

St. Adalbert's Black Madonna may be oldest in U. S.

St. Adalbert's painting of Our Lady of Częstochowa, commonly referred to as the "Black Madonna" may very well be the oldest painting of the Blessed Mother under this title that exists in the Western Hemisphere. According to St. Adalbert's 50th Anniversary Book, compiled in 1937, this painting was brought to America by the Felician Sisters when they arrived from Poland 75 years earlier. This, however, would place the date of its arrival in the United States at approximately 1861, when in fact the first Felicians to arrive in the United States did so in 1874, settling in Polonia, Wisconsin.

The order itself was established on Nov. 21, 1855, when Blessed Mary Angela, who was known as Sophia Truszkowska, and her cousin, Clothilde Ciechanowska, dedicated themselves to God's service before an icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa. In 1882, the Felician sisters transferred their motherhouse from Polonia, WI, to Detroit, MI.

In 1893, the Chicago World's Fair, also known as the World's Columbian Exhibition, was held to celebrate Christopher Columbus' discovery of the New World. To commemorate this event, which has been referred to as "The Fair That Changed America," the Felician Sisters and their pupils at St. Albertus Convent in Detroit created this exquisite rendering of the Black Madonna, adding embroidery, gems, and an elaborate frame to the painting, which was sent to Chicago to be displayed.

A detailed description of this and other works of art created at St. Albertus Convent appeared in the Detroit Sunday News on March 26, 1893. A sketch of the Black Madonna - which served as the



altarpiece in the Felician Sisters' Convent - was included in the article, which stated that much of the embroidery work was done by the sisters themselves, while the frame was entirely the work of their pupils.

According to St. Adalbert's 100th Anniversary Commemorative Album, a special Sunday collection held in December 1898 raised \$206.12, permitting the Black Madonna to be brought to Buffalo. The history of St. Adalbert's that was written for the parish's 50th anniversary, however, states that the painting was brought to Buffalo in 1902. It is known that the painting was on display at the Pan-American Exhibition, held in Buffalo in 1901, so it appears that the 1902 date is incorrect, but the date of the painting's exact arrival from Detroit remains unknown.

Father Thomas Flaczek, pastor of St. Adalbert's from 1895-1926, had a great devotion to the Black Madonna, and it was for this reason that he had the painting brought to Buffalo. It was also around this time, in 1900, that the Felician Sisters established

their second American province, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, in Buffalo. Until this time the Felician Sisters in Buffalo were part of the Detroit Province.

It is not known where at the Pan-American Exhibition the Black Madonna was displayed - Polish Day itself, which was scheduled to be held on Sept. 12, 1901, was cancelled by community leaders, despite months of preparation, following the shooting of President McKinley on Sept. 6 by Leon Czolgosz, the American-born son of Polish, immigrants. (McKinley died on Sept. 14.) Czolgosz's Polish roots were a source of shame and anger for Poles in Buffalo. The Polish language press in Buffalo was shocked, and disgusted at the assassination.

Father Flaczek had a special altar built for the Black Madonna at St. Adalbert's. Additional gems were added, and the framed painting was set behind a glass enclosure, which has since been removed, as have the papal symbols that once crowned it (the altar was renovated in the 1970s). Novenas to the Black Madonna were held at this altar for many years. Beginning in the late 1970s, name plaques donated by parishioners were nailed to the altar. These were removed and mounted on separate boards in 2005. It was the late Sister Simplicia, archivist of the Felician Sisters, who spotted the painting at St. Adalbert's and told the parishioners that it had a rich history that included being on display at the Pan-American Exhibition. Over the years, the sisters themselves had lost track of where the painting's whereabouts and had often wondered where it went!