

Br. Joseph Brom, SJC

I had never given much thought to Poland until about five years ago, when I joined a religious order named after a Polish saint, and not a very well-known saint in the United States, either. When I joined the Canons Regular of St. John Cantius (Sw. Jan z Kęty), people would usually ask, “Who is that?” I also knew that there is a very large Polish population in Chicago, but I never knew much of the history of this community until I joined the Canons Regular. I was then introduced to many Polish customs and traditions that enrich our religious order and the wider Polish community in Chicago.

St. John Cantius Church in Chicago, the main church of our order, was one of the first Polish churches built in the city to accommodate the growing Polish population in the city before the turn of the 20th century. It has served as a home for Poles in Chicago for over a century. It was built by the poor immigrants who came to Chicago when Poland was not to be found on any map because of the partitions. The coat of arms of the January Uprising is even set in stained glass in the entrance to the church as a reminder of the hardships they had to endure in their native land and the hope they had for a free and united Poland. Even though they didn't have much, they wanted to build a beautiful church that would remind them of the glories of their homeland.



1 Stained glass at St. John Cantius Church, Chicago.

I was able to take my first trip to Poland during my first year in the order and realized just how many of our customs come from Poland. Everything from putting a red stole on the crucifix on the altar during Easter to the sharing of the opłatek at Christmas comes from the Polish roots of our parish. I was able to visit St. Anne's Church in Kraków and pray at the tomb of St. John Cantius, a great honor indeed.

To me, Poland is also a land of saints. In the United States, we have a few native-born saints. But, because of the dominant culture and the relative youth of the country, there are not many American saints. The city of Krakow alone has almost twenty saints and blessed buried in its churches. Whether it was the tombs of Sw. Stanisław and Sw. Jadwiga at the Wawel Cathedral, or the tomb and shrine of Sw. Faustyna, the city is filled with saints. It is a great inspiration to be surrounded by so many saints of so many different times in history.

I was amazed at the vibrant culture and history of the country and the strong identity of the people. In American, because we have so many people from so many different places, it can

be hard to hold onto a shared cultural identity. And so, I was very impressed by the strong shared culture of the Polish people.

I knew that if I wanted to understand the origins of our religious order well, I would need to understand the Polish culture. But, language and culture are inescapably intertwined. So, I knew that I would never be able to understand Polish culture well without understanding the Polish language. Knowing something of the Polish language would help me understand Polish culture, but it would also allow me to help and minister to the many Polish people who live in Chicago and the areas where my order serves. While most of the seminarians try to learn Spanish because of the many Spanish-speaking immigrants in our country, I asked to learn Polish so I could understand our order, our culture, and to be able to serve the Poles in the area.

My longer stay in Poland in order to study Polish was very enriching. I was able to stay with the Dominican friars at the Klasztor dominikanów at the Church of Świętej Trójcy. Being able to chant prayers with the friars every day in Polish and in Latin was a wonderful experience. And every evening we went in procession to pray at the tomb of Sw. Jacek. Staying in a building which has been standing for almost 800 years was awe-inspiring. The room I stayed in was probably older than my home country. But, I was also able to see modern aspects of Polish culture. My stay was during the World Cup, and I saw just how excited Polish soccer fans can be, even when the team does not do very well.

I had an opportunity to use my Polish in ministry this past Christmas. I went along with a deacon to bring Holy Communion to a Polish woman who was unable to come to church. She doesn't speak very much English and would usually say her prayers in Polish in answer to the deacon saying prayers in English. I was nervous, but I was able to do the reading for the Communion service: "Słowa Ewangelii według świętego Łukasza..." The homebound woman's daughter had to correct my pronunciation a couple times, but I made it through the reading. It was a simple thing, but the homebound woman was clearly very happy to be able to hear the words of Scripture in her own language again after probably a very long time. This was very encouraging for me. I know that religion, like culture, is very closely tied to someone's language. Being able to communicate the faith in someone's first language is very important. This interaction helped to encourage me to continue my study of Polish and to see the importance of doing so and the impact it can have on people's lives.

For me, Poland is a land of faith, culture, and history. Every inch of Krakow is soaked in history. From the Wawel castle to the many museums, the city is filled with opportunities to learn about and understand Polish history. The many festivals and events on the city show all the different dimensions of Polish culture. And the faith of the people is on full display in the dozens and dozens of churches, along with processions (including the 3-hour Corpus Christi procession) and other events. The Polish people are proud of their heritage and I hope to be able to serve them well in Chicago in whatever way I am needed.