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Poles gather in Lawrenceville to pray for Pope

'The Polish people have a great love for him'

By [BILL OSINSKI](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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They pray not just for the pope, but for "our pope."

People all around the world are concerned over the health of Pope John Paul II, the spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic faith.



JESSICA MCGOWAN/SPECIAL
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Polish immigrant Emilia Borawska of Dacula and her 3-year-old daughter, Victoria, join in singing during Sunday afternoon Mass at St. Marguerite d'Youville Catholic Church.

But for one group of metro Atlantans, those prayers for him are highly personal. Every Sunday, about 200 Poles living in the Atlanta area gather for the Sunday afternoon Mass at St. Marguerite d'Youville Catholic Church in Lawrenceville. Additionally, Mary Our Queen Catholic Church in Norcross offers Mass for Poles on two Sundays each month.

The services are held in their native language, and every service includes special prayers for the Polish-born pope.

"He is the pope of the whole church, but he is also *our* pope," said Rev. Janusz Zych, a member of the Society of Christ, an order of Polish priests who minister to congregations of Poles around the world.

"The Polish people have a great love for him," Zych said. "They come to me and ask, 'What can I do?' I tell them the most beautiful gift we can give is our prayers."

The bond between Poles and Pope John Paul II goes deeper than national or denominational loyalties, according to Elzbieta Gurtler-Krawczynska, the parish council president for the Atlanta Polish Catholic Apostolate.

In a real sense, she said, many Poles see the pope as an important agent of the world-shaking events that led to their freedom as a people.

When John Paul II — formerly Cardinal Karol Wotyla of Krakow — became pope in 1978, Poland was under Communist domination. With his moral support, the leaders of the Solidarity movement led the resistance against the Polish Communist government and accelerated the ultimate breakup of the Soviet empire, she said.

"He would tell us, 'Do not be afraid,'" said Gurtler-Krawczynska, who is now an assistant professor in the rheology department of the Emory School of Medicine.

Throughout his long papacy, John Paul II has displayed a special affection for his native land and its people, she said.

"Now, he is so imbued in our culture and our lives, it's hard to separate us from him," she said.

She has experienced that personal connection herself. In 1991, she said, she went to Poland while the

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(ENLARGE)

'He is the pope of the whole church, but he is also our pope,' says the Rev. Janusz Zych, a Polish-born priest who serves Polish Catholics in metro Atlanta.

pope was visiting, and she can recall thousands of people walking long miles in the rain to see him. On a later trip to Rome, she was among a group of people who received Holy Communion from the pope. "I was really in heaven," she said.

The pope has been hospitalized twice in recent weeks. Even though his health has improved, he remains in the hospital and Gurtler-Krawczynska still monitors television news channels for updates on his condition.

Wherever Poles migrate, they want to take their language and their religion (more than 90 percent of Poles are Catholic) with them, she said. Toward that end, Gurtler-Krawczynska went to Rome in 2001 with a petition to send a Polish-born priest to the Polish people of metro Atlanta.

That request was granted in 2002. Zych now serves as the priest for the congregation. The Mass he offers in Polish is the same basic Mass celebrated by all Catholics.

One Polish touch is the icon on the altar of Our Lady of Czestohowa, the Queen and Protector of Poland, commonly called the Black Madonna. The original of this depiction of the Madonna and Christ child was believed to have been painted by St. Luke, the writer of one of the four Gospels.

Throughout Polish history, miraculous victories against military invaders have been credited by the faithful to the intervention of Mary, as she is depicted in this icon. The icon is stored at a monastery in Czestohowa, Poland, and the faces in it have turned black, probably due to centuries of soot from votive candles placed beneath it.

The pope, along with many other Polish Catholics, has a special devotion to the virgin.

Polish Catholics do not equate John Paul II with the Madonna, but they do hold him especially close to their hearts.




"He's one in a million," said Danuta Wroblewski, of Suwanee, a member of the metro Atlanta Polish Catholic community.

"He's great as a person, and great as pope," she said. "We love him, and we pray for him every day."



JESSICA MCGOWAN/SPECIAL
(ENLARGE)

Poles pray for the pope every Sunday afternoon at St. Marguerite d'Youville Catholic Church in Lawrenceville.

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