

**2d SUNDAY OF EASTER – A (May 1, 2011)**  
**Fr. Jerry Kopacek**

There is a whole lot going on today. First, we continue to celebrate the tremendous good news that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. So again I wish you a truly blessed Easter season—a season that began last Sunday and lasts for 50 days, concluding with Pentecost on June 12. Till then, the white vestments are worn, the Easter candle stays prominently displayed by our altar, and we continue to praise and worship the risen Christ.

This is also a time of a very important and solemn ceremony over in Europe, a ceremony involving very formal prayer and great pageantry. No, I am not talking the royal wedding in England...although we do offer our prayers for their growth in marital happiness and holiness. I speak instead of the beatification of Pope John Paul II taking place at the Vatican [tomorrow]/today. It is no mere coincidence that he is being beatified on this Second Sunday of Easter; I will say more about that in a moment. I do not think it is possible to overstate the influence on the contemporary Church of John Paul II. For one thing, his 26 ½ - year papacy is the third-longest in the entire 2000-year history of the Church. His visits to the Church throughout the entire world, his determination to implement the teachings and decrees of the Second Vatican Council, his ecumenical outreach, his strong conviction and teaching about the truths of the Catholic faith and her moral teachings, his special focus on the Gospel of Life—these and all his other accomplishments are an amazing legacy that will further enrich the work of the Church in ways we cannot fully predict at this time.

On a personal level, Pope John Paul II had a huge impact on my life and my vocation as a priest. He was elected pope in October of 1978; I was in my second year of law school at the time. I remember being surprised (along with everyone else) at the election of this first non-Italian pope in 400+ years, but I was otherwise caught up with my studies. As the years went on and as the Holy Spirit kept nudging me towards the priesthood, I was more and more impressed and inspired by the strength of this pope's dedicated witness to Jesus Christ and his total fidelity to the teachings of the Catholic Church. He was pope through my seminary years and through the first 17 years of my priesthood until his death in April of 2005. I was privileged to see Pope John Paul four times: in 1979 when he came to Living History Farms in Des Moines, in 1992 and 1996 in Rome, and in 1999 in St. Louis. In both of those trips to Rome I actually got to shake his hand. Yes, me and the pope—we were good buds....

So John Paul is beatified and will be known as Blessed John Paul II, just like the namesake for our new middle school was beatified and is known as Blessed Maria Assunta Pallotta. What does beatification mean? On one level, as you know, it is an important step in the process of canonization—being named a saint. In last week's issue of the Witness (our archdiocesan paper) was a good article on beatification, referring to it as an 'administrative act' by which the pope allows a candidate for sainthood to be venerated or honored in places closely connected with his or her ministry. The history of the process for beatification and canonization is interesting in itself. In the earlier centuries of the Church, bishops on their own would simply declare someone a 'blessed'. The process became more structured as time went on; by the 1600's, the pope's approval was required before someone could be beatified or canonized.

A central part of the process is to verify the person's genuine holiness and living the life of authentic Christian virtue. It is not a statement that the person was morally perfect, never sinned or never made a mistake of any kind. That would be impossible to show for anyone at all other than Jesus and his Mother themselves. You have probably heard about the need for a miracle to be declared before one is named a blessed or a saint—that is indeed a necessary step in the ordinary course of the current process. For beatification to take place, a miracle needs to be established as having occurred through the intercession of the candidate for sainthood. In the case of John Paul II, the Vatican congregation overseeing the process chose the spontaneous cure of a French nun from Parkinson's disease. Three separate panels

reviewed the case (including various medical experts) and concluded there was no natural explanation for her healing; Pope Benedict XVI approved this finding. For John Paul to be canonized or named a saint, a second miracle will be required.

I said before that it is no coincidence that John Paul II is beatified on this Second Sunday of Easter, otherwise known as Divine Mercy Sunday—a name given this Sunday by John Paul himself. The mercy of God is at the very heart of our Christian faith and especially of this great feast of Easter. In our second reading today, St. Peter began by blessing “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who in his great mercy gave us a new ... hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” The events of Holy Week and Easter—the Paschal Mystery—are all about our being reconciled with God through Jesus’ death and resurrection. And today’s gospel reminds us of the great gift that the risen Christ gave his apostles to carry on his work of offering the mercy and forgiveness of God. Recall the scene: Jesus breathes on them the gift of the Holy Spirit and tells them: “whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” This is the origin and foundation of our sacrament of reconciliation or confession—Jesus giving the apostles and their successors an explicit role in the forgiveness of sins.

But there is even more to why Pope John Paul decided to refer to this Second Sunday of Easter as Divine Mercy Sunday. It has to do with a Polish nun, a Sr. Faustina Kowalska. In the 1930’s, Jesus appeared to her and told her to remind the world of his infinite mercy and desire to forgive sinners who turn to him and trust him, no matter how serious their sins. After several years of investigating these claims of Sr. Faustina, Rome approved these messages in 1978, thanks in large part to the efforts of a Polish cardinal, Karol Wojtyla... who was elected as pope in 1978 and took the name of John Paul II. One of his first encyclicals was on the richness of God’s mercy; in 2000, he canonized this nun who is now known as St. Faustina. He did so on the second Sunday of Easter that year, declaring that Sunday would from there on be known as Divine Mercy Sunday. And for Pope John Paul himself, his connection with this feast would become even more personal. He died on April 2, 2005—the eve of Divine Mercy Sunday that year. And [tomorrow]/today, this pope, this dedicated apostle of the Divine Mercy, is to be beatified on that very same feast.

I have spoken at length today about Pope John Paul, and justifiably so since his beatification is a joy and gift for the whole Church. And we need to thank God for giving us Blessed John Paul II, St. Faustina and all the saints who show us in so many ways the beauty, truth and goodness of our Triune God. But this Divine Mercy Sunday is not primarily about either John Paul or Faustina, even if they were special instruments chosen by God to remind us of his infinite mercy. Instead, the Divine Mercy of God is first and foremost about Jesus Christ risen from the dead—Jesus who is himself the mercy of God poured out for us on Calvary, at the empty tomb, and through his Word and sacraments. Listen again to those words from St. Peter who blesses God “who in his great mercy gave us a new birth...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”. God grant us the grace to grow always in our faith and trust in the Divine Mercy; God also grant us the desire and resolve to conform our lives more closely to the gospel of his risen Son.