

## Open Letter of Polish American Bishops to Polonia

*"Each emigration from Poland has brought with it a new richness as well as new problems. There have been and there continue to be cases of harmful divisions, even splits, which have impeded Polonia in the United States from playing the full role of which it is capable in both the religious and spiritual spheres and the social and political spheres." **Pope St. John Paul II in Hamtramk***

In the movie, **Karol, a man who became pope**, we see a young woman who is a member of the then Father Wojtyla's circle of young student friends. She is distraught because she and her husband are about to flee Poland because of the harassment of the communist authorities. Fr. Wojtyla consoles her. Wherever you are, he assures her, you will still be Polish.

In the spirit of Easter, we, the American Bishops of Polish descent, extend the peace and joy of the Resurrected Christ to all Catholics of Polish descent. *Wesołego Alleluia!* We address you in a spirit of solidarity, to bring to your attention several events which are occurring this year and their impact on the life of our Polonia.

### **Jubilee Year of Mercy**

We are in the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy where the eyes of Catholics are focused on the unfathomable mystery of God. Many Catholics have revived devotional practices, such as pilgrimages to designated churches. For those who cannot pass through the Holy Doors of St. Peter's in Rome, local churches throughout the United States have been designated as pilgrim destinations including many revered by our Polish communities. Also, the celebration of World Youth Day in Kraków will bring hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to our fatherland, including many Polish America youth who travel to encounter the Holy Father but also to experience the land where their ancestors were formed within a culture friendly to the Catholic Faith. This Jubilee Year of Mercy is a time for Polish Christians and Christians everywhere to open their hearts to the grace of God and return to the roots of their faith.

### **Anniversary of Baptism of Poland**

The Year of Mercy falls providentially during the 1050<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Baptism of Poland (966 AD), when Prince Mieszko I, ruler of tribal Polanie, accepted Christianity with his entire household. By this very action Poland became a new nation, entered into a new Latin civilization and developed a new Christian identity. The first missionaries helped to Christianize the nation. For the first time, the cross was erected over the vast terrain as a sign of a new beginning. From that time the sacrament of baptism and the cross were visible signs of God's blessing for kings, knights, and peasants. Churches and monasteries were built to replace ancient pagan shrines spreading the light of faith and a new hope throughout the country. Over the centuries, Poland developed a unique spirituality, strong faith, and total trust in Jesus Christ. To that extent, faith became a way of life and permeated the culture. Today, a deep faith in the Eucharist, frequent participation in the sacrament of Penance, and devotion to the Blessed Mother are a few examples of how this faith manifests itself in common devotional practices. The Church in Poland will celebrate the anniversary of receiving baptism on a national level in Gniezno in June and many diocesan and parish celebrations will follow.

### **What Does this Mean for Polish-speaking Catholics in the U.S.?**

Polonia, which is an integral part of the Polish Nation, will celebrate this milestone event in Orchard Lake on Wednesday, June 22, 2016 with a Mass in the presence of many Bishops, priests, and laity. This unique event raises important questions of how we carry out our Baptismal promises in a multi-cultural and secular society. Past generations provided for us a living testimony of faith, supporting the mission of the Church, and proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ with words and deeds. The spirit of cooperation between pastors and the faithful resulted also in the building of magnificent churches, Catholic schools, convents, etc. The first

generation of our ancestors' courageous missionary work, faith, and generosity produced an impressive history of success of Polonia in our country. As members of Polonia we should continue to embrace the beautiful traditions established by our parents even as we face challenges and opportunities that may be different than those of our parents' generation. We encourage you to observe this anniversary in your local community and reflect who we are and what is the significance of our Baptism for our generation.

### **October 15, 2016 - National John Paul II Day in Washington**

A pilgrimage to our nation's capital will take place on October 15<sup>th</sup> in the name of Polonia in the US to celebrate St. John Paul II on the anniversary of his election as Pope. It is the second national celebration whose purpose is to keep alive his memory for future generations of Polish American Catholics. It is also an occasion to relive the memory of his pontificate which is depicted in an impressive way in his Shrine in Washington D.C. and there offer prayer for our personal, family and Polonia intentions.

There is a constant flow of people praying at his altar at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. To give Polonia the opportunity to renew spiritual life and then strengthen their faith, a special triptych of John Paul II was designed which is presently on a pilgrimage with his relics to Polish-American parishes across the country. Our generation had the privilege of witnessing the charismatic pontificate of the Polish Pope, St. John Paul II, who had an enormous impact on the Universal Church and the world and therefore, Polonia has an obligation to pass on his legacy.

### **Fiftieth Anniversary of Polish Chapel**

This year we will also celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Polish chapel of Our Lady of Czestochowa at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. The chapel was dedicated in 1966 on the occasion of the millennium of the Baptism of the Polish nation. The chapel has been renovated several times through the generosity of Polish-American bishops, clergy and Polonia. This chapel is a living testimony to the special devotional esteem which Polish people have for the Blessed Mother.

It is no coincidence that the first Polish hymn of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, *Bogurodzica*, was dedicated to the Blessed Mother. The first Polish permanent settlement in the USA, Panna Maria, Texas, 1854, is named after the Virgin Mary and its parish, Immaculate Conception. The devotional practices across our land in Polish parishes, such as May devotions, October Rosary services, and the coronation of the Blessed Mother are the hallmark of Polish-American Marian spirituality. The Our Lady of Czestochowa Shrine in Doylestown, PA is a clear sign of Marian spirituality of Polonia. Pope John Paul II had a special devotion to the Blessed Mother and whatever country he traveled to he always celebrated a Mass in the Marian shrines. In many homes, there is an icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa next to a crucifix which adorns your walls. We want to encourage you to keep devotions to the Blessed Mother, who leads us to Christ.

### **Final Thoughts**

Polonia is not an isolated, independent entity but is a part of a larger American society and is affected by economic, cultural and religious changes in our country. A secularist culture, indifference, relativism, and a misunderstood sense of freedom have had negative consequences in all of society, including Polonia. St. John Paul II during his visit to the Archdiocese of Detroit made this statement to Polonia *"There is always an issue of integration which has a double connotation. -it is important to know about the growing awareness and maturity of Polonia within itself and integration of Polonia in relation to the country where you are now living. The more you are aware of your identity, spirituality, history and Christian tradition from which your forefathers originated and from which you grew up, the better you will serve your new homeland, and multiply the common good of America."*

The major anniversaries and celebrations of this year provide Catholics of Polish ethnicity with the opportunity for self-examination of our attitudes and efforts to deepen our faith and love for God and His Church. In this Jubilee Year of Mercy, we look for inspiration and strength from our forefathers to renew the spirit of evangelization, strengthen our Catholic identity and pride in our cultural and religious heritage. The Millennium celebration of Poland's Christianity in 1966 was preceded by The "Great Novena" of nine years preceding Poland's Millennium had as its theme, *Fidelity to God, Cross, Gospel, Church and her Shepherds*.

Fifty years later, may the same theme guide our pastoral programs. We encourage all the members of our Polish American community to be engaged in religious and cultural activities, and thus write a personal chapter of our generation's history not only with a pen but with our deeds and hearts.

Renewed in faith through this Jubilee Year of Mercy may we rediscover our roots, even while we, as "missionary disciples" share with others the Joy of the Gospel. For this challenging, missionary work of spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ, we impart our fraternal blessings,

Cardinal, Archbishops, and Bishops of Polonia

Given on Mercy Sunday, April 3, 2016