

Polish Identity is about Values



As we break the wafer, we let go of all our grievances and resentments. An interview with Father Robert Łojek, pastor of St. Robert and St. Constance parishes in Chicago.

„SE”: – How are Poles in Chicago preparing for the upcoming Christmas holidays?

Robert Łojek: – From Monday to Friday, our church celebrates the Holy Eucharist. Before Christmas itself, we hold Advent retreats so that people can prepare well for the festivities.

– **What does Christmas Eve look like in the USA?**

– In keeping with tradition, we do not eat meat dishes on that day. In Polish homes, multi-generational families often gather at one big table. Americans celebrate the first day of Christmas more than Christmas Eve, and it is then that turkey appears on American tables.

– **Do twelve dishes still prevail on Polish tables?**

– This is the case in most Polish homes. About sixty per cent of Poles in Chicago order Christmas Eve take-away food from restaurants or stores. It is very good, it tastes like home-made food. The nuns prepare the twelve dishes themselves, the same number of dishes was in my family house in Poland. They also put hay on the table and cover it with a white

tablecloth. The dishes are made with produce from the forest, waters and fields, namely mushrooms, cabbage, poppy seeds and fish. It is usually red borscht with dumplings, compote made of dried plums, mushroom soup, and for dessert - poppy seed cake, babka or other baked goods.

During the holidays, Poles abroad connect spiritually with their hometowns. It is important that such Christmas Eve traditions as serving twelve dishes, leaving a place at the table for an unexpected guest, breaking the wafer, exchanging wishes, carol singing and going to Midnight Mass should be passed on to the next generations of Poles born in the USA. It is also very important to pass on to the young generation our Polish values such as: faith, love and forgiveness. This is our Polish identity, without which we, Poles, do not exist.

– **What is your favorite Christmas Eve dish?**

– A soup made with real mushrooms. I must admit I smuggled some in during my last trip from Poland, they are delicious and come from the forests of Podhale. Many Poles, Slovaks or Russians go to Colorado and Wisconsin especially for mushrooming. Of all the desserts, I like the

poppy seed cake and babka (a yeast cake) the most. One of our nuns bakes amazing cakes, she has a great talent in confectionery.

– **What’s about alcohol during the holidays?**

– On Christmas Eve we don’t drink. On Christmas Day you can, often a glass of wine or beer is served after the meal.

– **We often sit at the family table arguing with our family. What can we do to avoid anger and tension on this day?**

– As we break the wafer, let’s let go of all our grievances and resentments, let it be forgotten. Let us forgive ourselves and shake hands truly from the heart. As we forgive others, let us also forgive ourselves.

Let us go to Midnight Mass together, let us sing carols together. We, Poles, are like one big family in Chicago.

– **And how do Poles, who have no home or family here, spend Christmas?**

– The St. Hyacinth Basilica in Chicago has hosted Christmas Eve suppers for the homeless and lonely for years, and this year it will be held as well.

Meals for the hungry are provided for Thanksgiving, and there is an eating place throughout the year where anyone can get a bite to eat.

– **Which Christmas do you remember best?**

– The one from 25 years ago. It was my first Christmas in the States and I spent it all alone. I prepared only a few modest dishes for myself. I felt very lonely and I promised myself that I would never let that happen again. And I didn’t. Since then, I have never spent Christmas alone again.

Interviewed by: MARTA J. RAWICZ



ROBERT ŁOJEK is a chaplain of several Polish PPA circles and president of St. Albert Chmielowski Polish School in Chicago. He was born on 1 September 1972 in Białka Tatrzańska. He was ordained a priest in 2003, graduated from the seminary in Wroclaw and studied in the USA. His passions are travelling, mushroom picking, reading books and listening to classical music.

