

Saint Faustina Kowalska - a Mystical Profile Reflected in a Spiritual Autobiography

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Abstract. *Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska is an important contemporary mystic vocation from the Catholic space. Her diary represents a valuable piece of the genre of spiritual autobiography. For this reason, we will try in this research to bring into attention her spiritual life, activity and the way how she contributes to the enrichment of the spiritual literature with the ecumenical value. Together with the ones of Teresa of Calcutta and Pope John Paul the Second, her writings represent the most important contemporary spiritual autobiographies from the Catholic space in the contemporary period. For this reason, we will try there to emphasize them and to speak about the way how, through these notes, Kowalska reveals her spiritual concerns and achievements and can offer solutions to some of the problems of contemporary faithful or create bridges between the spiritualities of different Christian traditions.*

Keywords: Faustina Kowalska, Poland, mystical vocation, prayer, Eucharist, Catholic space.

1. Introduction

Spiritual autobiography passes in the latest years through a process of re-discover.¹ Aspects like the ones related with political theology, the

¹ Thanks to contemporary articles like: Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "An interdisciplinary genre in the Theological Literature: the spiritual autobiography and its landmarks for the Orthodox space," in *Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, VII (2018), no. 1, p. 145-149; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "The spiritual autobiography in the Eastern space in the second half of the XIXth and XXth centuries," in *Astra Salvensis*, III (2015), Supplement no 1 – "New Approaches in Contemporary Theology," p. 166-174; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiographies of the Orthodox space? New potential keys of lecture," in *Astra Salvensis*, V (2017), no. 10, p. 128-133; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of Applied Ethics in the Spiritual Autobiographies from the Orthodox Space in the 19th and 20th Centuries," in Camelia Ignătescu, Antonio Sandu, Tomiță Ciulei (eds.), *Proceedings Volume: Rethinking Social Action. Core Values in Practice*, Editura Lumen, Iași, Londra, 2017, p. 548-557; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiography of Dag Hammarskjöld," in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 74 (2018), no. 4, a4857, 2018, p. 1-5; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiography of Saint John of Kronstadt (1829–1908)", in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 74 (2018), no. 4, 4993, 2018, p. 1-5; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Educational aspects in the spiritual autobiography from the Orthodox space of the 19th and 20th centuries", in Ion Albulescu, Adriana-Denisa Manea, Iuliu-Marius Morariu, *Education, Religion, Family in Contemporary Society - Proceedings of the Conference*, Lambert Academic Publishing, Saarbrücken, 2017, pp. 113-123; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, Ștefan Josan, "Elements of spiritual autobiography in the literary works of Virgil Gheorghiu", in *Research and Science Today*, 6 (2016), no. 1 (11), p. 83-88; Maxim Morariu, "Saint Silouane l'Athonite el

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ones related with psychology or philology have been valorised inside different articles and books.

Still, there are many other questions that could be raised and many elements that could be presented. For this reason, we will try there to bring into attention the spiritual autobiography of an important Catholic contemporary personality, namely the religious Maria Faustina Kowalska, who offered an interesting mystic diary presenting her life and activity inside its pages, together with her concerns. We will therefore try to see how her spiritual life is reflected inside her notes and which are the aspects of actuality that can be found there. Due to the fact that we have previously approached this topic,² we will use the information from there and also other relevant sources, in an attempt to bring into attention an important work and to connect it when necessary with the relevant works from another traditions like the Orthodox ones.

2. Saint Faustina Kowalska – brief bio-bibliographic landmarks

Born on 25th of August 1905 in Glogowiec in Poland, Elena Kowalska, on her lay name, will be baptised two days later.³ When she will be 16th years old, she will start to work as a housekeeper in Alexandrov and Lodz.⁴ From a young age, she will feel the monastic call that will fill it on 1st of August 1925, when she will join the Congregation of the Sisters of Happy Virgin Mary from Warsaw.⁵ Previously, as her biographers underline, she will try to get in several monasteries, but will not be received.⁶

Here, she will work for the congregation in Cracow, but also in Plock and Vilnius,⁷ working in spaces like kitchen or garden or taking care

l'autobiographie spirituelle dans l'Eglise Orthodoxe", in *Presence d'En Calcut*, 55 (2016), no. 1, p. 35-39; Maxim (Iuliu-Marius) Morariu, *Autobiografia spirituală a lui Dag Hammarskjöld: o abordare teologică*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Argonaut, 2016; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, *Repere ale autobiografiei spirituale din spațiul ortodox în secolele XIX și XX: Ioan de Kronstadt, Siluan Athonitul și Nicolae Berdiaev*, Iassy, Lumen Press, 2019.

² Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Saint Faustina Kowalska and Saint Teresa of Calcutta – two authors of spiritual autobiographies from Catholic space of the 20th century" in *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 13, p. 231-239.

³ <http://faustina-messaggio.com/santa-faustina-biografia.htm>, accessed 23. 03. 2020.

⁴ Maria Elizabieta Siepak, "Introduzione," in Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diario. La misericordia divina nella mia anima*, Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001, p. XV.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. XV Cf. Franciszek Antoni Cegiela, *Siostra Faustyna: szafarka Miłosierdzia Bożego*, p. 7.

⁶ Maria Elizabieta Siepak, "Introduzione," p. XV.

⁷ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Saint Faustina Kowalska and Saint Teresa of Calcutta – two authors of spiritual autobiographies from Catholic space of the 20th century" in *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 13, p. 232.

of the gates and visitors. Her monastic life will be at least apparently, from 1925 and until her death from 5th of October 1938, linear. Still, there will be an aspect that will contribute to her fame and will have an important contribution to her later canonisation, made by Pope John Paul II a few decades later.⁸ It will be her diary. Therefore, as the researchers who investigated this aspect underline:

"With the approval of her confessor Father Michael Sopocho, St. Faustina recorded her visions of Jesus, Mary, and other religious apparitions (along with journaling events in her monastic life) between 1934 and 1938. It is at the beginning of her diary that she recollects an earlier vision that becomes the foundation for a later significant religious movement in the Catholic Church today known as Divine Mercy."⁹

Of course, her diary will not be spread by the lack of trust from the sisters of her congregation and later by the Vatican ones. When she spoke firstly about her visions, will be sent to a psychiatrist for examination.¹⁰ Even after this exam and after her death, she will not be considered among the accepted authors from the Catholic space. Therefore, as the researchers underline:

"For many years after her death, the Vatican not only disapproved of St. Faustina's *Diary*, but even had it "listed on the *Index of Forbidden Books*" (U.S. Catholic, May 2011). Its penetrating, ongoing discourse with Jesus provides St. Faustina's *Diary* with a pre-modern, if not medieval, tone. Her visions are unapologetic about being an anomaly for an age when mystical experience was often defined through a psychological prism or even seen as a symptom of a pathological experience. Not long after this young nun revealed her visions to a priest during confession, her superiors asked her to undergo a psychological evaluation. Miracles, visions, and

⁸ Maria Elizabieta Siepak, "Introduzione," p. XVII.

⁹ Kenneth Di Maggio, "Medieval Voices, Modern Mystic: The Continuing Tradition of Female Mystical Writing in the 20th Century Diary of St. Maria Faustina Kowalska," *International Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Society* 5 (2015), no. 4, p. 88.

¹⁰ Previously, when Saint Teresa of Avila spoke about her visions and about what God entrusted to her, she had also to face the Inquisition: Joseph Perez, *Teresa de Avila y la España de su tiempo*, Algaba Ediciones, Madrid, Mexico, Buenos Aires, San Juan, Santiago, Miami, 2007, p. 61-72. Cf. Maxim (Iuliu-Marius) Morariu, *Reperere ale autobiografiei spirituale din spațiul ortodox în secolele XIX și XX. Ioan de Kronstadt, Siluan Athonitul și Nicolae Berdiaev*, p. 52). In case of Maria Faustina Kowalska, this will not take place due to the fact that the aforementioned institution was already disappeared for many decades, but the suspicions regarding the authenticity of her visions will accompany her long time even after her departure out from this world.

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individuals experiencing stigmata and other unexplained paranormal phenomena may have been part of the Catholic Church's doctrines for centuries."¹¹

Still, Faustina will later become "a saint despite Vatican reservations"¹² and will offer to the future generations not only the testimony of a genuine mystical life that will determinate some of the contemporary theologians to ask her nomination among the "doctors" of the Catholic Church¹³, but also a very valuable diary, influenced by authors like Julian of Norwich,¹⁴ and bringing a new direction in the theological research.¹⁵

2. Saint Faustina Kowalska a mystical profile reflected in a spiritual autobiography

Hardly accepted by the Vatican and some of the Catholic officials, the diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska is, as we have already mentioned a rear piece in the genre of the spiritual autobiography. Together with the ones of Saint Pope John Paul the Second¹⁶ and the diaries of Mother Teresa

¹¹ Kenneth Di Maggio, "Medieval Voices, Modern Mystic: The Continuing Tradition of Female Mystical Writing in the 20th Century Diary of St. Maria Faustina Kowalska," p. 87.

¹² John L. Allen Jr., "A saint despite Vatican reservations," in *National Catholic Reporter*, 38 (2002), no. 37, p. 5.

¹³ Michael P. Riccards, "St. Faustina as a Doctor of the Church," in *New Oxford Review*, LXXV (2008), no. 9, p. 38-39.

¹⁴ For more information regarding his life and activity, see also: Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trad. Grace Warrack, Radford VA, Wilder Publications, 2011; Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology*, col. "Studies in Medieval Mysticism", vol. 2, Suffolk, Boydell & Brewer, 1999; Amy Frykholm, *Julian of Norwich – A contemplative biography*, Orleans, Paraclete Press, 2010; Sheila Upjohn, *In Search of Julian of Norwich*, New York, Morehouse Publishing, 2007; Julian's Gospel: Veronica Mary Rolf, *Illuminating the Life and Revelations of Julian of Norwich*, Maryknoll, Orbis Book, 2014, but also: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julian-of-Norwich>, accessed 11. 2017; <http://juliancentre.org/about/about-julian-of-norwich.html>, accessed 12. 11. 2017.

¹⁵ Kenneth Di Maggio, "Medieval Voices, Modern Mystic: The Continuing Tradition of Female Mystical Writing in the 20th Century Diary of St. Maria Faustina Kowalska," p. 91.

¹⁶ Papa Ioan Paul II, *În mâinile Domnului. Însenmări personale (1962-2003)*, translated into Romanian by Mariana Băluță- Skultéty, Constantin Geambașu, Bucharest, Humanitas Press, 2015.

of Calcutta¹⁷, the most relevant spiritual autobiographies from the Catholic space in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁸

Here, she describes her daily personal life, but also her spiritual one.¹⁹ The emphasis still, falls on the second one. Faustina is a woman that has visions, sees Christ, is deeply attached by the mystical and Eucharistic body of Christ and describes what He tells her in some of her notes. The desire to encounter Lord in his kingdom and the conscience that living on Earth makes sometimes difficult the mystical experience fills her heart with sadness. She will write about this feeling the following:

"My heart is filled with a continuous sadness because I want to come to you, Lord, in the plenitude of Thy like. O, Jesus, what a horrible desert seems to me this life; on this earth, there is not an aliment for my heart and my soul. I suffer of nostalgia for you, O God. You had left me, oh Lord, the Holy Ostia, but these wake up even more the nostalgia of my heart for Thee."²⁰

The filling of the heart with joy come with the time. The prayer and the remembrance of the name of the Lord will be elements that will contribute to that. Although she will not be among the hesychast Catholics,²¹ at least from the point of view of the theologians, she will write beautiful rows regarding the relevance of calling Jesus's name and the desire of the soul to do it:

"The name of Jesus. Oh, what great is Thy name, o Lord! It is the sustainment of my life when the force miss to me and when the darkness infiltrate inside my heart, Thy name is my son, whose' rays illuminates and bathes my soul and it makes it to rise light, getting splendour from Thy Light."²²

¹⁷ Cf. Paul Chungath, *Price of a precious pearl. Religious poverty Lived and Taught by Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta*, Delhi, ISPCK, 2009; Mother Teresa, *Where there is Love, there is God*, edited by Brian Kolodiejchuk, Detroit, New York, San Francisco, New Haven, Conn, Waterville, Maine, London, Gale Cengage Learning, 2010.

¹⁸ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "An interdisciplinary genre in the Theological Literature: the spiritual autobiography and its landmarks for the Orthodox space," p. 146.

¹⁹ Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diario. La misericordia divina nella mia anima*, Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001. Cf. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Saint Faustina Kowalska and Saint Teresa of Calcutta – two authors of spiritual autobiographies from Catholic space of the 20th century" in *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 13, p. 234.

²⁰ Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diario. La misericordia divina nella mia anima*, p. 316.

²¹ Iuvenalie Ionașcu, *L'esperienza della preghiera di Gesù nella spiritualità Romana*, Citta del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002, p. 154.

²² Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diario. La misericordia divina nella mia anima*, p. 314.

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Her notes, that look tremendously similar with the ones of another contemporary religious vocation, but coming from the Orthodox space,²³ although the two ones have never met or knew one about the other, could be surely used to create bridges about the spiritualities of the two Christian traditions.

Still, due to the fact that the Orthodox tradition did not encounter yet in the last two centuries, feminine models to write this category of notes and the Protestant different ones were dominated by personalities like the one of John Wesley²⁴ or Dag Hammarskjöld,²⁵ there are some particularities of the writing, generated by the fact that the author is a woman. In the motherhood tradition, namely in the Catholic one, it can be also found in the notes of the aforementioned religious vocation, but also, more deeply in the one of Saint Teresa of Avila,²⁶ that we think that she influenced the Polish mystical vocation. It is the idea of matrimony with Christ. The fact that she is a nun, makes her to wish to be a wife of Christ. Her relationship with Christ is expressed in words that look like the ones of a special book of the Bible, and are filled of the emotions like the ones of the in love people. In a special situation, she will write:

"Oh, my Jesus, life of my heart, my Saviour, my sweet husband, and in the same time, my judger, You know that in my last moments I will not trust in one of my merits, but only in your mercy. Starting from this moment, I entrust myself to the chasm of your mercy, which is always open for any soul.

Oh, my Jesus, I have only one mission in my life, in my death for all the eternity, and this is the one to adore you and your uncountable Mercy. Nobody, not even between the angels, nor between people will succeed to praise the mystery of your Mercy."²⁷

²³ Namely Saint Silouane the Athonite. See: Saint Silouane the Athonite, *Între iadul deznădejzii și iadul smereniei – însemnări duhovnicești*, translated into Romanian language by Ioan Ică jr., Alba-Iulia, Deisis Press, 1994; Saint Silouane the Athonite, *Ecrits Spirituels – extraits*, traduits par L. A. Lassus, Begrolles en Mauges, Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1976.

²⁴ John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.*, edited by W. Reignald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Abingdon, Abingdon Press, 1988.

²⁵ Cf. Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, London, Faber and Faber, 1972; Bernhard Erling, *A Reader's Guide to Dag Hammarskjöld's Waymarks*, St. Peter, Minnesota, 2010, Maxim (Iuliu-Marius) Morariu, *Autobiografia spirituală a lui Dag Hammarskjöld – o abordare teologică*, Cluj-Napoca, Argonaut Publishing House, 2016.

²⁶ Thérèsed'Avila, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 1948; Saint Teresa of Avila, *Castelul interior*, translated into Romanian language by Christian Tămaș, Iassy, Ars Longa Publishing House, 1995.

²⁷ Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diario. La misericordia divina nella mia anima*, p. 511.

There will not be a linear relationship of the Polish nun with God, although this is how it can look to a first glance her diary. Sometimes she will feel him closer and in other situations, like other mystical vocations, like Teresa or Silouane the Athonite, will wait for God's mercy to descend upon her soul and fill it with joy. Prayers, love for the neighbour, good deeds and many other elements will contribute to the creation of an intrinsic state of soul that where God could find his place or, in some situations, to one where God will not feel as welcomed.²⁸

Shortly previously her departure from this world and the meeting with Christ in her kingdom, the joy that previously had fluctuations, will increase and will become a very profound state of Faustina's soul. A few days before her departure, she will therefore write inside her diary:

"Today my heart prepares for the Holy Communion like for a nuptial banquet, where all the ones who participate shine an unbelievable beauty. I am also invited to this banquet, but I do not see myself in this beauty, but in an abyss of dirtiness. And because I do not feel worthy to sit at the table, I infiltrate myself at the legs of Jesus and eat the crumbs that fall under the table. Because I know your Mercy, for this I come to Thee, oh Jesus, because I want to leave my dirtiness before it will run out the piety of Your Heart...

16. Today, the Majesty of God wraps me. I do not succeed in any way to react in order to prepare me better. I am taken and totally surrounded by God. My heart burns of his love. I have the total confirmation of the fact that I love and I am loved. And this is enough for me. I will endeavour during the day to be faithful to the Holy Spirit and to correspond to His expectances. I try to have the interior silence, for being able to hear His voice..."²⁹

It will be this the last note that will testimony that Faustina departed for the meeting with her beloved Christ in a positive state of heart, hoping for his mercy that he praised during her life. Her notes remain an important document for the mystical theology and show that the encounter with Him in this life is possible and can come as a pre-taste of the one from the eternity.

²⁸ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Saint Faustina Kowalska and Saint Teresa of Calcutta – two authors of spiritual autobiographies from Catholic space of the 20th century" in *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 13, p. 237.

²⁹ Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diario. La misericordia divina nella mia anima*, p. 598-599.

Conclusion

As we have also tried to prove in this research, the diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska can be surely considered an important piece of the spiritual autobiography, not only from the Catholic space, but also from the Ecumenical area. It offers not only interesting meditations regarding the purpose of life or narratives about the mystical encounters of the writer with Christ in the Eucharist or by visions, but also a testimony regarding the possibility of the eternal life. In the same time, it speaks about the dynamics of the relationships with God and contemporary problems, like depressions or sadness and the possibility to achieve joy in one's life. For this reasons, a contemporary reader can find solutions to his problems, while a theologian can find aspects of scientific theology that can be later valorised in treaties or works of doctrinaire theology. In the same time, from the stylistic and compositional point of view, her diary can be surely considered synthesis of a rich tradition where works like the ones of Augustine,³⁰ Julian of Norwich³¹ or Teresa of Avila³² have generated a strong tradition of the genre and offered landmarks of this category of writings, but also an interdisciplinary writing that can be surely used to create bridges with other spiritualities from the Christian tradition³³ and can contribute to the re-discover of the spiritual autobiography and its relevance for the Christian tradition.

³⁰ Cf. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991.

³¹ Cf. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*; Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology*; Amy Frykholm, *Julian of Norwich – A contemplative biography*; Sheila Upjohn, *In Search of Julian of Norwich*; Julian's Gospel: Veronica Mary Rolf, *Illuminating the Life and Revelations of Julian of Norwich*.

³² Cf. Thérèse d'Avila, *Oeuvres complètes*; Saint Teresa of Avila, *Castelul interior*; Saint Teresa of Avila, *Cartea vieții mele*, translated into Romanian language by Christian Tămaș, Iassy, Pres of European Insitute, 1994; Elena Carrera, *Teresa of Avila's autobiography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005; Saint Teresa of Avila, *Întemeierile*, translated into Romanian language by Christian Tămaș, Iassy, Ars Longa Press, 1998.

³³ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "An interdisciplinary genre in the Theological Literature: the spiritual autobiography and its landmarks for the Orthodox space," in *Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, VII (2018), no. 1, p. 145.