

Ministering to the Polish Aged

By Sister Paula Szejder, Missionary Sister of Christ the King

I belong to the Order of Missionary Sisters of Christ the King for Polish people living abroad. Our Congregation was established by the Servant of God, Father Posadzy in 1959. The Headquarters of the Congregation is in Poznan, Poland.

The mission of our Order includes every apostolic and religious activity, as well as, depending on needs and resources – welfare, social and cultural support for the “Polonia” – i.e. Polish people living outside of Poland – irrespective of their religion.

The motto of our Order, “Wszystko dla Boga i Polonii Zagranicznej” (“Everything for God and for the Polonia”), aptly describes our roles, which are:

- promotion of infinite love of God among Polonia, and
- desire to sacrifice life, to forgo comfort, and to joyously devote all efforts for the good of Polonia.

Cardinal Hlond used to say: “On emigration Polish souls tend to perish”. So very true! Emigration, a phenomenon existing since the dawn of mankind, carries with it both the good and the bad. On one hand it may lead to one’s improvement of living standards and inner enrichment. On the other hand however, it creates a serious risk of uprooting, isolation, exclusion and loss of previously professed moral and religious values.

Our Founding Father, whom I was fortunate enough to have met, was a man who was extremely sensitive to human suffering, and at the same time – full of optimism and worldly wisdom. He always taught us that prayer and sacrifice is the best way to fulfill our mission.

We, Missionary Sisters, bring God to the Poles in this foreign land. We try to help them appreciate and preserve the rich traditions of the Polish culture. We serve God to our neighbours as per the example set by our King, Jesus Christ who came down not to be served, but to serve. Our lives are filled with work and prayer that intertwine. In order to work well and to be useful in the eyes of God and his people, one has to pray hard. Prayer is a force in our everyday faithful following in Christ’s footsteps.

Our Sisters work where there are large concentrations of Poles around the world. Most of them work in the United States, since the American Polonia is the largest. Furthermore, the Sisters provide service in Canada, Brazil, England, Germany, Italy, Hungary and Australia. In recent years many Sisters have also gone to the East – to Belarus.

The Sisters perform tasks dictated by particular needs of the Polish communities abroad: they teach in schools, catechise children and youth, look after the sick and lonely, work in parish offices, perform functions of sacristans, organists, and perform various other tasks stemming from apostolic needs.

I have established a link with the Australian-Polish Community Services thanks to the rector of the Polish Catholic Mission, Father Wieslaw Slowik. I recall that once in conversation, he mentioned an resourceful director of the Bureau, Elizabeth Drozd and a well-functioning organisation under her management. I met with Ms Drozd and the President, Mr Bill Nowak. Further developments followed rather quickly. The President met with the Mother Superior of our Order in Poland, which was followed by an exchange of correspondence between the Bureau and the Order. The result: Sisters based in Melbourne.

I now work in the Polish Older Persons Outreach Program. In my work today I use my Hobart experience, where I was involved in a similar program that we established 7 years earlier.

My main task is to visit older people in their own homes, as well as hospitals. We call this “friendly visiting”. The word “friendly” implies a friend, i.e. someone you can always depend on, someone who will always find time and be more than willing to help. I try my hardest to uphold these expectations of this name, “friend”, at the same time being fully aware of my smallness. I know that it would be a mistake to count entirely on my own strengths and skills. Time spent before the tabernacle gives me courage for “I am able to do anything in the One who makes me stronger”.

The scope of the program in which I am presently working is very flexible and responsive to the client’s needs at that moment. The scope of tasks I perform is very extensive: from various domestic chores, personal care, assistance in correspondence, reading newspapers and information brochures aloud, shopping, assistance with transportation and with paying the bills. In addition, my role also sees me providing information on available social services and help in getting access to these services, providing the clients with Polish audio-cassettes, as well as cassettes with recorded Sunday Mass, running memory therapy activities, offering respite to carers – for emotional and religious support, such as listening, counseling, praying together, Holy Communion, organising services at peoples homes, and many other – simple tasks, yet so important in their everyday lives. From my experience it is these things that often decide whether the client had a good or a bad day.

Our help may prevent unnecessary problems or stress, and if these occur, we try to help minimise the impact of it or rectify the issues.

Faith and prayer play a significant role in life or religious people. (And more than 90% of Poles are religious). People need to pray, and they draw joy from the fact that someone prays for their intention, from the awareness that nothing happens without God's will. And God is Love. This helps them to endure the hardest times. In every suffering we can identify ourselves with some moment through the Way of the Cross of Jesus Christ. And yet, Jesus' Way of the Cross is a way of love and salvation, a way that leads us to true happiness. Realisation that there is no Jesus without the Cross and there is no Cross without Jesus is a great way to help in overcoming even the biggest difficulties encumbered in life.

“God didn't promise
days without pain,
laughter without sorrow
or sun without rain.
But God did promise
strength for the day,
comfort for the tears
and light for the way”.

Through our lives we learn how to accept God's will, although that learning does not come easy to everyone. In the book of Job, one of the authors of the Holy Bible we read: “If we know how to receive good from God's hands, why can't we receive the bad?”

Based on my experience of working among older people, the ill and those struggling with various problems, I can see how important it is for them to be listened to, to be counseled, to be noticed as an individual. There are moments when a person needs to talk to someone without fear that they will be judged or betrayed; When a person would like to bear their souls, to exorcise from themselves the heavy burden or pain. Sisters inspire trust. People become self-assured that they can tell a Sister everything, and that the contents of their conversation will remain confidential, that it will not even be analysed by the Sister herself. Some call the conversation with us a “life confession”. Sometimes I do not know how I am able to help. But I listen intently. I feel the pain or burden, and take it to the tabernacle, to our Eucharistic God. There, where our words are inadequate, and deeds impossible, prayer appears to be the power.

Years of work among people of the so-called “third age” convince me that there is not enough information and interest pertaining to the elderly. And yet, the old age – like the youth – is just one of the stages in our lives. Saint Efreem the Syrian likened the human life to fingers of one hand, trying to explain that life is as short as the span of a hand, and that its consecutive stages differ from one another in the same way as the fingers. Every stage of life is important, very important. It has its merits, tasks and duties. But it also has its ups and downs, joys and sorrows.

“Youth is like the dawn – it passes quickly”, says Kohelet, the author of the Book of Wisdom of the Holy Bible. It is followed by other life stages. And finally comes the older years, which Cicero called “the autumn of life” in analogy to four seasons. Some contemporaries call it “the evening of life” or “the joy of dusk”.

My older clients often tell me that “God did a good job of everything, except old age”, or “One should not get old; one should rather die whilst in one’s prime”. But let us ask ourselves: Have your previous years been problem-free? Entering into the so-called “third age” should be considered a privilege. Not everyone is given a chance to cross that threshold. Those who have received from God the gift of time:

- have a chance to think over and assess their past
- have an opportunity to do something useful for others
- have time at last to pursue their own interests
- plus, an older being is often predestined to the role of a guru, a patron, and to share his worldly wisdom with the young.

In The Holy Bible we find many references to positive attitude to older age. For instance Psalm 90 shows the older age as God’s reward (“I shall fill him with a long life and shall show him my salvation.”), whilst in the Book of Proverbs we read: “A grey hair is a decorative crown”.

According to a psychologist, Karl Jung “the most important task for a man is to catch up psychologically with the physiological line of life”. It is therefore an important element in the life of an aging person to take a positive attitude towards older age, and to fully accept it. It is also important to be able to enjoy every day and treat it as a gift from God.

Lew Tolstoy, when he reached the age of 80, said allegedly: “I can now die, but I would like to live a little longer to do something useful”.

I am glad that I can work with older people, and that – thanks to the Program created by the Australian-Polish Community Services – I have a chance to meet people, whom I can offer words of hope and a helping hand by understanding their heart, and to whom I can simply offer my time and abilities. May I take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the State Department of Human Services for providing Home and Community Care funds to support our work with Polish older persons.

One can add to Merton’s words: “Nobody is a lonely island” the words: “We all want to live among friends”.

Let’s listen to Jill Wolf who explains the reason for creating friends:

“God made the world with a heart full of love,
then he looked down from the Heaven above,
and saw that we all need a helping hand,
some to share with, who’ll understand.

He made special people to see us through
the glad times and the sad times too,
a person on whom we can always depend,
some we can call a friend.”

In my everyday meetings with Jesus I pray to be able to be a friend, i.e.
to have eyes that can see,
ears that can hear,
heart that can feel
and hands always ready to help.