A Madeiran woman in east London kisses the image of the Divine Mercy by her front door every time she leaves the house, and says 'Jesus go out with me, and be on my right, on my left, before me and after me'. She believes the positioning of the image to be a powerful manifestation both of her personal faith and of the Christian identity of the family: as soon as people 'put the foot inside that door, they can see that picture'.1 Other members of the same extended Catholic community, from a wide variety of generational, ecclesiological and cultural backgrounds – Caribbean, Nigerian, Irish – have the image in their homes, and use it as a focus for regular personal prayer. Alongside the rosary, it is one devotional element of her Catholic past retained by Amelia, a Ghanaian Anglican convert, now a local curate in the Church of England.2 At mass in a Franciscan church in Oxford on the first Sunday after Easter 2012, the culmination of the novena of the Divine Mercy, a copy of the image was held up before the altar, and kissed by members of the congregation; a (male) student present was moved to go to confession for the first time in seven years.3 Appealing to a broad-based religious sensibility, the devotion is followed by an estimated 100,000 million Catholics worldwide (Groeschel 2010).

In 1931 a Polish nun, Sister Maria Faustina Kowalska had a vision of Christ. Appearing as the Divine Mercy, with two rays radiating from His heart, the vision instructed Faustina to have a devotional image painted and to inaugurate a variety of devotional practices centred on commemoration of Christ’s Passion and His remission of sins. Along the lines of the institution of devotion to the Miraculous Medal of the Virgin communicated through a vision to the French nun, Saint Cathérine Labouré in 1830, Faustina believed herself to be instructed by Christ to materialise and

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1 Interview with Petra, 4 October 2009 (#99). All interviews transcribed and anonymized.
2 Interview with Amelia, 29 October 2009 (#117).
3 Personal communication, 7 June 2012.
popularise the Christ that appeared to her: ‘By means of this image I shall be granting many graces to souls’ (Diary II, 40).\(^4\)

This article explores the controversial history and contemporary practice of this immensely popular devotion, sketching the charismatic role of its originator, Saint Faustina (canonised by Pope John Paul II in 2000), and the various artistic representations of the Divine Mercy that have been created and circulated. Analysis of the ways in which the transcendent is envisaged casts light on a spectrum of beliefs and prayerful engagement with Christ’s divinity and masculinity, and on issues raised by lay agency and autonomy in constructing and adapting these images. The contested nature of the representation offers to the historian and sociologist of religion a means of engaging with the beliefs, devotional practices and lived religious experiences of clergy and laity. Through exploring the visual and material practices surrounding this form of prayer and the gendered and embodied forms of solace that it offers, this article interrogates a highly influential contemporary form of Catholic spirituality as a socio-cultural as well as subjective, material and experiential form of belief and practice (Giordan 2011).

**The Making of a Saint: From Helena Kowalska to Saint Faustina**

Helena Kowalska was born on 25th August 1905 in Głogowiec, Poland, within the Russian Empire. Hagiographical biographies describe the poverty of her rural background, her devout parents and, ‘from her earliest childhood, her deep and unaffected piety and love of God in the Blessed Sacrament’ (Hargest-Gorzelak 2000, 7). Conforming to the prototype of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Marian visionaries, often from peasant stock and poorly-educated (e.g. Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorge) (see Zimdars-Swartz 1991), recent biographers stress the truncated nature of Faustina’s education (a mere three years of elementary education), her child-like trust in Christ, and the opposition of her parents (for monetary reasons, i.e. their inability to provide a dowry) to her desire to enter religious life from a young age. From the age of 16 she went into service but was prompted to seek entrance to a convent by a vision of the suffering Christ who communicated His frustration at her procrastination.