

Am-Pol Eagle
Thursday July 26, 2007
Letters to the Editor

Some conclude I am part of the problem. I moved out of the Western New York 22 years ago. Although I live in Florida, my roots are in Buffalo's Polonia. My faith formation was entrusted to, among others, the capable and holy hands of Felician Sisters and priests such as the late Msgr. Kazmierczak, Msgr. Wozniak, Msgr. Gabalski and other such giants. I learned Polish in the family and in a classroom at St. Adalbert Basilica School with Sister Calista on Saturday mornings and at St. Stan's.

I left the city. I moved from Buffalo's Polonia. So, some say I am part of the problem.

But I don't think so. I belong to and support a Polish Parish in Buffalo. I have always financially supported a parish on the East Side, if not several. I always remembered my roots and made certain the places that nurtured me and my own faith received nurturing and gratitude back from me in whatever way possible.

I have kept abreast of Polonia's plight and situation through the years, maintaining relationships that are very important to me. I am heartbroken when I visit the Broadway Market and the neighborhoods surrounding the Polish parishes on the East Side. I hardly can believe my eyes when I see the once cared for and vibrant neighborhoods reduced to shambles.

But what always gives me hope are the steeples that stand over the shambles. They always stood for the victory of hope, the silent witnesses that remind all who look upon them that nothing is impossible with God. And there, rising above derelict housing is God's dwelling among His people. It is for me. The Word made Flesh, in mortar and brick and stone. These buildings, dedicated by sacred oil, timeless rites and the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, are the only witnesses to life on what otherwise may well be nothing more than a Calvary. These hallowed buildings, where generation after generation of faith-filled people came with their joys, their tears, their hopes and dreams, their private pain and their public faith; here, in these sacred walls, is He who is The Foundation, He who never changes.

Yes, these are more than buildings, they are sacred and holy ground; no less sacred than anywhere the tears or blood of believers has fallen. No less sacred than the plot of land where Moses was told to

remove his shoes because God was present and where he stood was holy.

To imagine that these places are no longer to be regarded as holy, as sacred, as the place wherein God has pitched his tent among His people for generation after generation, is nearly impossible. It is beyond heartbreaking.

What was most heartbreaking was reading the account of the 4 p.m. Holy Mass at St. Adalbert Basilica on Sat., July 7. At that Mass, it was reported, instead of a homily, "The Open Letter to Polonia" from the Association of Priests for Polish Affairs was read by a lector.

The General Instruction to the Roman Missal (#66) and Redemptionis Sacramentum (#161) tell us that the homily can only be preached by a priest or deacon. If it is necessary for a lay person to speak at Holy Mass, it must either occur following the Prayer After Communion or before Mass begins.

The homily should ordinarily be given, by the priest celebrant himself. He may entrust it to a concelebrating priest or occasionally, according to circumstances, to the deacon, but never to a lay person. In particular cases and for a just cause, the homily may even be given by a bishop or a priest who is present at the celebration but cannot concelebrate.

There is to be a homily on Sundays and holy days of obligation at all Masses that are celebrated with the participation of a congregation; it may not be omitted without a serious reason. It is recommended on other days, especially on the weekdays of Advent, Lent, and the Easter Season, as well as on other festive days and occasions when the people come to church in greater numbers.

The homily is an integral part of Holy Mass. What serious reason demanded that those attending Mass not only did not hear a homily, but instead were read a letter, by the lector, that had absolutely nothing to do with the Mass being celebrated? The letter should have been discussed at the meeting held afterward, not as part of our Sacred Liturgy.

Since the letter from the WNY Association of Priests for Polish Affairs was brought to the attention of your readers and those who came to worship God at Holy Mass in the basilica, then permit me to reflect on one portion of the aforementioned letter.

"A parish that is fully alive is more than a beautiful and historic building where Masses are celebrated on a weekend for dwindling population, [sic] A vibrant

communion of faith celebrates inspiring, hope-filled liturgies, supports each other filling the church, shares their gifts and talents through involvement in diverse ministries and organizations."

"Today, especially in the cities, celebrating cherished ethnic traditions must include a renewal based on updated methods, of multi-generational faith formulation and social justice ministry. At the same time a parish must be able to carry its share of financial burden going beyond maintenance needs, to include its substantial share of diocesan and newly established school assessments."

If the above paragraphs are true, then there is a serious flaw in the determinations of the Journey in Faith and Grace. That methodology clearly was not used in determining who closes, merges and stays open within Polonia. These words, if used as a litmus test, display a tremendously disingenuous rhetoric.

St. Stanislaus Parish will remain open despite the fact that Masses are celebrated on weekends for a dwindling population. So dwindling, in fact, that only two Masses are celebrated on Sunday because of the lack of participants.

Yet, the beautiful and historic church has seen millions of dollars of redecoration despite the fact that it is not filling up on weekends, not open on weekdays and whose offertory is just over \$1,000 weekly.

Ministry is always directed outward. It is always "other based." And the ministries that reach out to others at St. Stan's are exactly what? Maybe I am ignorant, but I never read about "diverse" ministerial outreach there. I am talking about real, actual outreach, not simply a hope that people will flock to purchase homes surrounding the church.

"In the cities," the priests write, there must be "updated methods of multi-generational faith formulation and social justice ministry." I'm not exactly sure what "updated methods of multigenerational faith formulation" means, but I do know what social justice ministry is all about and I wonder what grand programs of social justice ministry the Mother Church of Polonia has?

A parish being responsible for paying the bills is a given. Yet, Scripture asks what good is it to say "God bless you and keep you" when we see our brother or sister in need and not provide for them? Multi million dollars have been spent on fanciful adornment of St. Stan's, not simply preventing leaks and repairing damage. Millions have been spent there on

re-decoration while neighboring parishes, members of Polonia's family, have struggled. This begs the question of whether or not gold leaf was more important than helping another parish remain open and viable.

I wonder why, knowing Polonia was suffering and seeing the writing on the wall, the Mother Church of Polonia, if she was - in fact - "Mother", did not help her offspring instead of applying more makeup while her children were dying slow deaths.

There seems to be a grand inequity here and a lot of double-talk and disingenuous rhetoric. What kind of mother abandons her offspring and spends lavishly on self while her children suffer?

I'm not saying that St. Stan's should close any more than I am saying St. Adalbert Basilica should close. What I am saying is that with all the talk about mergers and becoming integrated communities of faith, there seems to be no foundation under it especially when Polonia didn't even take care of her own!

Someone made the analogy that millions of dollars spent redecorating St. Stan's while the surrounding parishes were being slated to close was similar to Nero fiddling while Rome burned.

It is sad to see beloved churches slated to close. It is sad to hear what for a century was regarded as a basilica is now, suddenly, discovered not to be one.

It is sad to think we value buildings more than people. It is sad to know that our Sunday Mass can become an event that divides rather than an opportunity to feed and heal those who come to the Father's house.

What have we become? Those who want fancy palaces and a church laced with gold leaf, chandeliers, gardens and all manner of splendid finery more than open doors to churches whose gold leaf may have tarnished, but whose tabernacle still bears God's love brilliantly to the struggling neighborhood? Have we become wordsmiths content to craft and fashion rhetoric that only displays the incongruities of the truth we are too blind to see?

As long as a candle flickers next to a tabernacle, there Jesus has pitched His tent among us. As long as a steeple rises above the rubble, there is hope for a broken neighborhood and world.

Our beloved John Paul II said, upon his election to the See of Peter, "Open wide the doors to Christ!" We put his bronze statue on pedestals but his words fall on deaf ears.

If I was part of the problem, I want to be part of the solution. Not only will I continue supporting a parish on the East Side, but I will pray to the Servant of God John Paul II to keep open the doors to Christ in our neighborhoods. Maybe we all need to ask him to pray for this journey and emblazon those hope-filled words on hearts that are capable of making a difference.

**Sincerely,
Stanley F. Zerkowski,
Ormond Beach, FL**

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Dear Editor,

Bishop Kmiec would like to challenge the accusation that he's "ethnically cleansing" the diocese, but the regional focus of church and school closures is disturbing. The bishop has left no schools open in the Lovejoy and Kaisertown neighborhoods, and closed six out of eight in neighboring Cheektowaga. It's not by accident that the diocese also started the draconian "faith and grace" church closings with the East Side and rural areas, where it probably expected ineffective resistance.

Simultaneously slashing 2/3 of churches on the East Side is too much. These churches aren't subsidized - many people may not realize that parishes in fact pay "assessments" to the diocese. This means smaller groups of parishioners in the poorest areas of the city are making greater sacrifices to have a parish in the first place. They should be respected for their dedication, and their input in the "faith and grace" process heeded.

Yes, the city has shrunk, and some churches need to close. Over the past two years, parish representatives across the diocese have been meeting to make heart-breaking decisions about which parishes will shut their doors forever. The bishop's planning commission has consistently rejected their input, even when the communities had overwhelmingly agreed upon viable proposals. It is profoundly hurtful and insulting that the bishop has ignored the laity's contributions.

These recent church closings won't solve the priest shortage problem. The church will either have to empower the laity with running their own religious communities and making important decisions, or ultimately close most parishes across the region anyway when there aren't priests to staff them.

Finally, many of the targeted churches are architectural treasures. The diocese likes to refer to them as "buildings," but they are holy places, and they're irreplaceable. These churches are part of what makes Buffalo special, and they offer refuge and optimism in troubled communities.

St. Ann's, St. Gerard's, St. Adalbert's, St. Barbara's and Queen of Peace are truly works of art. The construction of a beautiful church is itself a form of prayer - when people care for and pray in these churches, they're not just maintaining a "building," they are participating with previous generations' expressions of "faith and grace." The bishop seems to overlook the spiritual value and community benefits of these significant churches.

The diocese's mysterious "plan" for many of these churches is probably to demolish them. This leaves open no window to any sort of future recovery (look at the example of the thriving Central Terminal, and be grateful that it wasn't razed) - and a loss of some of Buffalo's most beautiful and distinctive structures.

**Amy Buckley,
Buffalo**