

Praising the birth of the Savior

Song, prayer, staging - three ways to honor the Child who was born in Bethlehem. Polish Catholics attach great importance to each of them. Many cannot imagine Christmas Eve without carols, going to the midnight mass or Christmas without admiring the nativity scene.

Carol singing as a tradition

Songs known as Christmas carols began to widely celebrate the birth of Christ in the 16th century. It was then that they started to be sung in Poland too. Michał Marcin Mioduszewski, a Polish priest, was a collector of religious songs, including folk carols. Carol singing is deeply rooted in the Polish tradition. It usually starts right after Christmas Eve. As songs praising the birth of the Lord and the triumph of light over darkness, they are often accompanied by sparklers. The oldest Polish Christmas carol, „Zdrow się, king anjelski”, was created in 1424. At the end of the 19th century, it was found by Aleksander Brückner, a Polish literary historian, in the manuscript of the Zaluski Library in St. Petersburg. He also found out that the manuscript came from the library of the vicars of Wiślica. The lyrics of the carol was part of a sermon by Jan Szczekna, a Cistercian monk and confessor of Queen Jadwiga, who taught theology at the University of Kraków from 1407. Unfortunately, there is no musical notation for the lyrics. One can only assume that it was sung to the accompaniment of a lyre like many early Christmas carols. Starting from the 16th century Christmas carols were sung while going from house to house on Christmas Eve and accepting money and food for it. There was little seriousness in it. Priests would

rebuke carol singers for that attitude to caroling in their sermons, and then they began to personally approve the individuals who could sing carols in a given village during a specific year. In the end, however, this practice was abandoned because parish priests used to choose level-headed and married farmers as carol singers. This could not support the superstition that a couple formed by a male carol singer and a bachelorette would live happily ever after. Carmelite, Franciscan and Jesuit orders would also sing carols apart from rural carol singers. Their members would put on short performances of scenes depicting the birth of Jesus. The figures of Herod, Death, the Devil and the Magi would present religious disputes during such performances, and the idea of salvation always won. In Poland, Christmas performances accompanied by thematic religious songs became popular in the Renaissance. In 1849, Teofil Lenartowicz wrote a Christmas carol called „Mizerna cicha stajenka licha” which was part of his anti-German „Szopka”. The Christmas carol „Bóg się rodzi”, traditionally opening the Midnight Mass, was written by Franciszek Karpiński. Its melody is a coronation polonaise from the times of Batory, when Poland was a powerful nation.



The midnight mass - brightness in the middle of the night

Celebrating the Midnight Mass commemorates the waiting and prayers of the shepherds going to Bethlehem to welcome the Messiah. The custom of celebrating midnight mass on Christmas Eve is over 1500 years old, and it has been known for several hundred years in Poland. The solemn holy mass called the Midnight Mass (from the midnight celebration) belongs to the religious observances of Christmas. During the Midnight Mass, all church bells ring loudly, and when the faithful fill the temples to the brim, the „Bóg się rodzi” carol fills their every inch. The night service to the glory of the Baby Jesus was introduced into the liturgy of the Catholic Church in the 6th century after it had

been celebrated just outside the walls of Bethlehem for nearly 200 years. In Poland, after the Christmas Eve supper, Catholics have been rushing to Midnight Mass since the Middle Ages. Midnight Mass begins the celebration of Christmas and the new liturgical year in the Church. Before the mass court carriages and peasant carts would race to get to the church in Polish villages. Walking to churches on foot for the Midnight Mass in memory of the shepherds going to the stable became popular later on despite cold winters.

The nativity scene, or the idea of St. Francis

The nativity scene is an important symbol and element of Christian culture. It shows a stable or a grotto where the Savior was born. Starting from the 6th century a wooden manger was erected in the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. It was believed to come from the grotto of Bethlehem. St. Francis of Assisi contributed to the belief that the birth of Jesus should be associated with the manger. The Old Testament tradition depicts the donkey as the animal of the Messiah. In the Christian Middle Ages, the donkey, as a burden-bearing animal, became an announcement of the cross, and the ox became a symbol of sacrifice. Saint Francis was the creator of a living nativity scene with people and animals. Its scenery, in 1223, was Greccio - a grotto near a Franciscan monastery. Its idea was to bring the idea of salvation to the common people. The only carved figure in Saint Francis's nativity scene was the Child in the manger. Candle light and torches have been used to organize nativity scenes for centuries. First, those waiting for the Messiah would emerge from the darkness, and when Christ was born, the stable brightened in front of the disturbed believers. Initially, nativity scenes were created in Europe at Franciscan monasteries, then the custom spread. In Poland, Franciscans began presenting nativity scenes in churches at the end of the 13th century.



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