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New Polish Apostolate Brings Immigrants Together

By Paula Day

The arrival in early November of Father Kazimierz Jaisinski, S.Chr., to begin ministering to Polish Catholics in the archdiocese, may mark a new era for Polish immigrants here.

The 42-year-old Polish born priest came to Atlanta Nov. 2, on assignment from his congregation, the Society of Christ. As parochial vicar at St. Thomas More parish in Decatur, he has the specific responsibility of ministry to the Polish community in the archdiocese, according to Father Edward Dillon, vicar general.

Judging from telephone book entries Father Jaisinski believes the number of persons of Polish origin in the metro area may be considerable. However, a Polish community has not coalesced here.

Unlike other metropolitan area such as New York and Chicago, Poles in metro Atlanta do not have their own ethnic neighborhood or parish which can serve to bring them together. Since mid-November they have come from distance, some as far away as Macon, to participate in festivities and a 7:30 Mass celebrated in Polish each Sunday evening at St. Thomas More.

“They come from Stone Mountain, from Norcross, Smyrna, Kennesaw, Marietta – all over, the priest said. He estimated 200 regularly attend the Mass. At a recent traditional Christmas meal between 350 and 370 people of Polish origin joined the festivities.

Maciej Kraszczyński, who came to the United States three years ago, hopes to the presence of polish-speaking priest celebrating Mass regularly will be a magnet drawing the Polish immigrants together.

Kraszczyński, as most recent arrivals from Poland, was a political refugee seeking asylum from the more intense communist oppression after martial law was imposed in 1981. He and his wife, Irena, their son Simon and daughter Margaret, live in Stone Mountain where he has bought a home. He works two jobs and goes to school in an effort to pay the mortgage and improve his economic situation.

The 46-year-old Kraszczyński said language and his age are difficult barriers to

overcome. As a professional, he worked for 25 years in telecommunications in Poland. Now he is an administrative assistant for blind people at the First Atlanta Bank in Decatur. He does janitorial work at St. Thomas More and takes computer programming courses at DeKalb Tech. His wife is housekeeper at St. Thomas More rectory. Simon is in the third grade at St. Thomas More School. Margaret is a junior at Redan High School.

Asked what impact having a Polish-speaking priest would have on him and his family, Kraszczynski said simply, "I am Catholic from Poland. Religion in Poland is very strong. It is very important for life."

"In my opinion, a lot of (Polish) people don't know English well enough to understand the Mass in English and we have different religious traditions especially at Easter, at Christmas – very rich traditions. Having a priest, well, it makes it easier to celebrate these traditions. And Mass in Polish," he added with a tinge of homesickness, "well, it's like having a little piece of Poland in Atlanta."

Elizbieta and Marek Sochacki, Polish immigrants who have lived in Atlanta five years, were among those who helped collect the more than 70 signatures, wrote letters and contacted the archdiocesan officials explaining the need and requesting that a Polish-speaking priest be assigned to Atlanta. The process took almost a year. Sochacki, who came to the U.S. in late 1979, believes there are more than 500 recent Polish immigrant families in the metro area.

Marion Cieslik, president of the Southern Polish Society, estimated that during the past year, 1,500 immigrants came directly from Poland to Georgia in an area which includes Columbus, Macon and Atlanta. The Society estimates 30,000 persons of Polish origin live in the state.

Both men see the Church as a unifying element. "Church is where these people can come and see 10, 200, 300 (Polish) people together and they won't feel so alone," Sochacki said. "I think everybody needs this, even somebody who's been here 20 or 30 years. The idea is to bring people together."

Father Jaisinski said each Sunday he sees new faces, registers new members. He plans to concentrate his efforts in working with the "youngest" immigrants, those born in Poland and most recently arrived in the U.S.

"If old immigrants come to my Mass," he added, "the church is open and I welcome everybody, but most especially those who have come in the last five or 10 years – those I welcome."

The Society of Christ to which Father Jaisinski belongs was founded in 1932 to work expressly with Polish immigrants throughout the world. Its motherhouse is in Poznan, Poland. Its 400 priests and 100 brothers serve Polish immigrants in 17 countries worldwide. The Society's U.S.-Canadian provincial house is in Sterling Heights, Mich.

In addition to celebrating Mass in Polish, Father Jaisinski plans to visit Polish families and begin religious instruction for children and teenagers.

“I have many, many ideas, but I must wait to see what’s needed,” the priest said. Identifying members of the Polish community and bringing them together as church is his present tasks. Susan Colussy, immigration lawyer for Catholic Social Services, believes with the improving political climate in Poland, the number of Poles seeking political asylum may decrease, but unless economic conditions improve, many may find other reasons to immigrate to the United States.

When they do arrive in Atlanta, they will find a place where they can freely worship. They will no longer have to join the Communist Party in order to “get ahead.” Nor will they have to go to another town or city, where they are unknown, to be married in the Church or to have their children baptized.