

THE POLISH CATHOLIC COMMUNITY IN IPSWICH

(Written in 2001 by Stanisław Dobraszczyk and added to by Edward Chwastek)

With the 50th anniversary of the Polish Catholic Community in Ipswich on the horizon I would like to say a few words of reflection recalling past memories. After the war we came from all over the country to settle here in Ipswich, as civilians.

In the beginning only a small group of us settled here due to the fact that this was not an industrialised area, work was in short supply and we faced great opposition from the local Trade Unions.

The beginning of our religious and community life goes back to 1949. Our first Sunday mass in Polish was said in St.Pancras Church at 1pm by a visiting Polish priest from London. Due to the efforts of the then Anglo-Polish Society, mass began to be celebrated every week. The first parish committee was formed in 1950 whose first task was to arrange for a Polish priest to work in the parish – Fr. Borek came in October of that year. His presence stimulated the religious and social life of our community. Several societies sprang up like : Catholic Action, Confraternity of the Living Rosary and later the Polish language Saturday school.

Fr. Borek tried to arrange schooling in the Polish language for the Polish children in Ipswich and approached the sisters of Jesus and Mary whose convent was behind St.Mary's church and who ran both a boarding and a state school at the time. The Superior agreed on the condition that all Polish children came to the school. However, due to lack of interest this all fell through.

At this time there were over 200 Poles living in Ipswich and supporting the Polish parish. Eventually Fr. Borek arranged to have Polish mass said in St. Mary's Church where it continues to be said to this day.

In September 1953 Fr.Borek was moved to Swindon and the Ipswich community was left with visiting priests from London and Kelvedon, Fr. Kołodziejczyk, Fr.Aleksander Hołowacz, Fr.Busiak, Fr. Mieczysław Stasz and others. After the closure of the Polish Army campsite in Kelvedon, Fr. Mieczysław Stasz was transferred in September 1959 to Ipswich. From here he used to go on Sunday afternoon to say mass in the newly formed Polish communities in Witham and Braintree.

Fr. Stasz died in May 1961, and was replaced by Fr. Paweł Rzonsa. At this time two new Polish communities, Colchester and Chelmsford, were formed.

In 1966 Poland celebrated its 1000 years of Christianity - this great event was celebrated in all our communities. For this occasion our community in Ipswich financed the stained glass window of St. Stanisław Kostka the patron of our Ipswich Polish Community in the old St.Mary's church, which is now the parish hall – the window is still there.

During the end of 1973 Fr. P.Rzonsa was transferred to Ilford Park in Devon and Fr.Christopher Kozakiewicz came to Ipswich. With him began a new era of development in our community. The communities of Colchester, Chelmsford, Braintree, Witham, Norwich, Leigh-on -Sea and Ipswich, were again incorporated into a wider organisation now called The Polish Catholic Community of Essex and Suffolk (PWK).

Fr. Christopher proposed the purchasing of property to act as a parish centre for the Polish community here, however, nothing came to fruition due to lack of motivation from the majority of the people.

In November 1976 we celebrated the Silver Jubilee (25 years) of the Ipswich Community.

This great celebration was led by Rt. Rev. Bishop Rubin, who was responsible for the world Polish émigré Community at the time. Bishop Rubin confirmed a number of our young people while he was here. A celebration followed after mass with our choir singing many traditional Polish folk songs in which everyone joined in.

It was Fr. Christopher who set up a team of altar servers, PWK (Polish Catholic Community of Essex & Suffolk) and the Polish Scout group in Ipswich, who were amalgamated with the Polish Scout movement worldwide.

In September 1982 Fr. Christopher was transferred to teach in a private school in Pitsford. Fr. Gregory Aleksandrowicz came to replace him. During his time we celebrated the 40th Anniversary of our Polish Community.

In 1996 at the invitation of Fr. Gregory Aleksandrowicz, Archbishop Stefan Wesoły paid a visit to our parish. On this occasion the Rector of the Polish Catholic Mission in England and Wales Mgr. Stanisław Świerczyński presented the Parish Committee, the choir 'Syrena' and SPK with the 'Golden Order of Merit' and thanked everyone on behalf of the whole community for their effort and hard work throughout the years.

The year 2000 was one of great change for us. In September our priest Fr. Gregory Aleksandrowicz, who served us for eighteen years, was transferred to the Polish community in Bedford and Fr. Ryszard Zalewski replaced him in October. The year 2000 was also a Jubilee year. During our liturgy we had commemorative masses said for the sick of our community, Confraternity of the Holy Rosary, for the children in our community, the Polish Constiution, Polish Ex-Combatants Association and the 40th Anniversary of the Anglo-Polish Society of Braintree. All this enabled us to celebrate this year of great grace which the Good Lord had provided for us. The certificates given out during this time now grace the walls of our parishioners as a reminder of this Jubilee year.

We must not forget that the year 2001 is also an important one for us, as we celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the Ipswich Polish Community and the Silver Jubilee of the Polish Catholic Community of Essex - Suffolk & Norfolk (PWK).

Our invited guests Rt. Rev. Archbishop Wesoły together with the Rector and General Secretary of the Polish Catholic Community of England and Wales, Mgr. Stanisław Świerczyński, have expressed great pleasure at being able to celebrate this great occasion with us. Therefore, let us not just treat them as honoured guests but as old friends, who accompany us on our road to faith. Although this may require of us greater effort and participation than usual, may we accomplish it all joyfully.

However, we cannot ignore all the events and celebrations which have taken place in our community throughout the years and which have now become a tradition. We have never gone hungry during any of our events including 'tea and biscuits' after mass. Our thanks go to all the ladies who have worked so hard throughout the years.

Today, our 'Ladies Circle' includes H. Hulewicz, J. Bartkiewicz, L. Ołowińska, G. Dobrucka, B. Dobraszczyk, G. Jakubowska, M. Gładczuk, S. & M. Domańskie, W. Tuchalska, M. Żur, M. Hołownia, J. Kopeć, H. Shoeberl, J. Kwaśna, I. Wilkosz.

Our traditional Christmas 'Opłatek' is as popular as ever. The beautifully decorated hall is always full of children impatiently waiting for the coming of Father Christmas with his gifts. The singing of our traditional Polish carols touch the heart of every Pole, as childhood memories flood in, of family, friends and homeland.

Our traditional Easter blessing of food and communal celebration in the hall, resounds with the chorus of Alleluia and praise.

Traditionally we celebrate our religious and national festivals such as the feast of Our Lady Queen of Poland on May 3rd. On these occasions our choir 'Syrena' and SPK organise a celebration in the hall as they do for our other festivals such as the feast of the Polish Constitution and 'Day of the Soldier'. Our traditional harvest dance 'Dożynki' enjoys great popularity, and is held in September.

It is only with God's help and blessing that all our efforts come to fruition. In our community we have our Prayer Group which meets every Wednesday and members of the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary, who continually pray for the needs of our whole community.

We should also mention our annual pilgrimages to such places as Walsingham, Aylesford and Laxton Hall.

Many of our youngsters have been keen to attend religious conferences such as Loreto.

For several years now we have been having excursions to our Polish community in London, visiting the parishes and our theatre in POSK. In 2000 Fr. Gregory organised a pilgrimage to Rome for the Jubilee year. This year, in August 2001 we are organising a pilgrimage to the shrine of 'Our Lady of Ostrobrama' in Vilnius, Lithuania. All these outings and pilgrimages have always been the occasion of deepening friendship and a strengthening of faith.

A very important role is played by our parish committee without whom our community could not function. The members of our committee (in the year 2001) are as follows:

Edward Chwastek – chairman

Urszula Shilling – vice chairman

Maria Tchórzewska – secretary

Marie Suchocka – treasurer

Ludwik Jakubowski, Tomasz Suchocki, Helena Hulewicz, and Jadwiga Bartkiewicz,:

Financial auditors: Józef Tchórzewski, Henryk Ochwat, Zbigniew Kwaśny.

These people with their various gifts and talents are the backbone of our community.