

Democratic church looks beyond ethnic boundaries

By Teresa A. Parsons

From a post-Vatican II vantage point, it appears that Bishop Francis Hodur, the organizer of the Polish National Catholic Church in the United States, may have lived before his time.

Nearly 30 years before the Second Vatican Council, he and fellow priests in the Polish National Catholic Church had established many of the liturgical reforms later adopted by the Roman Catholic Church. In 1934, they began to celebrate Mass facing the congregation and speaking in the native language of their people.

From its foundation, the Polish National Catholic Church raised the liturgy of the word to a sacramental level, foreshadowing the renewed emphasis Vatican II placed on scripture.

Long before Vatican II reaffirmed that "the laity are made to share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ," the Polish National Catholic Church established itself as a Catholic democracy, granting women and all lay persons an equal voice in the governance of the church.

"We became a democratic form of Catholicism with each member of a parish having an equal voice," said Father George Grube, pastor of St. Casimir's Polish National Catholic Church in Rochester.

"He (Bishop Hodur) was light years ahead of his time," Father Grube added. "I am amazed at how close they (the documents of Vatican II) are to what we've been teaching for 100 years or more."

Despite a history of misunderstandings between Roman and Polish National Catholics, the two churches share much of the same theology and tradition — from belief in the Holy Trinity and Christ as the Son of God and our Savior to celebration of the Mass and the sacraments, to such devotions as the rosary and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

"People grew up with a lot of misconceptions about us — that we're different or strange," Father Grube said. "But we are a truly Catholic Church, even though in this country, Catholic has come to mean Roman Catholic."

The seeds of separation were planted during the First Vatican Council, convened in 1869. The chief action of the council, promulgated in 1870, was the definition of papal infallibility, which some church leaders, known as "Old Catholics," viewed as a false innovation.

As Eastern European immigrants flooded into the United States during the 1890s, many brought with them this sense of discord. In 1897, along with a group of 300 Polish-American families, Father Hodur, a native Pole and pastor of Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church in Scranton, became embroiled in a dispute with the diocese.



Father Melvin Walczak left the Polish National Church last summer to join the Roman Catholic Church.

The Poles asked for Church recognition of their traditions and culture, control of the parish property and authority to choose their own pastor. When their requests were denied, the group bought property and organized its own congregation at St. Stanislaus, the first Polish National Catholic Church in the United States.

Other predominantly Polish churches around the country joined with the Scranton parish, and in 1898, when the pope refused to assent to their requests, they formally broke ties with the Vatican.

In 1904, the church organized its first synod in Scranton. Representatives of some 20,000 people attended the gathering and elected Father Hodur as their bishop. He was consecrated in 1907 by three Old Catholic bishops from Utrecht, Holland, thereby establishing what Polish National Catholics claim as direct Apostolic Succession.

No official general pronouncement has been made by the Roman Catholic Church on the validity of ordination in the Polish National Catholic Church, according to Father Joseph Hart, a professor at St. Bernard's Institute. Despite that fact, Father Melvin Walczak's ordination in the Polish National Catholic Church was accepted as valid by Rome last year.

"One could draw the conclusion that Rome could be considering the matter," Father Hart speculated. One the other hand, he added, Vatican officials may have considered Father Walczak's case on its own merits.

Since Vatican II, most of the differences which remain between the two

churches are practical in nature rather than theological.

Officials of both churches are involved in continuing dialogue, and last fall, the Prime Bishop met with Pope John Paul II for the first time.

While Polish National Catholics accept as dogmatic the first four ecumenical councils of the Church, they still believe that papal infallibility is an innovation rather than a scripturally based principle.

Their church is instead governed by general synods, which meet every four years, and diocesan synods, which meet each two or three years. The Supreme Council meets annually to govern the church and is headed by the Prime Bishop or "first among equals," who is elected. All parishes send representatives to the synods and are bound by the church's constitution, written by Bishop Hodur.

Like Roman Catholics, Polish National Catholics celebrate seven sacraments, but with some differences. Confirmation is considered the completion of baptism, rather than a sacrament in its own right. The second sacrament in the Polish National Catholic Church is the Word of God — listening and interpreting scripture.

The sacrament of penance is administered in two forms; corporate or general confessions, which take place at the beginning of each Mass, and private confessions, which are administered to children and youth under 16 and to adults upon request.

Although the sacrament of matrimony is the same in both churches, grounds for annulment differ somewhat. The Polish National Catholic Church, for instance, recognizes psychological impediments as grounds for annulment.

Matrimony is also a possibility for Polish National Catholic clergymen. Based on their interpretation of scripture, members of the church decided in 1921 that priests could choose to marry either before or after ordination.

Curiously, although the church permits a married clergy, it still suffers from a shortage of priests. "We have about 20 parishes waiting for priests," Father Grube noted. Partly as a result, the church is currently training its first class of permanent deacons and is planning to establish a religious community of men, Father Grube speculated that a community of women religious will not be far behind for the church.

The Polish National Catholic Church currently claims 162 parishes in North America and Poland. St. Casimir's, the only Polish National Catholic Parish in the Rochester area, belongs to the Buffalo-Pittsburgh Diocese, which encompasses Upstate New York, central and western Pennsylvania, eastern Ohio and North and South Carolina.

Continued on Page 12

AQUINAS INSTITUTE THEN AND NOW



— A series of articles to appear semi-monthly commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the school.

When the editor of the Rochester Post Express on September 8, 1906, wrote "the sooner the Rochester Catholic High (forerunner of Aquinas Institute), puts out a baseball, football, basketball and track team; then, and only then, will the Catholic children of the city attend it," he never could have predicted the outcome. Sports have always been an integral part in the education of American youth and this is no less true of students in Catholic schools. Competitive, well-coached, disciplined teams have always been the hallmark of Aquinas.

Sixty years after, when one thinks of Aquinas sports, football leaps immediately to mind. But it was in the very first year of the new Aquinas on Dewey Avenue the varsity basketball team rose to the heights in local, state and national competition. Bill Cucci, the 1925-26 team mascot, "a high sounding term for water boy", as he describes himself, recalls some highlights. Most exciting game during the regular season was a 9-8 victory over Latin High of Cleveland. Five games were one point victories, the last one a 17-16 victory over Most Holy Rosary of Syracuse for the New York State Catholic Championship. The team capped its season when it emerged as runner-up in a national tournament sponsored by Loyola of Chicago.

Though the 1925-26 team was hailed as "best quint Aquinas ever had" by its contemporaries, the 1926-27 team was close behind in laurels. Highlight of the season, according to Cucci, was a 20-14 victory over Latin again. "Skee" Flynn tied that game with six free throws; John Riley and Thomas Slowe also contributed. George Schaad, presently living in Lakewood, Colorado, was all scholastic team guard. Season record was 18 wins - 3 losses.

The only undefeated basketball team in Aquinas' history was in 1953-54. A team coached by Lou Basile started five players, all of whom went on to play in college: Fred Wagner (Fordham), Greg Britz (Canisius), Danny O'Brien (St. Bonaventure), Jerry Kotwas and Mike Spang (Assumption of Windsor). Most games were played in the War Memorial as a preliminary to the Rochester Royals, according to Mike Spang. Hornell and Holley, both previous Sectional V winners, were both beaten twice. Highlight of the season, Spang recalled, was a 58-54 victory over Erie Prep.

The 1985-86 team under Coach Mike Ruff continues this Aquinas tradition. Presently sporting a record of 12 wins and 3 losses, the team has to be reckoned as a threat in Section V this year.

NEXT ISSUE — MISSIONS AT AQUINAS

Printed by Aquinas Institute

SUPPORT

HOME MISSIONS

BLACK AND INDIAN

The Black and Indian annual mission collection will be taken up in the Rochester Diocese on February 18th.
Black and Indian Commission Office, 2021 H Street, N.W. Washington, DC 20006

Unique Care

R.N.'s - L.P.N.'s - Live-ins
or Hourly Aides

Bonded, Insured,
prescreened & reasonable

758 South Avenue
442-1700

Be An Instrument Of Peace



In a community following the Gospel in prayer, in service, to sick and aged.

Write to:
Daughters of St. Francis of Assisi
507 N. Prairie St.
Lacon, ILL 61540