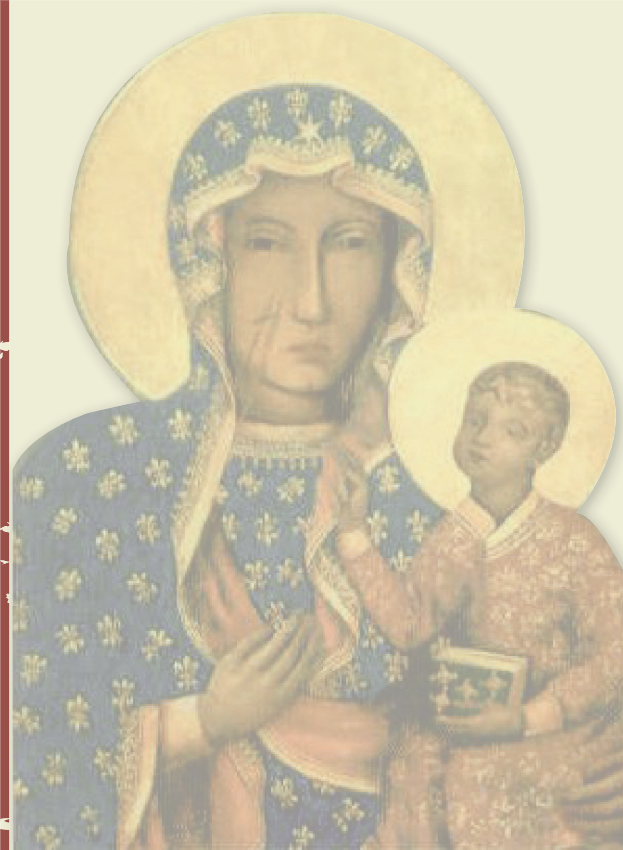


STO LAT! **The First Century of St. Mary's Polish Parish** **WITAMY! Welcome!**

**Presented in collaboration with
Cape Breton University's East and
Central European Cultures and
Communities Program,
with funding from the
Social Sciences and
Humanities Research Council of Canada**



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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

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FORMING THE PARISH, BUILDING THE CHURCH

The parish was officially formed on September 8, 1913, 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 sits, were deeded by Elias and Tekla Szelak 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 themselves.

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

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THE 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 actually building the church.

Many of the founding members worked near the open hearth and blast furnaces of the Dominion Iron & Steel Co. The dues in 1909 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 St. The current Polish Village Hall was built in 1949. Major renovations were carried out in 2011-2013.

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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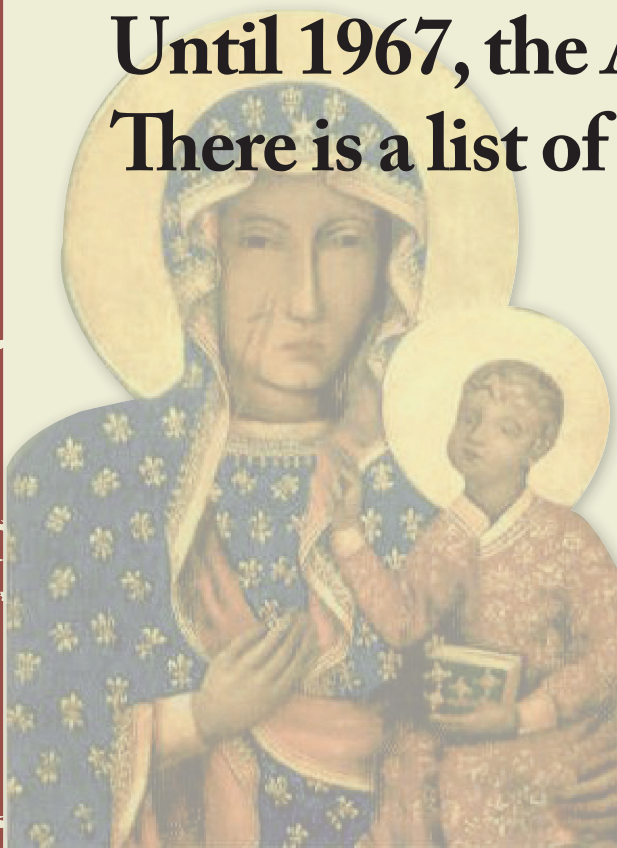
THE ALTAR SOCIETY

The Altar Society of St. Mary's Polish Church is believed to have started in 1924, known officially as Towarzystwo Matki Boskiej Saletynskiej (Our Lady of LaSalette Society). In the past, there were monthly dues. Many of the altar improvements and repairs over the years have been paid for by the Society. The Society was and is responsible for pre-Mass preparation, decorating, and the cleaning of the sanctuary – all essential and important work!

Until 1967, the Altar Society always conducted its meetings in Polish. There is a list of what appears to be the original members of the Society:

Jozefa Stryczek, Rozalia Gwozdz, Maria Melska, Weronika Grochalska, Ewa Kudra, Michalina Paruch, Rozalia Kokoszka, Johanna Kozera, Maria Kokocka, Maria Rzepa, Ludwika Tynska, Franciszka Durkacz, Katarzyna Wludyka, Stefania Beretkowa, 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

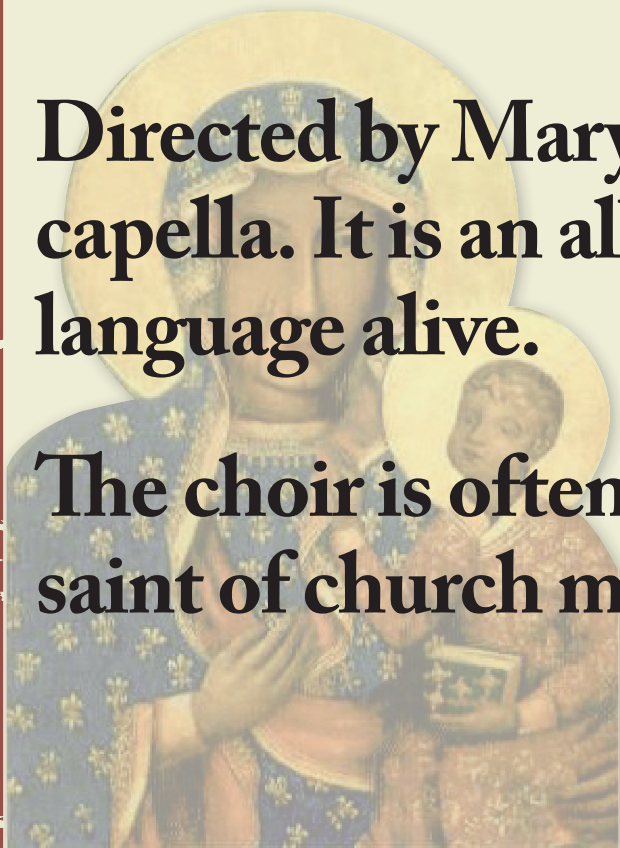
St. Mary's Polish Parish has long been known for having an exceptional choir, the only Polish-language choir in Cape Breton.

Although the repertoire has grown and changed, it still includes hymns that would have been sung when the church was built and even hymns that 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 an all-women choir of 14 members. It plays a major part in keeping the language alive.

The choir is often known informally 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 started the St. Stanislaus Young Men's Club. In the 1950s, it was re-started for parishioners of junior high-school age.

Father O'Connell was also a baseball fan and encouraged the start-up of the "St. Mary's White Eagles."

Over the years, the parish has had active hospitality and community service committees, and these are still going strong.

These committees have welcomed visitors to the parish, prepared meals for less fortunate residents, helped newcomers to Canada to get settled, and helped with neighbourhood improvement projects.

To this day, the parish has many lay people willing to serve in leadership and administrative positions and in various ministries, such as on 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. He was also assigned to minister to St. Mary's Polish Parish.

On September 8, 1929, he was named Pastor of St. Mary's Polish Parish, a position he held until June 30, 1969. He never tired encouraging his parishioners to maintain their customs. The respect was mutual – 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.

Next to Father O'Connell, the longest-serving Pastor of St. Mary's Polish Parish was Father James A. MacLean. Father Jim was posted here through most of the 1980s and still attends as many parish functions as he can. He has been an ordained priest for more than 70 years. St. Mary's Polish Parish was also well served, at various times, by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Franciscans and the Society of Christ, who sent bilingual (Polish-English) priests with experience working in Polonia communities (Polish communities outside Poland), and of course by the parish's recent diocesan priests.

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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, you will see parishioners young and old dressed in traditional attire, often reflecting 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 have always been home to people of other ancestries. Many other Slavic immigrants and their descendants were welcomed, too – with the Croatian contingent being the largest of the non-Polish-affiliated parishioners.

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

Some parishioners have no Polish or Slavic heritage but have joined because they value the sense of community, feel welcomed, and find that the traditions help them to experience 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 John Paul II. The parish formed the welcoming delegation when the Holy Father arrived in Halifax on September 13, 1984.

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, which 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 early groups were children's ensembles.

In 1973, the Polish Singers and Dancers were formed, with 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.

The current group is the Pogoria Polish Folk Ensemble, formed in 2003 and directed by Shari McKay.

It brings together three generations of dancers, singers, and dinner theatre performers, and often represents the community at outside events.

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SERDECZNIE DZIĘKUJEMY

Our sincere thanks to ...

- Parishioners of St. Mary's Polish Parish, past and present, for maintaining the legacy of the pioneers;
- All who have lent and donated items to this exhibit;
- St. Michael's Polish Benefit Society
- Rada Duszpasterska (Pastoral Council) of St. Mary's Polish Church;
- East and Central European Communities and Cultures Research Program (ECECC),
- Cape Breton University,
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- Prof. Marcia Ostaszewski (Program Lead) and Patricia Nalepa (Researcher, Exhibit Technician, Graphic Artist);
- Blair MacNeil/Maritime Merchant

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