

## **A Polish Community: Where to now?**

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### **A Religious Ministering to the Polish Community**

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Most of us here will remember the first year of our new life in Australia. We recall the uncomfortable sense of being different and lost in this new and unknown world. We could not communicate, and everything around us was strange. The only real and accessible link with the outside community was our faith.

A Membership in the Catholic community - writes John Paul II in his recent Message for the 89<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants B is not determined by nationality or ethnic origin, but essentially by faith in Jesus Christ and Baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity. The cosmopolitan make-up of People of God is visible today in practically every local Church because migration has transformed even small and formerly isolated communities into pluralist and inter-cultural realities.

The Anglo-Celtic Catholic Church of Australia saw the new arrivals: Italians, Croats, Hungarians and indeed Poles as a gift and a challenge. However, the newcomers, who had survived the war or escaped persecution, saw that this Anglo-Celtic Church of Australia proclaimed the same faith, administered the same sacraments and celebrated the same Holy Mass. Therefore, the Catholic Church was their first and often their only familiar link with their lost home. It was a real anchor in their new land. That is the reason, why so many of us in the early fifties and eighties flocked the churches so often. Not only to meet people, to make friends or to find the information or help we needed, but also to reinforce our sense of belonging. The Church was important to all immigrant groups, not just to Poles.

In the Census of 1954 over 30 % of persons born overseas and settled in Victoria were Catholic. Likewise, in 1961, Catholics formed 37% of those born overseas. In his History of the Catholic Church in Victoria Fr. Bourke writes that: A providentially there were some priests amongst the migrant national groups who had suffered with their own people; they have been uprooted from their homes and banned from returning, especially to communist dominated countries. Other priests were sought abroad and volunteered to serve their countrymen in Australia. Many of the migrant chaplains were unsung heroes; some of them had already suffered much ill-treatment, yet they were found faithfully at work in the transit camps and on construction sites in rough country. They had a slow and often painful journey to being recognized as migrant chaplains and to receive proper faculties and the support of the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

Most people are convinced that Poland is a Catholic nation and that few Polish people belong to any other faith or denomination. This could be true in Poland but according to the Atlas of Australian People in Victoria, based on the 1996 census, only 67 percent of Polish born settlers in our state are of the Catholic faith. Almost 16% percent profess Judaism and one and a half percent are Seventh-Day Adventists. The religion of the remaining 16 percent is not specified, but it is likely that they described themselves as non-religious.

According to the 1996 Census, almost 15 thousand Polish born Catholics now live in the

archdiocese of Melbourne. Many others were born in Germany or elsewhere of Polish parents. Most would see themselves as Polish. If we add their children and grandchildren, we arrive at about 40 thousand people of Polish background living in the 250 Catholic parishes of Melbourne. The number of Polish people is decreasing as immigration dries up, many die, older Poles return home and younger people seek a better life in Poland.

Each Sunday in the archdiocese of Melbourne some 3 thousand Polish people attend Polish language Masses. They are celebrated in 12 local parishes and 2 Polish centres. These Sunday liturgies form the largest and most regular gatherings of Polish people in Melbourne.

The Polish Community is richly served by its chaplains. The example the Polish, Filipino and Croatian communities are of about the same size. However, there is only one full time Filipino chaplain, four Croatian chaplains, while there are ten full time Polish chaplains. Only a few are supported by the archdiocese, and none by the Government. Most of them have to rely on the support of their congregations.

All ten full time Polish chaplains in the archdiocese of Melbourne belong to three religious orders and live in five religious communities that play an important role in the pastoral and cultural care for the Polish Community. The chaplains themselves participate in the life of most Polish social, cultural and youth organizations in Victoria. They also contribute to most of the Polish Saturday Schools and to the Polish media.

Professor Jerzy Smolicz of Adelaide in the monumental *An Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins*, beautifully edited by Dr James Jupp, sees the Polish culture in Australia demonstrated also in the extensive contribution of the Polish Catholic clergy to the spiritual and cultural needs of the Polish-Australian community, as well as to Australian religious life in general. Members of religious orders have carried out the bulk of this activity. The work of such orders, although primarily concerned with catering for religious needs, has undoubtedly helped to maintain the Polish language through its use in services. Polish Catholic customs and devotions have also proved to be not only of purely religious, but also of general cultural significance.

The importance of Christian faith in the life of the Polish people was vividly shown in the jubilee celebrations of the Black Madonna, the icon of Czestochowa. They were held on 8 May 1983 in St. Patrick's cathedral and in Dallas Brooks Hall. At the end of the impressive concert to mark the occasion, Sir Francis Little, the archbishop of Melbourne spoke to over two thousand Polish participants. He said, "How beautiful it would be to Mary, our Mother that this special honour is paid on Mothers Day". In the parish, where I said Mass this morning, I spoke of my own mother. However, you have plunged me into a mystery far more beautiful, far more enduring, one in which, together as a family, we can recognize the one Mother. I met a beautiful Polish lady outside this hall this afternoon. She said, "It does not matter I am Polish, it does not matter you are Australian. We are Catholic". That dimension counts far more than any national divisions. Therefore, I thank you. I hope that what you have presented here so beautifully will be for you and for me a prophetic example of what could happen to our Nation, which we form together now. You showed us, that what we need today in this country and in every country of the world is what you have demonstrated to us today B a spiritual summit. Religious education is an effort to unite faith and culture, and faith and life. You have shown us through this afternoon that you are profoundly educated religiously. Religion is not separated from a culture. It is one and the same and it gives new dimensions and new heights and new visions to your culture. It is not just secular, it is profoundly human. Moreover, it reaches to the heights that

humanity can reach. And may I conclude by saying this words as archbishop of Melbourne. May I join with you and with our Pope together saying and rededicating ourselves on this 600 centenary: "Mother, Totus Tuus, we are all yours".

Archbishop Frank Little, who was very dear to us, recognized the significant unity of religion and culture in the Polish soul. Poles never celebrate Easter without the customary blessing baskets of beautifully decorated food. Blessed food is then shared and unites all the family. We bless homes at Christmas time, and walk in processions on the Feast of Corpus Christi. Many other Polish customs are partly religious and partly cultural. They have been developed over centuries and are very dear to the Polish soul. Ceremonies associated with death and mourning and our prayers at cemeteries each first of November are other powerful examples of the unity of the Polish culture and religion.

The relationship between the Polish community and the Australian church is sometime misunderstood. Some Polish people would like to speak of a separate Polish Church linked with Poland, and would expect Polish Bishops to have some jurisdiction over them in Australia. However, there is no such thing as the Polish Catholic Church in Australia. There is only one Catholic Church, and one Bishop who is head of the local diocese or Church province, including its immigrant communities. Though we have Polish traditions, liturgies, language, customs and the Polish priests and nuns, we are really only a part of the local Australian Catholic Church.

The Australian Bishops Conference has encouraged the pastoral care of Polish Catholic immigrants through the Polish Catholic Mission in Australia and N.Z. It was founded in 1953. The Rector who is head of the Mission is a sign of unity for the Polish chaplains and for the Catholic communities. He helps find new chaplains, represents their needs, organizes occasional gatherings and conferences, and is ready to help, support and advise.

If we turn to Australasia as a whole, we find 45 Polish chaplains in Australia and New Zealand. They serve their people in 22 Polish Catholic Centres and celebrate the Eucharist in Polish in 75 local parishes. We have only four Polish churches, which are officially monuments rather than parishes. However, they function as parishes. Three of them are dedicated to Our Lady of Czestochowa (Sydney, Melbourne and Perth). The Adelaide church is dedicated to Saint Maksymilian Kolbe who died in Auschwitz. In Brisbane, the parish church of Our Lady in Bowen Hills was given to the Polish Community and for many years has served both the Polish and non-Polish parishioners.

All 45 Polish chaplains are members of different religious orders: 26 are members of the Society of Christ, 4 are Jesuits, 3 Franciscans and 3 Resurrection Fathers. Others belong to the Salvatorian, Dominican, Paulist and Divine Word congregations. Since 1952 three Polish women's congregations have worked among the Polish communities in Australia: first the Resurrection Sisters in Melbourne and Adelaide; later, the Sisters of Nazareth in Sydney, Perth and Brisbane, and most recently the Missionary Sisters of Christ the King in Hobart, Brisbane and Melbourne. They have helped spread the Gospel through their care for orphaned children after the War, than through schools, kindergartens, Saturday Schools, and also through their care for the aged and sick. I should mention here the development of the site purchased by the Polish community and religious sisters in the 1950s at Marayong in the West of Sydney. To celebrate the Polish Millenium in 1966, first the orphanage and a church were constructed, and than a whole complex was built. The orphanage became a part of the local school. Special Accommodation Home and a huge Village for the aged was the next, than Nursing Home for

over 50 beds, multi-functional Hall, Convent for nuns and Presbytery for the chaplain. Today it is a source of pride to the whole Polish Catholic Community in Australia. So is the Polish Marian Shrine and the Resurrection School in Essendon.

The growth of the Polish Catholic community can be seen in the Final Statement of the First National Convention on Pastoral Care in Multicultural Australia, organized by Scalabrinian Fathers fifteen years ago. It listed the Polish community as the fifth largest national group in the Catholic Church of Australia - after Italians, Irish, Croats and Maltese, with 24 Polish chaplains. Today there are 45 Polish chaplains.

In the last ten years, too, almost 50 Polish priests have become pastors or assistants in the local Catholic parishes. Three are serving in the Military Ordinariat. Australian bishops, especially in remote dioceses of Western Australia, are keen to look for Poland to provide extra help in times of the shortage of local Australian clergy. Four Polish monks of the Paulist Fathers now live the monastic life near Sydney and near Gold Coast.

At the National Convention ten years ago, Professor Desmond Cahill summed up the image of the Polish community. He described it as the image of a community, conservative with a fundamentalist type of Roman Catholicism, somewhat closed in upon itself, but basically doing O.K. He was probably right. Certainly, the majority of Polish chaplains are reluctant to introduce lay ministers, communion services, liturgical committees, modern liturgies, general absolutions, and they maintain the reverence and dignity of liturgical gatherings, because they see the need to provide some kind of Abridge between the church of Poland and Church of Australia, between the homeland of yesterday and the homeland of today. They recognize the gap between two cultures, which confronts all migrants. Many Polish people travel a long distance to come to the Polish Mass on Sunday. They pass by many beautiful Catholic churches and vivid liturgies. It is not their difficulty with English that makes them travel so far, but rather need for the familiar and meaningful which they find in the link between faith and their culture.

It is very difficult to imagine the Polish Community in Australia without Polish pastoral centres. It is likely that we shall see Mass and sacraments celebrated in Polish for a long time.

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