

Why Are They Determined To Close Polish Parishes?

There really is no English language equivalent for the French term —prise de conscience, which denotes a sudden understanding, or coming to grips with basic underlying truths, about individuals or organizations. Another way to explain the term is to note that reality did not change, but appreciation of that reality's true nature by the people did.

A prise de conscience is a religious experience. Here we define religion etymologically from religio — the effort of an individual to link himself back to the past of his people and their faith. This is why for Poles, a prise de conscience is the prelude to revolution.

Polish Americans in Buffalo, NY, have had a prise de conscience. They see themselves as having been betrayed by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of an institution they long have loved and served — the Roman Catholic Church in America. Moreover, the Roman Catholic Church, whether in America or abroad, always has been marked by authoritarian top-down decision making, not unlike most business corporations which deploy the rhetoric of "empowering employees" while actually exercising power through command.

Unlike for profit corporations which base the legitimacy of their authoritarian style on the fact that they pay their employees, the Roman Catholic Church in America, to a far greater extent than in Europe where state subsidies and regular contributions from very wealthy donors play a key role, largely depends on the financial generosity of the faithful to continue to operate. Buffalo's Polish Americans simply want to keep their financially healthy parish churches open; Bishop Edward U. Kmiec, a Polish American, wants to close many Polish parishes.

Not only Polish parishes are affected by the Diocese of Buffalo's plan for redeployment, "Journey in Faith and Grace", but as Professor Daniel S. Buczek recently observed: today's events in Buffalo evoke memories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century struggles for dignity vis-a-vis the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church in America which then was led by prelates of Irish and German background who had no use for Polish culture or Polish worship traditions. Professor Buczek has studied this sad chapter in the history of the Roman Catholic Church in America. Read his first-rate description of the effort to keep Polish culture alive against the wishes of the hierarchy in Immigrant Pastor, published in 1974.

Polish Americans well recall, but the hierarchy seems to have forgotten, that there are two sides to the coin: many Polish Americans are pious and obedient Roman Catholics; Polish Americans also led the largest enduring schism to date in the history of the Roman Catholic Church in America, when Bishop Francis

Hodur, an immigrant from Zarki, near Krakow, but not the principal subject of Buczek's book, organized the Polish National Catholic Church in Scranton, PA, in 1897. Today's hierarchy in Buffalo shows little interest in how the Polish past may shape the reaction of Poles in the present. Will it be submission or secession?

Others see a third way. In our age of instantaneous global communication, there is no reason why Polish parishes in America could not be apportioned among the several Roman Catholic Dioceses in Poland. This arrangement would help to strengthen the bonds of Polish Americans with their Fatherland.

Most now view "Journey in Faith and Grace", the Diocese of Buffalo's plan for merging or closing parish churches with the pro forma participation of the laity, as a sham. Most Polish Americans in the Diocese of Buffalo simply do not understand why the hierarchy is determined to close their parish churches.

In July, the parish council of Buffalo's Polish Basilica -- St. Adalbert's -- appealed to the Vatican to prevent Bishop Kmiec, who is a Polish American, from closing their church. Of course, the Diocese of Buffalo legally owns St. Adalbert's. Nevertheless, the Polish parishioners who have been praying at St. Adalbert's over five generations assert a moral trusteeship over their parish church's property. They want their church to stay open and they have demonstrated that they can meet their financial obligations.

The zeal of the Diocese of Buffalo to close healthy Polish American parishes led Mr. Bill Parks to challenge the wisdom of the hierarchy's policy. This is why he helped to establish a mass movement of opinion — Catholic Parishioners Against Church Suppression (CPACS) with its web site at: <http://www.catholicpacs.com>. Parks and like-minded parishioners, most of whom are of Polish background, had hoped to engage the Diocese of Buffalo in debate.

The future prospects for fair minded debate withered away after Parks' serendipitous meeting with Bishop Kmiec, at the Clarion Hotel, Dunkirk, NY, on Saturday, August 11, 2007. Six hours after they posed for a photo, Mr. Parks filed a police report in which he stated that he was harassed and the victim of "unwanted touching" by Buffalo's Diocesan Bishop.

On August 22, 2007, the Chautauqua County District Attorney, Mr. David Foley, wrote to Mr. Philip J. Julian, a local newspaper columnist and public advocate who supports Mr. Parks. Foley made the following findings:

1. No charges against either Bishop Kmiec or Bill Parks, based on the allegation by the Diocese of Buffalo, that Parks filed a false police report.
2. Five witnesses held there was no physical

contact; two said there was, "I do not believe that necessarily means that I have found that there was no physical contact."

3. "Finally, I cannot compel anyone to provide a statement, especially someone who is the subject of an investigation." This is Foley's answer to Julian's query: "Is it normal to reach a decision in a criminal case without a face to face interview with Bishop Kmiec, one of the accused parties? The Reverend Lipuma was an eyewitness to the entire incident, but he was not subjected to direct questioning."

4. Foley continued by observing that the Diocese of Buffalo and the local press can comment on his findings any way they like. Foley proffered this banality in response to Julian's accurate claim that both the Diocese and most of the local press put a lurid spin on Foley's decision in order to persuade the public wrongly to conclude that Foley's findings vindicate Bishop Kmiec.

5. Foley concluded by stating that he does not believe that "the incident rises to the level necessary to prosecute."

Against the facts, most of the local press, with the key exception of Roger Puchalski's Am-Pol Eagle and Julian's column, publicized the wrong view that the Bishop was vindicated by the District Attorney, who made it clear, that he did not rule out physical contact, but he did not believe the incident could be prosecuted under the Penal Code. This is not vindication for Bishop Kmiec.

Instead of being rightfully praised as a champion of the rights of parishioners. Parks wrongfully has been vilified by the mainstream Buffalo area press that has parroted the Diocesan line.

Polonia supports Bill Parks. He is a man of principle and integrity. He should not be the victim of a smear campaign.

Don't wait till your ox is about to get gored. Many Polish parishes throughout America are in danger. Log on to Bill Parks' web site. Above all, anti-Polonism underlies the campaign to close or merge Polish parishes. This is why the struggle of Buffalo's Polonia to keep open their churches is Polonia's struggle.

Bill Parks had a prise de conscience when he met Bishop Kmiec at the Clarion Hotel. At a minimum, Bishop Kmiec treated Parks, a 71 year-old of considerable achievement, like a delinquent schoolboy. Free and open debate under such conditions is increasingly seen as futile. The reverse pledge campaign and street demonstrations are now the order of campaigns to keep Polish parishes open.

John D. Czop, August 28, 2007
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(The anti-racist movement to enact a U.S. Congressional Resolution to correct American public opinion about the role of Poland and the Poles in the World War II era Judeocide.)