

Polonia i parafia Matki Bożej Częstochowskiej w London, Ontario

Jan Walkusz

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In his subsequent and concrete Polish publications, the first with the title of *Polish Community and the Parish of Our Lady of Częstochowa in London, Ontario*, Fr. Jan Walkusz has taken on himself the task of recounting in a professional and unique style, as a historian, the past of a Polish community and of their Parish of Our Lady of Częstochowa in Canadian "London", Ontario (pages 8-9). The author's delving into the affairs of this parish has turned up rich pickings for three concerned parties: for himself (Fr. Walkusz) who has appeared in London regularly, as an agent of the Catholic University of Lublin; for the parish itself, which is supplied with the aforementioned as well as with another, forthcoming, monograph, very solidly documented with bibliographical background; and for the Congregation of St. Michael the Archangel (Michaelites), involved in pastoral activity in this centre from the year 1966 (pages 102-106, 115-117, 128-151).

Prior to establishing Our Lady of Częstochowa Parish, Poles were forming a settlement and a style of living in London, initiated in 1858 with Kashubs. In 1920 the settlers started to develop the outlines of their formal organisational structures, thanks to the amazing level of initiative shown by Joseph Cebulski, and they set up a Polish National Society. Then soon (in 1927) this body was able to commence Polish schooling. Comments on this school are available in the publication on pages 36-40 and 407-424. More or less at the same time, religious forms of activity begun to flourish, and developed strongly in the midst of this community despite various difficulties and obstacles, and even some regressions, these being mostly noticeable in the years 1939-1941.

The beginnings of a Polish Ethnic Parish in London showed slow progress, but always had significant and productive enterprises. From the very beginning the organising Polish Community needed a proper spiritual setting. Therefore some Polish priests residing and working in far-away parts of Ontario were regularly visiting the Poles in London (Fr. Jan Bocian, Fr. Ludwik Kociszewski, Fr. Jan Achtabowski). By and large, the strong feelings of Poles that they should have their own pastoral centre, and the quite positive stance of the new bishop of London diocese, John C. Cody, regarding the issue, had the effect that the Polish Ethnic Parish was established in 1953, in London. This new pastoral centre began to function under the leadership of Fr. Franciszek Pluta, who arrived there from the United States (more information on this parish priest is available in chapter three, pages 95-160).

The first parish priest of the Polish Ethnic Parish in London turned out to be a very persistent, talented and determined organiser. In the same year (1953) together with parishioners he undertook the task of erecting the permanent church for all Poles living in the vicinity of Ontarian London. The first Mass in this new, still uncompleted church was said on 15 August 1954. Its blessing took place one month later, i.e., 12 of September. This newly established parish was consecutively guided by Fr. Pluta (1953-1973), Fr. Piotr Sanczenko (1973-1983), Fr. Mieczysław Kamiński (1983-1992) and Fr. Adam Gabriel CSMA (1992-2005). It was always full of life, pulsating in its own rhythm of activities not only in the pastoral field, but also in the socio-cultural area. These aspects of activity were also dependent on those who served in the parish as assistant priests. On pages 85-151 Fr. Walkusz describes their life stories (many of them, especially pioneers, were victims of the Nazi and Soviet attacks on Poland in September 1939), detailing the way in which they lived out their priestly vocation, and their engagement in parish and ethnic work, in a very attractive manner. In a similar way he presents accounts of the religious sisters of the Ursuline Community, working in the Polish Parish of London from 1975. Their daily, unquestioning service, equal to the work of the biblical Samaritan, brought close to them all who had and still have any contact with the parish. Such personalities as Sr. Kinga Lewicka and Sr. Urszula Bruzik are good to know of and remember. In the later part of his work, Fr. Walkusz deals with the church building and its parish's material base.

This is very much connected with the parochial leaders, particularly – as has already been mentioned – the parish priests, who were very talented, full of energy and initiative, sensitive to pastoral matters and to matters beyond. Then the author made efforts to describe in detail issues of tenure concerning the church, and everything connected with the matter of ownership and parochial property. He illustrates this under the perspective of the mutual relations and involvement of the people in all parish spheres of activity, and in the lives of both the parish priests and the parishioners. The church building is one of the parish properties which pastors and the faithful especially take care of. This pattern was strictly observed and property was carefully managed in the Polish parish in Canadian London, and still is today. In the next chapter, following a logical approach, the author focuses his attention on devotional activities, such as are typically conducted in the parochial place of worship (the church building). He also centres on those pastoral undertakings which occur outside of it. Hence in this fifth chapter the author deliberates on parish engagement in sacramental life, particularly in the Eucharist, and then he extends his studies and looks at all kind of devotions organised during the year in Advent, Christmas Season, Lent Time and Easter Solemnities.

Interesting in this chapter is a report on the spiritual exercises, such as parochial missions and retreats, where the author indicates how deeply the pastors of the parish were aware of this area, how they responded to the needs of people organising these exercises and encouraged the faithful to be involved in such things. No surprise that in this area there were constant adaptations and innovations in order to be sure that the pastoral and spiritual needs of parishioners were met. And the two last themes of this fifth chapter are dedicated to catechesis and pilgrimages. The issue of catechesis (pages 284 and 288) attracts the attention and then creates in readers' minds a question concerning a trend in the parish which began to develop in 1968 and still is a burning one today. The question remains the extent to which catechesis could be being neglected in the parish, leading to the level of knowledge and religious consciousness of children and young people slipping down. This issue is very crucial from the pastoral point of view and is like a litmus paper as a measure of parish success. The pilgrimages organised to Canadian Shrine of Martyrs in Midland and to Poland after the Unrest in Poznań in the year 1956 and to Italy, especially after the election to the See of Peter of Card. Karol Wojtyła, received high recognition and applause. This kind of activity was highly appreciated and brought its positive effects not only in the sphere of religion but also in the area of human and cultural integrity.

In the last two chapters (sixth and seventh) the author reflects on how the Polish community as such, and the parish, functioned in the past, and what their present shape is with regard to its social, cultural and religious priorities.

The sixth chapter the author has divided into two parts. In the first he looks at various groups functioning in the parish, i.e., parish council, liturgical committee, and charitable interest groups. In the second part he reviews formation groupings (living rosary, apostolic forms of youth and children, oasis of families, prayer group, renewal in the Holy Spirit, Bible circle, Divine Mercy group and sympathisers of Radio Marya). Among those groups it is important to stress the role of the parish council, especially in those moments when the parish was undertaking decisions about making serious investments. Diligent research shows how this council was ever developing and taking on new shapes, especially from the time immediately after the Second Vatican Council. The Vatican Council accented the role and firmly stressed the importance of lay people in the Church. It is very clear that the Polish parish in London would never have been as successful as it is, if those priests and the religious sisters had not been there. That they were brought in was thanks to the parishioners out of whom the parish council was selected and formed.

In the further part the author touches on the theme of the liturgical team of the parish. Then in interesting way he records the history of its parochial choir; its glorious past and then its slow decline and closure (pages 334-342). In the second part of this sixth chapter the reader is taken into the spiritual world of the parish. In the whole section the author shows what the parish as such is able to do and what it is actually achieving; how the parochial community prays and how far its spiritual life is developing, based not only on traditional forms of piety but looking at wider dimensions and engagement with values which concurrently have high meaning in peoples' lives. The author has sorted out everything and methodologically portrayed things so that all groups of the parish (adults, youth and children) have been accounted for, showing what forms of spiritual activity (even the most simple and ordinary) these groups have been involved in.

Finally in chapter seven the author considers issues lying beyond the religious and pastoral areas. It is clear that such institutions as parishes emphasise in first place the spiritual aspects, but this does not mean that ideas about other facets of life are not recognised and acted on. Such a more social aim has from the very beginning had a room dedicated to it in the Polish parish in Ontarian London (pages 574-575). This parish is a place where each Pole living in London or in the countryside, one of good will and sincere intentions – even if not practising his/her faith, even a non-Catholic – was and still is welcome to join in the community, express their ideas, views and realise him/herself. Therefore: Polish schools; social organisation; Polish National Association (through its structures it oversees the smaller associations, organisations, groups, teams, clubs, circles and centres); Society of Polish Combatants (2); Credit Union Association; Federation of Polish Women (2); structures of the scouts, together with the groups of their sympathisers; Seniors' Club; and Union of Former Political Prisoners in London; undertakings in the cultural-educational area (especially the activity of publishing, and of artistic groups); and charitable bodies – all these have played/play their roles and had/have gained extremely valuable advantages from the structures of the parish. These advantages are apparent to those who understood and understand that people will always have needs to express themselves and will want to share their religious convictions, spiritual development, intellectual achievements and traditional cultural experiences as well.

At the end of this review I would like to lay stress on two, rather low-ranking issues. The first concerns religious priests, whom the author mentions many times. He did not apply one particular method while talking about them and referring to which religious congregation they belong to (i.e., pages 48-53, 115, 274-275). The second relates to the Bernardinum Publishing House. There are a few spots where in the book the computer-printing mistakes are noticeable (page 20, footnote 10; page 32, footnote 45; page 37, footnote 51; page 49, all footnotes; page 100, footnote 60).

Summarising – I must say that such an analytical study as the one provided by Fr. Walkusz in his 631-pages book could only have been put together by a person highly qualified as a historian and a theologian by vocation. With great sensitivity and sincere recognition the author has emphasised the role of Polish women abroad in this particular overseas place, London, (pages 157-164, 345-356, 446-447, 461-464, 473-483). This is done carefully, in a suitable style. Points of biographical detail have been diligently collected on the religious sisters and parish priests, together with their co-workers, all of whom served the parishioners at the Polish Parish of Our Lady of Częstochowa in Ontarian London. The whole masterpiece is delivered in a beautiful and readable style, notwithstanding one unfortunate expression in Polish on page 135. On many pages there are black and white photos, which make the book more interesting, fleshing out its essence and complementing its written content, thus giving final food for thought to those who have decided to read it.

Note on Reviewer

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