Polish Catholics keep traditions alive in local parishes

Ministry to Polish community in Western Washington dates back to 1892

BY KEVIN BINBAUM

For Sts. Peter and Paul in Tacoma and St. Margaret of Scotland in Seattle, two parishes with large Polish populations, it all comes down to prayer.

“The language of prayer is Polish for these people,” explained Society of Christ Father Piotr Dzikowski, pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul Parish. Thus the importance of the several Masses celebrated in Polish each week at the two parishes, which carry on a legacy of Catholic ministry to Western Washington's Polish community that dates back to the days of the old Diocese of Nesqually.

Sts. Peter and Paul in Tacoma was established in 1892 as a specifically Polish parish. St. Margaret of Scotland, though founded in 1910, only became home to the Polish Catholic community of Seattle in 1992. A third Polish community, tiny Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Aberdeen, no longer celebrates Masses in Polish and hasn’t had a regular weekend Mass in several years because of its small size.

Serving a need

Both Sts. Peter and Paul in Tacoma and St. Margaret of Scotland draw members from several surrounding cities. “Almost every family has quite a distance to get here to the church,” said Society of Christ Father Stanislaw Michalek, priest administrator of St. Margaret of Scotland.

“In Seattle, there’s actually no Polish neighborhood,” he continued. “So one part of our parish — the most important, of course, is to gather and celebrate the Eucharist and sacraments and grow in God’s grace — but the other part also would be social meeting … so on Sundays they can meet and have coffeecake and talk.”

Carrying on traditions

With Corpus Christi processions, Easter basket blessings and an extra-long Christmas season, among many other practices, the parishes keep alive the traditions of their homeland. “We keep the (Christmas) decorations up until Feb. 2, the Presentation of the Lord,” said Father Dzikowski. “During this time we sing all the time Christmas carols.”

“We have special celebrations, we have dances, we have performances in Polish language, we celebrate Polish Independence Day, the whole year we have celebrations,” he continued.

The Polish communities at Sts. Peter and Paul and St. Margaret of Scotland also pass on their cultural heritage with Sunday-morning catechism and Polish culture classes for the children, taught partially in Polish.

And with only a couple hundred Polish families, St. Margaret of Scotland even has some advantages over parishes in Poland. “In Poland, the parishes are very much bigger and people are more anonymous, but this parish is very much like a family,” said Father Michalek, who, like Father Dzikowski, came to Western Washington from the Archdiocese of Poznan in Poland.

St. Margaret of Scotland is home to the Seattle chapter of the Friends of John Paul II Foundation, and a memorial room and library dedicated to the late Polish pope will be dedicated at the parish on April 1.

Since coming to St. Margaret of Scotland in 2004, Father Michalek has been working to integrate the Polish community and the “traditional” American community at the parish. On Thanksgiving and holy days of obligation, he now celebrates bilingual Masses, and there is an all-parish festival each June. As he says, the parish is now “one community of faithful people who have different languages of worship.”