and by an act of will (by not running away from the Cross) decided with the Son to implore the Father's forgiveness for the world. Consequently, she shows solidarity with her Son – Mercy, and at the same time she is revealed before us as merciful Mother, ready to forgive the man who kills her most beloved Son – her only Child.

Calling Mary the merciful Mother has its deep biblical basis also in the Hail Mary, recorded in Luke 1:28: "He [the angel] went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, you who enjoy God's favor! The Lord is with you'." The key words here are "who enjoy God's favor", or in the original language *kecharitomene*. It is worth noticing that the Archangel Gabriel does not call the Virgin of Nazareth by name, but says "who enjoy God's favor" thus as though giving her a new name. This occurs in the context of the imminent Incarnation of God. The fiat of Mary determined Her motherhood full of mercy. Apart from the detailed exegetic analysis of the term, it is important to note that the concept of *kecharitomene* includes a reference to the word **charis**, commonly translated as 'grace'. However, contemporary man tends to react to the word 'grace' rather in a negative way. Grace includes a risk of humiliation and the need to recognize one's own powerlessness in a certain field of life or to confess one's guilt and weakness. Nevertheless, the Greek word *charis* is far from such an understanding of the word 'grace'. It means God's desire to endow us with affection, love, and His willingness to thank man for his kindness shown to neighbors! This can indicate that God took a particular interest in someone and surrounded them with His care (Luke 2:40), took a liking to someone and bestowed a special blessing, or benevolence; freed from evil and from sin (John 1:17).

The person who has been endowed with *charis*, has a special ability to trust God completely and witness to His goodness (Acts 4:33). All the outpouring of God's mercy somehow concentrated in Mary. As the Church teaches us, Mary was protected from sin, the fullness of grace concentrated in Her, in other words the merciful love of God. Mary by the gift of life of the mercy of God, by carrying in Herself all His graces, was especially gifted to share the goodness and love. She expresses it at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12), when she intercedes for a young couple and protects them from shame, or in the Upper Room, because with the apostles she asks for the gift of the Holy Spirit for the early Church. Owing to her trust and intercession, Jesus can deal with any problems, the miracle of transformation of water into wine takes place, and the Holy Spirit descends upon the Apostles. Mary is thus a loving Mother primarily by the will of God. Merciful means called to advocacy for mankind. Merciful also means full of trust in God.



In Theology

Within the Church, Our Lady of Mercy has been venerated under this title for a long time; however, theological literature on this subject is scarce. Our Lady of Mercy is first and foremost the One who gave the Son of God, Mercy Incarnate, to the world and continuously does so, leading all believers to Him. **Today's most complete justification for this title of Mary is given by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, where he writes that Mary is first of all the One who obtained God's mercy in an exceptional way, when she was preserved from original sin and endowed with the fullness of grace, to become the Mother of the Son of God. She consented at the time of the Annunciation, and in Bethlehem she gave birth to the Son of God in human flesh and, throughout her life, participated in His revelation of the mystery of God's mercy until the sacrifice, which she made at the foot of the cross. "Mary, then, is the one who has the deepest knowledge of the mystery of God's mercy. She knows its price, she knows how great it is" (DM 9).**

She also proclaims God's merciful love from generation to generation since the day when she sang the Magnificat at the threshold of her cousin Elizabeth. Mary leads people to the sources of the Savior's mercy. The merciful love of God in the history of the Church and the world continues to manifest itself in Her and through Her. **John Paul II writes that "this revelation is especially fruitful because in the Mother of God it is based upon the unique tact of her maternal heart, on her particular sensitivity, on her particular fitness to reach all those who most easily accept the merciful love of a mother" (DM 9).**

Mary is also Mother of Mercy because by her intercession God's mercy comes into the world in the form of all graces. Her motherhood towards all people lasts without interruption. The Second Vatican Council emphasizes that "being assumed into heaven she has not laid aside this office of salvation but by her manifold intercession she continues to obtain for us the graces of eternal salvation. By her maternal charity, she takes care of the brethren of her Son who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they are led into their blessed home." (LG 62).

Mary is called the Mother of Mercy, Our Lady of Mercy, or Mother of Divine Mercy, and in each of these titles, as Pope John Paul II writes, there is a deep theological meaning. These titles in fact "speak of her principally, however, as the Mother of the Crucified and Risen One; as the One who, having obtained mercy in an exceptional way, in an equally exceptional way "merits" that mercy throughout her earthly life and, particularly, at the foot of the cross of her Son" (DM 9). She proclaims and implores it for the whole world.



The title 'Mother of Mercy' first appeared in the devotion to Mary, in the spirituality of the Church, and only afterwards in theology. The prayer "We fly to your patronage", known since the fourth century, in the original version began with the words "Beneath thy mercy we take refuge, O Mother of God". The anthem "Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy" has also enjoyed great popularity in the history of the church. The theology of Mary, the Mother of Mercy, has appeared not only in prayers but also in sermons. In the eleventh century St. Fulbert believed that Mary is the Mother of Mercy because she brought forth Christ, "the very Source of mercy, who washes away all faults of our lives." However, she exercises her mercy towards people by an extremely powerful intercession. St. Fulbert is the author of the phrase used up to this day, "*Mater Misericordiae et pietatis*", Mother of Mercy and Compassion, which according to St. Fulbert, refers to the interior predispositions of the Mother of God (*Mater Misericordia*) as well as the acts she performs; in the language of the time *pietas* meant 'deeds of mercy'.

Devotion to the mercy of Mary in its devotional and theological aspects was developed in the teaching of St. Anselm of Canterbury (+1109). He wrote no strictly theological treaty on mercy of Our Lady, but at that time prayers and sermons served as theological works, because they presented the mysteries of the faith as if directly, namely at the level of the practice of the faith. St. Anselm wrote three prayers that call on the mercy of Our Lady, these three corresponding to different stages of a human being striving after perfection. The content of these prayers indicates that the source of the mercy of Mary is Christ Himself. He "for mercy's sake became the Son of a Woman; she for mercy's sake became the Mother of God." Both of them exist "for the salvation of sinners." In the third prayer St. Anselm turns to Mary as a son's to his Mother and to Jesus as a brother to his Brother, Jesus. St. Anselm says that the Mother of God is our Mother also. He closely connects Mary with Christ, Her mercy with the mercy of Her Son, and Her part in our salvation and sanctification as completely subordinate to Jesus.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (+1153) contributed to the widespread consolidation in the Church of the devotion to Mary as the Mother of Mercy. He rested his teaching of Mary's mediation on the notion of mercy. St. Bernard preached that the Mother can plead everything of the Son and that Her heart is extremely sensitive to people's needs. St. Bernard wrote that "What we thus need is a mediator with the Mediator and no one is more useful to us than Mary."

In the history of devotion to the mercy of Mary in prayers, songs and sermons, there are threads which oppose the mercy of Our Lady to the righteousness of Christ and God the Father, and in the extreme form, which concede mercy only to Mary. Anselm of Lucca claimed that after the Ascension, Christ passed the whole heritage of mercy to his Mother and that He left to Himself justice. This view, through the writings attributed to St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure, became common among theologians of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and continued in Mariology for a long time. Sometimes such views went so far as to deny Christ all mercy, which is totally contrary to the Scriptures because He came into the world to save what was lost.

The naming of Mary as the Mother of Mercy appeared quite late in the teaching of popes, only in the sixteenth century, initially in the context of titles of related or similar meaning.

Pius VIII wrote that “She is the Mother, the Mother of pity and grace, the Mother of mercy, to whom we were entrusted by Christ dying on the cross, so that as He intercedes for us before the Father, so she may intercede for us with her Son.” His successors wrote about the Mother of Mercy in a similar way. It was not until Pope Leo XIII, who developed the teaching on the spiritual motherhood of Mary that the situation changed. He considered her mercy as one of the manifestations of her motherhood to people. Pope Pius XII also associated Mary’s mercy with her motherhood of God and her participation in God’s mercy.

Chapter 9 of John Paul II’s encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, entirely devoted to the Mother of Mercy, is particularly remarkable. Although this chapter is quite short, it is extremely rich in theological topics which justify giving this name to Our Lady. For John Paul II states that on the one hand she obtained the mercy of God in a complete, particular and exceptional way, which she expresses in Her Magnificat, but she also “made possible with the sacrifice of her heart her own sharing in revealing God’s mercy. This sacrifice is intimately linked with the cross of her Son, at the foot of which she was to stand on Calvary” (DM 9). Mary, “through her hidden and at the same time incomparable sharing in the messianic mission of her Son, was called in a special way to bring close to people that love which He had come to reveal” (DM 9). She, being the mother of all people, also mediates with God to implore mercy for the world.

Therefore in *Dives in Misericordia* John Paul II emphasizes the mercy of Mary implicit in the Redemption accomplished by Jesus, her Son. However, in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (written thirteen years later), the pope gives new threads for the title of Our Lady of Mercy: God’s being in our midst and the gift of the Holy Spirit obtained for us. John Paul II writes that Mary is the Mother of Mercy because she gave Jesus—the Incarnate revelation of God’s mercy (VS 118) to the world. This mercy does not only consist in the liberation of man from sin, but also in God’s presence among us. Finally, “this mercy reaches its fullness in the gift of the Spirit” who makes all things new: renews the face of the earth, which in practice means that the Holy Spirit enables man to do good and to do the will of God, and above all gives man the power to become, like Mary, “immaculate,” that is to say, the power to sin no more.



Veneration In the Church

Devotion to Our Lady dates back to the second century after Christ, and it developed widely during the Middle Ages. Mary was venerated as the Mother of God, Queen and Mother of countries, nations, cities, religious orders, religious and secular organizations, and also as the Mother of every human being. The devotion to the mercy of Mary first developed in the East, and was then adopted by the Church in the West, which gradually developed the devotion, deepened it and gave it its own form visible in the areas of devotion and iconography. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, the idea of *Mater Misericordiae* began to dawn. In our own time, however, we have seen not only an increase in devotion to the Divine Mercy, but also an increase in devotion to Our Lady of Mercy and a deepening of theological reflection associated with this title of Mary. These can be seen most clearly in John Paul II's encyclical "*Dives in Misericordiae*" and are also evident in MA theses on this subject, written at university theology faculties.

The veneration of Mary in the mystery of mercy was first revealed in the faith of the people, and then in specific practices approved by the Church. The oldest prayer to the Mercy of Our Lady began with the words: ***Beneath thy mercy, we take refuge, O Virgin Theotokos*** ... This prayer dates back probably to the early fourth century, as seems to be indicated by the use of the term *Theotokos* (*Mother of God*). This prayer first served for the private use of the faithful, and was then entered into the Church's liturgical books. In the West it was known before the ninth century, in versions with no direct appeal to the mercy of Mary but with a reference to surrendering oneself to her care, as to a powerful Lady. *We fly to your Patronage Oh Heavenly Mother of God* – so to this day reads the first sentence of this prayer in the Western Church.



During that period (ninth century) the notion of the mercy of Our Lady appeared also in the liturgy: in Marian sermons and in votive Masses in honor of Mary, written for private use by **Alcuin** (+804) – the greatest theologian of that time. It is likely he is also the author of the famous prayer "Ad sanctam Mariam" which shows on the one hand the unique purity and dignity of Mary, emphasizing the greatness of Mary's mercy, and on the other hand the unworthiness and abomination of sinful man. For some time this theme became a leading thought in all the prayers that refer to the mercy of the Mother of God.

The prayer "**Salve Regina**" was of particular importance for the development of the devotion to the Virgin of Mercy. This prayer was probably written in the tenth century and quickly spread throughout the whole Church. In it praying people turn to Mary as Queen and Mother of Mercy, for she is the Mother of the Son of God.

In the original version the prayer began with the words: *Salve, Regina misericordiae*; the word *Mater* was added at a later time. In the next sentence, Mary is called: *our life, our sweetness and our hope*. Mary is called *our life* because she begot Christ, from whom everyone receives God's life. She is called *our sweetness* because her maternal heart lives only by the love of Christ and shows this love to anyone without exception. Finally, Mary is called *our hope* because as the Queen and Mother of Mercy, she is our reliable advocate with God. It is a Christocentric prayer, for Mary owes her mercy role to Christ and shows her mercy through her maternal intercession. The words of the prayer emphasize that Christ is the ultimate goal of her mercy, because the prayer ends with the request: *and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus*.

In the West the Benedictine Abbey of Cluny (founded in 910) worshiped Mary under the title Mother of Mercy in a special way. Its Abbot St. Odon (+942) was an avid proponent of the title. However, **St. Fulbert** is considered to be the first theologian of Mary's mercy in the West. Although he did not write any theological treatise, he presented the mercy of Our Lady in his sermons and prayers. St. Fulbert preached that Christ is the source of all mercy. However, Mary can be called the Mother of Mercy, since by giving birth to Christ, at the same time she gave birth to *the source of mercy* for us. Her mercy is manifested in interceding with God for forgiveness of sins and all the graces. Her powerful intercession with her Son means that *the righteous can more quickly obtain from him whatever they ask Him through His Mother; sinners also obtain mercy more often*. St. Fulbert is the author of the term *Mater Misericordiae et pietatis* (Mother of Mercy and Compassion), which he used in his prayers to the Virgin Mary. The term was adopted in the Church and is still used today. The term *Mater Misericordiae* can mean not only the Mother of the Son of God, Who is the source of all mercy for us, but also the Mother of God who has a motherly heart for people, which is willing to show mercy. However, the term *Mater pietatis* primarily refers to acts of mercy shown to us by Mary as Mother.

A prayer to Mary's mercy, written by **Maurillus** (+1057), a Benedictine who later became the Bishop of Rouen, became very popular in the eleventh century, especially in France and England. The prayer perfectly reflects the Marian spirituality of the period, which stressed the great disproportion between, on the one hand, Mary – holy and unblemished Mother, the only one pleasing to God – and, on the other hand, man who had a sense of unworthiness due to his weakness, misery, the abomination of sin, a feeling of being held in contempt by God. This unusual sense of one's own misery, moral unworthiness, in contrast to the exceptional purity and holiness of Mary gave rise to great faith in her mercy, even though the one who asked did not speak to her as a son to his mother, but as a servant to the Mother of God, Lady and Queen. In the prayer, people cried out: *To whom are we to sigh, poor and abandoned as we are, lamenting all the evil of our misery and poverty, if not to you the true and reliable Mother of Mercy? Holy Mother, Immaculate Mother, most pure Mother of Mercy, Mother of compassion and understanding, open your bosom of mercy and receive those who are dead in sin!*

A slightly different approach to the mercy of Mary can be found in the prayers of **Anselm of Lucca**, contemporary to Maurillus, who intended the prayer to Our Lady for the saintly person, and not for the wretched sinner, because he wrote these prayers at the request of Princess Matilda of Tuscany, whom Pope Gregory VII commended to him for spiritual guidance. In these prayers Mary owes her function, Mother of mercy, to Christ, because He after His Ascension, handed down to her *the whole legacy of mercy*. For this purpose he also chose her as His mother, so that through her sinners could obtain forgiveness of sins from God.

Mary's mercy in the texts of these prayers is so powerful that it even appeared to be set in opposition to God's justice: that is to the stern but righteous Son and to the anger of God the Father. This idea of opposing the mercy of Mary to the justice of God remained for many centuries (it can be found even today) and in its extreme form it denied mercy even to Christ, and granted it only to His mother. Elements of the spiritual motherhood of Mary can be found in the texts of Anselm of Lucca's prayers, as she through the Eucharist shapes Christ in the souls of men. In the context of the Eucharist, her divine motherhood begins to become spiritual motherhood to people, yet Mary is still referred to as the Mother of God, as our Lady and Queen, and not as the Mother of men.

Devotion to the mercy of Mary in its theological and devotional dimensions reached its peak in the teaching of **Saint Anselm of Canterbury**, where he included it in three prayers written at the request of a brother monk. These prayers, intended for reading and meditation rather than recitation, were written from the viewpoint of a man striving for perfection, and who finds himself in different states of mind. The first prayer was intended for a man in a state of *indolence of mind*, the second – for a man who is *seized with anxiety*, and the third – to *implore the love of Mary and Christ*. The first prayer shows a man who because of his sins does not dare to appear before God, and therefore asks mediation of Mary, who has an unusual sanctity, and at the same time has *great power and mercy*. The text is to awaken in the praying person the feeling of admiration for the Mother of God, trust in her mercy, and faith in the effectiveness of her intercession, and then to lead the praying person to believe that there is no other salvation for him, other than by completely surrendering himself to her care. For her intercession can obtain forgiveness even for the greatest sins. The second prayer of St. Anselm is meant for the man who has broken with sin, but feels weak, does not trust himself and therefore seeks help from Mary. She is the *mighty and merciful Lady*, as Christ is the source of her mercy. Although both of them are merciful, they differ in their way of showing mercy. Christ shows mercy of His own accord, but Mary on the other hand through the intercession to her Son. Together they carry out the joint work of mercy to the people. St. Anselm never opposes the mercy of Mary to the righteousness of Christ. We can read in the text of the second prayer of St. Anselm: *O God, who for mercy's sake became the Son of Woman; O Woman, who for mercy's sake became the Mother of God; through your forgiveness, through your intercession, have mercy on the poorest of the poor! Or else show me to whose greater mercy I might more safely draw near? Show me in whose greater power I might more confidently trust ...*

In the third prayer, St. Anselm presents Mary as the Mother of mercy, who, not only as the Mother of God and the Queen, but also as the Mother of people provides them with help and mercy. As a mother she loves her children and wishes that they should love her too. This was the first prayer to address Mary as *our Mother*, which led to a significant breakthrough in Marian devotion in the consciousness of the Medieval man. While still nurturing a great reverence for Mary as Mother of God, Queen and mighty Lady, at the same time people began to refer to her as their Mother. This idea resulted in the development of Mary's spiritual motherhood.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (+1153) contributed to the universal spread and final consolidation in the Church of devotion to the mercy of Mary. He enjoyed great authority and was marked by great zeal for the glory of the Mother of God, reverence for whom he preached not only among the clergy, but primarily to the faithful in general, which meant he had a huge impact on the development of devotion to Our Lady in the West.

In the texts of prayers and sermons he used language, which was accessible to all, so the truths preached by him were quickly adopted and popularized. St. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote in one of the prayers: *"We praise your virginity and honor your humility; but it is your mercy that draws us closer to you, poor sinners that we are, and we embrace it with greater love. (...) Your most powerful and most merciful love is full of compassion for us and gains for us the help we need. Let my thirsty soul run to this source; let our poverty run to this excess of mercy with all haste ... May your mercy reveal to the world the grace you found with God, May your holy prayers implore forgiveness for the guilty, healing for the sick, strength for the fainthearted and freedom for those who fall."*

St. Bernard pointed out for the first time that Mary shows mercy not only when people ask her for it, but always, since mediation in entreating favors belongs to the nature of her maternal mercy. St. Bernard wrote: *"Why would she not grant gifts, since she does not lack the power or the will? She is the Queen of Heaven and Queen fully merciful. Above all she is the Mother of the only Son of God."* While developing the doctrine of Mary's mediation, St. Bernard wrote that Christ alone could suffice as an intermediary with God, but people worship the divine majesty in Him, see a Judge in Him and feel shyness, and therefore *"Mary should properly be joined to Him, because she alone, blessed among women, is not found idle, and she has her place in this reconciliation. There is thus need of a mediator with this Mediator and none serves us better than Mary ... What indeed could human weakness fear when approaching Mary? She poses no danger, no dread: she is sweet... full of grace and mercy... Be grateful to Him Who gave you such a Mediatrix, from whom there is nothing to fear."*

The teaching of St. Bernard consolidated for the next centuries the devotion to Our Lady of Mercy. In subsequent generations, although a new prayer, sermons and songs were written in praise of the mercy of Mary, they did not bring anything new to the doctrine of the mercy of Mary. The devotion to the mercy of Mary throughout the centuries was a private form of devotion in the West, because there was no liturgical devotion to Our Lady of Mercy in the Church. Also in the teaching of popes the title of Mother of Mercy appears only in the sixteenth century with Gregory XIII, then with his successors, but initially in the collection of titles with similar content. It was only Pope **Leo XIII** who undertook the topic of Mary's mediation and her motherhood of Christ and her spiritual motherhood towards people, and who treated her charity as a basis for mediation with God and one of the manifestations of her spiritual motherhood towards people. Pope Leo XIII wrote that *"Thus do those whose actions have disturbed their consciences need an intercessor mighty in favor with God, merciful enough not to reject the cause of the desperate, merciful enough to lift up again towards hope in the divine mercy the afflicted and the broken down."* (Octobri Mense 4).

Pope **Pius XII** emphasized that the mercy of Mary is a sign of her motherly love for people. This love is rooted in Christ Himself. The Pope not only calls Mary the Mother of mercy, but also gives her the title "Mother of God's love", not only because she gave birth to Christ (God's love for us), but also because she has this love in herself and she has the ability to awaken it in human hearts. Pope Pius XII turned to Mary in the prayer: *"Mother of Divine Love, for us who are thy sons keep guard over the fire of God's love. Kindle it in ardent hearts. Revive it in lukewarm hearts. Light it in the indifferent hearts of those by whom it has been let die. Restore to the life of this Love those poor souls who have lost it through sin. To all those who beg you, O Virgin of Divine Love, grant your generous and consoling motherly blessing!"*

Pope Pius XII, while juxtaposing the titles of God, who is the Father of mercy and of Mary, Mother of Mercy, indicates that the devotion of God the Father *rich in mercy* can be seen as the source of devotion to the mercy of Mary. It should be emphasized that other forms of worship of the Mother of God have developed from the devotion to the mercy of Mary, still they all have their source in her motherly mercy.

In Poland, the devotion to Our Lady of Mercy has been connected for nearly 400 years with the miraculous painting of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn (Matka Boska Ostrobramska), which was solemnly crowned in 1927. Copies of the painting decorate not only the churches dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy of the Gate of Dawn, but also other churches, chapels, monasteries and the homes of believers. Pope Pius X granted permission for the votive Mass in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy. On November 16th in Lithuania and in the Archdiocese of Białystok in Poland the liturgical solemnity is celebrated in honor of Mother of Mercy of the Gate of Dawn, and the feast is celebrated in the Diocese of Łomża, Warmia and Drohiczyn. Before the ceremony at the Gate of Dawn, a special novena is held in some churches and communities.

The devotion to Our Lady of Mercy is still alive in the Church, and the dynamics of its development is undoubtedly affected by the developing devotion of Divine Mercy in the forms handed down by St. Faustina, who belonged to the Congregation of Our Lady of Mercy. The painting of Merciful Jesus, executed according to St. Faustina's vision, was first exhibited for public veneration in the Shrine of Our Lady of Mercy of the Gate of Dawn. These are not coincidences, but the deep mysterious working of God, leading the understanding of the mystery of His mercy revealed in Christ and through Christ and in His Mother, and by her maternal mercy.

The fact is, one reason that we are right to call Mary our "Mother of Mercy" is that during her sojourn on earth, she performed a tremendous work of mercy for us all: *She showed us the way to be true disciples of Jesus Christ.*

As St. Faustina wrote, "Mary is my Instructress, who is ever teaching me how to live for God. My spirit brightens up in Your gentleness and Your humility, O Mary" (Diary, 620).

On the one hand, Mary taught St. Faustina how to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ by her words: her exhortations to practice the virtues. **For example, in Diary entry 1711 St. Faustina reports:** When I was left alone with the Blessed Virgin she instructed me in the interior life. She said *"The soul's true greatness lies in loving God and in humbling oneself in His presence, completely forgetting oneself and believing oneself to be nothing; because the Lord is great, but He is well-pleased only with the humble; he always opposes the proud."*

In Diary entry 1415, Mary gave to Faustina a message that focused on the importance of three virtues above all. Mary said to her: I desire, my dearly beloved daughter, that you practice the three virtues that are dearest to Me — and most pleasing to God. The first is humility, humility, and once again humility; the second virtue, purity; the third virtue, love of God. As my daughter, you must especially radiate with these virtues.

Here Mary teaches us that humility is the only good soil from which any spiritual growth can arise. Unless the soil of humility is in us first, nothing good in us can grow and bear fruit. In other words, unless we can first humbly admit our *need* for our heavenly Father — our need for His forgiveness for our past, His strength within us for the present, and His guiding light for our future — unless we can admit our need for Him in these ways, our hearts cannot be open to *receive* all that the Lord wants to give to us. In other words, how can God fill us with His grace if we are already full of ourselves? There is just no room in our hearts for his grace to be poured in!

Saint Maria Faustina learned this lesson well. Just remember how many times in her *Diary* she refers to herself simply as "misery," almost as if that were her proper name. Even in the very last entry of **her Diary, St. Faustina wrote:** Although I am such misery, I do not fear You, because I know Your mercy well. Nothing will frighten me away from You, O God, because everything is so much less than what I know [Your mercy to be] ...(1803):

On the other hand, while Mary was a good "Instructress" for St. Faustina in *words*, we must not think that this was the *only* way that she taught St. Faustina how to be a true disciple of Christ. Even more important for St. Faustina, and for us, is that Mary taught us true discipleship by her own *example*, shining out to us from the pages from the gospels.

Saint Maria Faustina did not write out for us in any detail her own meditations on Mary's evangelical virtues. But we know that Mary's example was very important to her in her struggle to become a true disciple of Christ. She wrote in *Diary* entry 843: **"The more I imitate the Mother of God, the more deeply I get to know God."**

Again, **listen to what St. Faustina wrote in her beautiful prayer in Diary entry 1232:**
O sweet Mother of God,
I model my life on You;
You are for me the bright dawn:
In you I lose myself enraptured.

O Mother, Immaculate Virgin,
In You the divine ray is reflected,
Midst storms, 'tis You who teach me to love the Lord,
O my shield and defense from the foe.

Mary is "Mother of Mercy" because from heaven she continues to come to our aid. By her tender intercession for us, she looks after our needs and nurtures the Christ-life within us, from now until the hour of death.

Mary's continuing role as our Mother of Mercy was actually foreshadowed at the time of the Annunciation. Remember how the angel Gabriel promised that Mary's Son would reign forever as the Messiah? The angel said:

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Lk 1:32-33)

Now, let us move off of the theological level, and bring this whole discussion "down to earth."

What do we think of when we think of a "mother?" A mother is someone who cares for us tenderly, someone we can run to whenever we are hurt or sad, someone in whom we can always find understanding and compassion. A mother is always ready to comfort us, to care for our needs, to help us go on, and even to help us grow up.

When speaking to St. Faustina on suffering and humility, Our Lady told her **"Know my daughter, that although I was raised to the dignity of the Mother of God, seven swords of pain pierced my heart"** (entry 786). On another occasion, Our Lady told her, **"I know how much you suffer, but do not be afraid. I share with you your suffering, and I shall always do so (entry 25).** Thus, Mary, "full of grace," is the Mother who understands our joys, our sorrows, and our true needs better than anyone.

Saint Maria Faustina knew all this very well. That is why she placed her complete trust in Mary right from the beginning: a childlike trust that knew no bounds. In the early pages of her *Diary*, for example, she consecrated her whole being to Mary, entrusting her life to Mary with these words (entry 79): **O Mary, my Mother and my Lady, I offer You my soul, my body, my life and my death, And all that will follow it. I place everything in Your hands.**

Later, when **St. Faustina went to Czestochowa** to pray there before the great miraculous icon of Our Lady, she wrote (entry 260): The Mother of God told me many things. I entrusted my perpetual vows to her. I felt that I was her child and she was my Mother. She did not refuse any of my requests.

Toward the end of Faustina's life, Mary encouraged her again to place complete childlike trust in her by saying to her (entry 1414): **"My daughter, at God's command I am to be in a special and exclusive way your Mother; but I desire that you too, in a special way be My child."**

Saint Faustina's childlike trust in Mary was especially evident in the times of great suffering. It was then, above all, that she placed herself in the arms of her Mother Mary, and entrusted herself completely to Mary's tender care and heavenly intercession.

In *Diary* entry 315, for example, Faustina prayed: Mother of God, Your soul was plunged into a sea of bitterness; look upon Your child and teach her to suffer and to love while suffering. Fortify my soul that pain may not break it. Mother of grace, teach me to live by [the power of] God.

As her physical and spiritual **sufferings increased St. Faustina again entrusted herself to the care of the Mother of God**, and fortified herself by meditating on Mary's own patience and courage (entry 915).

O Mary, today a terrible sword has pierced Your holy soul. Except for God, no one knows of Your suffering. Your soul does not break; it is brave because it is with Jesus. Sweet mother, unite my soul to Jesus, because it is only then that I will be able to endure all trials and tribulations, and only in union with Jesus will my little sacrifice be pleasing to God. Sweetest Mother, continue to teach me about the interior life. May the sword of suffering never break me. O pure Virgin, pour courage into my heart and guide it.

Whether in times of sorrow or of joy, the Blessed Virgin Mary was the one St. Faustina always turned to, again and again, to help her live in close union with Jesus Christ. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Mother of God often appeared to St. Faustina or spoke to her right before Holy Communion, as if Mary's special office was to prepare Faustina for receiving Jesus in the Blessed **Sacrament (e.g., entries 449, 597, 608, 846, 1414). As she wrote in entry 840: I am spending this time with the Mother of God, and preparing myself for the solemn coming of the Lord Jesus. The Mother of God is instructing me in the interior life of the soul with Jesus; especially in Holy Communion.**

To conclude, let us review the four ways in which Mary is rightly called our "Mother of Mercy."

First of all, we said that Mary is Mother of Mercy because, *through her Immaculate Conception, God made her the created masterpiece of His Mercy in the world.*

Second, we can call her Mother of Mercy because *she was the one chosen by God to be the Mother of our merciful Savior, Mercy Incarnate; she literally brought Divine Mercy Himself to birth in our world.*

Third, we can call her Mother of Mercy because *she showed us the way to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. Through living her 10 "evangelical virtues," she set the shining example for us of true Christian discipleship, and this was a great work of mercy she did for us all.*

Finally, we said that Mary is our Mother of Mercy because, *from heaven, she continues to come to our aid with her intercessory prayers, nurturing and caring for all of our needs, both of body and of soul, from now until the hour of our death.*

In the end, the merciful motherhood of Mary is one of those topics for meditation that can never be exhausted. Until we join her one day in heaven, we shall never know all the ways in which Mary has been, and always will be, our Mother of Mercy!

One of the symbol of Mary is star with 10 rays. Let us look very briefly at each of the 10 rays of this Morning Star, and see how Mary's example of virtue lights the way for us.

The first is *purity*: in other words, the ordering of our passions and bodily appetites, so that they always move us toward the true following of Jesus Christ, in faith and love, and never away from Him. We see this clearly in Mary, who was so "full of grace," according to St. Luke, that she became for us the first great example both of Christian Motherhood, and of Consecrated Virginity in the service of God.

Mary's second gospel virtue is *prudence*: prudence in the capacity to consider one's options reasonably, and to choose the right course of action in the light of Faith. Remember how Mary carefully considered the angel Gabriel's words to her at the Annunciation. First she was "troubled" at his words, Scripture says, "and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be" (Lk 1:29). Then she asked for more information (Lk 1:34): "How can this be, since I have no husband." Then, when the angel explained to her the Lord's wondrous plan, Mary submitted to it with all prudence, for the expressed will of the Almighty, All-Wise and All-Merciful God was reason enough for her! "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord," she said, "be it unto me according to Thy word."

Mary's third gospel virtue is *humility*: the knowledge and acceptance of one's dependence upon God for everything good, from the gift of life itself, to every natural and supernatural blessing. Mary is the shining example of gospel humility, for even when she was told that she was chosen to be the very Mother of the Messiah, the Mother of the King of Israel, the Son of God, yet she referred to herself as the mere "handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38), and she gave all the credit to God for the privileges she received, in the words of her *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46-49):

My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden ...
For He who is mighty has done great things for me ...

Mary's fourth virtue is *faith*: this means the capacity to surrender oneself, in the heart and mind, to all that the Lord has revealed through Christ and His Church about His nature, His works, and His saving purposes for us. St. Elizabeth commended Mary for her faith with the words: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:45). And Mary showed that she had surrendered herself completely to God, trusting Him to fulfill all His promises to Israel, when she declared at the end of her *Magnificat* (Lk 1:54-55):

He has helped His servant Israel
in remembrance of His mercy,
as He promised to our fathers,
to Abraham and his posterity forever.

Mary's fifth evangelical virtue is *devotion*. Of course, the English word "devotion" has several possible meanings, but here we use it to mean the virtue of using to the full all of the means of grace that our Lord has given to us to draw near to Him, especially prayer and the sacraments. Mary showed herself a truly devout woman of prayer when she offered, in praise and thanksgiving, her *Magnificat*, "My soul magnifies the Lord" (Lk 1:46), and again in the cenacle after Christ's ascension, when she was found at prayer in the midst of the disciples, waiting and praying for the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit promised by the Lord (Acts 1:14).

We know that Mary was also given to prayerful meditation upon the mysteries of Christ, especially upon the wonders of His Nativity. Twice in the gospels we are told "she kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2:19, 51). The coming of the shepherds, the wise men, the star, and the prophecies: she treasured and cherished these memories, pondering them frequently, and uncovering their true meaning. This is an authentic exercise of religious devotion.

Mary's sixth virtue is *obedience*: Obedience means following loyally all the lawful directives of one's parents, employers, governors, and ecclesiastical superiors, in so far as those directives do not require us to break the commandments of God. Mary was a model of obedience when (even though she was with child) she obeyed the decree from Caesar Augustus, and journeyed with Joseph to Bethlehem for the common enrollment (Lk 2:1-5). Not only was Mary obedient to civil law, she was also obedient to ecclesiastical law, for when the time came for her purification according to the Law of Moses, she and Joseph brought the child Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, offering there the sacrifice required by the Jewish law: "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons" (Lk 2:22-24). Above all, Mary was obedient to the will of her son, the Son of God. As she said to the servants at the wedding feast at Cana: Just "do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5).

Mary's seventh evangelical virtue is *poverty*: By this we mean not just material poverty, but true simplicity of heart, in other words, detachment from all created things. The poor in spirit know that accumulating and enjoying worldly goods is not the purpose of our lives; rather, material goods ought to be a "means," not an "end": a means to be used for the service of God and the relief of human need. How poor in spirit Mary showed herself to be when she "gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Mt 2:7). Mary did not complain bitterly about suffering this hardship. On the contrary, she must have rejoiced at the birth of Jesus, despite the poverty of her surroundings. Though she was a homeless young mother, she trusted in God to provide what was truly most needful, and she received with joy, even in the midst of material poverty, the divine gift of the Christ Child.

Mary's eighth gospel virtue is *patience*. This is the virtue that enabled her to endure all the wrongs and misfortunes of life without discouragement, but with trust in God instead. Think of the patience and trust in divine providence that Mary must have had when she was awakened by Joseph in the middle of the night and told that their family had to make a quick, nocturnal escape from Herod's murderous soldiers — indeed, that they had to flee for safety all the way to a foreign land, to live as refugees in Egypt, a place where they had (as far as we know) no job, no friends or acquaintances, in fact, nothing at all! Only patience, founded upon complete trust in God's providence, could have borne Mary through this sudden flight, and prolonged exile.

Mary's ninth gospel virtue is *mercy or charity*. See how merciful she was to her cousin Elizabeth. No sooner had Mary heard from the angel Gabriel that her elderly kinswoman was with child, than she journeyed with haste through the hill-country to visit her, and stayed with her three whole months to help her (Lk 1:36-56).

Moreover, Mary went to Elizabeth not just to help her with the daily chores, but also to share with her the secret of the Christ Child that was to be born. In fact, no sooner had Mary crossed the threshold of Elizabeth's house than a bond of the Holy Spirit was formed between them (Lk 1:41).

How charitable also was Our Lady at the wedding feast at Cana when she noticed that the young couple was running out of wine for their guests. Eager to preserve them from shame and embarrassment on their wedding day, Mary brought their needs before her Son with the simple words, "They have no more wine." By her intercession, therefore, Mary came to their aid (Jn 2:1-3). To come to the aid of those in need is the essence of "mercy" or "charity."

Mary's tenth evangelical virtue is sorrow. Of course, there is nothing especially virtuous just in "feeling sad." But whenever we take our pain, grief, and sorrow, and offer them up, in union with Christ's passion, then our sufferings can merit graces for the good of souls, both on earth and in purgatory. In this way, we can share in the redemptive work of our Savior (see Col 1:24). As Pope John Paul II taught in his apostolic letter on the meaning of human suffering, *Salvifici Dolors*: Our unavoidable sufferings and sorrows can find meaning in Christ, and can be put to good use. We are not only to do good *to* the suffering, he wrote, we are also to be good *by* our sufferings.

This is precisely what Mary did. As old Simeon had foretold, sorrow like a sharp sword would one day pierce her heart (Lk 2:35). She had a foretaste of this when she lost her 12-year-old son in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover, only to find him again in the Temple three days later (Lk 2:48). But Simeon's prophecy was fulfilled most of all at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus, as Mary remained faithfully with Him, standing at the foot of His cross, and bearing with Him the greatest sorrow that a mother's heart could ever endure: She witnessed the torturous death of an innocent man, her own beloved Son, the true Son of God.