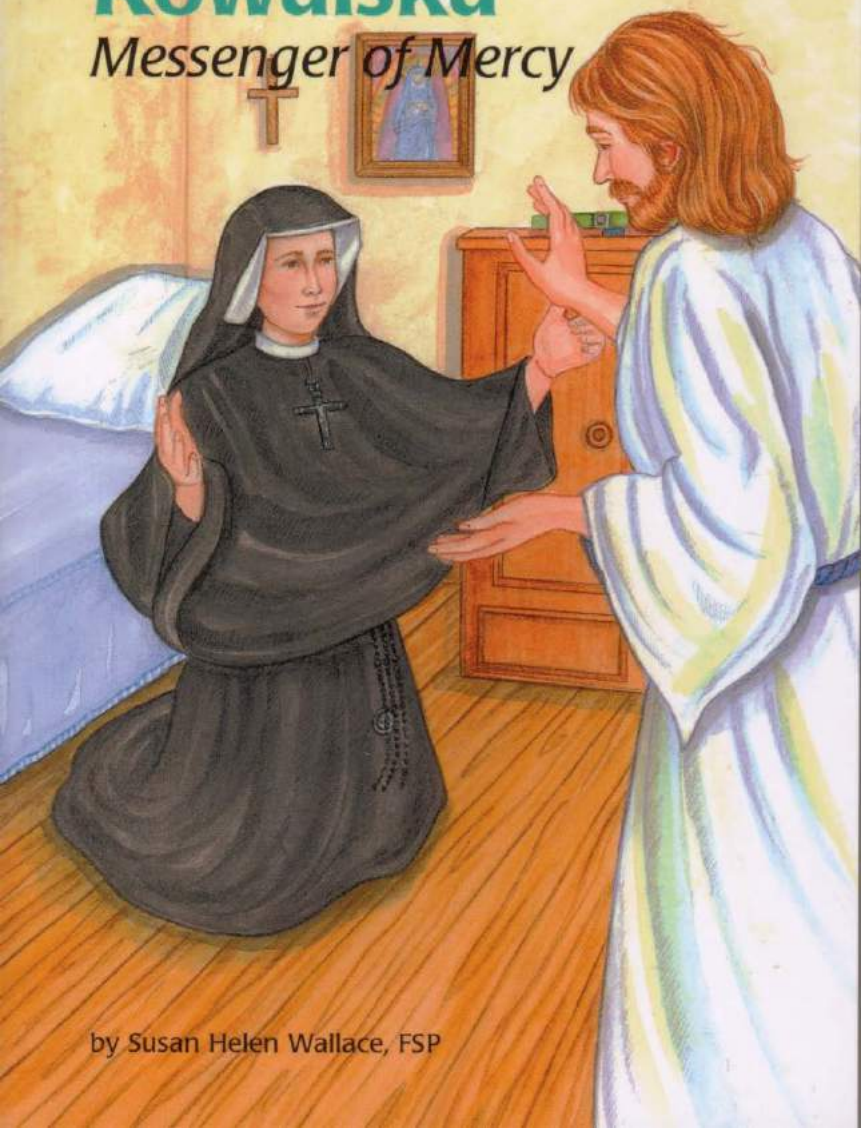


# Saint Faustina Kowalska

*Messenger of Mercy*



by Susan Helen Wallace, FSP



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# CONTENTS

1. A Girl Named Helena . . . . .	1
2. Tell Us a Story . . . . .	9
3. A Secret of the Heart . . . . .	15
4. Jesus Was Waiting . . . . .	21
5. Drifting . . . . .	29
6. Convent Life . . . . .	37
7. A New Name . . . . .	43
8. Challenges. . . . .	51
9. Help from Heaven. . . . .	59
10. Back to Glogowiec . . . . .	67
11. Jesus' Special Request . . . . .	75
12. Toward the Goal. . . . .	83
13. The Stranger . . . . .	89
14. You <i>Are</i> a Saint . . . . .	95

15. The Long Road Home . . . . .	99
<i>Prayer</i> . . . . .	107
<i>The Devotion to Divine Mercy</i> . . . . .	109
<i>Glossary</i> . . . . .	113

## A GIRL NAMED HELENA

"Helena, wait for Papa," Stanislaus Kowalski called. "Wait, I don't want you to fall!" The young farmer hurried along the crooked path lined with weeds and clusters of rocks. "Stay with me," he said, gently taking hold of four-year-old Helena's hand.

Helena's two older sisters, Josephine and Genevieve, were near the front door of the family cottage. Now that their chores were finished, they could play. Their mother, Marianna Kowalska, kept an eye on the girls as she went about her housework. (In Poland, many family names end in "-ski." Polish grammar provides both a masculine and a feminine ending for these names. This is why the men of Helena's family would spell their names with the ending "-ski"; the women, instead, would use the feminine ending of "-ska.")

Helena was different from her sisters, though. Although she was still too young to be of much help, she insisted on staying with Papa as he led the cows back to the

barn every evening for milking. This little trip was a highlight of the child's day!

For the first nine years of their marriage, Stanislaus and Marianna had waited and prayed to have a family. Finally, their prayers had been answered. The couple would eventually have eight children, six girls and two boys. They were Josephine, Genevieve, Helena, Natalia, Stanislaus, Mecislaus, Marianna Lucyna, and Wanda. Two other children died as infants.

Their third child, Helena, had been born on August 25, 1905, in Glogowiec (pronounced Glog-o-wick), Poland. One day, she would become famous in her own country—and around the world—as Saint Faustina. But that would be many years from now.

Baby Helena was baptized at Saint Casimir Church soon after birth. From a very young age, the little girl loved to hear about Jesus, Mary, and the saints. Every evening she listened, entranced, as her father read wonderful true stories from his mission magazines.

"Will you read us stories of the saints tonight, Papa?" she asked each night.

"Of course, Helenka," Papa always responded with enthusiasm. ("Helenka"

means "little Helen.") The children didn't know that every joint in his body was aching for some rest. Stanislaus often sighed and thought how wonderful it would be to rest for a little while. "But I can't disappoint the children," he told himself. Helena stood by the cabinet and watched Papa search for just the right magazine. She couldn't wait to learn how to read.

Helena quickly learned the short prayers her parents taught her, and she loved saying them over and over. Sometimes she simply murmured to herself, "Jesus, Mary, heaven." How beautiful those simple words were!

Once, when she was six, Helena woke up in the middle of the night. Sitting straight up in bed, she prayed in her clear voice: "My Jesus, I love you. Mother Mary, I love you. Take me to heaven with you some day." Helena's mother appeared in the doorway and gently encouraged her to lie down again. "It's time for all children to be sound asleep, Helena. You can say more prayers in the morning, as many prayers as you like." But the little girl wasn't convinced.

"Oh, no, Mama," she answered, shaking her head, "what if my guardian angel is waking me to pray? I couldn't disappoint



my angel!" Mama was amazed. Papa wrinkled his forehead, the way he did when he was a bit perplexed.

Stanislaus and Marianna were devoted parents and tried their best to practice their Catholic faith every day. They helped the children to understand that Sunday and feast day Masses were special events.

During the week, Stanislaus had to concentrate on coaxing the poor soil of his farm into growing wheat, rye, and crops for his cattle to graze on. He had a large—and growing—family to feed. Stanislaus was proud of their little cottage, made of stone and brick with wooden shingles on the roof. The cottage had three small rooms and a hallway. It was home.

Mama spent her busy days cooking, cleaning, and caring for her large family. Papa worked the farm in the early mornings and during late evenings. During the day, he labored at carpentry to earn enough money to feed and clothe them all. The couple's Catholic faith was as natural a part of their lives as raising a family and running the farm.

They began each morning with prayers that set the tone for the day. Sometimes, when the sun was shining and the air was

warm, Stanislaus sang hymns as he worked. God was always close by. Then, of course, there was Helena, who often tugged at his sleeve and asked him to pray with her. Each evening, the setting sun lit the hues of red in Helena's hair as father and daughter led the cows to the barn.



"Oh, Papa," Helena said one day, "I'm so excited about preparing for my first Confession and first Communion. I want to receive the sacraments, just like you and Mama. After all, I'm old enough now. I'm nine!"

Stanislaus smiled. "I'm happy for you, Helenka, really happy." Helena was always excited about something. It was a good reminder to Papa to recognize and cherish the many joyful moments in life.

Their parish priest, Father Pawlowski, had carefully prepared Helena and her companions for their first Holy Communion. "There's one more thing I would like to share with you," Father said solemnly. "This is an old Polish custom." The children listened intently. "I would like to invite you to make a special act of love for Jesus."

"How can we do that, Father?" the children asked.

"Before you leave the house to come to church for your first Communion Mass, go to your parents and kiss their hands. Then ask forgiveness for whatever you may have done wrong. This pleases Jesus very much," Father concluded.

"Yes, Father," the children chorused.

When Helena's first Communion day arrived, she kissed each of her parents' hands. "Papa, Mama, I'm so sorry for whatever I have done wrong. Please forgive me." Her parents took turns hugging her, and Helena felt really ready to go to church and receive Jesus in Holy Communion.

Helena continued to receive the sacrament of Penance every Saturday. She also wanted to make sure never to miss Mass on Sunday. What could she do to help her parents with the farm chores so that the whole family would be free to go to Mass? She realized that their three cows had to be milked even on Sunday. That took time. So the young girl invented an elaborate plan.

That Saturday night, Helena unlatched the bedroom window. Early the next morning, she crawled out the window and head-

ed to the barn all by herself. The girl carefully led the cows to pasture.

A little while later, Papa got up and went to the barn to take his cows out to the field. The poor man shook the morning sleep from his eyes and stared, panicked. "Where are my cows? Stolen? I hope not!"

Mr. Kowalski ran out of the barn and stopped. There on the path was Helena, peacefully leading the three cows tied together by a single rope. All of Papa's fear and anger melted into a broad smile. "Now can we all go to Mass?" the girl asked eagerly.

"Yes, Helenka," Papa smiled, "thanks to you."