News
Ministry



Sr. Michaela Rak of the Sisters of Merciful Jesus hugs a patient in the Hospice of Blessed Michal Sopocko in an undated photo in **Vilnius**, Lithuania. (OSV News/Courtesy of Hospice of Blessed Michal Sopocko)

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Thousands of pilgrims are expected to gather in June in the Lithuanian capital for the sixth World Apostolic Congress on Mercy, or WACOM, a five-day event that has previously been held in cities such as Rome, Kraków, Bogota and Manila.

But in Vilnius, the theme "Building the City of Mercy" is not only a slogan — it is a living heritage.

The June 7-12 congress, organized by the Vatican's Dicastery for Evangelization, is expected to draw up to 5,000 participants from around the world. The choice of Vilnius as host city is not accidental.

It was here, in 1934, that St. Faustina Kowalska received visions that led to the painting of the first image of Divine Mercy, created by Eugeniusz Kazimirowski. Since then, numerous versions of the image have been painted by other artists, including a popular interpretation by Adolf Hyla in Kraków — both images are now found in churches across the globe.

The WACOM program will include conferences, testimonies, concerts and daily moments of prayer held across the city. "While in Vilnius, WACOM participants can explore the Way of Mercy — a pilgrimage route linking 14 sacred sites, St. Faustina's house and the Gate of Dawn chapel, home to a 17th-century icon of the Mother of Mercy," said Archbishop Gintaras Grušas of Vilnius.

At the Hospice of Blessed Fr. Michal Sopocko — named after St. Faustina's confessor — the message of Divine Mercy takes concrete form in daily care for the sick and dying. In fact, the hospice is an indispensable part of the Way of Mercy itself.

The building now housing the Sisters of Merciful Jesus was once the studio of painter Kazimirowski, where he created the first Divine Mercy image. It was also a place associated with Blessed Sopocko, and St. Faustina would come here often.

Sr. Michaela Rak, the founder of the hospice, told OSV News — speaking ahead of April 12 Divine Mercy Sunday — that the continuity is clear: The message that began in this place is now lived out daily through care for the over 300 sick and dying

patients.

The image of Merciful Jesus "came out of Vilnius and went to the whole world," she said. "But it is not a decoration on a wall. It is a call: Experience my mercy and bring it where you are sent."

"For many people, hospice is still something they are afraid of," Aneta Górniewicz, deputy director of the facility, told OSV News. "But what we try to give here first of all is a sense of safety, dignity and daily care."

Górniewicz did not plan such a path. She arrived in 2013, just after finishing her studies. "I was looking for work that would have a deeper sense — not just a source of income," she said. A meeting with Sr. Michaela changed everything. "I thought, 'It's worth trying.' And I've been here 13 years."

Sr. Michaela, a Polish nun from the Congregation of the Sisters of Merciful Jesus, arrived in Vilnius in the early 2000s with the idea of creating the country's first hospice, which opened in 2009. Sr. Michaela built the institution from the ground up, turning it into a place that now serves both adults and children at the end of life.

Inside the hospice, mercy is often expressed in small, almost invisible moments, such as a physiotherapist helping a woman, weakened by cancer, achieve a simple goal: to sit up on her own.

"It may seem like a small thing," Górniewicz said, "but for that patient it was a huge success, a great achievement." Other days bring different forms of care — reading books to patients who can no longer hold them, organizing shared moments of music, or even laughter therapy for a young woman with lung cancer. "It looked unusual," Górniewicz recalled, describing a room filled with staff and patients laughing together. "But it really helped her — both physically and emotionally."

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The hospice also cares for children, some only a few years old. When possible, they are taken outside for walks. Volunteers sit with them, read stories or simply remain present. "Sometimes you don't need words," Górniewicz told OSV News. "You hold a hand, you pray, you just are with the person." She described this as a "language of the heart."

"We often tell volunteers that not every meeting will be about talking," she said. "Sometimes it is about silence, about presence." That presence extends to families as well. Górniewicz remembers one family thanking her simply for a kind welcome. "For me, it felt like something completely natural," she said. "But for them it was very important — that someone received them with kindness and empathy."

Moments like these have convinced her that mercy is not abstract. "Mercy is love of the heart," she said. "Giving your time, your attention, your care to another person."

Her work has also deepened her faith. Accompanying people at the end of life brings both difficulty and clarity. "From a human perspective, it is hard — especially when young people die," she said. "But I believe that life does not end, it changes. That gives hope."

Górniewicz recalled a patient who initially refused any spiritual care: "She said, 'I don't want a chaplain, I don't need confession.'" But as her condition worsened, something shifted. "In the end she asked for the sacraments," she said. "It was like she took hold of a lifeline."

For Sr. Michaela, this connection between faith and action is essential.

"Jesus looks at everyone with the same gaze — with a gaze of mercy," she told OSV News. "At the one who loves him and at the one who rejects him." That gaze, she said, defines what mercy truly is. "To look with the same love at the one who hurts me as at the one who loves me — that is mercy," she said.

She pointed to another key element: initiative. "Jesus takes the first step," she said, referring to the Gospel account of the risen Christ entering the room where the disciples were hiding. "He does not accuse them. He says, 'Peace be with you.'" For Sr. Michaela, this movement outward is at the heart of Christian life. "Mercy is to take the first step toward another person," she told OSV News.

"We look at each person as we look at the image of Jesus — with love," she said of her hospice. "We take the first step to relieve their suffering."

Pope Francis made a surprise stop to bless patients of the Blessed Father Sopocko hospice during his 2018 apostolic trip to Vilnius.

"We feed the body, but also care for the soul," Sr. Michaela told OSV News, pointing to the role of the sacraments and spiritual support. If that dimension is lost, she

warned, the consequences extend far beyond one institution. "When people lose the source of mercy, the world becomes a place of war, hatred and exploitation," she said.

The June congress is expected to highlight not only Vilnius' key religious sites — including the Shrine of Divine Mercy and the Gate of Dawn — but also the lived experience of mercy in the city.

"I would encourage everyone to come and see Vilnius," she said. "Not only for its beauty, but to discover this spirit of mercy." She pointed to the congress program, which will include not only conferences but also testimonies and opportunities to encounter works of mercy directly — also at the hospice.

"People today need mercy — even if they don't always realize it," she said. "We need to return to its source."