



**After 150 years a permanent Polish Parish in San Francisco**  
by Wanda Tomczykowska. Forum December 1996.  
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The first Polish people to arrive in the San Francisco Bay Area were the political immigrants who survived the 1830/31 National Uprisings against the Russian occupants of Poland. Coming mainly from the Polish intelligentsia, they were great patriots ready to serve their new homeland, and from here would work and fight for Poland's independence. They arrived in San Francisco by various means of transportation, but mainly by ships on which they served their Russian masters, and from which they escaped as soon as they arrived at the shore. One of them, Paweł Pietrowicz (Petrovits), a '49er, was an active member of the Vigilance Committee of San Francisco.

Around 1860, approximately 700 Poles settled in San Francisco, but this number was greatly increased after the 1863 Insurrection against the Russian occupation. Considering the social situation of that time, little is known about their religious life.

Much more information on the migratory wave that followed in the late 19th and early 20th century is available from more detailed records. Some of the Poles who tied the political oppression in Poland were joined by masses of people escaping from terrible economic problems in their country. Their religious backgrounds were Roman Catholic, Jewish, and some Protestants. Unfortunately, comparing immigrants from other countries, the Polish Catholics were unable to get their own pastorate in any San Francisco Bay Area locations, even though their numbers reached several thousand by then. This may be the reason for their forming, rather quickly, socio-cultural-political organizations in which their patriotism and concern for Poland could be continued - - but surely they must have also had their prayer sessions for their unhappy homeland.

Shortly before World War I, Reverend Jan Kanty Rozmus, always concerned about the spiritual life of the local Polish people, began to raise funds to build a Polish church in San Francisco. He collected several thousand dollars, but died shortly afterwards, and the Poles used the money later as a downpayment for the Polish House - now called Polish Club - at 3040 22nd Street. In the meantime, Archbishop Allemany delegated Fathers Stanisław Kusiacki and Józef Guidi, both of the Jesuit Order, to cooperate with the Polish immigrants. In 1902 Archbishop Riordan invited an Italian Jesuit, Rev. Enrique Bontempo, who established a mission for all Slavic people at the Nativity Church on Fell Street.

After World War II, Archbishop Józef Gawlina, staying in Rome, became the spiritual leader of all Poles scattered around the world. He succeeded in arranging hospitality for Polish priests who spent many years in German Concentration Camps. Archbishop Mitty of San Francisco answered this call for help, and between 1950 and 1952, eleven priests arrived in San Francisco: Antoni Dahlman, Leon Degner, Wojciech Głuszek, Paweł J. Guttman, Stefan Kopania, Wincenty Kruk, Albin K. Kudziełka, Henryk Maciejewski-Mayski, Jan Stasiak and Franciszek Wajda. However, their duties did not include specific regular spiritual work with the Polish community, nor the establishment of Polish Pastoral Centers - - they were sent to various local parishes where they lived and helped with the liturgical duties of the given rectory. They were allowed to celebrate only one Holy Mass a month for the Polish community in the three centers the Archbishop designated: in the Nativity Church in San Francisco - Fathers Wajda and Kruk; at St. Columba Church in Oakland - Fathers Leon Degner and Jan Stasiak; and at St. Anthony Church in Redwood City - Fathers Kopania and Dobkowski. Father Banasiewicz was sent to Richmond to take care of the Polish immigrants in Marin County, and Father Głuszek was sent to Fairfax. Of course, it was better to have one Polish Holy Mass every month, rather than none, but this forced the Polish people to attend Sunday Masses in their local parishes. Was it planned assimilation? Despite, the fact that the Polish immigrants, then about 15,000, were known for being fervent Roman Catholics? And most of them lived in stable homes?

Around 1962, Father Dobkowski transferred the monthly Polish Masses from the Nativity Church to the Chapel of Lone Mountain College in San Francisco. Father Leon Degner began building the St. Anne's Church in Walnut Creek, for which purpose he was transferred there in 1965. Several other Polish priests arrived in the San Francisco Bay Area, who became active in the Polish community. Among them was Father J. J. Klaia, a Dominican who stayed in San Francisco, and Father Kazimierz Murawski; in Oakland. Father Józef Myrda, who taught architecture at St. Mary's College in Orinda, and Dr. Andrzej Woźnicki, who became Professor of Philosophy at the University of San Francisco, were instrumental in establishing the "Veritas" Club for intellectual Poles. In addition, Father Wojnicki published the bilingual quarterly San Francisco Echo from 1969 to 1971, which he then changed to Migrant Echo published until 1981. (Many, detailed; and interesting articles on the Polish immigration were published in these issues.) Other priests helped with the weekly one-hour Polish radio programs, taught at the Saturday Polish Language School for children, were available for public lectures, and gave material and financial assistance to Mr. Jan Kowalik, who established the invaluable "American Polish Documentation Studio" in which he collected and cataloged all Polish publications published abroad after World War II began in Poland on September 1, 1939.

With the influx of more immigrants from Poland, (this time escaping Communist rule and indoctrination), it became obvious that permanent and regular (not only monthly) religious services ought to be established in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 1974 the Society of Christ (established by the Primate of Poland, Cardinal August Hlond in 1932 for missionary priests to be sent to Polish communities around the world), approached Archbishop Joseph McGucken of San Francisco offering their services to the Polish community. One year later representatives of the Northern California Division of the Polish American Congress submitted a petition to

the Archbishop to appoint a Polish priest from the Society of Christ as a Missionary Pastor for the Polish people. On February 4, 1976 Archbishop McGucken issued a decree proclaiming the founding of the first Polish Mission Parish in San Francisco. Finally, after more than a century, the Poles living in the Bay Area had a Mission Parish - - but not yet their own church.

The first Missionary Pastor became Father Wojciech Baryski, who was permitted to choose St. Wojciech, the Polish Bishop and Martyr, as the Mission's Patron Saint. He established a Parish Council to cooperate with him. Its members were as follows:

President, Mrs. Aleksandra Nowicka; Vice Presidents, Mrs. Krystyna Chciuk and Mr. Piotr Midunczyk; Secretary, Mr. Marian Grohoski; Treasurer, Mr. Jan Smelski.

The inaugural Holy Mass was concelebrated on February 1, 1976 in the Polish Club, and there, the following day, the first meeting of the Parish Council took place. Father Baryski lived in the Rectory of St. Gabriel Church, 2535 40th Avenue, but until the 7th of March continued celebrating the Sunday Mass at the Polish Club. On March 14th, he succeeded in moving the weekly Mass to the Chapel of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd at 501 Cambridge Street. There, on August 28th, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła celebrated a High Mass - after his participation in the Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia. On December 18th the first Polish Wigilia was held for the Polish community. From 1976 to 1978 Father Baryski published a weekly Bulletin, but changed it - on January 1, 1979 - to a monthly brochure entitled "Boży Siew" (God's Sowing). On July 6, 1980 Father Baryski celebrated his first Mass at the Nativity Church at 240 Fell Street, and in November 1981 he was transferred to Calgary, Canada.

His post was taken over on November 29, 1981 by Father Stanisław Drzał, also of the Society of Christ, who on August 13, 1989 was transferred to Portland, Oregon. Father Andrzej Maślajak became the new Pastor of the St. Wojciech Polish Mission Parish on August 13, 1989, but only one year later, on August 19, 1990, he was delegated to take over the new Polish Mission Parish in San Jose, and later became the Provincial of the Society of Christ for America. On that same day, Father Stanisław Poszwa became the Pastor, and transferred the Sunday Masses to St. Thomas the Apostle Church at Balboa and 39th Avenue. He continued living at the Rectory at 2535, 40th Avenue. On December 8, 1990 he began broadcasting the weekly half-hour religious radio programs on station KUSF 90.3 FM. He had large Parish Councils to cooperate with. On February 20, 1993 he opened the "Centrum" of the Mission at 50 Banbury Street, outfitted by many young, creative volunteers. There, every Friday at 7 p.m. a Holy Mass was celebrated, Saturday lessons for Polish children were given, and Senior Citizens met regularly. On October 29, 1993, The Primate of Poland, Cardinal Józef Glemp, visited the Centrum, and in the evening celebrated a High Mass at St. Thomas Church. For the 15th Anniversary of the St. Wojciech Mission, Father Poszwa published a special issue of his weekly Bulletin, giving detailed descriptions of the work done at the Mission since its inception in 1976.

Despite all the above, none of the Priests was able to create a permanent church for the Polish Community in San Francisco. This miracle happened when Reverend William Levada, the new Archbishop of San Francisco took over the work of Archbishop Quinn. He understood the neces-

sity and urgency of giving one of the closed churches to the Polish community. His choice was the Nativity Church, maybe because of its Slavic past. Father Czesław Rybacki, who took over the Polish Mission Parish after Father Poszwa left for Canada in 1994, was elated - to say the least. He was jubilant when he called me at the Foundation just a few days after the Polonaise Ball. His voice sounded like a bell ringing the good news. He was a changed person when he picked up from the Foundation the large painting of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa we purchased several years ago from the Pauline Fathers on Jasna Góra. We are delighted that it became the first gift to the first Polish Church in San Francisco! We could not have dreamed of a better home for Her! Certainly, the Fathers on Jasna Góra will be happy with us, and will celebrate this miraculous occurrence with a special Holy Mass at Her altar for the well-being of the first Polish church in San Francisco!

I am happy that I no longer have to admit - with "great embarrassment - that there are more than eleven Russian Orthodox Churches in San Francisco, but not one Polish Roman Catholic Church. Therefore it is thrilling to tell the world that finally, after almost 150 years, there will be a Polish Church in San Francisco! Father Rybacki will finally have his own rectory, can make his own decisions about programs he wants to present, instead of adjusting his plans to the schedule of the church he had to rent, as all the Polish priests before him. Although the Nativity Church, closed for quite a few years, is not listed in the phone book, the Poles, and the Americans of Polish descent will certainly make sure that everyone knows about this miracle. Everyone is very excited that the inaugural Mass at the Nativity Church will be celebrated at Midnight on Christmas Eve. But until then, many renovations of the church and the rectory have to be completed, which the good Archbishop promised to take care of - without having been asked for help. What admirable generosity, what a great heart! What a welcome change!

The Nativity Church is architecturally rather modest, but the inside is spacious, and has beautiful stained glass windows. A floor below houses a large hall and has a kitchen to prepare refreshments and meals, but lacks a sink, a stove and a refrigerator. The same problem has to be solved in the rectory. Anyone willing to donate such expensive kitchen items? Father Rybacki has the necessary office equipment to move into the office spaced but there are many needs for the guest rooms and the general outfitting of the rectory. We will be happy to cooperate with the Parish Council in completing the outfitting of the rectory rooms. The more giving hands, the better. The happier all of us will be!