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## Jesus Christ as the Divine Mercy by Eugeniusz Kazimirowski: The Most Influential Polish Painting of the Twentieth Century?

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***Jesus Christ as The Divine Mercy* by Eugeniusz Kazimirowski:  
The Most Influential Polish Painting of the Twentieth Century?**

Ivan Gaskell

Modern and contemporary Western art has little place for organized religion. In the accepted scheme, serious artistic endeavor, rattling unconstrained and at full tilt to impressionism, through cubism, and on to abstraction, has no time for the stifling institutional demands of churches. Art, as understood within Western institutions principally concerned with art as such, no longer serves Christian cult practices. Those who meet such needs have equivocal roles at best within the artworld of artists, critics, gallerists, curators, collectors, and art historians.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the last prominent canonical Western artists to produce devotional works for ecclesiastical use in the normal course of their careers were J.-A.-D. Ingres,<sup>2</sup> and Eugène Delacroix.<sup>3</sup> Their younger contemporary Édouard Manet is the painter anointed by art historians as the true founder of modern art. His few religious paintings, including his first, *The Dead Christ with Angels*, 1864 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), seem more than faintly anomalous, fitting only awkwardly into a narrative of the progress of Western art towards modernity.

Examples in the twentieth century of Western works of art with overtly religious themes that have been accepted, usually equivocally, into the art historical canon are few and far between. Several are the result of patronage arranged or inspired by one remarkable Dominican priest, Marie-Alain Couturier (1897-1954) who was able to

persuade free-thinking and even Jewish artists to contribute to ecclesiastical projects, notably the church of Notre-Dame de Toute Grâce du Plateau d'Assy, France(1938-49).<sup>4</sup> Couturier was also involved in the realization of the Chapel of the Rosary, designed, built, and outfitted (including with vestments) to designs by Henri Matisse between 1947 and 1951 for the Dominican sisters in Vence, France.<sup>5</sup> We should also acknowledge that several twentieth-century canonical artists produced Christian religious works for personal reasons, among them Salvador Dalí and Andy Warhol;<sup>6</sup> yet pious artists, and perceptive priests who could work with doubting artists, were the exception in the twentieth century, and remain so. Indeed, many leading twentieth-century Western artists were skeptical or openly hostile towards Christianity. “What do you mean by religious art? It is an absurdity,” exclaimed Pablo Picasso, a Communist from 1944 until his death in 1973.<sup>7</sup> Although Georges Braque designed stained glass windows in the 1950s for two churches in Varengeville-sur-Mer on the Normandy coast, where he lived, he summed up the suspicions of many twentieth-century artists towards religious art: “The moment that religious art is reduced ‘to the level of the common man,’ it’s no longer an act of faith, it’s an act of propaganda.”<sup>8</sup>

For Braque, as well as for many other artists, critics, and curators, art itself had become the bearer of transcendence.<sup>9</sup> The Dominican Marie-Alain Couturier may have helped to inspire John and Dominique de Menil to commission what is now known as the Rothko Chapel in Houston (dedicated in 1971), dominated by a series of abstract paintings by Mark Rothko, but in the words of its website it is an “intimate sanctuary available to people of every belief.”<sup>10</sup> In the Rothko Chapel, art is not in the service of organized religion, but has taken its place. Such a faith in the independent power of art

can be traced back at least to Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935), who treated his *Black Square*, 1915 (State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) as a sacred icon.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, members of the artworld tend to view most visual art created in the service of organized religion in the twentieth century and later at “the level of the common man” (in Braque’s phrase) as no more than kitsch.<sup>12</sup> Once artists had so stylized figuration as to render it unfamiliar or unrecognizable, or abandoned it entirely, they could no longer meet the devotional and liturgical needs that depend on the clearly evocative representation of sacred figures in accordance with a longstanding set of visual conventions. The progressive visual clarification of such figures and their actions had long been a feature of Western religious art.<sup>13</sup> Obfuscation from the early twentieth century onwards ran counter to the needs of organized religion.

Not all artists, by any means, were or are artworld artists. Many could and still can be found to serve the needs of ecclesiastical authorities by producing stylistically traditional and readily recognizable religious images “at the level of the common man.” Art historians understandably ignore such works, but to cultural historians they can help to reveal elements of the changing social fabric. This article concerns one such work, a celebrated twentieth-century painting, and some of its copies, derivatives, and reproductions. Although not painted by a famous artist, and certainly not within the Western art historical canon, the fact that it is among the most widely venerated images in contemporary Roman Catholicism means that it is undoubtedly one of the best known and socially influential paintings of the twentieth century.

*Jesus Christ as The Divine Mercy* was painted in 1934 by Eugeniusz Kazimirowski, a relatively obscure Polish artist. Kazimirowski was born in 1873. Between 1892 and 1899

he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, with periods at art schools in Munich and Paris. He spent part of 1900 at the Academy of St. Luke in Rome. Thereafter he lived first in Kraków, and later in Vilnius, making regular visits to Lviv.<sup>14</sup> He served in the Polish army against Russia under the sponsorship of the Central Powers during the First World War. This experience gave rise to one of his best known paintings (a relative term), *Russian Prisoners of War*, 1916 (Muzeum Historyczne, Białystok). His more usual subject matter consisted of landscapes, garden scenes, and portraits in a vigorously yet decorously brushed, pastel, central European realist manner. He also decorated two theaters in Vilnius, and a vestibule in the railroad station in Lviv. In 1936 he moved to Białystok, where he died in 1939. During his career he participated in various group exhibitions in Warsaw, Vilnius, Lviv, and Białystok. Much of his work was lost in World War II. His work has been largely ignored by the artworld. Not until 2008 was he accorded a modest, one person exhibition held at the Muzeum Podlaskie, Białystok: “Eugeniusz Kazimirowski (1873-1939): Znajomy Świętychi” (Eugeniusz Kazimirowski (1873-1939): Friend of Saints).<sup>15</sup> The exhibition was organized as part of the festivities celebrating the beatification in Białystok on September 28, 2008 of Kazimirowski’s most unusual patron, Father Michał Sopoćko.

Michał Sopoćko was born in 1888 within what was then imperial Russia. He attended the seminary in Vilnius, where he was ordained in 1914. After service as a parish priest, military chaplain, and having completed doctoral studies at the University of Warsaw, he became co-ordinator of regional military chaplaincies in Vilnius in 1924. He was subsequently appointed spiritual director of the Vilnius seminary, and began a teaching career in pastoral theology at Stefan Batory University. As rector of the Church of St.

Michael,<sup>16</sup> he served as confessor to the Congregation of Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy. In 1933, he became spiritual director of the member of that congregation who would posthumously achieve world-wide fame, Sister, subsequently Saint Maria Faustyna of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

Who was the visionary sister whose mystical experiences were championed by Father Sopoćko, then doubted by the Catholic Church in Poland, and by the Vatican, before being triumphantly rehabilitated? Helena Kowalska was born in 1905 in that part of Poland then in the Russian Empire.<sup>17</sup> She took her final vows in the convent of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy in Płock in 1926. Within five years, she was experiencing visions of Christ, which she later recorded in a diary. By her own account, on February 22, 1931, Jesus Christ appeared to her. Of her vision she wrote:

In the evening, when I was in my cell, I saw the Lord Jesus clothed in a white garment. One hand [was] raised in the 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. In silence I kept my gaze fixed on the Lord; my soul was struck with awe, but also with great joy. After a while, Jesus said to me, “Paint an image according to the pattern you see, with the signature: Jesus, I trust in You. I desire that this image be venerated, first in your chapel, and [then] throughout the world.”<sup>18</sup>

Sister Faustyna recorded that Jesus explained to her that the imagery in her vision derived from his future appearance as the King of Mercy, shortly before his arrival as Just Judge

in the Last Days.<sup>19</sup> She recorded that he further directed that a Feast of Mercy should be instituted on the first Sunday after Easter, when the image should be displayed.<sup>20</sup>

Sister Faustyna was sent to the convent at Vilnius where her new confessor, Father Michał Sopoćko, investigated the status of her visions. Eventually, he was convinced of their veracity. He happened to lodge in the same house as Eugeniusz Kazimirowski, so it was to Kazimirowski that Sopoćko turned when he decided that Sister Faustyna's vision of Jesus Christ as the Divine Mercy should be depicted in accordance with the instructions she had received in her vision. They began work in January, 1934, Kazimirowski adapting a canvas to fit a frame that had been given for the purpose by a parishioner. The artist may have used Father Sopoćko to model for the figure of Jesus, whose hands ostensibly resemble those of the priest.<sup>21</sup> Repeatedly not satisfied with the face of the figure, Sister Faustyna reputedly had the artist change it at least ten times before the painting was completed in June. He inscribed the words specified in Sister Faustyna's vision, "Jezu Ufam Tobie" (Jesus, I trust in You) on the frame. The painting was shown publicly for the first time during the rites marking the close of the Jubilee Year of the Redemption of the World between April 26 and 28, 1935. It was exposed in a chapel window above the Eastern or Dawn Gate of the city of Vilnius. Two years later, the image was placed in Father Sopoćko's Church of St. Michael, Vilnius. In the meantime, Sister Faustyna, who had moved to her congregation's convent in Łagiewniki on the outskirts of Kraków, had fallen seriously ill. She died in October, 1938. For Eugeniusz Kazimirowski, whatever his private beliefs, the commission had been a commercial transaction: he was remunerated by Father Sopoćko. As we have seen, in 1936 Kazimirowski moved to Białystok where he died in 1939.

The subsequent history of the painting is scarcely separable from that of the devotion its making helped to inaugurate and encourage. These histories are in turn entwined with national identity and ethnic pride, Cold War politics, and the reinvigoration of the Roman Catholic Church as an internationally influential body during the pontificate of John Paul II (1978-2005).

The road to the present acceptance and ecclesiastically sponsored spread of the Divine Mercy cult was far from smooth. Father Michał Sopoćko did all he could to promote it after Sister Faustyna's death, even under the challenging circumstances first of the war years, second, under Communism, and third, in the face of hostility from the Vatican. The German and Soviet invasions of Poland in 1939 thwarted his attempt to build a church dedicated to the Divine Mercy in Vilnius. He survived the German occupation, spending two years in hiding near Vilnius, and thereafter promoted the foundation of the congregation devoted to the Divine Mercy, as stipulated by Sister Faustyna in her revelations, writing its constitution in 1947. In that year he moved to Białystok to teach at its diocesan seminary. He used his position to promote the Divine Mercy devotion, writing prolifically and tirelessly on the subject. However, his efforts were received with skepticism among the highest ranks of the Catholic Church. In 1959, the Blessed Pope John XXIII followed the advice of the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office by placing the published edition of Sister Faustyna's diary on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. Father Sopoćko was disciplined.

Only after Karol Józef Wojtyła became Archbishop of Kraków in 1963 did matters change. The new archbishop instituted an investigation that eventually confirmed the devotion. Father Sopoćko died in 1975, but the elevation of Archbishop Wojtyła to the



papacy in 1978 as John Paul II signaled an acceleration of the new ecclesiastical commitment to the cult. The Church's ban on spreading the cult was lifted in that year. The Congregation of the Sisters of Merciful Jesus was recognized. Sister Faustyna was beatified in 1993, and canonized in 2000.

In 2005, Cardinal Audrys Bačkis, Archbishop of Vilnius, consecrated the house in Vilnius in which Michał Sopoćko and Eugeniusz Kazimirowski had lived, and in which the artist had collaborated with Saint Faustyna and her confessor to paint *Jesus Christ as the Divine Mercy* in 1934. It thereby became a convent of the Sisters of Merciful Jesus, the congregation that had been founded by Michał Sopoćko. Its chapel was dedicated to Saint Faustyna.<sup>22</sup> As we have seen, Sopoćko was beatified on September 28, 2008. The official Vatican online biography of the Blessed Michał Sopoćko omits all mention of the vicissitudes of the Divine Mercy cult.<sup>23</sup> The ban is now a source of embarrassment to the Catholic Church, and, in so far as it has offered any explanation, it alludes to mistakes in the Italian translation of Saint Faustyna's diary and other material written in Polish on which the Holy Office had relied. This is most likely disingenuous. Any claim, such as Saint Faustyna's, to be conveying instructions directly received from Jesus Christ threatens the intermediary authority of the Church, which usually investigates such claims, when seriously made, with great care. The Holy Office is more likely to judge as genuine those instructions that are compatible with existing Church doctrine than those that are at odds with such doctrine. Saint Faustyna had relayed Jesus Christ's command that the Feast of Mercy should be instituted on the first Sunday after Easter, but with the stipulation "that whoever approaches the Fount of Life on this day will be granted complete remission of sins and punishment."<sup>24</sup> Members of the Holy Office investigating

the devotion in the 1950s may have inferred that this undermines the role of the sacraments, and therefore may have concluded by 1959 that the devotion was heterodox.

What of Kazimirowski's painting? In April, 1937 it was hung in the Blessed Michał Sopoćko's church of St. Michael in Vilnius in accordance with an instruction given by Jesus Christ through Saint Faustyna. There it remained until 1948, when Communist authorities closed the church. After a short stay at another church in Vilnius, a friend of Father Sopoćko, Father Józef Grasewicz, took it to the parish church in Novaya Ruda in that part of Poland that had been annexed by the Soviet Union (now in Belarus).<sup>25</sup> In about 1970, local authorities in Novaya Ruda decided to convert the church into a warehouse. Learning of this new threat, Father Sopoćko, still in Białystok, suggested moving the painting to the site of its first exposure, in 1935, the chapel above the Eastern Gate of the city of Vilnius. The priest in charge of the chapel rejected the idea, but suggested the Church of the Holy Spirit as a more discreet setting. The parish priest, Father Aleksander Kaszkiewicz, agreed to receive the painting, so Father Grasewicz passed on the painting to his colleague in Vilnius. Vilnius, previously in Poland, had been incorporated into Lithuania, itself then part of the Soviet Union, so although under this proposal the painting would return to its city of origin, it would not have to cross any international border. However, a subtle sense of Polish identity underlies these moves. The Polish Father Grasewicz, who had looked after the painting in Novaya Ruda, passed it on to the church in Vilnius most identified with the Polish community in that city.

In 1986, Father Kaszkiewicz arranged for the painting to be conserved and amended. The face was reportedly repainted. It was provided with a new, more elaborate gilded frame with a scalloped and arched top shaped to fit the altar embrasure, so the canvas was

extended to fit. Finally, the words of the inscription on the original frame, “Jezu Ufam Tobie” (Jesus, I trust in You), were painted directly onto the lower part of the canvas. The original frame had reportedly been lost when the painting was hidden prior to being sent to Vilnius. These changes made, the painting was hung above a side altar in the Church of the Holy Spirit in 1987.<sup>26</sup> Tumultuous times were just ahead.

In 1990, Lithuania, a predominantly Catholic country, asserted its independence from the disintegrating Soviet Union, receiving international recognition the following year. As we have seen, these were years of renewed attention to the cult of the Divine Mercy and its founder, leading to her beatification in 1993, and canonization in 2000. In July, 2001, the Sisters of the Merciful Jesus, a predominantly Polish congregation, returned to Vilnius, and were given special access to the painting by the parish priest of the Church of the Holy Spirit. They petitioned for its conservation, and in 2003 the painting was treated at their convent in Vilnius by a Polish conservator, Edyta Hankowska-Czerwińska from Włocławek.<sup>27</sup> She removed varnish and overpaint (including the inscription added in 1986), stabilized the paint surface, retouched losses, and restored the work to its original form, removing the arched and scalloped top. In the following year, the Church of the Holy Trinity in Vilnius was rededicated as the Sanctuary of the Divine Mercy. Kazimirowski’s original painting of *Jesus Christ as the Divine Mercy* was transferred there in September, 2005, where it remains.

This move was highly controversial because it entailed its removal from the church identified as the focus of the local Polish community in Vilnius. The move of the painting, sanctioned by the archbishop, Cardinal Bačkis, was vociferously resisted by some in that community who interpreted the transfer as an assertion of Lithuanian control

over a Polish image. Cardinal Bačkis decreed that daily prayer services should be held in both Lithuanian and Polish.<sup>28</sup> This incident raises a matter as closely associated with the painting and the cult of the Divine Mercy as religion itself: national and ethnic identity. To examine this more closely, we should begin with the iconography of Kazimirowski's painting.

The image of Christ stepping forward, right hand raised in blessing, left hand to his breast, conforms to a type made familiar by the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus that grew enormously in the nineteenth century, especially after the institution of the Feast of the Sacred Heart as obligatory throughout the Catholic Church in 1856, and the beatification in 1864 of its proponent, Saint Marguerite Marie Alacoque (1647-1690), a French nun who, like Saint Faustyna, had been a visionary. Rather than his heart, Saint Faustyna's Jesus reveals two rays of light, one red, the other pale, emanating from his breast. These explicitly derive from the blood and water that came from Jesus's side when pierced on the cross by a soldier's spear, as described in Gospel of St. John (19: 34). Long the subject of patristic interpretation, the blood of Christ continually atones for the sins of humankind, while water is the vehicle of spiritual adoption at baptism. Both prefigure sacraments, and are necessary for redemption. Saint Faustyna clearly associated the two rays in her vision with the blood and water of Christ's sacrifice. In words that she claimed were conveyed to her by Jesus, she wrote, "The pale ray stands for the Water which makes souls righteous. The red ray stands for the Blood which is the life of souls."<sup>29</sup> Further, she specifically associated the blood and water with Christ's mercy, this being the appearance of Jesus, as we have seen, as King of Mercy prior to his arrival as Just Judge in the Last Days.<sup>30</sup> She continued, "These two rays issued forth from the very

depths of My tender mercy when My agonized Heart was opened by a lance on the cross. These rays shield souls from the wrath of My Father. Happy is the one who will dwell in their shelter, for the just hand of God shall not lay hold of him.”<sup>31</sup> She recorded the words of a prayer she allegedly received from Jesus that he told her would grant the grace of conversion: “O Blood and Water, which gushed forth from the Heart of Jesus as a Fount of Mercy for us, I trust in You.”<sup>32</sup> The mercy of Jesus Christ towards those who turn to him is the central focus of the devotion. The rays, though, have another connotation, one that is not commented on in the devotional literature.

To Poles, the red and pale (actually white) rays emanating from Jesus Christ’s breast in the Divine Mercy image cannot but evoke the national flag. These colors derive from the arms of Poland and Lithuania, and had been adopted during the failed Polish uprising against Russian imperial rule in 1830-31. They were retained by Polish nationalists thereafter in their struggles for independence. Two equal horizontal stripes, white above red, became the flag of the reborn country in 1919. The contrast between the robustness of Polish national identity and the fragility of Poland as a polity during the twentieth century have contributed to a considerable emotional investment on the part of many Poles, and members of the Polish diaspora, in these colors. Devotion to the Divine Mercy may have become a world-wide phenomenon among Roman Catholics irrespective of ethnicity and national identity, but for many Poles the prominence of their national colors in the image serves as a reminder of the Polish origin of the cult, and all that this might imply in terms of favored status and grace in the face of hostility and persecution. We should not overlook the fact that the rehabilitation and enthusiastic adoption of the cult within the Catholic Church began under an archbishop of Kraków who in 1978 became

pope, and has spread thanks to the efforts of Polish regular congregations. The revived cult of the Divine Mercy was one means by which Poles resisted Soviet domination, ultimately successfully. However, this Polish image, painted to the specifications of a Polish nun by a Polish painter in a city in Poland, was no longer in that country from 1940 onwards. Poland was partitioned between Germany and the Soviet Union following its invasion in 1939, and the following year Lithuania, reunited with its historic capital, Vilnius, was annexed by the Soviet Union. Following the defeat of Germany in 1945, the new postwar borders left Vilnius and Novaya Ruda, where Kazimirowski's painting was taken in 1948, within the Soviet Union. By 1991, the independence of Lithuania was recognized internationally, by which time, as we have seen, the painting was back in Vilnius, though in the care of a predominantly Polish congregation. We have already seen that its transfer to a Lithuanian church rededicated as the Sanctuary of the Divine Mercy in 2005 caused ill-feeling and protests among members of Vilnius's ethnic Polish community. However, the production of other painted versions in Poland from 1943 onwards served both to deflect attention from Kazimiroski's original, and to give Poles an opportunity to claim possession of the image, albeit in derivative form.

The Kraków artist, Adolf Hyła painted two versions of *Jesus Christ as the Divine Mercy*, one of which is in the vast Sanctuary of the Divine Mercy in Łagiewniki on the outskirts of Kraków, consecrated in 2002.<sup>33</sup> This pilgrimage site includes the convent chapel of the Sisters of our Lady of Mercy, which contains the remains of Saint Faustyna. Ignoring and implicitly displacing the original painting in Vilnius, its website declares the Łagiewniki sanctuary to be the “World center of veneration of the Image of the Divine Mercy.”<sup>34</sup> The sanctuary not only has the much reproduced and popular Hyła version of

the Divine Mercy image, but Saint Faustyna's remains. In addition, the sanctuary has already accrued fame among Catholics as the site of pilgrimage on two occasions by Pope John Paul II (in 1997 and 2002), as well as his successor, Pope Benedict XVI in 2006. The Łagiewniki sanctuary is making a bid for status as a major international pilgrimage site, emphasizing the Polish origins of the cult of the Divine Mercy. In this light, the conservation of the original painting in 2003 at the petition of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Merciful Jesus, and its removal in 2005 by the Archbishop of Vilnius to the Church of the Holy Trinity, rededicated as the Sanctuary of the Divine Mercy, can be seen as moves to counter the eclipse of the original image in Lithuania threatened by the promotion of the Polish sanctuary.

How can a later derivation—the painting by Adolf Hyla in Łagiewniki—which is not even an accurate copy of the original painting, be its devotional equivalent, or even threaten to displace it? Let us first examine the status of Kazimirowski's original painting. That it had ostensibly been commanded by Jesus himself, acting directly through Saint Faustyna, would appear to be the guarantee not only of its authenticity but of its efficacy. The painting is the principal means of asserting the truth of the revelation, for by accurately representing Saint Faustyna's vision at the command of Jesus, it supposedly gives devotees immediate access to that vision, and, by extension, to Jesus himself. Saint Faustyna recorded in her diary the instructions from Jesus that she received on this matter: "By means of this Image I shall be granting many graces to souls; so let every soul have access to it."<sup>35</sup>

Saint Faustyna and the Blessed Michał Sopoćko appear to have believed that the painting had to be absolutely faithful to the nun's vision in order to function as Jesus had

specified. This is why she was reportedly obsessed with the precise details of the figure's facial features. Others have since sought confirmation of their accuracy by comparing them with the ostensible face of Christ on the Shroud of Turin, allegedly the shroud in which the dead Jesus was entombed, having thereby directly received an impression of his body and facial features. In spite of questioning of its status, many Roman Catholics continue to accept the Shroud of Turin as a true relic rather than a medieval copy. For them, it is therefore an unimpeachable record of Christ's features. The home page of the website of the Sisters of the Merciful Jesus, the congregation founded by the Blessed Michał Sopoćko to spread and foster the devotion introduced by Saint Faustyna, prominently displays an animation that fades between the two superimposed images of the face of Christ, one from Kazimirowski's Divine Mercy painting and the other from the Turin Shroud. Their apparent congruence, much commented on, supposedly guarantees the accuracy and veracity of Christ's facial features in Kazimirowski's painting.<sup>36</sup>

All these factors point to the status of the image for believers as not that of a mere painting, but as embodying the miraculous real presence of its prototype. For believers, Christ was the author of the image as well as its subject. Saint Faustyna and Eugeniusz Kazimirowski were mere vessels through which the vision and the resulting image no more than passed. The theologian Robert Stackpole, a leading proponent of the Divine Mercy devotion, notes that "to the best of my knowledge, the Image of the Divine Mercy is the only image of Jesus Himself that Jesus expressly commanded to be painted in a particular manner, and disseminated throughout the world in a particular form."<sup>37</sup> In this it differs from both the Mandylion of Edessa, and the Veil of St. Veronica, images of



Jesus that were ostensibly produced by the direct contact of the cloths concerned with his face.<sup>38</sup> It is therefore an image vested with an extraordinary authority in the eyes of its devotees, fully sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church.

To repeat our question, how can Adolf Hyla's version, among others, of the Divine Mercy image, painted at a distance from its origins, and criticized by the Blessed Michał Sopoćko, assume a position of authority? Sopoćko valued Kazimirowski's painting because of its demonstrable fidelity to Saint Faustyna's vision. However, in accordance with the ecclesiastically sanctioned view that the author of the image is neither Kazimirowski nor Saint Faustyna who instructed him, but Jesus Christ himself working through his saint, the efficacy of the image does not reside in any one token of it, not even the first painting executed by Kazimirowski, but potentially in any. To draw an analogy from contemporary art, the image is properly conceptual, vested in Christ's stipulation rather than in any particular physical manifestation of it. Saint Faustyna, the Blessed Michał Sopoćko, and Eugeniusz Kazimirowski were under an obligation to realize that stipulation as accurately as possible, but once achieved, any recognizable token of it could act as a channel for grace. Thus a prayer card of the Divine Mercy, hidden in the clothing of a concentration camp prisoner, could be credited with miraculously preserving her life during the Holocaust.<sup>39</sup> On this understanding, Adolf Hyla's versions, among others—notably the one accorded such prominence in the sanctuary in Łagiewniki—could therefore be as efficacious as the original.

The spread of the devotion to the Divine Mercy has been brought about in large part by the proliferation of the image in various versions. The Congregation of Marians of the Immaculate Conception (Marian Fathers) has been among the most active orders in

promoting the cult. Originally founded in Poland in 1673, the Marian Fathers had declined by the early twentieth century, but were refounded in 1909 after which they spread internationally while retaining strong Polish roots. They championed the cult of the Divine Mercy, founding an apostolate of the Divine Mercy at their house in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in 1944, which has since become the U.S. National Shrine of the Divine Mercy. The Blessed Michał Sopoćko had given a photograph of Eugeniusz Kazimirowski's painting to Józef Jarzębowski, a Marian Father who collected Polish historical documents and material culture items. During his wartime peregrinations with his huge collection across the breadth of the Soviet Union, through Japan and North America, and eventually to England, Father Jarzębowski stayed at the Stockbridge house of his congregation, and in 1945 arranged for a Mexican artist, Maria Gama, to paint a version of *Jesus Christ as The Divine Mercy* using the photograph as her source.<sup>40</sup> This painting is the devotional heart of the U.S. National Shrine of the Divine Mercy. The annual feast of Divine Mercy on the Sunday after Easter attracts about 10,000 pilgrims to Stockbridge each year. Many bring their own reproductions of the image. In recognition of their contribution to church rebuilding in Vilnius, the archdiocese, while retaining copyright,<sup>41</sup> reportedly granted reproduction and distribution rights in the Kazimirowski painting to the Marian Fathers. They distribute copies to newly founded Divine Mercy shrines worldwide, with the words "Jesus, I Trust in You" in any of fourteen languages.<sup>42</sup> The Congregation of Sisters of our Lady of Mercy in Łagiewniki owns the copyright in the Hyla painting in the sanctuary, which was assigned to the convent by the artist before his death in 1968, and grants licenses to reproduce it.<sup>43</sup> Reproductions of this version are actively being distributed no less than those of the Kazimirowski painting.<sup>44</sup>

For personal devotional use, the image can also be downloaded from the Web. Anyone with access to the Internet can download high quality digital versions of the Divine Mercy image of their choice to their computers from the website, “rayofmercy.org.” It states that “this website was created mainly in response to the surprising lack of quality Divine Mercy images available on the Internet for download.”<sup>45</sup> Most remarkable is that each of these digital images, as well as each printed photographic reproduction, shares the character of the original, so by means of any them Christ can ostensibly grant graces to souls anywhere in the world. Several purported miracles have been popularly ascribed to the image, and some have even been captured photographically. One instance is the “Divine Mercy Tabernacle Alight,” in Smithtown, New South Wales, Australia, found on the website of the Purgatory Project for the registration of souls for masses for the remission of Purgatory.<sup>46</sup> When Jesus Christ dictated to Saint Faustyna, “By means of this Image I shall be granting many graces to souls; so let every soul have access to it,”<sup>47</sup> the image concerned was potentially not only the painting made by Eugeniusz Kazimirowski, but any representation of the vision granted to the saint. No wonder that devotees cling to their personal reproductions of the image.

What, then, are we left with? Is the image of the Divine Mercy, in its various manifestations, an example of religious art “reduced ‘to the level of the common man,’” and an act of propaganda? Or should we risk blasphemy and cast Jesus Christ as a conceptual artist, orchestrating an outpouring of visual material that wholly bypasses conventional twentieth and twenty-first-century artworld values in order to promote religious devotion? The devotional effectiveness worldwide of this imagery cannot be

denied. Further, its success suggests that values associated with artworld art and values associated with Catholic Christianity have been decoupled in spite of the efforts of a few priests such as Marie-Alain Couturier. Does this matter? For a cultural historian, this decoupling is of interest. It suggests that socially, the artworld has been marginalized, whereas the ever-developing devotional practice of the Roman Catholic Church, of which the Divine Mercy cult is but one example, affirms its role as powerfully influential in the lives of many all over the world. Its use of images, therefore, is worth studying. That use depends on picture making according to premises to which few artists in the artworld would subscribe. In the case of the Divine Mercy image, the individual creativity of the artist counts for little or nothing, even if the nuances that ultimately define the appearance of an image depend on that artist's skills. Eugeniusz Kazimirowski's role in the creation of *Jesus Christ as The Divine Mercy* in 1934 was ostensibly self-effacing, not self-affirming. He had no opportunity to exercise what capacity for originality he might have had, for the only originality that counts is what could be ascribed to the originator of the saint's vision that the artist was striving to convey, that is, Jesus Christ. Authenticity only counts insofar as the painting successfully captures that authentic vision. The uniqueness of the artwork counts for nothing once its efficacy as a vehicle for grace is vested in all tokens of the vision in whatever medium, whether paint on canvas, photolithography, or pixels on a computer screen. Artworld concerns, then, are marginal if not irrelevant. They have no bearing on whether images of the Divine Mercy have played a role in the transformations of Poland in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and the transformations of swathes of the world through the actions of a reinvigorated Roman Catholic Church under a Polish pope. Whether art or not, whether kitsch or not, whether

propaganda or not, Eugeniusz Kazimirowski's *Jesus Christ as the Divine Mercy* remains one of the socially most influential paintings of the twentieth century. This is why it is worth examining.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term *artworld* in the sense employed by such analytical philosophers as George Dickie and Arthur Danto to denote an entire institutional framework.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, *The Vow of Louis XIII*, 1824 (Montauban Cathedral), and *The Martyrdom of Saint Symphorien*, 1834 (Autun Cathedral).

<sup>3</sup> Including the murals for the Chapel of the Angels, Church of Saint-Sulpice, Paris, 1857-61.

<sup>4</sup> With contributions by Jean Bazaine, Pierre Bonnard, Georges Braque, Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger, Jaques Lipchitz, Jean Lurçat, Henri Matisse, and Georges Rouault, among others: see William S. Rubin, *Modern Sacred Art and the Church of Assy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> The project was the result of a personal request from Matisse's former nurse, Monique Bourgeois, who had entered the order in 1943. See her account: Soeur Jacques-Marie, *Henri Matisse, la Chapelle de Vence* (Vence: Gardette, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> One of the most popularly celebrated examples is Salvador Dalí's *Christ of St. John of the Cross*, 1951 (Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow), which in 2005 was voted Scotland's favorite painting in a newspaper poll: "Scotland's Favourite Painting," *The Herald* (Glasgow), August 17, 2005, p. 6. Another example of a critically accepted body of work with a religious subject is Andy Warhol's *Last Supper* series (1986), the artist, to the surprise of many, having been a devout Catholic: see Lynne Cooke, "Andy Warhol, *The Last Supper Portraits*," <http://www.diaart.org/exhibs/warhol/lastsupper/essay.html> (accessed December 20, 2008).

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Penrose, *Picasso, His Life and Work*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 373; see also Gertje R. Utley, *Picasso: the Communist Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Alex Danchev, *Georges Braques: A Life* (New York: Arcade, 2005), p. 99.

<sup>9</sup> For another example, see Marcia Brennan, “Illuminating the Void, Displaying the Vision: On the Romanesque Church, the Modern Museum, and Pierre Soulages’ Abstract Art,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 52, 2007, pp. 116-127.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.rothkochapel.org/aboutthechapel.htm> (accessed December 20, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> In the “Zero-Ten” Futurist Exhibition in St. Petersburg in 1915, Kasimir Malevitch declared his *Black Square* to be an inalienably sacred icon by placing it diagonally across the corner of a room towards the ceiling, a claim that he sustained consistently throughout his life.

<sup>12</sup> I use kitsch in the sense defined and popularized by Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 248: “the absolute denial of shit.”

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, the case of what may be the earliest known likeness of St. Dominic (Harvard Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts) painted by an unidentified artist in about 1240 in Siena, probably for the high altar of the church there dedicated to him. The facial features were apparently revised twice in the thirteenth century at twenty year intervals to conform to stylistic innovations that would make the saint appear more empathetic and accessible to those venerating the image. See Cathleen Hoeniger, *The Renovation of Paintings in Tuscany, 1250-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 88-100.

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<sup>14</sup> Place names can vary according to national borders at any given time. Present-day Vilnius (in Lithuania) was known officially as Vilna while in the Russian Empire, and Wilno when in Poland. Similarly, present-day Lviv (in Ukraine) was known in Russian as Lvov, as Lemberg in German, and as Lwów in Polish.

<sup>15</sup> Much of the above information is derived from the web page of Polskie Radio Białystok devoted to the 2008 exhibition:  
<http://www.radio.bialystok.pl/polecamy/index/k/6/n/8246> (accessed December 19, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Michał in Polish, Mykolo in Lithuanian.

<sup>17</sup> Accounts of Saint Faustyna are predominantly devotional. See Maria Tarnawska, *Blessed Sister Faustina Kowalska: Her Life and Mission*, trans. Anne Hargest-Gorzelać (London: Veritas Foundation, 1993), and *Pillars of Fire in my Soul: The Spirituality of Saint Faustina*, ed. Robert Stackpole (Stockbridge, Mass: Marian Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul*, trans. Adam Pasicki, Danuta Pasicki, and George Pearce (first English edition, 1987), 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Stockbridge, Mass.: Marian Press, 2007), p. 24 (*Diary*, 47).

<sup>19</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, p. 42 (*Diary*, 83).

<sup>20</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, p. 44 (*Diary*, 88).

<sup>21</sup> A claim repeated by Polskie Radio Białystok:  
<http://www.radio.bialystok.pl/polecamy/index/k/6/n/8246> (accessed December 19, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> For the consecration of the convent, with photographs, see the website of the Congregation of the Sisters of Merciful Jesus: [http://www.faustina-message.com/informacje\\_ang.htm](http://www.faustina-message.com/informacje_ang.htm) (accessed December 19, 2008).



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<sup>23</sup> See

[http://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/liturgy/saints/2008/ns\\_lit\\_doc\\_20080928\\_sopocko\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/2008/ns_lit_doc_20080928_sopocko_en.html) (accessed December 19, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, p. 139 (*Diary*, 300).

<sup>25</sup> Called in Polish Nowa Ruda, but not to be confused with either town of the same name in present-day Poland.

<sup>26</sup> See the website of the Congregation of the Sisters of Merciful Jesus:

[http://www.faustina-message.com/informacje\\_ang.htm](http://www.faustina-message.com/informacje_ang.htm) (accessed December 19, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> See the documentation, with photographs, at

[http://www.faustyna.eu/obraz\\_krakow.htm](http://www.faustyna.eu/obraz_krakow.htm) (accessed December 22, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> See “The Image of Merciful Jesus Replaced to the Sanctuary of Divine Mercy,”

*Catholic Church in Lithuania*, September 28, 2005:

<http://www.lcn.lt/en/bl/news/?newsid=1647> (accessed December 23, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, p. 139 (*Diary*, 299).

<sup>30</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, p. 42 (*Diary*, 83).

<sup>31</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, p. 139 (*Diary*, 299).

<sup>32</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, p. 102 (*Diary*, 187).

<sup>33</sup> Hyla offered to paint a work as a thank-offering to the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy in 1942. They requested a version of the Divine Mercy image, which he completed the following year. It was too large for the intended altar, so the convent commissioned a second painting, completed in 1947, which remains in Łagiewniki, while Hyla’s first painting was sent to the Church of the Sacred Heart, Wrocław, which is associated with

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the congregation. See [http://www.jesusmisericordieux.org/ed/ojmm\\_developpimage.htm](http://www.jesusmisericordieux.org/ed/ojmm_developpimage.htm) (accessed December 27, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> See <http://www.milosierdzie.pl/jezyki/en/index.php> (accessed December 26, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, p. 242 (*Diary*, 570).

<sup>36</sup> See <http://www.faustina-message.com/index.htm>; see further [http://www.faustina-message.com/zgromadzenie\\_anga.htm](http://www.faustina-message.com/zgromadzenie_anga.htm) (accessed December 26, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Robert Stackpole, “The Only Image He Commanded?” *The Divine Mercy*: <http://thedinemercy.org/news/story.php?NID=2549> (accessed December 26, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> For the Mandylion and the Veil of St. Veronica see in particular, David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 207-209; Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 208-224; and Gerhard Wolf, “From Mandylion to Veronica: Picturing the ‘Disembodied’ Face and Disseminating the True Image of Christ in the Latin West,” in *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation: Papers from a Colloquium held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome, and the Villa Spelman, Florence, 1996*, ed. Herbert L. Kessler and Gerhard Wolf (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1998), pp. 153-179, with further references.

<sup>39</sup> See <http://www.divinemercuryusa.com/shopping.shtml> (accessed December 26, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> See <http://www.divinercypictures.com/images/large/Shrine.htm> (accessed December 29, 2008); also *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, caption to

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unnumbered color plate of the sanctuary of the National Shrine of The Divine Mercy, Stockbridge.

<sup>41</sup> The image is published with the notation, “© Obraz - Kuria Metropolitalna w Wilnie”: see [http://www.faustyna.eu/obraz\\_maly\\_67x119mm.pdf](http://www.faustyna.eu/obraz_maly_67x119mm.pdf) (accessed December 27, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> See <http://www.mercyimages.com/> (accessed December 19, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> Information regarding copyright from Sister Maria Elżbieta Siepak of the Sisters of our Lady of Mercy in Łagiewniki, posted at [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Deletion\\_requests/Divine\\_Mercy\\_paintings](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Deletion_requests/Divine_Mercy_paintings) (accessed December 19, 2008). Because of copyright considerations, Wikimedia has deleted both versions, though expects to post the Kazimirowski painting on the expiration of copyright, seventy years after the death of the artist, on January 1, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Ingrid Ciulisova wrote, “Please find attached the image of the Divine Mercy with the signature ‘Jesus, I trust in You’ in Slovak enclosed as an attachment. The picture is already on display in many Slovak churches and attracts great attention.” (email message to the author, December 18, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> See [http://rayofmercy.org/index.html?middle=image\\_download.html](http://rayofmercy.org/index.html?middle=image_download.html) (accessed May 8, 2008). Attempts to access this site in December, 2008 failed. Have copyright issues caught up with it?

<sup>46</sup> See <http://www.holysouls.com/divinemericytabernaclealight.jpg> (accessed May 8, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, p. 242 (*Diary*, 570).

<sup>48</sup> I should like to thank Ingrid Ciulisova for the invitation to contribute to the current volume. This article is a development of some ideas initially expressed in a paper, “In

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Search of Christian Miraculous Images in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, and Beyond,” delivered at the Global Center of Excellence: Death and Life Studies conference *Miraculous Images in Christian and Buddhist Culture*, University of Tokyo, in June, 2008. My thanks to Akira Akiyama, David Carrier, and Gerhard Wolf.