

5-2001

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Recommended Citation

Gicewicz, Edward C.M. (2001) "The Apostolate with Polish Immigrants in the USA: New England Province," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 45: No. 3, Article 8.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol45/iss3/8>

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The Apostolate with Polish Immigrants in the USA

New England Province

by Edward P. Gicewicz, C.M.
Province of New England

Early Beginnings

The installation of the Vincentian priest, Fr. George Glogowski, C.M., as pastor of St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Church, New Haven, Connecticut, took place on New Year's Day, 1 January 1904.

As superior of the group, Fr. Glogowski also organized: St. Michael's Parish, Derby, Connecticut, in 1905; in 1906 he accepted St. Mary's Parish in Conshohocken, Pennsylvania; the Swedesburg, Pennsylvania, Parish of the Sacred Heart; and in 1908, St. Hedwig's Parish in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

It was at this time, following the conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, and after the revolution of 1905, that Czar Nicholas II relented and made concessions, at first in the field of education, that gave the Poles a certain amount of religious and cultural freedom. He opened the part of Poland, occupied by Russia, for missionaries to administer to the faithful.

The thought, therefore, of growth in the new land of the United States was abandoned and the Visitor recalled the confreres.

The honeymoon with the Russian government, however, lasted only two years and when the czarist government reneged on its promises, the former iron rule set in. Again, the Russian-occupied borders were sealed off and the missionaries expelled. One by one, they returned to the United States and a previous idea of a school of higher learning for Polish boys rose to the forefront. The Vincentians realized that the proper follow-up of mission work in a parish was a good boarding high school, as also a source for future vocations to the Vincentian Community, and they attempted to do something about it.

St. John Kanty Prep – Builder of Boys, Maker of Men

The notion of a minor seminary was there from the beginning and when Fr. Ignasiak of Erie, Pennsylvania, donated a large tract of land for a school, it was built in 1912 and flourished until its closing in 1980.

In the 68 years of St. John Kanty Preparatory School's existence (1912-1980), of the 1214 graduates who pursued further professional education, there were 164 priests (38 of them Vincentians), 17 monsignors, 3 religious brothers, 34 dentists, 51 medical doctors, 4 osteopath physicians, 23 attorneys, 3 judges, 5 PhD's, and 6 in professional military service.

How an Ethnic Parish Was Established

There were about 60 Polish families in New Haven at the turn of the century and they were not concentrated in any one section but scattered all over the city. Already in 1896, however, they formed a St. Stanislaus Association and registered it legally. They attended the German church on George Street but craved for a Polish church and a Polish priest.

Around the year 1900, the St. Stanislaus Association sent a delegation to the Hartford Bishop with the request for a Polish parish and Bishop Michael Tierney selected Fr. Stanislaus Musial to organize it. The new pastor made a census of the people and collected money to pay for renting of a place of worship.

Vincentian Polish Publications

Fr. Stanislaus Konieczny, C.M., was the editor of *The Family Treasure (Skarb Rodziny)*, but his best known works were: *The Catechism*, *Lives of Saints*, *Tales of a Missionary*, *Story of a Soul*, and the most popular, *The Polish Prayer Book*.

Fr. Stanislaus Wlodarczyk, C.M., an Example of an Outstanding Parochial Vicar

Many parochial vicars assisted in the New Haven parish of St. Stanislaus throughout the years, but Fr. Wlodarczyk, C.M., should be singled out, since he served St. Stan's quietly for 21 years. He never held a high office in the Community, always calling himself the top soldier, however. He avoided all positions of authority, never built any buildings, amortized any debts, but who could count the souls he converted or strengthened through his well-prepared homilies and confessional talks, the innumerable seeds of virtue he planted within the hearts of his students as he taught catechism, the seed he planted which blossomed into the many good citizens and parishioners.

He was not unknown to the diocesan clergy whom he entertained, cajoled, and indirectly instructed at all social events whether after a confirmation or a Forty Hours Devotion.

Where the Polish Immigrants Came From

Between 1851 and 1890 more than 500,000 Polish people fled the religious and political persecutions in Poland. Approximately the same number fled during martial law in the 1980s. Most of the Poles came from the Prussian part of Poland at first, but by the 1890s the Russian Poles began their exodus.

How the C.M.s Received the Brooklyn St. Stanislaus Parish

On the occasion of a mission, Fr. Anthony Mazurkiewicz, C.M., had approached the Vincentian Fathers at St. John's in Brooklyn about contacts to establish a Mission House in the Brooklyn Diocese. Fr. John J. O'Byrne, C.M., a confidant of Bishop Molloy, suggested the Whitestone area and also suggested that the bishop turn the parish over to the Vincentians especially since, at the request of the bishop, they remained administering the parish after the mission and the sudden departure of the pastor. During a canonical visitation by Fr. Casper Slominski, C.M., Visitor of the Polish Vincentian Fathers, Bishop Molloy offered St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish to the Vincentians. At first, Fr. Slominski said he needed the priests elsewhere but when the bishop, in addition, allowed for a Vincentian Mission House to be established in his diocese in Whitestone, the Visitor agreed.

The takeover was to be effective 9 December 1922 and Fr. Mazurkiewicz was appointed as temporary administrator.

Vincentian Religious Practices

Certain religious customs were started, like the daily hearing of confessions from 7 to 8 a.m., as well as from 4 to 5:30 p.m. and 7 to 8 p.m. on Saturdays. Missions were preached with regularity every couple of years, with occasional weeks of retreats for the young people. Gorzkie Zale (Psalms for Lenten Devotions) and the Miraculous Medal Novena were introduced in all the Vincentian parishes.

Forty Hours Devotions were held annually in all the parishes as examples for the diocesan parishes.

Paderewski Visits St. Stanislaus Parish in Brooklin

On Tuesday, 1 March 1916, at 7 p.m., the Paderewskis visited St. Stan's Parish and the master pianist gave one of his famous concerts. These

were the years of World War I when Poland was involved in another bitter struggle for its independence and Paderewski († 29 June 1941) was seeking support from all groups. Point thirteen of President Wilson's famous Fourteen Points was a direct result of his efforts. This demanded the guarantee of free access to the sea for Poland. General Haller's Army, composed of 28,000 Polish immigrant volunteers, was formed, at least 80 of whom came from the two Polish parishes of Upper Greenpoint and Williamsburg.

Encomium to Fr. Studzinski

After Brooklyn's diocesan pastor left town suddenly, there was a certain resentment from the diocesan clergy that the parish went to order priests, until Fr. Studzinski's time when ties were renewed. He had been able to unite two seemingly disparate characteristics: a gentle disposition, but a stoic firmness in executing his responsibilities. The Polish paper *CZAS* wrote that Fr. Studzinski was a great friend of everything good and beautiful in the life of an individual and in the Greenpoint community. It made a special note of his support of everything that furthered Polish culture. It concluded by saying, "The loss of this quiet, unassuming servant of God is sincerely mourned by all his parishioners and neighbors." The extent of his influence was best measured by the immense number of Masses requested for him and the fond memories of him up until the present time.

Future Pope, Cardinal Wojtyla, visits Upper Greenpoint Parish

Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, Archbishop of Krakow, Poland, was St. Stan's most prominent and distinguished visitor on 29 September 1969, celebrating and preaching at an evening Mass. He was able to spend barely six hours there, including a short rest in the rectory.

Domestic Mission Expansion

Four domestic mission groups, Derby from 1905 to 1922, Erie from 1912 to 1980, Whitestone from 1922 to 1990, and Utica from 1963 to 1996 conducted missions in almost every Polish parish in northeastern United States.

A Summary Statement

Not the least, the Derby, Connecticut, St. Michael Parish (1905), the Ansonia, Connecticut, St. Joseph Parish (1925), and the latest-accepted Brooklyn Parish of Sts. Cyril and Methodius (1996), are mutually happy

working together. For nearly a hundred years, 1904 to 2001, the Vincentians have woven education, pastoral care, and domestic missions into an American fabric.