

Special Report on World Apostolic Congress on Mercy (WACOM) Rome April 2-6 2008

In early April this year I travelled to Rome, as a delegate for the Christchurch Diocese, with my daughter Anna-Marie (11), to attend the congress on Divine Mercy held in St John Lateran Cathedral. The congress, the first international focus on Divine Mercy as espoused by St Faustina, began with the anniversary Mass of the death of Pope John Paul II in St Peter's Square presided over by Pope Benedict XVI. This truly memorable occasion was followed by three full days of prayer, Mass, adoration, and lectures by many notable Cardinals among whom was Cardinal Schonborn of Vienna, the congress president, Cardinal Arinze, Cardinal Dwisz, Cardinal O'Malley and Cardinal Barbarin.

It was a great blessing to be able to share the beauty and history of Rome with my daughter, both during and after the congress, when we toured St Peter's, the tombs of the popes, including John Paul II, the catacombs, the Holy Steps, and innumerable exquisite basilicas. We also received a special personal blessing from Cardinal Schonborn in Piazza Navona during the closing festival which was held on an open-air-stage in the piazza.

The delegates, numbering several thousand, came from all five continents and it was especially inspiring to see the response of the Church in Asia and Africa to the Divine Mercy message, this was particularly brought to the fore by the powerful and at times numbing testimony of Immaculee Ilibagiza, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. Her address, given to a hushed crowd in St John Lateran Cathedral, conveyed the sheer terror and anguish she and six other women faced for 91 days as they cowered in a tiny bathroom in an effort to escape the mayhem that consumed Rwanda in 1994 when over one million people were massacred in an orgy of ethnic hatred. The gamut of emotions she experienced, from outright hatred, through acceptance, and finally to prayer and forgiveness for those who sought her life, and in fact had already killed her father, mother, and brothers, along with aunts, uncles and friends – everyone she knew. She and the other women survived through the power of prayer, particularly the rosary and Divine Mercy chaplet, which Immaculee prayed for 14 hours a day for 91 days. On her eventual escape and liberation by French forces she discovered the full horror of what had overcome Rwanda and her family. Through prayer she found a job with the United Nations refugee program and was later able to return to Rwanda (she lives in New York) to locate and forgive the man who killed her parents. This she did in a great spirit of humility and mercy, and though sorely tested by the prison warden to take her vengeance on the killer, whom she knew, she resisted and forgave him, extending mercy to him in a merciless world. The warden promptly rebuked her for her 'weakness' in not at least kicking the killer and told her to go. One year later she met the jail warden again, he rushed up to her and shaking his head confessed, "All we did there was hate those killers, we kicked and punched and spat on them; the next day the hatred was worse and we did it all again. But your action showed me there was another way and I could leave the hatred behind."

That action was mercy. Immaculee's testimony resonated throughout St John Lateran and has done so throughout the world, by means of her book, *Left to Tell*.

It is an action we were continually exhorted to follow by the speakers at the congress, especially Cardinal Schonborn.

His closing address carries a special resonance, "... the message (of Divine Mercy) presents the Gospel in its pure form in a manner conducive for contemporary

understanding.... Such revelations can help guide people to the truth in specific situations at precise moments of time.

Divine Mercy is undoubtedly the message for our time.....The greatest school of Divine Mercy is Jesus Himself. That's what we have learned this week. Jesus is Mercy."

Urging us to extend this work, he asked, "How do we continue? We will do it as the Lord indicates. National and regional congresses are already being discussed....We want to make known The Divine Mercy through His presence and His merciful heart (which is) close to all of us. We are here for the same reason: to get to know and promote Divine Mercy....I believe the Lord has blessed this event. I thank the Lord for leading us on this beautiful road".



Anna-Marie & Patrick Barrett meet Cardinal Schonborn, Piazza Navona, Rome during closing festival for WACOM April, 2008

These remarks were echoed shortly after the congress closed by the Holy Father on a visit to Savona, Italy, "This is the essence of Christianity (Mercy) because it is the essence of God Himself", he exclaimed. "God is One in that He is entirely and solely Love, but precisely because He is Love He is openness, acceptance, dialogue. And in His relations with us, sinful mankind, He is mercy, compassion, grace, forgiveness.My visit to Savona on the day of the Blessed Trinity is above all a pilgrimage, through Mary, to the font of faith, of hope and of love".

Once again we see the action of God in His servants and repeated by Jesus through the writings of St Faustina in her Diary;

"Do whatever is within your power to spread devotion to My mercy. I will make up for what you lack. Tell aching mankind to snuggle close to My merciful heart, and I will fill it with peace." (D 1074)

"My Heart overflows with great mercy for souls, and especially for poor sinners... It is for them that the Blood and Water flowed from My Heart as from a fount overflowing with mercy. For them I dwell in the tabernacle as King of Mercy". (D 367)

There will be continuing Congresses:

- Continental 2009 * National 2010* Diocesan/Parish 2011 *
- World Congress, Krakow, most likely 2012.

For information: www.apostoliccongressonmercy.org www.divinemeracy.co.nz

Immaculee's book, 'Left To Tell' is available from Divine Mercy Publications @ \$35