

# **The Development Perspectives of the Sanctuary of God's Mercy in the District of Łagiewniki in Cracow**

**(An interview with Prelate Marian Rapacz, the President  
of the Sanctuary of God's Mercy Foundation)**

*Are you aware of the fact that the investment in charge of which you are may change the appearance of the map of sanctuaries and pilgrimage centres in Poland?*

I am aware of the significance of this place, because since 1997, when I became the President of the Sanctuary of God's Mercy Foundation, I have observed a notable increase of the worship of God's Mercy and a very dynamic increase in the number of pilgrims coming here from all over the world. It is enough to mention that last year in Łagiewniki, in the open air, we received almost one million of them. And this is certainly a good reason for changing in the map of the Polish sanctuaries. Of course, Cracow itself is undergoing a transformation. I can see that every tourist coming to Cracow is also a pilgrim visiting the Łagiewniki sanctuary. In Cracow, on the other hand, each pilgrim is also a tourist. Such a large number of pilgrims visiting this special place must definitely cause some "turbulence" in the network of the Polish pilgrimage centres.

*We have many distinguished sanctuaries in Poland which boast long history and tradition. How should we perceive the Sanctuary of God's Mercy among all the other holy places in Poland – both the old ones, such as Jasna Góra and the Holy Cross, and the newer ones which emerge in Poland almost on daily basis?*

Most traditional sanctuaries are usually dedicated to St. Mary, such as the respectable Jasna Góra, so they are connected with the worship of Our Lady. Here, on the other hand, in the Sanctuary of God's Mercy the most important places are the altar and the confessional. It should be emphasised as a significant characteristic of this place that before meeting God's mercy at the confessional people should also meet human mercy here. That is why, I think, not only Christians come here.

There are also searching people, sometimes atheists or people whom life has injured. They are looking for some anchorage or they hope that someone here can help them, even in a human way. And this is some basic characteristic feature of this place. In a way it accounts for the fact that the development plan of the sanctuary includes also the *home of merciful ministration*. It will house various counselling institutions. In other words, it will provide human mercy to cure human misery.

*What is missing from the present infrastructure of the Sanctuary? Why has its development been planned with such a momentum, perhaps even hurriedly?*

We could ask: *'Isn't it too late to build the Sanctuary, if nearly one million pilgrims can be received in the open air?'* Of course, all that has evolved somehow. Sister Faustina's beatification certainly enhanced the worship of God's Mercy. Now her canonisation should intensify it even further. Thus, it can be answered: *'it is high time we had a new Sanctuary which this place deserves'*. Being aware of the fact that the nuns cannot be left unassisted with the task of developing the Sanctuary, Cardinal Franciszek Macharski established a special Foundation.

*We can come up with an idea that the essence of the Sanctuary of God's Mercy is its function of the symbol of the Third Millennium of Christianity. What should its status in Poland and in the world be?*

In spite of the immense progress, the ending century has also unfortunately been the century of the civilisation of death. Millions of human lives were lost during the October Revolution, some more millions during the First and the Second World War and millions of babies were not allowed to be born in the times of peace... And then, Christ comes to this generation, which lives as if in terrible darkness, in order to remind them through Sister Faustina the truth about God's Mercy. If man does not turn towards God's Mercy, if he does not live according to the words: *"Jesus, I trust in You"*, and he would rather live according to the words: *"Jesus, I do not trust in You"*, then we are all bound to destroy one another. And that is why the Third Millennium that is about to begin and the new epoch must be *the epoch of mercy*.

*The canonisation of Sister Faustina is undoubtedly a great symbol. Will it be a 'breakthrough point' for the Sanctuary and its further development? Or will it only enhance the continuation of the popularisation process of the worship of God's Mercy, which we have observed since Her beatification, or even earlier?*

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It is worth making a point of the fact that Faustina is the first Polish woman to be canonised in over one thousand years of history of the Polish Church. It is very significant that an average *Kowalska*, as it is said in Poland, will be the first Polish woman saint. It is certain that Lord Jesus sends out Sister Faustina with the message of God's Mercy to the world. And she knows her place. She never moves ahead of Lord Jesus or exposes her own self. She continues to be a servant and to be fascinated with God. She keeps saying: "*Even if Thou killed me, I would not cease to trust in You.*" All the time Faustina remains in the service of God's Mercy.

*What are the basic tenets and the main idea of the development of the Łagiewniki Sanctuary? What are its theological as well as the architectural and landscape assumptions that would enable to obtain the religious objectives as well as the objectives of the worship?*

According to Professor W. Cęckiewicz, who is the chief designer, the idea of the design refers to the two beams coming out of Lord Jesus' heart – the red one and the pale one. Hence, the idea of having an oval church involves a solution according to which the radiate lines-rays come out from the altar, which is the central place in the church, and they end at the confessionals. Also the whole church is lighted from the top in such a way that it brings about the association with the rays coming out from the picture (in the altar). Thus, the design of the church, which has been given various awards, is ultra-modern. At the same time, it does not interfere with the existing church and convent complex built over one hundred years ago.

*What buildings in the sanctuary complex are going to be built?*

At present we are building a new church and its tower. At the same time, we are building the ministration facilities, such as a hall for holding conferences, symposia, lectures, etc. Simultaneous, or even more advanced, is the construction of the already mentioned The Home of Merciful Ministration. A covered corridor will link it with the church. We believe that this stage of the project implementation (in the unfinished state) will be completed by June 2001. The next stage, the finishing of the constructed buildings, will be executed depending on the financial means we have at our disposal.

*Are any other facilities, such as a pilgrim's house, planned? If crowds of pilgrims from Poland and from abroad are to come here, there will be a need for the infrastructure allowing to receive them and to attend to them and above all to make sure that they get the proper ministration.*

The Home of Merciful Ministration will partly perform the function of a pilgrim's house. There will be about 40-50 single and double rooms on its upper floors, where at least some pilgrims will be able to find accommodation. It is possible, however, that in the future – if we can afford it – we will build such houses. Yet when we look at the great sanctuaries worldwide, we can see that they do not have such houses, since the whole town becomes a hotel.

*What will be the function of the present chapel, after the new church is built? Where will the picture of Our Merciful Lord be situated?*

In my opinion it is not possible to build the Sanctuary in such a way that the old chapel is 'walled up', since anyone who prays in the new church will have the wish to visit the one in which Sister Faustina used to say her prayers. And besides, it is Sister Faustina's wish that a dozen sisters or so should be selected for the incessant adoration of the Holy Sacrament. They should also beg for mercy for the whole world. I think that it is time that the existing Sanctuary became such a place of eternal adoration and prayer for God's Mercy for the whole world. The picture will be in both buildings – in the old one and in the new one. One cannot imagine the picture being taken from the old church to the new one. There will certainly be a new picture in the new church (perhaps of different size) and the holy relics of Sister Faustina. The construction site of the new church has deliberately been located in a close vicinity of the old one, in order to avoid creating the impression that there are 'two sanctuaries'. Of course, in Łagiewniki it is not possible to introduce the solution used in Assisi, where Porcinunculla has been incorporated by the new structure.

*How many pilgrims at a time will the Sanctuary be able to receive and serve? Are there any forecasts concerning the intensification of the pilgrimage movement in Łagiewniki?*

The part of the new church that is meant for the congregation has the area of 1500 m<sup>2</sup>, while the chancel is designed for up to 100 co-celebrants. Thus, on weekdays, about one hundred more people will be able to pray in the chancel. There will also be a lower church, functioning as the central chapel, surrounded by four smaller ones. They are specially designed in such a way that it will be possible to attend there to groups of pilgrims speaking different languages. Therefore, about 5000 people will be able to find comfortable conditions for prayer in the new church.

*And how about the surroundings of the Sanctuary? There are such holidays which attract large numbers of pilgrims – sometimes as many as several*

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*hundred thousand. Are there any calculations or estimates concerning the full capacity of the Sanctuary complex?*

We have noticed that from year to year more and more pilgrims come on the Holiday of God's Mercy. Last year, from Saturday evening till Sunday evening there were about 130 thousand of them. While building the new Sanctuary we anticipate such gatherings, of course. Even an open-air altar has been designed for that purpose. On the Holiday of God's Mercy, about 200 thousand people will be able to take part in the liturgy. So the space is really a bit limited.

*At present the access to the Sanctuary is complicated and inconvenient. What communication solutions will be introduced?*

Unfortunately, the Foundation cannot solve the communication problems by itself. The authorities of the City are competent to do something about it. At the moment there is only one approach to the Sanctuary – along Sister Faustina Street. The construction of the Cracow by-pass is now being continued and in the future the best access to the Sanctuary from it will be situated in Witos Street. And anyway Witos Street is being extended onto the convent grounds, near the Wilga River, in the direction of the Zakopianka highway.

*Will there be a parking lot or, to be exact, several parking lots in the vicinity of the Sanctuary?*

We are planning a parking lot within the area of the Sanctuary grounds.

*What is the time schedule for the project implementation? When will the whole world be able to see the Sanctuary of God's Mercy in its full splendour?*

The splendour depends on the financial resources, of course. As I have already mentioned, the building in the unfinished state will be ready in 2001, but the finishing depends on the collected funds. We believe that the number of contributors will be growing and that there will not be just minor donations but also substantial contributions from rich sponsors. I think that in some four or five years the whole project will be roughly finished.

*Is there any interest in the construction of the Sanctuary? What is its scale? Are there any responses from abroad? In the letter of the Episcopate the Łagiewniki Sanctuary is mentioned as one of the three major national sacral investment projects.*

Among the millions of pilgrims who come here, Poles constituted the majority, but there are also many pilgrims from abroad. In a very natural way they become concerned with the construction process. We are also present in the Internet and anyone who is interested in this issue may obtain information there. Among the contributions for the development of the Sanctuary we have had some donations from foreign countries. They are not very numerous yet. We believe that Sister Faustina's canonisation as well as the tele-bridge, which joins St. Peter's Square and Łagiewniki on 30 April, 2000, will inform the whole world about the project and will certainly stimulate wide response.

*While saying thank you for the conversation I would like to express the wish that Sister Faustina should take care of the project. May she fulfil all the intentions conveyed to her by the Merciful Lord in her revelations. We also wish you a lot of strength, perseverance, patience and God's help, since the Sanctuary is really an impressive project and a sign for mankind entering the Third Millennium.*

*(Interview made by Father Ludwik Kaszowski; April 2000)*

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