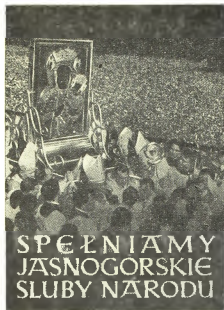


Report on Poland



Our Lady's Miraculous Picture is carried by the bishops in a procession on the occasion of the nation's renewal of Vows, August 26, 1956. The words in the picture mean "We Renew our Vows."

Dear friend:

You are asking me to tell you something about my impressions in Poland. The greatest experience every visitor in Poland receives concerns the strong Catholic life of the Polish people. The churches are overcrowded on Sundays and ordinary weekdays alike. Many persons who for years stayed away from the Church are now wholeheartedly participating in her activities. The priests are overloaded with work. The reception of the sacraments is to be admired. Private visitations of the Blessed Sacrament are frequent. There is scarcely a time during the day that the church would be found empty. Young people become convinced and are ardent Catholics. I visited a church, situated close to a State university. I was there in the morning. Hundreds of students made a short visit to that church before going to their classes in which they heard lectures on materialistic dialecticism. I was there at noon and again in the afternoon. At every time young people were kneeling before the tabernacle. They were coming and going endlessly.

Last year, on August 26, there was a three-hundred year anniversary of the dedication of Poland to Our Lady made by King Jan Casimir in 1656. On that memorable day over one million people from every part of the country gathered in Czestochowa, Our Lady's

national shrine, and renewed their vows to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Some of the promises of the people were: "I promise to live in the state of the sanctifying grace — without a mortal sin. I promise to be faithful to the Church and to her Shepherds. I promise to live in harmony and peace: To forgive all offenses and to do good to all."

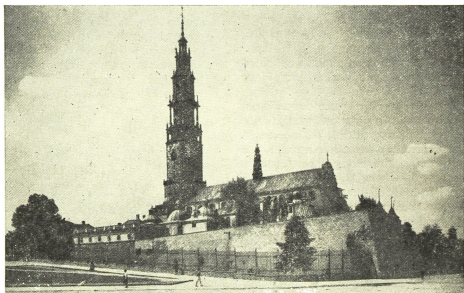
This year again led by the Cardinal, thousands of people with many bishops and some 1,500 priests gathered in Czestochowa. A copy of the miraculous picture, blessed by the Holy Father, touched the original three times and then it was carried in procession through the church yard. On that day also a nine-year novena in the whole country began. It is being conducted as a preparation for the celebration of the millenium of Poland's baptism in 966. Hence for the year 1966 great celebrations are in preparation. The nine-year novena should serve as a continous reminder of the forthcoming festivities. The picture is already touring the parishes of Poland. It is supposed to visit every parish in the country, during the nine-year novena. In the May and October devotions the

people are reminded to put their vows into action. Also in Sunday sermons and special manifestations organized by confraternities and associations the same idea is discussed, interpreted, and realized.

The Polish people always had a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin, but this adherence to Our Lady is even stronger and more decisive now. It is through her that the people hope to rejuvenate the life of the country. The World War wrought terrific disaster upon Europe. Nations instead of becoming closer to each other, are rather filled with hatred and envy. The people hope through the intercession of our heavenly Mother to bring peace and unity to families and society.

Another effect of this devotion to Our Lady is the ever-deepening appreciation of spiritual values by the Polish people. The remarkable paradox that people who are exposed to the materialism of Communism should show a keener understanding of spiritual values can be explained only by the great devotion of the Polish people to Our Lady.

Another beautiful impression



Our Lady's National Shrine at Czestochowa, Poland

Christmas Customs IN POLAND

one gets out of Poland is the teaching of religion in all public schools. Until October of last year this was unthinkable. Religion was even ridiculed. Priests were annoyed on every occasion. Now all this has changed. Priests are free to preach and even are invited to teach children in all public schools. The communist government remunerates them as ordinary teachers. The main thing, however, is the very fact that religion is introduced into the schools. In some places it is done after the ordinary classes, in others it is incorporated into the curriculum. This is one of the most important changes the October revolution brought in.

There are no travel restrictions in Poland now. Personally, I flew several times to Warsaw and visited many cities. I was on the Baltic Sea in the north and in the Beskid mountains, Cracow, Nowa Huta in the south. In the east I visited the Catholic University at Lublin and in the west many places of interest. I used public transportation as well as private cars. Nowhere was I asked about travel documents.

Polish intellectuals for years were shut off from the West. Every branch of science had to follow strictly the Soviet line. No foreign periodicals or books were admitted. Books, papers or magazines sent from abroad were instantly confiscated by the custom officers. All this has changed. Contact with the West is sought. Scientific periodicals, which were for years suppressed, begin to appear anew. Scientific research is freed from the chains of eastern uniformity.

The Catholic press, however, is weak. Besides the diocesan papers, very few others exist. It is hard, indeed, for the time being almost impossible, to get permission for an edition of a new paper. Those existing are of a solid Catholic content, though.

Although the radio broadcasting are frequently favorable to the Catholic cause, there are no Catholic programs as yet.

In general, the people I met were happy and optimistic. It depends upon the political genius Gomułka's and Moscov's more soft course whether the hopes of the Polish people will be realized or not.

With best wishes to you and to all Carolinians,

I remain, always yours,

FREDDY

THE WAFER

It is a Polish custom to share wafers on Christmas Eve. These wafers are thin like the Communion Host but larger usually rectangular, and impressed with holy symbols. The custom certainly goes back to the old Christian eulogies. Eulogies were blessed bread distributed to all who could not receive holy Communion. Also churches were sending it to each other as a sign of fidelity and unity.

Strict fasting is observed on Christmas Eve. The abundant supper will not be touched before the first star appears in the skies — the star of Bethlehem. When the news breaks in that the star can be seen, the father of the family takes the wafers and says: "May this sharing of the wafer be an expression of the continuous harmony, love, and unity that exists among us living, our beloved departed (all pray for them), and those who cannot be with us." The father and mother divide the wafer, each taking a small part and shaking hands they wish to one another "A Blessed Christmas!" Then they share it with their children, guests and all present expressing their greetings. If any member of the family were absent a small particle will be sent to him by mail early enough so that it may reach him for Christmas.

After this ceremony is over, gifts are distributed. Then all sit down to supper. As soon as this is finished they begin to sing Christmas carols, to admire their gifts, and to tell interesting stories. And when shortly before midnight the church bells start calling for the "Pasterka" or the Shepherds Mass, whoever is able to walk will not miss the Christmas Midnight Mass.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

The deep significance of the Christmas tree lies in this: that it represents the tree of life and death in Paradise. The ornamentations on the tree are external signs of graces Christ merited for us. The burning lights symbolize the light of Christ that shines to all people in the darkness and shadow of death. Every family in Poland trims a Christmas tree.

THE CHRISTMAS DRAMA

St. Francis of Assisi with his friars celebrated the Midnight Mass in the open air and presented dramatically the story of the Birth of Christ in the manger. In Poland these dramas were called "Jaselka" and were played in the open air mostly by the university students. Later this practice changed into "szopka" — the actors were not live persons anymore but lifeless figures. It is a miniature puppet theater made of cardboard and elaborately decorated with ribbons. It represents the greatest event in the history of mankind — the Birth of Christ.

CHRISTMAS CAROL-SINGING

Long in advance of Christmas young people meet frequently and go through a rigid schooling, rehearsing many songs arranged in four-part harmony. They rehearse sacred carols and lay carols as well. The holy carols have as their theme the Nativity of Christ. The secular ones are laudatory in content and tell the great deeds of some hero or some other individual person. Not everyone can become a member of the carolers since they must possess the ability to sing and the ability to master the art of carol-singing. †