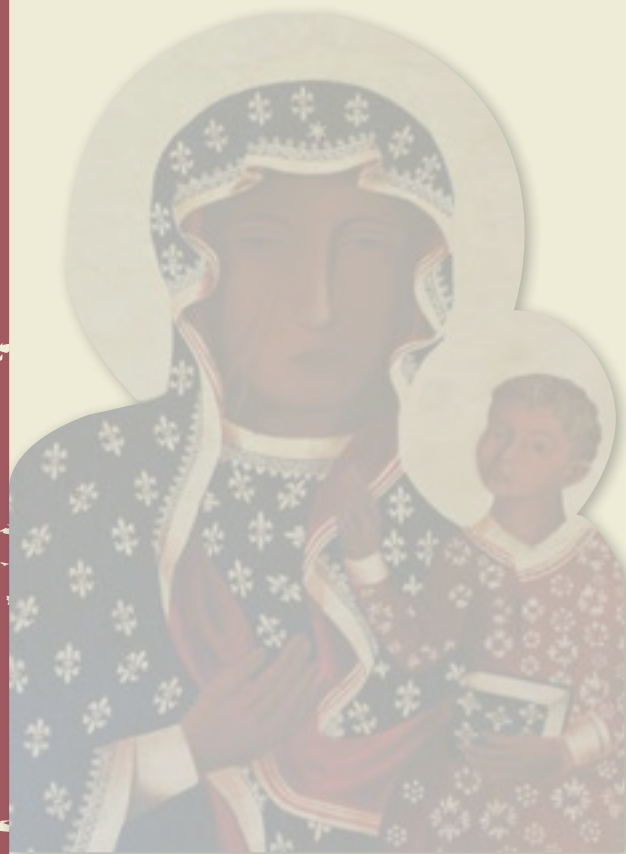


STO LAT!
The First Century of St. Mary's Polish Parish

Witamy! Welcome!



presented in collaboration with
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Cape Breton University

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ST. MARY'S POLISH PARISH

A CENTURY OF FAITH AND SERVICE

The building of the Sydney steel plant started in 1899. There were already Poles in the region working in the coal mines, but the steel plant became a major draw. Poland was under foreign occupation. Rural regions were struggling. Cape Breton's steel plant and coal mines, although dangerous and dirty, represented opportunity.

In 1909, the St. Michael's Polish Benefit Society petitioned the Catholic Bishop of Antigonish for a Polish parish, also to serve other Slavic immigrants and their descendants. The parish was formed in 1913. The struggling labourers and their families who built the church donated everything they could spare. They and their descendants have kept up the church through good times and bad. Most Polish Cape Bretoners are second, third, and fourth-generation Canadians : proud Canadians. But they hold onto their roots, traditions and language, while embracing other cultures in Cape Breton and welcoming newcomers. The parish is still the community's base. The church is provincially designated and protected under the Heritage Property Act.

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FORMING THE PARISH, BUILDING THE CHURCH

The parish was officially formed September 8, 1913, on the Feast of the Nativity of Mary, in keeping with the parish's official name: *Parafia p.w. Narodzenia Najświętszej Maryi Panny*.

The original two lots on which the church stands were deeded by Elias and Tekla Szalak to the "Catholic Episcopal Corporation of Antigonish, Trustee for St. Mary's Polish Church."

The church was designed by Chappell Architects in a modified Polish Gothic style. Most of the original construction work and much of the art work was done by the founding members.

The first winter, the parish held Masses in a covered basement. It took until 1918 to complete the structure.

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ST. MICHAEL'S POLISH BENEFIT SOCIETY

Towarzystwo Bratniej Pomocy im. Św. Michała was set up in 1909 and incorporated in 1912 by a special Act of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly. St. Michael's is the oldest local Polish Society in Canada. It played a major role in establishing the parish and building the church. Many of the founding members worked near the open hearth and blast furnaces of the Dominion Iron & Steel Company. In 1909, Society dues were 50 cents per week. Sick benefits to a maximum of \$10 per week for 13 weeks were paid if a member lost work because of illness or injury. In 1911, members built a hall on Wesley Street. The current Polish Village Hall was built in 1949. Major renovations were carried out from 2011 to 2013.

The Society continues to be active in the parish and the broader community. Its organizational and membership structure was recently modernized by a special provincial law which was written in Polish.

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THE ALTAR SOCIETY

The Altar Society of St. Mary's Polish Church is believed to have started in 1924, known officially as *Towarzystwo Matki Boskiej Saletyńskiej* (Our Lady of LaSalette Society). Many of the altar improvements and repairs over the years have been paid for by the Society. The Society was and is responsible for Mass preparation, decorating, and cleaning the sanctuary.

Until 1967, the Altar Society always conducted its meetings in Polish. The original members of the Society include:

Jozefa Stryczek, Rozalia Gwozdz, Maria Melska, Weronika Grochalska, Ewa Kudra, Michalina Paruch, Rozalia Kokoszka, Johanna Kozera, Maria Kokocka, Maria Rzepa, Ludwika Tynska, Franczyszka Durkacz, Katarzyna Wludyka, Stefania Beretkova, Maria Wludyka, Maria Wojcik, Regina Trojan, Tekla Szela, Agata Planeta, Jozefa Pierzynowska, Rozalia Musizewska, Weronika Dobrucka, Katarzina Gura, Marcela Chmielowa, Maria Henrych, Ewdokia Barylukowa, Maria Rozycka, Malgorzata Rzepa.

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THE CHOIR THROUGH THE YEARS

St. Mary's Polish Parish has long been known for having an exceptional choir. It is the only Polish-language choir in Cape Breton.

Although the repertoire has grown and changed, it still includes hymns that were sung when the church was first established. Some of these hymns are rarely heard now in other Polish churches. Hymns are carefully chosen to fit with feast days and special celebrations.

Directed by Mary Pierrynowski, the current parish choir's trademark is a resonant *a capella*. It is a choir composed of 14 women. This choir plays a major part in keeping the Polish language alive in Cape Breton.

The choir is often referred to as "St. Cecilia's Choir," after the patron saint of church music.

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PARISH CLUBS AND COMMITTEES

St. Mary's Polish Parish has been home to numerous clubs and committees. About 1930, Father Leo O'Connell established the St. Stanislaus Young Men's Club. In the 1950s, it was revived for parish youth. Father O'Connell was also a baseball fan and encouraged the formation of the "St. Mary's White Eagles."

Over the years, the parish established hospitality and community service committees, many of which are still active. These committees welcome visitors to the parish, prepare meals for less fortunate residents, help newcomers to Canada to get settled, and help with neighbourhood improvement projects.

Many people of the parish serve in leadership and administrative positions and in various ministries. These include the *Rada Duszpasterska* (Pastoral Council) and Finance Committee, and as Eucharistic Ministers, lectors, altar servers, catechists, ushers, and greeters.

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OUR LONGEST-SERVING PASTOR FATHER M. LEO O'CONNELL

Born in 1891 in Sydney and ordained in 1918, Father O'Connell was named Assistant Pastor at Holy Redeemer Church. On September 8, 1929, he was named Pastor of St. Mary's Polish Parish, a position he held until June 30, 1969. He encouraged his parishioners to maintain their customs. He was loved by the parishioners for being a role model of dedication and dignity.

"Father's O'Connell's tastes were simple. His demands were few. He loved the Pier and its people. No one could fault him for reserving a special part of his priestly heart for his beloved Polish congregation, their liturgy, and their language, which he willingly learned, and their culture . . . He didn't labour for fame, fortune, or esteem. He just wanted to be a good priest and pastor".

Msgr. William Gallivan in tribute to Father O'Connell at his funeral Mass, February 1971

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UNIQUE CUSTOMS

St. Mary's Polish Parish is the only church in the region where the Polish language is still heard every Sunday.

There are many distinctive customs that have been preserved over the course of generations, such as *Święcenie Pokarmów Wiekanocnych* (blessing of special Easter foods), the Weekly Novena to Our Lady of Częstochowa, *Boże Ciało* processions, the sharing of *Oplątek* (special Christmas wafers) among families and in a parish-wide celebration, and the annual blessing of chalk and homes.

At various Masses and celebrations throughout the year, parishioners young and old are dressed in traditional attire. Their clothing often reflects the region of origin of their ancestors.

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THE DIVERSITY OF ST. MARY'S POLISH PARISH

St. Mary's Polish Parish is proud to be a home to people of other ancestries. Many other Slavic immigrants and their descendants have always been welcomed. People of Croatian ancestry are the largest of the non-Polish affiliated parishioners.

These parishioners introduced artwork, stories and unique dishes. Their contribution to the parish has been important and valued.

Some parishioners have no Polish or Slavic heritage. They have joined because they appreciate the sense of community, and feel welcomed. The church's unique traditions and practices enhance the experience of their faith.

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A SPECIAL CONNECTION WITH POPE JOHN PAUL II

Karol Wojtyła's election as Pope in 1978 was a major event for people of Polish heritage around the world. The Polish pontiff came from a country that was Communist against its will. The "pilgrim Pope" became a symbol of human rights and the desire for freedom.

Many members of St. Mary's Polish Parish had an opportunity to personally meet and speak with Pope John Paul II. The parish formed the welcoming delegation when the Holy Father arrived in Halifax on September 13, 1984. Pope John Paul II made a point of meeting Polish communities wherever he travelled. He spent time conversing with our parishioners. He congratulated the parish for maintaining its heritage and the legacy of its ancestors. He urged the parishioners to continue doing so.

Following the death of Pope John Paul II in April 2005, St. Mary's Polish Parish hosted a Memorial Mass. This event brought together people from many parishes and denominations.

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OUR FOLKLORIC GROUPS

The early folk groups of the late 1940s and 1950s were set up by Dr. C.A. Uhma. She came to Sydney from Poland via the British Isles. The earliest groups were children's ensembles.

In 1973, the Polish Singers and Dancers were formed. Stephanie (Melnick) Black as dance instructor and Mary Pierrynowski as singing instructor. The group welcomed various guest performers from Polish folk groups in other Canadian cities.

Pogoria Polish Folk Ensemble is the parish's current folkloric group. It was formed in 2003 and is directed by Shari McKay.

This group brings together three generations of dancers, singers, and dinner theatre performers. Pogoria Polish Folk Ensemble often represents the community at events outside the parish. They enjoy sharing their traditions, music, and dance.

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OUR THANKS *SERDECZNIE DZIĘKUJEMY*

Thank you for sharing in this year's celebration of the St. Mary's Polish Parish first century.
Special thanks to parishioners both past and present, for maintaining the legacy of the pioneers.
Thanks to all who have lent and donated items to this exhibit. *Sto Lat!*

Additional thanks to:

St. Michael's Polish Benefit Society

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Tom Urbaniak, Associate Professor of Political Science (Exhibit Curator, Polish Projects Coordinator)

Marcia Ostasewski, Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology (Program Lead)

Patricia Nalepa (Exhibit Technician, Research Assistant)

Cape Breton University

Blair MacNeil, Maritime Merchant (Graphic Designer)

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