

Polish Oblates in Canada (1896-1956)

Towards the end of the nineteenth century Archbishop Adelard Langevin OMI of St. Boniface sent distinguished missionary, Fr. Albert Lacombe, to Europe to seek out priests who spoke the various languages of the many new immigrants who were settling in Canada from Central and Eastern Europe. The Canadian Oblates saw the need to provide pastoral care for people in their native languages. In 1896, the first Polish Oblate, Brother Antoni Kowalczyk, arrived in Alberta. After many years of humble service and a saintly life, he died in 1947 – a true saint, in popular opinion. Others followed and continued the task of evangelization, beginning with Western Canada.

The Kulawy Fathers – pioneering pastors in the Polish community

In 1897, the Superior General of the Missionary Oblates promised Bishop Adelard Langevin OMI two Polish Oblates who were just finishing theological studies in Ottawa. They were two brothers: Jan and Wojciech Kulawy. Immediately after their ordination, they traveled to Winnipeg, where Fr. Wojciech Kulawy was named pastor of the Poles, Slovaks, Ukrainians and Germans in the St. Boniface archdiocese, which stretched from Winnipeg to the Rocky Mountains. In one of his first voyages along the train route from Calgary westward, Fr. Kulawy stopped at several towns that had grown along the railroad: Cochrane, Canmore, Anthracete and Banff. He arrived in British Columbia and preached retreats at Fernie for the local Poles, Slovaks and Ukrainians.

Fathers Jan and Wojciech Kulawy concentrated their efforts in Winnipeg and gave thought about forming a multicultural parish there. In 1899, both Fathers organized a Eucharistic procession with the participation of then-Archbishop Langevin OMI. At that time, the Archbishop presented a plan to create a new parish for the German and Slovak communities. On August 20 of that same year, the cornerstone of what would become Holy Ghost parish was blessed. Archbishop Langevin OMI wrote in one of his letters that the Polish priests could be characterized by a pastoral zeal of the highest quality. Fr. Jan Kulawy OMI was named pastor of the new parish.

In 1901, Fr. Karol Gretchel OMI and Fr. August Forner OMI joined the Kulawy brothers in pastoral service. Together with Fr. Wojciech Kulawy, they visited Polish settlements throughout Manitoba.

Holy Ghost parish in Winnipeg developed ever more actively and soon became a centre of Polish life there. It should be noted that from the very beginning there was a Polish school at Holy Ghost parish. The Polish-language weekly, “Canadian Voice”, had been published at the parish since 1904. The publication was costly both in terms of finances and personal commitment, so it was discontinued for a certain period of time. However, in 1908, it was re-issued with the name “Gazeta Katolicka” (Catholic Gazette) and, later, “Gazeta Polska” (Polish Gazette). In 1951, the undertaking merged with the National Polish League and the publication now became known as “Glos Polski” (Polish Voice), which to this day is published in Toronto. In 1903, Fr. Pawel Kulawy – the third of the Kulawy brothers – arrived in Canada. He travelled to Alberta, where he worked until his return to Poland in 1921.

Polish Oblates and their service to St. Mary's Province

The 1920's in Western Canada was a significant period in the expansion of Oblate missionary activity where the religious community saw the formation of new organizational structures. In 1926, a province was formed for the German and Polish Oblates and was based in Regina: St. Mary's Province. This province covered all the communities served by Polish and German Oblates in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Fr. Leonard Nandzik OMI was a part of the first provincial council and represented the Polish Oblates. By this time, the period of "traveling missionaries" in the history of the Canadian Church was essentially coming to an end. The number of priests grew. New priests came from Poland.

Besides pastoral ministry, the Oblates also provided education. In 1908, St. John's Juniorate, a high school for candidates for the priesthood, opened in Edmonton. In 1943, its name was changed to St. John's College. A large group of Poles studied there. In 1917, the Oblates established what in 1927 would become known as St. Joseph's Seminary in Edmonton – so named by Archbishop Henry O'Leary. In 1926, Archbishop Sinnott of Winnipeg turned to St. Mary's Province with the request that the Oblates form an English-language high school for boys in Winnipeg (St. Paul's High School). In 1932, a juniorate and seminary were also established at Battleford (SK). In this way, new structures were formed that would help in the formation of new Oblate missionaries – including those of Polish descent.

The first parishes in Toronto

The first Oblate in the Toronto Archdiocese was Fr. Stanislaw Puchniak OMI, who on June 29, 1935 arrived at St. Stanislaus Kostka parish and began working there. Two weeks later, Fr. Thomas Schnerch OMI joined him, and was a brief time later replaced by Fr. John Bednarz OMI. Fr. Bednarz devoted himself to ministry among those who had become indifferent to religion and who were far away from God. The parish was rather stratified and full of divisions; for this reason, the Fathers decided to visit each Polish family individually. They also held the conviction that parishioners could attain true peace only by means of the Sacraments. In his first homily, Fr. Puchniak said: "The only barometer for your faith comes in the form of the confessional and Holy Communion". St. Stanislaus Kostka parish was the second truly Polish parish in Toronto after St. Mary's and, in the early days the parish played an important role in the life of the Polish community. St. Stanislaus parish was the focal point for Polish community organizations and groups. The Fathers were instrumental in the formation of organizations, musical ensembles, schools and other groups.