



Mercy – the Greatest Attribute of the Holy Trinity according to Sister Faustina Kowalska

DARIUSZ KOWALCZYK

Pontificia Università Gregoriana

Rzym

ORCID: 0000-0002-6469-2443

Miłosierdzie – największy atrybut Trójcy Świętej według Siostry Faustyny Kowalskiej

STRESZCZENIE

Prawda o Bożym miłosierdziu została w ostatnich latach na różne sposoby przypominana i uwypuklona. Tym bardziej warto pamiętać o Siostrze Faustynie Kowalskiej, która już w latach trzydziestych ubiegłego wieku pod wpływem mistycznych doświadczeń zapisywała w swoim *Dzienniczku* oryginalne myśli o Miłosierdziu. Jedną z nich jest stwierdzenie, że Miłosierdzie jest największym atrybutem Boga. Z takim sformułowaniem nie zgodziłby się prawdopodobnie żaden z teologów tamtego czasu. Bo czy w ogóle można stopniować Boże atrybuty? A jeśli tak, to dlaczego akurat miłosierdzie miałoby być największym atrybutem? Jednak w perspektywie historio-zbawczej takie stwierdzenie nie tylko można obronić, ale okazuje się ono inspirujące do różnych dalszych rozważań teologicznych. „Bóg jest miłością” – czytamy u św. Jana. A zatem możemy wyłączyć miłość z listy Bożych atrybutów, a następnie spojrzeć na atrybuty nie w sposób abstrakcyjny, ale jako na atrybuty właśnie miłości. W takiej perspektywie miłosierdzie jawi się jako pierwszy atrybut Boga, który umiłował świat.

Słowa kluczowe: Faustyna Kowalska, mistyka, Boże atrybuty, miłosierdzie, miłość

* * *

Today everyone seems to be talking about Mercy. “For me it is a »sign of particular times« the fact – says Benedict XVI – that the idea of God’s Mercy becomes more central and dominant – starting with Sister Faustina, whose visions in various ways reflect deeply on the image

of God proper to man today and his desire for divine goodness”¹. On the first Sunday after his election Pope Francis expressed that: “Jesus has this message for us: mercy. I think – and I say it with humility – that this is the Lord’s most powerful message: mercy”². John Paul II, on the other hand, indicates mercy as “the most astounding attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer”³. Angelo Roncalli, the future John XXIII, wrote in 1940: “It is well said that our miseries are the throne of Divine Mercy. To say it even better, the most beautiful name and designation of God is this: Mercy”⁴. Before Francis, Benedict XVI and John Paul II, however, there was an unassuming Polish nun, Faustina Kowalska, who wrote in her *Diary*: “Oh, how great is the mercy of the Lord; it surpasses all His other qualities! Mercy is the greatest attribute of God; everything that surrounds me speaks to me of this” (D. 611)⁵. In the 1930’s, there was probably no theologian who would have agreed with such a statement.

1. The mysticism and the theology

6 —————
“It wouldn’t be an overstatement to say that theology pays special attention to saints and spiritual authors. We are well aware of the differences in literary genres, and of how the voice of those who have had a profound experience with God is a source of enrichment of a credible reflection regarding mystery”⁶. These Luis Ladaria’s words invite us to dive into a treasure of prayers and learn from the experiences of diverse mystical authors to speak about God, who is One and in Three Persons.

Not only spiritual, but also physical experience, seems to be, from the very beginning, a necessary requirement to preach and to think about faith. The Apostle John tells us: “What [...] we ourselves have actually heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have contemplated and what our own hands have touched, that is, the Word of life, [...] what we ourselves have seen and heard, we proclaim to you” (1 John 1:1-3). Our faith is based

¹ Intervista a S.S. il papa emerito Benedetto XVI sulla questione della giustificazione per la fede, in ed. Daniele Libanori, *Per mezzo della fede* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2016), 128.

² Pope Francis, “Homily during the Holy Mass in the Parish of St. Anna in Vatican, 17.03.2013”, access 10 October, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130317_omelia-santa-anna.html.

³ John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 13, access 10 October, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html.

⁴ Ang. lo G. Roncalli (Giovanni XXIII), *Il Giornale dell’Anima*, ed. Alberto Melloni (Bologna: Istituto per le Scienze Religiose di Bologna, 1987), 350.

⁵ D. = Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diary. Divine Mercy in My Soul* (Stockbridge: Marian-Press, 2019).

⁶ Luis F. Ladaria, *La Trinità mistero di comunione* (Milano: Paoline, 2004), 179.

on the Apostles' experience that was a unique and unrepeatable experience. However, it does not mean that the faithful cannot have their own, personal, strong and credible experience when meeting with God. On the contrary, the generation of faithful, saints and mystics, bear witness to experience with God that, even if it remains dependent on the founding experience of the Apostles, it surprises us with its freshness and originality. For St. Ignatius of Loyola this experience was so powerful that in His *Autobiography* he stated "These things he saw strengthened him then and always gave him such strength in his faith that he has often thought to himself: if there were no Scriptures to teach us these matters of faith, he would be resolved to die for them, solely because of what he has seen"⁷.

Nowadays we have become more aware that theology cannot consist only of abstract speculation⁸. In particular, theology has to refer to Christian experience, to spiritual horizon, sustained and enlivened by the Holy Spirit who guides us towards the whole truth (see J 16:13). Vatican Council II affirmed: "This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience"⁹. Thus, immediately, we are facing a problem of defining the following terms: experience, religious experience, Christian experience and mystical experience. The reality suggested by these notions not only is very complex, but also lively and dynamic. To grasp it, we don't need so much precise definitions, but descriptive accounts, drawn from different perspectives. H. G. Gadamer writes: "The concept of experience – however paradoxical this may sound – seems to me to be counted among the least clear we possess"¹⁰.

Gerald O'Collins indicates 7 general aspects of experience: 1. Experience is a process, but also a condition that results from it; 2. Experience allows direct contact between the subject and the object; 3. Experience is conditioned by various historical, social and religious factors; 4. Every experience brings forth passivity and activity of the subject; 5. Experience is self-evident, but it can be modified by other experiences; 6. Experiences

⁷ Ignatius of Loyola, *A Pilgrim's Testament*, translated by Parmandanda R. Divarkar (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), no. 29.

⁸ See Dariusz Kowalczyk, "La Trinità-Misericordia nell'esperienza mistica di Faustina Kowalska", *Studia Bobolanum* 4 (2013): 75-95.

⁹ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, no. 8, access 10 October, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

¹⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Verità e metodo*, vol. I, traduzione di Gianni Vattimo (Milano: Bompiani, 1983), 401.

are subject to interpretation; 7. There is a close connection between personal experience and tradition¹¹. Religious experience would be that type of human experience where one's relation to God is rediscovered, taking into consideration one's entire personality and all aspects of one's life. This experience is always a mediated one: Grzegorz Strzelczyk argues that "God cannot be experienced by man in his essence. What is grasped directly by man are the effects of the presence and actions of God"¹². The Christian experience, on the other hand, is a religious experience that refers to God revealed in Jesus Christ, that is, to God one and three: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The apex of such an experience is mystical, understood not necessarily as an extraordinary experience accompanied by strange phenomena and reserved for a few chosen people, but rather as the end of every Christian life.

The mystical experience is not only something strange and obscure, but it brings with itself mystical knowledge which – when critically elaborated – can act as a source for systematic theology. One of the thinkers who examined the question of mystical knowledge is Maurice Blondel¹³. The French philosopher points out that there is no opposition between love and knowledge. Thus, if the core of mysticism consists in love, it constitutes real knowledge. This comprehensiveness is founded in God himself who is love and as such is not unintelligible. Even if Blondel's observation is generally correct, it should be noted that mystical experiences are very different because of their cognitive value. Therefore, one speaks of mystical knowledge, but also of non-knowledge or of dark and negative knowledge. In any case, the question arises of translating sometimes a-conceptual mystical knowledge into conceptual reflection. It happens that the mystic herself receives this translation from God that can become an explicit message for the Church.

Mystical knowledge – like any type of knowledge – has its limitations and conditions. The mystic generally knows nothing more what Church teaches, at least implicitly, and what theologians can achieve with their reflection. However, they can rediscover, deepen or confirm some aspect of faith with existential and emotional strength. Then, every mystical experience is limited by the mystic's historical, cultural and social conditions as well as by her ability to communicate the lived experience to others. The process of experiencing God to expressing this experience is difficult, if not problematic. Mystical experiences are analogical and should be

¹¹ See Gerald O'Collins, "Experience", in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, eds. René Latourelle, Rino Fisichella (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 306-309.

¹² Grzegorz Strzelczyk, *L'esperienza mistica come "locus theologicus"*. *Status quaestionis* (Varese: EUPRESS FTL, 2005), 26.

¹³ See Maurice Blondel, *Qu'est-ce que la mystique?* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1925).

compared with the teaching of the magisterium and with theology. Even if mysticism has its own authority, it cannot justify itself. The saints and their mystical knowledge should be treated with respect and attention, but at the same time in a critical way in the light of the *depositum fidei* safeguarded by the Church.

The theologian who wants to draw on mystical experiences in his/her systematic reflection should, on the one hand, be critical of mystical testimony, and on the other, be open to its true and original meaning. Otherwise he/she risks repeating only the mystic's words as a pure illustration of his/her theses. The purpose of mysticism is quite practical: mystical experiences strengthen the individual who is first called by God and who then serves the whole community in his concrete life of faith. Within this practical and devotional purpose, however, there is understanding of the experienced mysticism that can enrich the theologian's systematic discourse. One should be careful of not dividing but distinguishing these two levels. The notable difference between mysticism and systematic theology can be also found in language. The mystics sometimes challenge the linguistic limits that leads to symbolic paradoxes or silence. A theologian, on the other hand, wants to be clear and as far as possible precise in a web of concepts and sentences. One cannot say, however, that theological language is always superior to the mystical one. There are in fact several legitimate languages which in their own way express the mysteries of faith. The important thing is that there is an affinity and translatability between them. The mysticism of Sister Faustina Kowalska is one of the cases that shows us how a mystical experience can influence life of the Church and the reflections of the theologians.

2. The mysticism of the attributes

The mysticism of Sister Faustina can be called the mysticism of God's attributes¹⁴. "On one occasion" – Kowalska writes – "I was reflecting on the Holy Trinity, on the essence of God. I absolutely wanted to know and fathom who God is" (D. 30). In fact, in an instant, Sister Faustina was taken to another reality where she saw the inaccessible light. However, instead of getting to know the essence of God, she heard a voice from that light: "Who God is in His Essence, no one will fathom, neither the mind of Angels nor of man" (D. 30). Then Jesus appeared to her and said: "Get to know God by contemplating His attributes" (D. 30).

This experience of Faustina is in compliance with different theological-spiritual currents regarding either the unknowable essence of the in-

¹⁴ See Dariusz Kowalczyk, "La Misericordia: il più grande attributo di Dio secondo Suor Faustina Kowalska", *La Chiesa nel Tempo* 1 (2016): 45-65.

tra-divine life or God's action in creation and in history that allows us to know God in His attributes. Charles André Bernard is convinced that "to the extent that one wonders whether mystical knowledge reaches who God is in Himself, one must answer negatively"¹⁵. Eastern Christianity – following Gregory Palamas – acknowledges the difference between the essence of God and His energies (operations), a distinction which had been already known to the Greek Fathers. In Eastern spirituality, the divine essence remains inaccessible, unknowable and incommunicable, the energies, instead of being the uncreated modalities of God Himself in the world, ensure that God not only makes Himself known, but that He also divinizes man. What Palamas calls divine "energies" is expressed in the Bible by various terms such as "glory" or "light". The mystical experience of Sister Faustina participates in that great tradition of contemplating God. The Polish Saint writes about it in Her *Diary*: "My spirit rushed toward God with all its might. During that time, the Lord gave me much light to know His attributes" (D. 180).

However, the expression the "Mystic of Divine attributes" seems too generic in relation to the spiritual experience of Faustina Kowalska. In fact, she should be called the Mystic of the Attribute of Mercy. In her *Diary* Mercy is called the greatest attribute of God. Jesus not only communicates it to Faustina, but entrusts her with the task of being the Apostle of Mercy: "Proclaim that mercy is the greatest attribute of God. All of the works of My hands are crowned with Mercy" (D. 301). However, these revelations remain private. And even if Sister Faustina has been beatified and canonized, and the cult according to the *Diary* is spreading throughout the Church, there can be doubts as to whether it is truly correct to say that Mercy is the greatest attribute of God. Why should Mercy be considered the greatest attribute of God? Does the doctrine of Divine attributes allow us to formulate such argument?

The doctrine of God's attributes has two distinct, but not separate sources: the Bible and natural theology. Both sources are based on the analogy between creation and Creator. In the Book of Wisdom we read: "For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator" (13:5). We find the same thought in the Letter to the Romans: "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (1:20). This teaching, developed by Scholasticism was confirmed by the Lateran Council IV (DS 800) and by Vatican Council I. The latter states: "that there is one true

¹⁵ Charles A. Bernard, "Conoscenza e amore nella vita mistica", in *La mistica. Fenomenologia e riflessione teologica*, eds. Ermanno Ancilli, Maurizio Paparozzi, vol. II (Roma: Citta Nuova, 1984), 265.

and living God, Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, Almighty, Eternal, Immense, Incomprehensible, Infinite in intelligence, in will, and in all perfection, who, as being one, sole, absolutely simple and immutable spiritual substance, is to be declared as really and essentially distinct from the world...” (DS 3001). The doctrine of attributes is based on the philosophy of the participation of creation in divine perfections, but at the same time it cannot ignore the fact that – as the Fourth Lateran Council teaches – “for between creator and creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them” (DS 806).

There are different classifications of Divine Attributes. Drawing on the threefold discourses of God (*negative, causalitatis, eminentiae*), St. Thomas distinguishes three categories of names (attributes): the names that are attributed to God in a negative sense (i.e. infinite, that is, non-finite); the names that indicate God’s relationship with creation (i.e. provident); and the names attributed to God in the absolute way (good, wise)¹⁶. But even the latter, that are positively attributed to the Divine Essence, cannot completely define the Essence of God. Aquinas then distinguishes between the divine entitative attributes and the operative ones. Among the first ones, which are the properties of the *Esse ipsum*, Thomas considers eight of them: simplicity, perfection, goodness, infinity, the presence of God in things, immutability, eternity and unity. Instead, the main operational attributes, which concern divine operations, would be: science, truth, life, will, love, justice, mercy, providence, power. Those attributes are divided into immanent (intra-divine) operations and operations that bring about the external consequence to God. St. Thomas affirms that “it is proper for God to use Mercy because it particularly manifests His omnipotence”¹⁷. But this does not mean that Aquinas considers Mercy as one of the leading divine attributes.

3. The greatest attribute?

Let us return to the questions stated above: Why mercy should be the greatest of all listed and classified attributes? What is the meaning of a distinction between the “smallest” and “greatest” attributes of God? And if we would be able to put the attributes into separate categories, what this gradation would actually mean? In what sense can some attributes be greater than others? From the point of view of scholastic theology, everything in God is one, except for the relations of opposition within God, so there is no difference between the attributes of divine nature and the divine nature

¹⁶ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 1, c.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 30, a. 4.

itself. In this way, all the attributes would be identical with the nature of God and none of them could be referred to as the greatest. Despite this, there have been enough theologians who were trying to identify the divine attribute that would express more adequately the difference between the Creator and creation. Moreover, that difference would contain all the other attributes, and, in a sense, this distinction would be the primary one. The Scotist School saw the greatest attribute of God in infinity. The Thomist School, on the other hand, saw it in *asitas* or *perseitas* (subsistence). Neither mercy nor love were treated as God's greatest attribute.

However, after numerous anthropological turns in theology, the doctrine of attributes has been seen not so much in an abstract perspective of divine essence, but rather in a historical perspective, in a relationship between God and man. Knowing God from nature and revelation, man begins to speak of divine properties as important for his salvation. It is evident that perfections in God are all perfect and as such they are not "smaller" or "bigger", "more perfect" or "less perfect". However, from the point of view of human destiny we can distinguish the attributes that concern us in a particular way, those which amaze us and attract us more than others. In addition, it should be emphasized that God has revealed Himself to the fullest in his incarnate Son, in a concrete history of Jesus Christ. Similarly, the divine attributes are realized at their best in a person and in the works of Jesus. Now, if we observe the face of the Crucified and Risen Christ, we appreciate, for example, not so much His omnipotence and eternity, but love and mercy. Thus, in his Encyclical on God's mercy, John Paul II writes: "Some theologians affirm that mercy is the greatest of the attributes and perfections of God, and the Bible, Tradition and the whole faith life of the People of God provide particular proofs of this. It is not a question here of the perfection of the inscrutable essence of God in the mystery of the divinity itself, but of the perfection and attribute whereby man, in the intimate truth of his existence, encounters the living God particularly closely and particularly often"¹⁸.

It is possible that John Paul II was thinking about Ignacy Różycki when he was writing "some theologians" in the passage above. The Polish theologian was asked by Card. Karol Wojtyła to engage in a critical study of Divine Mercy, drawing on Sister Faustina Kowalska's message. Reflecting on Faustina's *Diary*, Różycki says that mercy is defined indirectly in it, that is, from the perspective of God's action in the world. And if we align the attributes in order of the magnitude of their actions, mercy would take the first place because of its greatest effects in the world. Therefore, Różycki affirms that the statement: "Mercy is the greatest attribute of God" "is

¹⁸ John Paul II, no. 13.

doctrinally unassailable”¹⁹. Walter Kasper calls mercy the “God’s defining attribute”²⁰ and demonstrates that it occupies the first place in the history of the salvation in the Old and New Testaments. Therefore “we should treat mercy not as an appendix to the exposition of God’s attributes, but rather as the organizing center of God’s attributes, with the other attributes grouped around it”²¹.

4. The Trinitarian perspective

It wouldn’t be sufficient, however, if we took into consideration only mercy’s effects in the world to show its primacy amongst all the divine attributes. We are convinced that the Trinitarian perspective is critical to argue that mercy is in fact the greatest attribute. Commenting on Balthasar, Luis Ladaria writes: “From Trinitarian love all divine attributes should receive their meaning and their color; they are all manifestations of love that can only be understood from the perspective of Divine Trinity”²². In Faustina’s *Diary* we find the Trinitarian dimension as well. In fact, mercy is not an abstract and generic property of God, it is the attribute of Trinitarian love.

The figure of Jesus Christ is undoubtedly at the center of the message regarding Divine Mercy. “I am Mercy Itself” (D. 1273) – the Lord says to Sister Faustina in one of her visions. However, Faustina’s message does not diminish the truth regarding the source of mercy within Trinitarian life: the Father (see D. 949). In fact, Mercy, manifested in Christ’s Paschal Mystery, is the way that leads to the Father. On the other hand, the Father’s Mercy, which is the principle of everything, has already been revealed in the work of creation. In the *Diary* we read: “God, who in Your Mercy have deigned to call man from nothingness into being [...] You had no need of us at all to be happy” (*Diary* 1743). Thus, the act of creation *ex nihilo* should be seen as an act of mercy of God and above all of the Father Creator. In a prayer

¹⁹ Ignacy Różycki, *Il culto della divina misericordia* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), 83.

²⁰ Walter Kasper, *Mercy. The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014), 83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

²² Ladaria, 159. Kasper also indicates the Trinitarian dimension of Divine mercy: “The trinity of God is, therefore, the inner presupposition of God’s mercy, just as, conversely, his mercy is the revelation and mirror of his essence. In God’s mercy, the eternal, self-communicating love of the father, Son, and Holy Spirit is mirrored and revealed. We can go another step further in order to penetrate as deeply as possible into the mystery of divine mercy. Thus far we said: mercy is not actualization of God, but rather the mirror of the inner Trinitarian essence of God. Now we must add: in mercy, God’s Trinitarian essence is admittedly not actualized, but it does become reality for us and in us in a concrete way” (Kasper, 93).

composed by Sister Faustina we read: “Divine Mercy, gushing forth from the bosom of the Father, I trust in You” (D. 949).

Mercy, however, is never explicitly defined as an attribute of the Holy Spirit, unless the other Persons are mentioned and mercy is indicated as the Trinity’s attribute. Similarly, we have no image of the Holy Spirit, unless it includes the Father and the Son. Nevertheless, the Spirit is always present in the Saint’s experiences: “The infinite love of God swept over me. My soul was in communion with the Holy Spirit, who is the same Lord, as the Father and the Son” (D. 1781). Faustina is well aware that without a guidance of the Spirit her revelations would be worthless. Therefore, before she starts writing, the Polish Saint turns to the Third Person of the Trinity and asks for the grace of discernment. Sister Faustina’s Pentecostal experience of mercy is compatible with the affirmation of John Paul II that Christ pours out mercy on humanity when sending the Spirit. So, the Father is the source of mercy, the Son is mercy incarnated and the Holy Spirit is the condition of possibility to understand and accept Divine mercy.

In any case, God’s mercy is represented in Sister Faustina’s *Diary* as the attribute that springs from the Holy Trinity (see D. 522, 949). Faustina often turns to the whole Trinity as the source of mercy, as in the following example: “I want to glorify Your Mercy, Most Holy Trinity” (D. 163). The symbolic images that Sister Faustina uses to convey the greatness of Divine mercy never lose their strictly personal, Trinitarian perspective. For example, “the ocean of God’s Mercy” is not understood as an abstract attribute, but as the infinite space between the Three of the Trinity (see D. 225). The “abyss of Mercy” is the abyss of the relational Triune God (see D. 283). The sinful man is immersed in this Trinitarian abyss: “O Holy Trinity, [...] our nothingness and our misery are drowned in Your greatness” (D. 361). Even when Faustina speaks of mercy present in the Eucharist, she explicitly indicates the Trinity: “O Blessed Host, in whom is contained the Mercy of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit towards us” (D. 356).

5. Mercy – the greatest attribute of Trinitarian love

Mercy, therefore concerns all three Persons. Moreover, it concerns the effects of Trinitarian action in the world. However, in the intradivine life, outside the world, there is no mercy. In fact, Father loves His Son eternally, but there is no need for Him to show mercy towards the Son. The intra-Trinitarian manifestations communicate not mercy, but love. The One and Triune God has always already been Love. Thus all God’s attributes cannot be abstract, because they express Trinitarian Love. Therefore, we shall agree with the French Jesuit, François Varillon, who excludes love from the list of

the attributes: “Love is not God’s attribute among many others, because all divine attributes belong to Love. Undoubtedly, this affirmation cannot be justified in all its rigor except in the meditation of the Trinitarian mystery. [...] God is not love *as* justice, holiness, light, power. It is Love that is Holy, Righteous, and Almighty. God is not the Almighty because He loves, as if love tempered or at least directed His power. He is Love whose infinite power leads always more towards His creative impulse, towards death [...] and forgiveness, supreme gratuitousness”²³.

If we apply Varillon perspective to validate a statement: “Mercy is the greatest attribute of God”, we should not conceptualize mercy as love, nor underestimate the concept of “love” in favor of “mercy”. In fact, God is Love in Himself. Mercy would be the first attribute of Divine Love according to the order of creation and salvation. In other words, God’s Love is holy, and just, amongst His many attributes, but above all, His Love is merciful. God in Himself, outside the world, is Pure Love. Mercy, therefore, does not simply present another name for Love, and it is not its competitor. It characterizes Love because mercy originates in it. As Balthasar points out: “We must now exhibit mercy as an ontological modality of love in its own right”²⁴. Therefore, Sister Faustina’s expression: “The Love of God the Flower, and Mercy the Fruit” (D. 949) can be understood as a distinction between Love as God and Mercy as the greatest Divine attribute. Ignacy Różycki calls mercy “essential attribute of the Divine Substance”²⁵ that is nothing else than Trinitarian Love. As such, Love is revealed primarily as Mercy in interaction with a human being. It is in such a context that Mercy is the greatest attribute. This interpretation is suggested to us by Faustina herself: “Mercy is the flower of love, God is love, and Mercy is his deed. In love it is conceived; in mercy it is revealed” (D. 651).

Faustina’s concept of Divine mercy recalls the modern mystic, Madre Trinidad, who also speaks of mercy as the greatest attribute of God: “Although mercy is not an intrinsically essential attribute of God, in his consubstantial and infinite glorification, it is what makes the mystery of incarnation became transcendent, possible, overflowing, majestic and shining. In such a manner that, for the man’s thought that does not know well how deep divine arcane founded and how unfathomable of infinitive being, mercy is the greatest attribute of divine attributes, and the most comforting, the most tender and full of hope. Hence, what would have happen on us,

²³ François Varillon, *Un compendio della fede cattolica*, translated by Marco Chiolerio (Bologna: EDB, 2007), 26-27.

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, vol. II, *Truth of God*, translated by Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 143.

²⁵ Różycki, 83.

if Christ, the Incarnate Mercy, had not redeemed us?”²⁶. The above statement is surprisingly deep from a theological point of view, especially if we take into account that the author has no philosophical or theological education. It places the issues of God’s attributes in a soteriological perspective. Therefore, mercy is the greatest attribute, even if it is not one intrinsically essential to God.

6. Conclusion: Trust as the greatest answer

We can summarize our reflections in three points: 1. Faustina Kowalska’s *Diary* constitutes a *locus theologicus* for a theology of the attributes of God’s trinity; 2. The statement “Mercy is the greatest attribute of God” is debatable, but it is also defensible in a perspective of the creative and salvific action of the Holy Trinity; 3. God is Trinitarian Love and His first attribute – in the economic perspective – is Mercy.

Let us add to our conclusion, that the attributes of the Holy Trinity are not merely something that philosophers and theologians can discuss. Above all, they present a challenge to provide a response from personal and community perspectives. In Faustina Kowalska’s *Diary* we read many times about trust in God as the right answer to the significance of God’s mercy. During the visions concerning the image of Merciful Jesus, Sister Faustina heard those words: “Paint the image according to the drawing you see, with the signature: Jesus, I trust in You” (D. 47). The trust that the Apostle of Mercy communicates to us is not simply a cheerful optimism that everything will certainly be fine. Those who trust in God are aware of the destructive power of sin and evil, and this is the reason why they consecrate themselves ever more to God’s Mercy. Therefore, in the context of evil that threatens man, not only in the temporal dimensions but above all in the eternal dimension, the greatest attribute of God is mercy, in response to which the greatest human attribute is trust.

Bibliography

Balthasar von Han Urs. *Theo-Logic*, vol. II, *Truth of God*. Translated by Adrian J. Walker. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004.

²⁶ Madre Trinidad de la Santa Madre Iglesia, *Dio è Colui che Si E’* (Roma-Madrid: L’opera della Chiesa, 2001), 17.

- Bernard A. Charles. "Conoscenza e amore nella vita mistica". In *La mistica. Fenomenologia e riflessione teologica*, editors Ermanno Ancilli, Maurizio Paparozzi, vol. II. Roma: Citta Nuova, 1984, 253-293.
- Blondel Maurice. *Qu'est-ce que la mystique?* Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1925.
- Francis. *Homily during the Holy Mass in the Parish of St. Anna in Vatican, 17.03.2013*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013.
- Gadamer Hans-Georg. *Verità e metodo*. Vol. I, traduzione di Gianni Vattimo. Milano: Bompiani, 1983.
- Ignatius of Loyola. *A Pilgrim's Testament*. Translated by Parmandanda R. Divarkar. Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995.
- John Paul II. *Dives in Misericordia*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1980.
- Kasper Walter. *Mercy. The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*. New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014.
- Kowalczyk Dariusz. "La Misericordia: il più grande attributo di Dio secondo Suor Faustina Kowalska", *La Chiesa nel Tempo*, nr 1 (2016): 45-65.
- Kowalczyk Dariusz. "La Trinità-Misericordia nell'esperienza mistica di Faustina Kowalska", *Studia Bobolanum*, nr 4 (2013): 75-95.
- Kowalska Maria Faustina. *Diary. Divine Mercy in My Soul*. Stockbridge: MarianPress, 2019.
- Ladaria F. Luis. *La Trinità mistero di comunione*. Milano: Paoline, 2004.
- Libanori Daniele, ed. *Per mezzo della fede*. Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2016.
- Madre Trinidad de la Santa Madre Iglesia, *Dio è Colui che Si E'*. Roma-Madrid: L'opera della Chiesa, 2001.
- O'Collins Gerald. "Experience". In *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*. Editos. René Latourelle, Rino Fisichella, 306-309. New York: Crossroad, 1994.
- Roncalli G. Angelo (Giovanni XXIII). *Il Giornale dell'Anima*. Editor Alberto Melloni. Bologna: Istituto per le Scienze Religiose di Bologna, 1987.
- Różycki Ignacy. *Il culto della divina misericordia*. Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002.
- Strzelczyk Grzegorz, *L'esperienza mistica come "locus theologicus". Status quaestionis*. Varese: EUPRESS FTL, 2005.
- Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. Any edition.
- Vatican Council II. *Dogmatic constitution on divine revelation "Dei verbum"*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965.
- Varillon François. *Un compendio della fede cattolica*. Translated by Marco Chiolerio. Bologna: EDB, 2007.

**Mercy – the Greatest Attribute of the Holy Trinity
according to Sister Faustina Kowalska**

SUMMARY

The truth about God's mercy has been recently recalled from different perspectives and emphasized in various ways. It shall be remembered that drawing on her mystical experiences, Sister Faustina Kowalska, wrote down in her *Diary* in the 1930's original thoughts on Mercy. One of them is the statement that Mercy is the greatest attribute of God. Probably none of the theologians of that time would agree with such a formulation. How could it be possible to rate God's attributes? And if so, why should mercy be the greatest attribute? However, in the perspective of history and salvation, such a statement not only could be upheld, but it could also inspire further theological considerations. We read in St. John that "God is Love". Thus, we can exclude love from the list of God's attributes, and then look at the attributes not in an abstract way, but as attributes of love. From this perspective, mercy appears as the first attribute of God who loved the world.

Keywords: Faustina Kowalska, Mysticism, God's attributes, Mercy, Love