

# Parishes in Transition

## *Holding on While Letting Go*

### Parishioners face momentous mission in joining their distinctive traditions

JESSICA TROBAUGH TEMPLE AND ERIN BLASKO  
*Tribune Staff Writer*

Riding a pink two-wheeler bike, a young Hispanic girl cruises the sidewalk in front of St. Adalbert Catholic Church.

Outside the building's heavy front doors, she pauses and cranes her head, looking for something.

Unsatisfied, she takes off again. But as she rounds the corner, she finds what she's been seeking. She hops from the bicycle seat and kicks down the stand.

Trucks and motorcycles rev and basses boom at the four-way stop on the corner of Olive and Huron streets, but the girl pays them no notice.

She kneels on the cement, folds her hands and with lifted gaze utters her prayers before a figure of Jesus, who greets her with lowered arms and bowed head.

She knows nothing of the church whose statue this is. Its heritage, its service times or whether Masses are said in Polish or Spanish. She's come simply looking for Christ.

Parishioners of St. Stephen, St. Adalbert and St. Casimir Catholic churches in South Bend may similarly find themselves resting on their commonality of Christianity.

On April 27, St. Stephen Catholic Church, South Bend's first Hungarian-founded parish that now serves a predominantly Spanish-speaking congregation, learned that it will close on May 31 and merge with the traditionally Polish St. Adalbert.

St. Adalbert will become part of a "parish community" by sharing two Congregation of Holy Cross priests, the Rev. David Porterfield and the Rev. Christopher Cox, with St. Casimir, another Polish parish.

As parishioners of churches with distinct cultural heritages and practices, they and clergy are faced with the challenge of meshing those cultures while preserving each one's special character.

During a session of the transition committee, which formed late last year and includes members of each parish and ethnic group, Porterfield created a subcommittee on ethnic traditions.

"It'll take education" for each group to understand and appreciate one another's religious traditions and practices, Porterfield said.

"Participation and education," added St. Adalbert member Tim Hudak.

But the group has the added challenge of holding tight to this task while weeding through a tangle of suggestions, concerns and logistical issues that comes with such a drastic and disorienting move.

St. Casimir parishioner Ann Marie Sommers mentioned carrying the Blessed Sacrament around the church building on Easter as one example of a cherished ritual in her parish not practiced at all Catholic churches.

But new liturgical rules might require a change in that, noted Monsignor J. William Lester, who earlier this week relinquished his duties as St. Adalbert's administrator.

Another parishioner suggested to Lester, however, that the Stations of the Cross in St. Stephen, which are statuaries, take the place of the portrait-style Stations in St. Adalbert.

While many agreed the fixtures are beautiful and would be a nice element to carry over from St. Stephen, questions of wall placement and mounting challenges arise. And what of the Stations at St. Adalbert? "We have to first find out if some family donated them," Lester said.

A statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe and some pictures will make the move, Porterfield said. But the sensitive issue of what will happen to the pews, stained-glass windows and ornate wood altar remains to be decided and will depend on whether or not the local diocese chooses to preserve the structure.

The possibility of a joint bulletin for St. Adalbert and St. Casimir came up for discussion, too. But, Porterfield pointed out, in the early stages of the transition most Hispanic activities will take place in St. Adalbert.

One committee member suggested that including the events in the St. Casimir bulletin would help Hispanics feel more welcome at the church. A second member agreed and said the inclusion would advance the effort "to be one big community."

But Porterfield offered up a sobering fact. “Given that people really don’t want this, I think we should hold off on that for a while.”

The issue of English Masses also arose for debate. On any given Sunday, people clog the aisles and spill out the doors during the two Spanish Masses at St. Stephen. Parishioners registered there, most of them Spanish speaking, number 6,500. Church rolls at St. Adalbert list roughly 1,300 and at St. Casimir, 550 parishioners. Both churches will add Spanish Masses.

Though Mass times haven’t been officially hammered out, the group unanimously agreed on one Sunday English Mass per church. “I’m just thinking that if one church has two (English Masses), then the other will have to also,” Porterfield said.

And though letters of welcome from St. Casimir and St. Adalbert appeared in the St. Stephen bulletin on Sunday, Guadalupe Salazar of St. Stephen tearfully mentioned one unpleasant encounter with a member of St. Adalbert. “She said she felt the Hispanics would push them out,” Lopez said. “And it hurt: Because we’re not coming to this church because we want to. We have no choice.”

And because there is no other choice, Louis Ciesielski of St. Adalbert said, the transition will have to be accepted by everyone who intends on remaining with the parishes.

“My brother, who used to attend St. Stephen, said that the older Hispanic women would get on their knees and walk on them to their pews. They showed great devotion. I hope some of that devotion will rub off on us, too,” Ciesielski said: “We are a Catholic church. . . . We must open our arms to everyone.”

But St. Stephen member Irene Egry, whose parents married in the church, said she doubts she’ll make the move to St. Adalbert.

She and her baby sister made their First Communion at St. Stephen. They graduated from the grade school and every Sunday walked to Mass with their father—their mother attended a later Mass.

She grew up hearing her father sing in the men’s choir, and every year she and her sister dressed up in their traditional Hungarian garb and danced in the St. Stephen Day street festival. Today, she’s still a member of the St. Theresa Society.

In her west-side home, stacks of church memorabilia sit at her fingertips: memory books, photos, sheet music to Polish hymns. From beside her chair she picks up a pocket-size volume with a creased and faded cover—her father’s prayer book.

“I like old things,” she says.

It will be hard letting go.

## Old Order Changing on South Bend’s West Side

ERIN BLASKO

A return visit to South Bend in 2002 confirmed a Polish sociologist/anthropologist’s prediction about South Bend’s Polish community.

When Janusz Mucha visited South Bend in 1990 he hadn’t anticipated writing about the Polish community here. In fact, he didn’t know it existed.

Mucha, a professor of sociology and anthropology from Krakow, Poland, served as a visiting professor at Indiana University South Bend.

After learning of the Polish community on the city’s west side, Mucha began to study and take part in many of the community’s activities.

His research led him to write “Everyday Life and Festivity in a Local Ethnic Community,” published in 1996 by Columbia University Press. In the book he suggests that the once strong community will decline.

In August 2002, Mucha returned to South Bend as a visiting Fulbright professor at IUSB. Once here, he learned his prediction had been correct.

“Now the article is about the Polish community *and* the Latinos,” he said, referring to the large number of Hispanics who have moved to South Bend’s west side in the last several years.

“The area is actually an area in transition,” he said. “First it was to black, and now it is to Hispanic.”

In 1990, Poles made up 21 percent of the west-side population and Hispanics made up 4.3 percent, Mucha pointed out. In contrast, the 2000 census showed Poles dropping to 11 percent and Hispanics rising to 14 percent.

“It’s a process of ethnic succession,” Mucha said. “One population is moving out, and another one is coming in.”

“Ten years ago there were many Polish businesses” on the west side, he said, “and now they are nearly gone. Many are Hispanic now.”

The ethnic succession of the west side is unique because the Poles are not being forced out but are leaving on their own, Mucha said.

“In reality, it’s first that the Poles move out and leave vacant stores,” he said. “And then the Hispanics take over the vacant stores.”

But why are all of the Polish residents leaving?

According to Mucha, it has to do with education.

“Educated professionals are moving out of the neighborhood,” he said. “And the old population is dying out . . . or going to nursing homes.”

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Besides Polish people and businesses leaving the west side, the local Polish Catholic parishes also are going through a period of change.

Because of smaller congregations and a shortage of priests, many of the old Polish parishes are either sharing priests or merging with other parishes.

“St. Hedwig’s and St. Patrick’s (have) one pastor,” Mucha said. “St. Casimir has the same pastor with St. Stephen’s, and St. Stanislaus merged with another parish.”

And he cited the merger between St. Stephen and St. Adalbert Catholic churches.

Currently, St. Stephen, originally a Hungarian parish, is predominantly Hispanic, while St. Adalbert remains predominantly Polish.

As early as 1990, west-side parishioners were offered at least two Polish Masses a week. The Masses are mostly in English now.

Now St. Hedwig and St. Adalbert have only one Polish Mass a month. “There are not many people during these Polish Masses. And most of them are elderly,” Mucha said.

Despite the decline in Polish parishes, Mucha said the churches are decorated with many Polish symbols and at least one Polish carol is included in Christmas services.

“There also are some other Polish religious traditions in the Masses,” he added. “But it’s shrinking.”

Not only is the Polish language disappearing from the church, it is also disappearing from daily life.

“The Polish language is gone” from the South Bend Polish community, Mucha said. “Only old people know Polish now.”

“After World War II, the schools stopped using Polish as the language of instruction. The younger generations know some phrases and use some phrases, but nothing more.”

Although the Polish neighborhood and language are in decline, many Poles still gather for important Polish events throughout the year, including Mucha.

“I attended the Polish Heritage Month Dinner at the very beginning of November,” he said, “and also the Polish Oplateck” on Christmas Eve.

The Oplateck, explained Mucha, is “a very thin wafer that is shared with others with wishes of all the best.”

According to Mucha, the Polish Heritage Month Dinner was attended by fewer than 200 people, and the Polish Oplateck attracted about 300.

Mucha described the crowd at both events as “mostly elderly.”

Although the decline of South Bend’s Polish community is evident, Mucha said it will be quite a while before it completely dies out.

Mucha pointed to the continued existence of Polish organizations such as the Achievement Forum and the Chopin Fine Arts Club as evidence of the staying power of many Polish traditions.

“They don’t care much about language,” Mucha said of the Polish clubs, “but they like to socialize with people who care about Polish traditions.”

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