

New home:

Immigrant priest values Polish heritage, appreciates opportunities of life in U.S.

By Father Mitchell Zygodlo
Guest contributor

In the last three centuries the tragic fate of the Polish people forced many to leave their fatherland in search of a livelihood and freedom. Polish people migrated to many different countries in the world. The first Polish immigrants came to America as early as the 18th century and to the Rochester area at the end of the 19th century.

In 1932 — encouraged explicitly by Pope Pius IX — Cardinal August Hlond, the primate of Poland, founded a new religious congregation whose pastoral works would be devoted exclusively to the people of Polish descent throughout the world.

The pope himself gave the new congregation its name — *Societas Christi Pro Emigrantibus Polonis*, meaning, "Society of Christ for Polish People Outside of Poland."

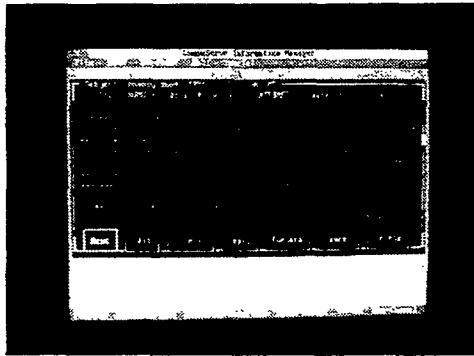
When I was in high school, I had heard about the special seminary that trained priests for this congregation. I had been thinking about the priesthood even in grammar school, as many Polish students did.

Another influence toward the priesthood came from priests at my parish, members of the Society of the Divine Word. I remember being at the reception for one of the priests who was going to Brazil, and thought that maybe I could be a missionary, too.

Immediately after graduation from high school in Szczecin Province in 1975, I entered the special seminary in Poznan that prepared priests for pastoral services among the Polish people in all parts of the world. While at this seminary I took additional courses and earned a master's degree in theology at the Catholic University in Lublin.

On May 25, 1982, I was ordained in the Basilica in Poznan by Archbishop Emmanuel Clarizio, and was assigned for one year to Szczecin, a city the size of Rochester in northwestern Poland. I spent 24 hours each week teaching religion to the grammar school and high school students. I was also in charge of 40 altar boys and the youth group.

Besides this, I also said Masses and funerals and heard confessions. I spent more hours in the confessional there than in this country because the Polish people go to confession very often — I



A daily computer news service from Poland keeps Father Zygodlo in touch with his homeland.

don't know if they have more sins than people in the United States, but it is a tradition. Of course, each First Friday I visited about 30 people and took them Holy Communion because we do not have eucharistic ministers in Poland as we do in this country.

During the next two years I served three mission churches in the parish of Suchan in the Diocese of Szczecin. This assignment included the responsibility of rebuilding one of the churches that had been destroyed in World War II.

My years in the seminary and after ordination came during the time of the

Solidarity strikes and martial law. These followed years of tension between the Catholic Church and the communist government in Poland.

Poland had accepted Christianity in the 10th century. Pagan shrines and idols were destroyed. Churches and monasteries arose in their place, spreading the light of faith and progress throughout the country. Crosses, small shrines near the road and the churches have been visible signs of God's blessing on the Polish people.

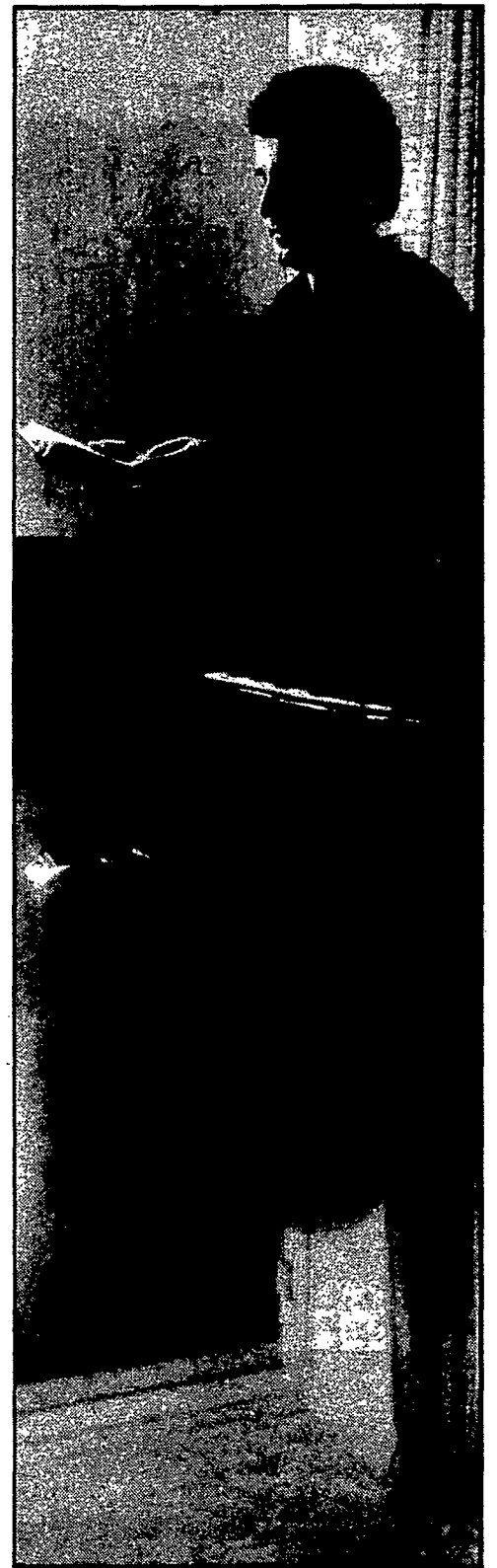
But Poland was wedged between and often occupied by her powerful neighbors. The faith in Poland was interwoven with nationalism.

Under the communist regime after World War II, large estates were abolished, industries nationalized, and farm production fell. The harsh working conditions led to a riot in Poznan in June, 1956.

The church also suffered. During the Stalinist era from 1948 to 1956, schools were removed from the supervision of the Roman Catholic Church, and Catholic priests were jailed. A February, 1953, law had required government consent for high Roman Catholic Church appointments. In 1956 Gomulka, the first secretary of the Polish Communist Party, agreed to permit religious freedom and to allow religious publications, provided that the church kept out of politics. In 1961, religious studies in public schools were stopped.

Meanwhile, during the persecution, the Catholic faith of the Polish people had grown stronger. The churches were the only places where opposition groups could meet. The Polish Church at all times supported those who were being persecuted.

Government relations with the church improved in the 1970s. Conse-



Father Zygodlo recites his morning prayers in the living room of the rectory before preparing for an early-morning Mass.



Father Mitchell Zygodlo, parochial vicar at St. Patrick's Church in Seneca Falls, takes care of paperwork in his rectory office. The hand-woven image of the pope comes from Poland.

quently, the number of priests and churches was greater in 1971 than in 1939. But labor troubles began to grow in the 1970s as well. In August, 1980, following two months of labor disputes that crippled the country, the Polish government met the demands of the striking workers at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk. One of the 21 concessions granted was the right to form independent trade unions and the right to strike — an unprecedented development in a communist country.

By 1981, 9.5 million workers had joined the independent trade union Solidarity. Farmers had won official recognition for their own independent trade union in May of that year. Solidarity leaders in December 1981 proposed a nationwide referendum on the establishment of a non-communist government if the current government would not agree to a list of demands. Those demands included access to the mass media, and free and democratic elections for local councils in the provinces.

The next day, Dec. 13, the Polish government, fearful of Soviet intervention, imposed martial law. Public gatherings, demonstrations and strikes were forbidden. Lech Walesa and other Solidarity leaders were arrested. The U.S. government imposed economic sanctions against Poland; these were lifted when martial law was suspended in December 1982.

The church was the one institution that had the power to stand against the government during this time. Priests had helped Solidarity get started, and