Chicago Catholic Immigrants Conference: The Poles
Saturday, November 14th, 2015
Panel 9: Chicago Polish Catholicism for the 21st Century Perspectives from Loyola Students

Xenia Dylag
Loyola Graduate 2007

These past two days have been incredibly inspiring. I feel I’ve grown with each panel, and with each panel, this speech has been altered. As a Loyola Graduate I am really proud and honored to be part of this Conference and part of this panel. Both Bozena Nowicka McLees and Fr. Mark Bosco are very dear to me, especially when reminiscing of my undergraduate days. Whether they realize it or not, Bozena and Fr. Bosco have helped me along my journey in magical ways.

I studied Polish with Bozena at Loyola. This was my first official lesson in the Polish language. I learned and spoke Polish at home, but my grammar was way off, well, to be honest, my Polish grammar probably did not exist at that time. I was in a class with students from Poland looking for an easy A or others that grew up going to Polish Saturday School. I never went to Polish school, so this class was a challenge. It was this class, however, that opened a new door into the Polish language, history and culture, not only of Poland, but also of Polish Chicago. Bozena introduced me to new aspects of Polish Chicago that I didn’t know existed: poetry readings of Polish artists; Mrozek’s Tango at the Chopin Theatre; events at the Polish Museum of America. Never having attended Polish school, I wasn’t exposed to the extensive history of Poland and Polonia. As a child I learned what I could during visits to the Polish Museum that my uncle dragged us to. However, one thing I realize about this life is the importance of timing: timing is key. It’s all about timing! When my uncle took me to the Polish Museum as a kid, I didn’t care. I was upset we had to walk really far to get there. At the time that I took Bozena’s class (and I didn’t know it at that time, I don’t think), but I was searching for identity. I wanted to connect with my Polishness and that class opened that door for me.

As an undergraduate I also roamed the streets of Rome with Fr. Bosco as our tour guide while studying at Loyola’s Rome Center. I was exploring Catholicism and my Catholic faith and what that meant to me at that time. I will never forget those trips examining Caravaggio painting, and exploring the deep history of Catholicism in Rome. That experience gave me a new perspective on the temple that is the Church. As an adult coming of age at that time, 6 years ago, those moments helped shape me, my Polishness, and (I’m very hesitant to say because I still struggle with Catholicism but yes with) my Catholicism, because it’s played a huge part in my life and my Polish Chicago-ness.

Identity is a funny thing. How do we identify ourselves? How does one identify oneself? Sometimes depending on the day and mood and surroundings we may identify in different ways (in my experience at least). I find that my identity is
fluid in the sense that I can move from being Polish, from being Ksenia from Chicago, to being Xena, from America. It is really interesting how I can flow from these two identities depending on the setting and the group of people I’m with. However, does this make me two different people? Well, that is interesting to examine, yet no. I’m a melding of these two identities: Polish and American. I am Polish in so many ways, yet when I lived in Poland for a few years for graduate school, I realized how far from Poland Polish I was. I’m a special brand of Polish: the Polonia Chicagowska Polish.

During my first visit to Poland when I was in high school, at a sleep over getting to know my cousins, my cousin Aga asked, “what language do you think in?” I answered automatically that my thoughts are in English. But then, I realized at that moment, and shared with my cousins, that my prayers are in Polish. My father taught me how to pray and those prayers were always in Polish. It was the language, the tongue, the język, as you say in Polish that for me, spoke to my God.

As Stuart Dybek said this morning: “the universal is in the particular.” I found pieces of my own story with each of the speaker’s stories during this Conference. Quoting Dybek again, he mentioned that we remember the scars, “memories are scars.” So I wanted to take this time to share a few of my scars, which are not scars in the negative sense of the word, these are my memories that have shaped and defined me as a Polish American and inevitably Catholic, culturally Polish Catholic.

My Polishness is defined by grade school memories of sandwiches with Polish pickles on the side, while my classmates ate lunches bought at the school cafeteria; and my father telling me not to sleep with socks on or else the devil will haunt my dreams. (I have to remind myself once in a while that my dreams will be fine, I can sleep with socks on tonight.)

Stuart Dybek summed it wonderfully this morning; he said that identity “happens organically. It rises up from the bottom. From the experience.” I feel that is the best way to describe my Polishness. My Catholicism. My Polish Catholic American experience.

Thank you.