

**Urban Spaces and Sacred Places:  
The Lived Religion of Polish Catholic Laity in Detroit, 1870-  
1939.**

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## INTRODUCTION

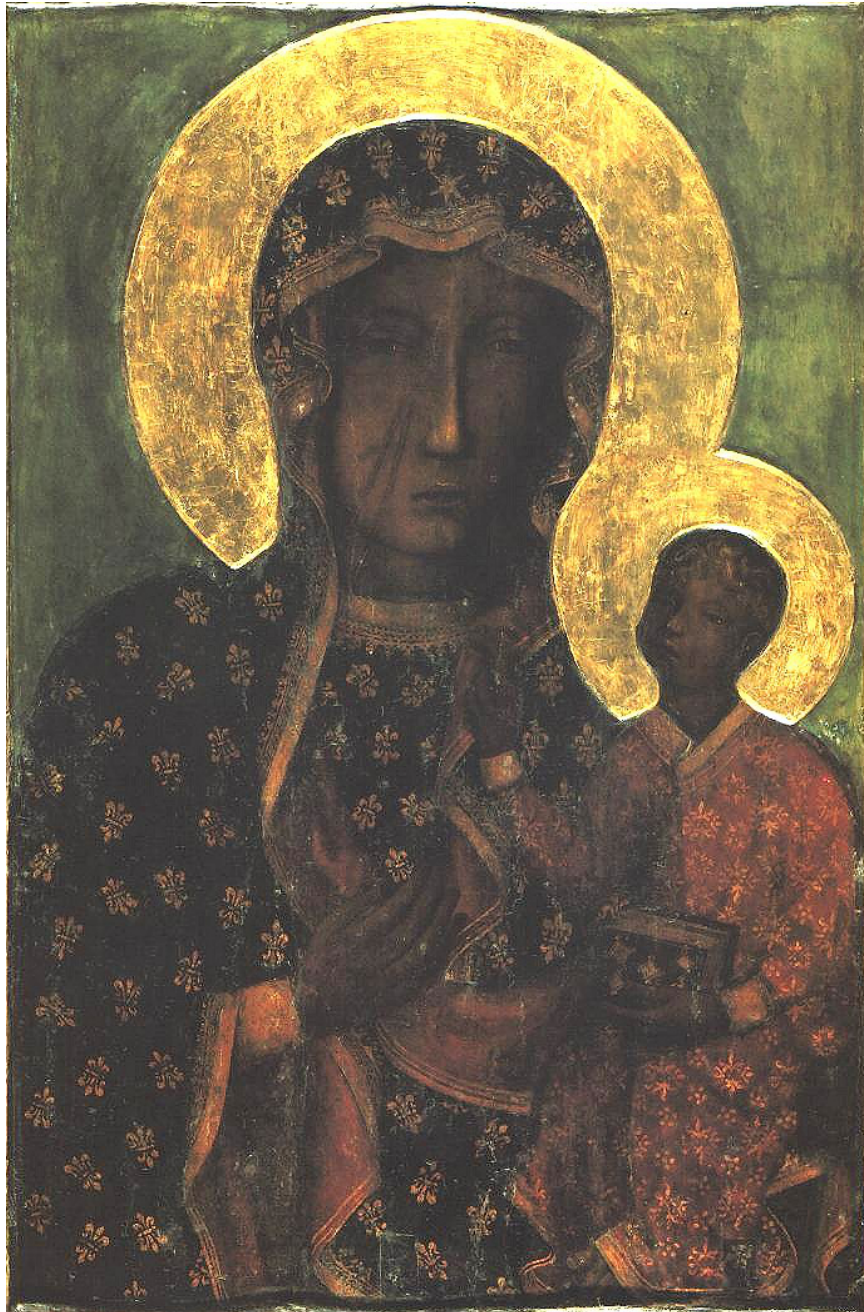


Fig. 1: *Our Lady of Czestochowa*, the ca. 14th century Polish icon attributed to Luke the Evangelist. Her image has been reproduced countless times, and can be found in churches, gift shops, and homes in Hamtramck and Detroit.

## I. “QUAINT CUSTOMS”<sup>1</sup>: POLISH CATHOLICISM IN URBAN AMERICA

*God who is both Creator and Judge of man,  
Never abandoning us from your care,  
To whom we raise our prayers and supplications,  
Have mercy on sinful people, O Lord.*

*Deign to turn away the calamities of starvation and war,  
Benevolent God, return us to a time of peace.  
Cause us to love you eternally.  
After our death, take us into your kingdom.*

*Deign to hear this, our tearful voice.  
Cause freedom to return to our motherland.  
Grant us the good fortune to return to our nation.<sup>2</sup>*

*(H. Wagner, ca. 1917)*

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The author of the prayer quoted above was a Polish immigrant to Detroit named Hipolit Wagner. He immigrated to America in 1913 in search of a well-paying job that would allow him to support his family in Poland and to later return there himself.<sup>3</sup> At the time, many immigrants arrived with families, making Wagner a unique case. He journeyed through the American countryside to Detroit, where he settled with his cousin who was already living in the city.<sup>4</sup> By then, Detroit was home to one of the largest populations of

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Seroczynski, "Poles in the United States," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 12 (New York: Robert Appleton Company), 1911.

<sup>2</sup> Hipolit C. Wagner and Arthur A. Wagner, *My Journey in the World: The Memoir of Hipolit C. Wagner 1912-1919: Immigration to World War I*, (Warren, Michigan: Arthur A. and Magdalene Wagner, 2010), 27.

<sup>3</sup> He did return to Poland in 1919 for a short time before returning to Detroit for good to establish a family on the stable wages of an auto worker. He was buried in Mt. Olivet cemetery in 1960. Hipolit C. Wagner and Arthur A. Wagner, *My Journey in the World: The Memoir of Hipolit C. Wagner 1912-1919: Immigration to World War I*, (Warren, Michigan: Arthur A. and Magdalene Wagner, 2010), 7; 39.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Polish immigrants in America, along with Chicago and New York.<sup>5</sup> Since the mid-19th century, a growing population of immigrants from various Polish territories had been building the city upwards and outwards, establishing the churches, social halls, schools, markets and funeral homes that would sustain their community. In Detroit, Wagner took on a job as a cook's assistant and later worked in the auto factories. He sent some money back home<sup>6</sup> and promptly joined the Polish Falcons of America<sup>7</sup> with whom he trained to become part of a Polish infantry regiment to fight alongside the Americans in World War I.

This prayer (or poem) was found in his private diary which he kept between 1912 and 1918. It was probably composed in 1917, before Wagner left for the army in August 1918. If this was the case, he likely wrote it with the war in Poland weighing heavily on his mind—perhaps thinking about his parents back home whom he had not heard from since 1914 when the war began<sup>8</sup>—as well as his own unhappiness in Detroit, where he labored in “unhealthy” factories<sup>9</sup> and grappled personally with the realities of early 20th century industrialization and with his own place in the social and sacred landscape of the

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<sup>5</sup> Due to inconsistencies in census record-keeping at the turn of the 20th century, it is difficult to conclude how large the Polish immigrant population in Detroit was compared to other cities. Some estimates put the Polish population in Detroit at 50,000 in 1910, or about 20% of the entire population, a number which would increase almost threefold by 1915. Suffice to say, the Detroit area was a major destination for Polish settlement by the 20th century. Thaddeus C. Radzialowski, *Polish Americans in the Detroit Area* (Orchard Lake, Michigan: St. Mary's College of Ave Maria University, 2001), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Wagner, *My Journey in the World*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> A Polish fraternal benefit society with an emphasis on physical fitness. The first "nest" in the United States was founded in 1887 in Chicago by Felix Pietrowicz. During World War I, the Falcons began hosting military training for members. See Alvin J. Schmidt, *The Greenwood encyclopedia of American institutions vol. 3: Fraternal Organizations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 266-7.

<sup>8</sup> Wagner, *My Journey in the World*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. “I obtained a job in a factory, but it was not necessarily a good thing because unhealthy—the work was so demanding that a person could scarcely make it home [at the end of the workday].”

city. Although Wagner intended to return to Poland, as he expresses in his prayer, he ended up settling in Detroit with his family for the remainder of his life.<sup>10</sup>

Like most Poles who immigrated to America during the first major wave between 1870 and World War I, Wagner left when Poland did not exist as an independent governmental unit.<sup>11</sup> The existence of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ended in 1795 after a series of invasions and partitions of Polish territory carried out by the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Habsburg Monarchy. No independent Polish state existed from 1795 until 1918, when the Second Polish Republic was established. In German and Russian Poland, education in Polish language, culture, and history was actively discouraged and even forbidden, as were public expressions of national memory. In part because Catholic churches were important centers of Polish nationalist activity, both occupying powers carried out anti-Catholic policies.<sup>12</sup> As Dennis Badaczewski put it, being Polish was as much an *idea* as it was a fact for Polish immigrants to the US.<sup>13</sup>

To Wagner, and likely to many Polish immigrants, national and familial memory, language, and religion were all important aspects of a developing Polish identity in America. In his diary, Wagner complained about fellow Polish immigrants who “get jobs and quickly begin speaking English, forgetting at once about their homeland, their parents, and their religion.” He added, with not a small amount of pride, “I thought entirely differently.”<sup>14</sup> Evidently not all self-identified Polish immigrants in America retained their native language or fervently practiced “their religion”—by which Wagner, himself

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>11</sup> Dennis Badaczewski, *Poles in Michigan*, Discovering the Peoples of Michigan (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Radzialowski, *Polish Americans in the Detroit Area*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Badaczewski, *Poles in Michigan*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Wagner, 12.



Catholic, almost certainly meant an ethnically Polish form of Catholicism. There were of course also Polish atheists who settled in Detroit, as well as Polish communists and anarchists, Polish Jews and Protestants. That being said, many of those immigrants who *were* practicing Catholics and continued to be so in Detroit articulated a dually religious and ethnic identity in the *nowy świat* ('New World').

The "idea" of being Polish became synonymous with being Catholic.<sup>15</sup> This was a result of the national rhetoric of Polish revolutionaries during the partition and the historically Catholic sovereignty of the Polish Commonwealth,<sup>16</sup> which was then exacerbated by the process of immigration:

Although pre-World War II Poland was a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country, the process of immigration galvanized and re-created ethnic identities in the New World context. For example, Polish Jews, who also emigrated in large numbers during the same period as their Catholic neighbors, largely identified as Jewish American or Russian Jewish in America.<sup>17</sup>

Although not every self-identified Polish immigrant to America was Catholic, and not every Catholic was necessarily practicing, the majority of Poles who settled in America were Roman Catholics. Moreover, the Polish parish and Catholic organizations were integral to forming and sustaining their communities. Polish Catholicism offered a framework for immigrants to place themselves within the diverse religious, racial, and ethnic network of urban life. But what did this look like, in practice? How did early Polish

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<sup>15</sup> Other scholars have tackled the larger question of how 'Polishness' and Catholicism have been historically linked. See, for instance, Brian Porter, "The Catholic Nation: Religion, Identity, and the Narratives of Polish History," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 2 (2001): 289-99.

<sup>16</sup> See Robert Alvis, *White Eagle, Black Madonna: One Thousand Years of the Polish Catholic Tradition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> John Radzilowski, "A Social History of Polish-American Catholicism," *U.S. Catholic Historian* Vol. 27, No. 3 (Catholic University of America Press, 2009): 21.

Catholic immigrants<sup>18</sup> in industrial urban America negotiate their identity, both their self-perception and the perceptions of outsiders to their religious-ethnic community, through their religious practices?

Despite the significance of Catholic religiosity and culture to many Polish immigrants, relatively little scholarship has been dedicated to the history of Polish Catholicism in America, and even less pertaining to Detroit Polonia. The impressive research that has already been conducted on Detroit Polonia<sup>19</sup> tends to focus on the importance of the Catholic parish as an organizing cultural force in the lives of Polish immigrants. Even when more attention is given to the diverse spectrum of religious activities within and exceeding the parish, the extent of *lay* Polish immigrant church devotion, public celebration, and domestic devotion has traditionally been treated with a degree of dismissal. For instance, the 1911 Catholic Encyclopedia entry on Poles in the United States reads:

Poland was but little affected by the religious rebellion of the sixteenth century and hence the Catholic *medieval spirit* is still that of the Poles. The Christmas and Easter carols heard in the Polish churches are exact counterparts of those sung by the peasants of pre-Reformation England, and are the expression of the *childlike faith* of the people.<sup>20</sup>

The perpetuation of a perception that lay Polish immigrant religiosity was ‘quaint,’ ‘medieval’ or characteristic of ‘peasant’ piety and/or naivete in modern scholarship is itself a legacy of the sorts of cultural tensions that arose during the first decades of peak Eastern

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<sup>18</sup> Meaning those belonging to the first major wave of immigrants, roughly between 1870 and the First World War.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Thaddeus Radzialowski, “The View From a Polish Ghetto. Some Observations on the First One Hundred Years in Detroit,” *Ethnicity* 1 no. 2 (July 1974): 125-150; Thaddeus Radzilowski, *Polish Americans in the Detroit Area* (Orchard Lake, Michigan, 2001); Greg Kowalski, *Hamtramck, Soul of a City* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Seroczynski, "Poles in the United States," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Italics mine.

European immigration to America, particularly in northern cities where most immigrants settled and were most visible. This attitude romanticizes ‘old world’ religiosity as simpler and more devout than modern religiosity. The dichotomy between the ‘medieval’ and the modern concerning common Polish Catholic practices—such as religious processions, Polish carols, and interaction with religious and ritual materials including rosaries, medals, statues, clothing, and images—also implicitly colors Polish Catholicism as existing outside of the realm of a modern, Protestant American framework of privatized devotion.

While acknowledging the various power structures that affected the lives of Polish immigrants, from the American Catholic clergy to various naturalization and Americanization committees, I wish to present the Polish American laity as the main characters of their own religious history in Detroit. In an attempt to draw attention to this preconception, and in order to address the lack of scholarship that seriously considers the form and legacy of Polish lived religion<sup>21</sup> in industrial America, I am investigating lay religious activity and community organization as the means by which Polish immigrants in Detroit influenced the social, sacred, and geographic boundaries of the city to meet their needs, and by which they sought to present a particular national-religious identity and gain American respectability at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>22</sup>

## **II. BACKGROUND: THE HISTORY OF METRO-DETROIT POLONIA**

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<sup>21</sup> For more on the concept of lived religion, see David Hall, *Lived Religion In America: Toward A History of Practice*, Princeton University Press, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> This thesis will focus on material related to Polish immigrants in Detroit between 1870 and the beginning of World War II, roughly corresponding to the period of the first major wave of Polish immigration to the Detroit area. Although this period includes multiple generations of immigrants, as a group, Polish Catholic immigrants previous to World War II differ from the waves of immigration during and after the second world war.

The history of Metro-Detroit Polonia is one of shifting boundaries: geographic, ethnic, and religious. Many Polish immigrants came to Detroit between the 1870s and World War I seeking economic opportunities, earning the name *za chlebem* [‘for bread’].<sup>23</sup> The first Polish immigrants to Detroit were Kashubian and German-speaking families from Prussian Poland who settled alongside German immigrants beginning in the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>24</sup> The earliest Polish immigrants to Detroit came as family groups, many of them headed by men who were skilled workers. Subsequent migration in the late 19th century brought younger, unskilled workers who found employment in foundries, stove works, and railroad car and carriage industries. By the 1880s, the economic growth in industrial Detroit drew increasing numbers of Poles from Galicia and Austrian Poland, followed by Poles from the Russian partitioned lands. These immigrants were on average poorer and less well-educated than earlier migrants from Prussian Poland.<sup>25</sup> At the turn of the 20th century, Detroit experienced an immense industrial and geographic expansion that was fueled by a coinciding influx of Polish immigrants, a pattern not replicated in other cities with large Polish immigrant populations during the same period.

[Detroit] is unique in this sense that its growth and expansion coincided with the arrival of Polish immigrants. The immigrants fitted into the framework of the growing city and provided labor for its developing economy. As the city grew, so did the Polish settlements within it.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> John J. Bukowczyk, *And My Children Did Not Know Me: A History of the Polish-Americans, Minorities in Modern America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Thaddeus Casmir Radzialowski, *Polish Americans In the Detroit Area*, Orchard Lake: St. Mary's College of Ave Maria University, 2001, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Radzialowski, *Polish Americans In the Detroit Area*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Mackun, “The Changing Patterns of Polish Settlements in the Greater Detroit Area: Geographic Study of the Assimilation of an Ethnic Group,” Ph.D. Thesis, (University of Michigan, 1964), 34, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Poles heavily populated the growing industries in Detroit. By 1900 nearly all of the 3,000 workers at the Peninsular Car Company, a manufacturer of railroad cars, in Detroit were Polish-born. By 1915 most of Detroit's cigars were made by unskilled Polish-born women and girls, and in 1916 the largest ethnic group working at the Ford Motor Company was Poles.<sup>27</sup>

Although the history of Polish settlement in Detroit reaches back to the 1840s at least, the mythography of Detroit Polonia often begins with the establishment of St. Albertus in 1872, the first Polish parish in the city. Many Poles<sup>28</sup> flocked from the increasingly overcrowded German parishes they had been attending to St. Albertus, around which Detroit's Poletown<sup>29</sup> is said to have sprung. Although the history of Poles in Detroit precedes the establishment of St. Albertus, the force of this event on the historiography of Detroit Polonia is a testament to the significance of the parish to Polish American life.

The spread of the Polish immigrant community in Detroit can be traced by the establishment of Polish parishes, which formed the geographic, spiritual, and social nodes of immigrant life. Thaddeus Radzialowski sketches this expansion beginning with St. Albertus, explaining how "Polonia began a restless, generation-by-generation expansion north and northeast" from Canfield Street "across Detroit's east side that took it into Hamtramck and northeast Detroit" and onwards into the surrounding suburbs.<sup>30</sup> Hamtramck itself underwent a drastic transformation as much of the once sprawling and mainly rural township, which was founded in 1798 by French settlers, was annexed to the

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<sup>27</sup> Badaczewski, *Poles in Michigan*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> At this point, many were from German-speaking Polish territories.

<sup>29</sup> Now mostly lost, having been razed for the construction of the current Dodge plant building in 1981.

<sup>30</sup> Radzialowski, *Polish Americans In the Detroit Area*, 8.

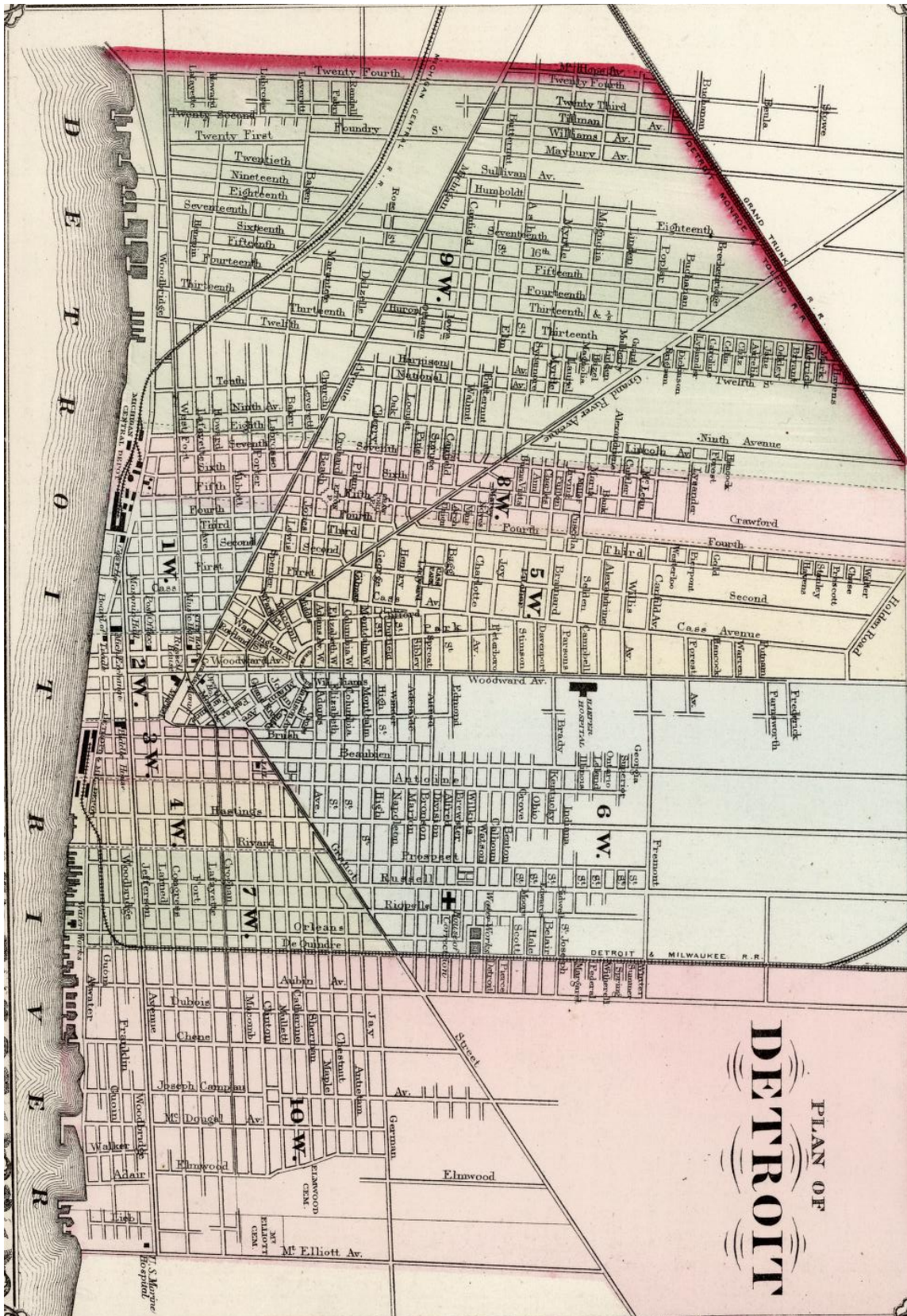


Fig. 2: Samuel Augustus Mitchell Jr., *Plan of Detroit*, 1874. David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.



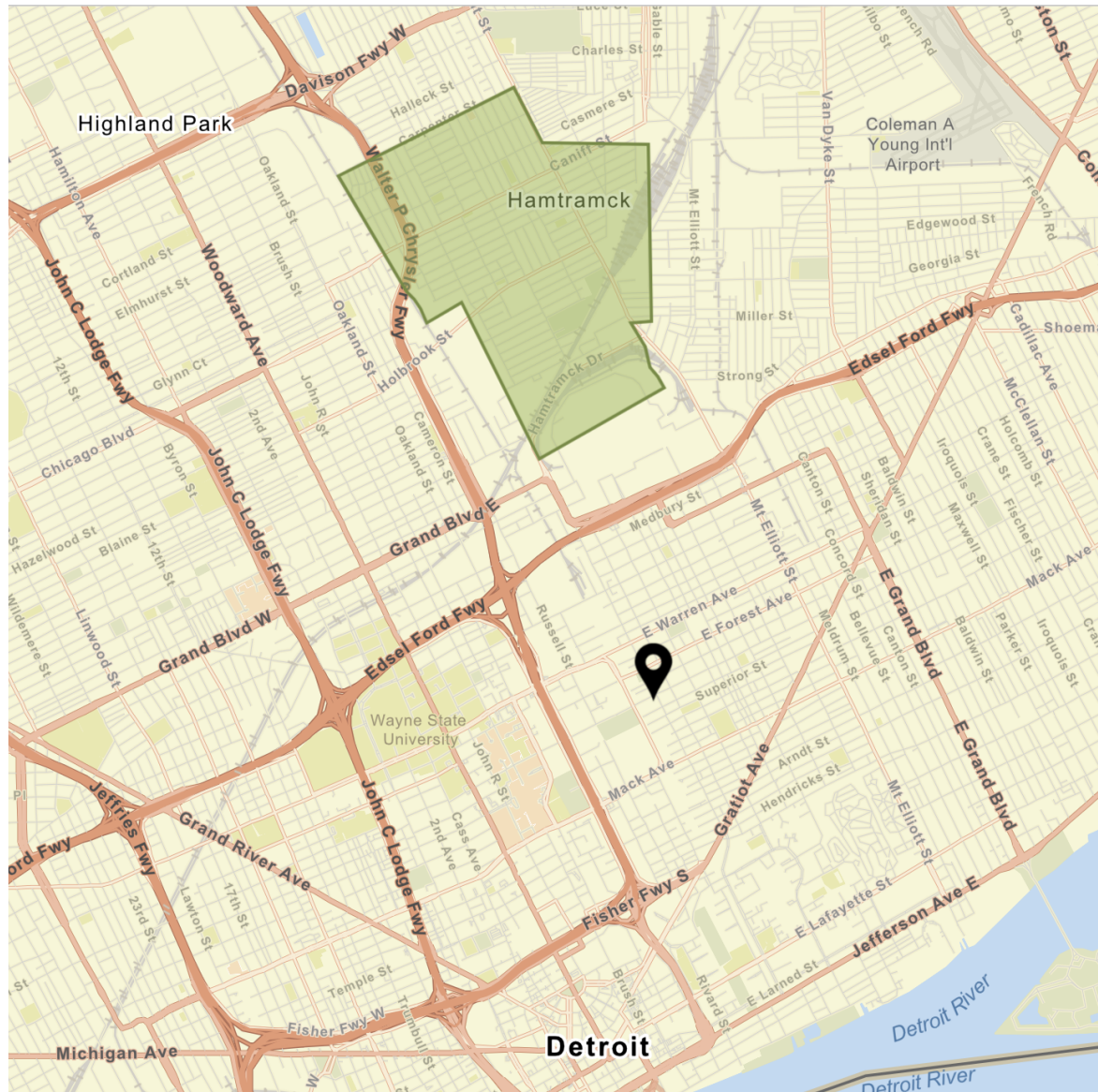


Fig. 3: Modern boundaries of Hamtramck shown within Detroit. St. Albertus church is flagged. ArcGIS Esri, map details created by me. Here we can see the actual orientation of the city, in contrast to the previous map which was reoriented. The road that vertically bisects the previous map is Woodward, labeled on this map. ‘East side’ and ‘West side’ are determined in relation to Woodward.

city of Detroit just as Polish immigrants made Hamtramck their home. Only by 1922 did Hamtramck incorporate as a city to prevent further annexations,<sup>31</sup> becoming the 2.1 sq mi city remaining today. A smaller settlement of Poles was founded on the west side,

<sup>31</sup> Greg Kowalski, *Hamtramck, Soul of a City* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2003), 7.

beginning with the establishment of St. Casimir parish in 1883, which expanded west towards Dearborn in the following decades.<sup>32</sup>

In both settlements, on the east and west side of the city, Polish immigrants built their communities emanating from parish boundaries, forming ‘ethnic enclaves’ within the city. To some outsiders, they were “like an invading army,” taking “section after section of the city exclusively for themselves” and mingling primarily with “the least successful class of Americans.”<sup>33</sup> But to the immigrants, nothing made more sense than to live among people who spoke like they did, dressed like they did, and prayed like they did; people who kept two homes in their prayers—the one they left behind, and the one they built from scratch on American soil.

Despite the persistent image of the Polish ethnic enclave as heavily cloistered, from the late 19th century onward white Polish Catholics in the Detroit area lived alongside Baptists and Lutherans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and a plethora of other European immigrants from Germany, Ireland, Italy and elsewhere. For Poles, carving out their space in the city was an act of cultural preservation and negotiation in response to the surrounding diverse population and urban American culture at large. Polish-American Catholicism, as a late-19th and 20th century American innovation, was crucial to the creation of Polish-American identity through the definition and assertion of geographical, social, and religious boundaries in the city of Detroit.

### III. CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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<sup>32</sup> Radzialowski, *Polish Americans In the Detroit Area*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> I.e., other immigrants like themselves. Raymond E. Cole, "The Immigrant in Detroit," May 1915, 2, Americanization Committee of Detroit Correspondence, Minutes, Reports, and Misc. Material, Undated, Americanization Committee of Detroit papers, 1914-1931, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.



I have chosen to organize my chapters spatially, reflecting the different religious spheres of Polish Catholic life in the city: the parish, the streets or the city itself, and the home, in that order. Within each of these spheres, Poles participated in different religious activities determined by the allowances of the space itself and the level of privacy afforded. Over the course of the thesis, I will ‘zoom in’ from my discussion of the national parish system and its impact on the geography of Detroit, as well as intra-parish developments in Polish Catholic churches, to discussing public rituals that exceeded the bounds of the church, to finally discussing the intimate and individual space of the home.

In Chapter 1, I will discuss the parish, a central institution in the Polish Catholic community. The parish was where Polish immigrants celebrated (and still celebrate) daily mass, holy days, weddings, baptisms, funerals, and national holidays. The devotional activities of laity were more heavily monitored by clergy in the parish, leading to conflicts over acceptable practices and over the use of Polish and English within sacred ceremonies as well as practical parish organizational activities. Since the majority of scholarship on Detroit Polonia and on Polish Catholics in America in general has focused on the activities which took place within the Polish church, I will instead focus on how the parish served as one of the major battlegrounds on which Polish laity fought to discern their place in the religious and ethnic landscape of urban America. Through shared religious services, language, church-based social groups, Polish laity nurtured a particular ethicized form of Catholicism and resisted the perceived or real threat of assimilation into an Irish-dominated Catholic culture.

The creation of Polish parishes in Detroit, beginning with St. Albertus, also impacted the ethnic geography of the city. While Polish national parishes did not

exclusively admit Polish residents, the majority of their parishioners at the turn of the 20th century were of Polish descent. This occurred mainly because these parishes were established to cater to the needs of the Polish immigrant population, but also because Polish immigrants tended to settle around parishes, creating ‘ethnic enclaves.’ Nonetheless, the Detroit neighborhoods that Poles lived in were ethnically and religiously diverse. The public rituals that I will discuss in Chapter 2, including pageants, processions, and parades, were highly visible not only to the Polish community but also to all the other groups that they lived and worked alongside of. Because of this visibility, public celebrations did not only help to articulate the social boundaries of Detroit Polonia—parades and processions tracing routes between Polish churches and social halls, weaving through the streets where most Poles lived, or passing by the houses of important community members—but they also communicated a curated image of Polish American identity to outsiders. This projected identity, and the reception of public Polish Catholic rituals, changed over the course of the first decades of Polish immigration to Detroit, gradually emphasizing their commonalities with other established Christian groups in the city and emphasizing their respectability as Europeans and as Christians who were taking advantage of new financial opportunities in America.

Many of the public and parish devotional activities were connected to the home, especially to ‘women’s work’ (preparing holiday feasts to be eaten after mass, sewing traditional costumes for parades, etc.). The most intimate form of religiosity, domestic religion encompasses most of the practices and beliefs that some clergy and Detroiters, Polish and not, labeled as “medieval superstition”: material devotion, collecting wax Virgins and holy cards, warding off witchcraft, and other activities that were treated with

suspicion and disapproval. However, because of the privacy provided by the domestic sphere, the extra-institutional activities that Polish Catholics performed in their homes were less easily targeted for clerical intervention, offering a greater degree of creative and interpretative possibility. Domestic religion was a vehicle for not only spiritual expression, but also cultural education, the articulation of familial relationships, and personal memory.

**CHAPTER 1: THE PARISH**

Fig. 4: Postcard of St. Albertus, Detroit, dated September 18, 1908. Courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

## I. THE POLISH PLYMOUTH ROCK

What did the Catholic parish mean to Polish immigrants in Detroit? By the 1970s, looking back a hundred years to the beginnings of a major Polish presence in the city, the foundation of the first Polish parish took on an importance of mythical stature. In 1973, in celebration of the centennial of the oldest Polish Catholic church in Detroit, Rev. Joseph Swastek and Rev. John Szopinski wrote these patriotic lines: “St. Albertus is the Polish Detroiter’s Plymouth Rock. This is where their forefathers in the faith landed on solid ground to stay, for none of the early founders of the Parish went back to the old country.”<sup>1</sup> Szopinski understands the Polish American parish as the key to Polish American identity. It was the foundation of life in the ‘New World,’ a promised land of religious freedom akin to that which the pilgrims went seeking after. This new Plymouth Rock—a plain brick building of typical late-19th century style, stuffed with medieval arches, kind-eyed saints, and painted heavens<sup>2</sup>—was founded by a very different sort of pilgrim: Polish Catholics, peasants, farmers, factory workers, and business-owners, some of whom spoke little English; even fewer could read or write it.

The historiography of St. Albertus in Polish Catholic life, as that of other Polish parishes in Detroit and other American cities, presents the parish as the cornerstone of Polish settlement. Although a Polish settlement existed in Detroit prior to the establishment of St. Albertus, its foundation and the foundation of all the ethnic Polish parishes following it did mark a turning point in the history of Detroit Polonia. Albertus was the first Polish national parish in Detroit, and it became a model for Polish laity to define their own

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<sup>1</sup> J. Swastek and J. Szopinski, *Detroit's oldest Polish Parish, St. Albertus, 1872-1973, Centennial*, (Detroit, 1973), 198.

<sup>2</sup> This is the new church. The original building was replaced in the 1880s under Kolasinski. See *Detroit's Oldest Parish*.

‘Polishness’ in America through parish-building, devotion, education, inter- and intra-parochial conflict, rioting, and petitioning.

The story of St. Albertus is the story of how Polish immigrants wove themselves into the history of America and rewrote the history of Detroit. Most Polish immigrants who arrived prior to the founding of St. Albertus—those from the Polish districts of Prussia<sup>3</sup>—naturally settled in German neighborhoods to live amongst people who shared their language. These early Poles lived alongside German Catholics, as well as a relatively large population of German Jews. Many German Jews had migrated from other American cities to Detroit in the mid-to-late 19th century, and were similarly attracted to the established population of non-Jewish Germans who shared a familiar language and culture.<sup>4</sup> Polish Catholics had been attending mass at the German churches in the area, where German parishioners allegedly discriminated against them and segregated Poles to specific pews where their bitterness simmered until it coalesced into the creation of a Polish parish where Poles could be free from the suffocation of German prejudice. In 1871 Bishop Borgess, himself a first-generation German immigrant,<sup>5</sup> permitted the disconcerted Poles to establish their own church. The owners of the once-prominent St. Aubin and Riopelle farms where Poles had settled donated \$1,200 for a lot on St. Aubin Avenue where the original frame church was built.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Thaddeus C. Radzialowski, *Polish Americans In the Detroit Area* (Orchard Lake: St. Mary's College of Ave Maria University, 2001), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Rockaway, “Moving in and Moving Up: Early Twentieth-Century Detroit Jewry,” *The Michigan Historical Review* 41, no. 2 (2015): 59.

<sup>5</sup> C. George Herbermann et. al., *The Catholic Encyclopedia: an international work of reference on the constitution, doctrine, discipline, and history of the Catholic church*, vol. 2 (New York: Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1913), 684.

<sup>6</sup> “An Event of Interest.: The Establishment of The First Polish Church,” *Detroit Free Press* (1858-1922), Jul 11, 1897, 15.

The missionary priest Simon Wieczorek, who had held services for Poles at St. Joseph's since 1870,<sup>7</sup> was appointed to serve as an intermediary to “unite the Poles in Detroit.” “Like an Old Testament patriarch leading his spiritual progeny to a new life in another land,”<sup>8</sup> Fr. Wieczorek spearheaded the creation of St. Albertus—as this quote would have it—in order to deliver the Poles to the Promised Land where they could freely worship among other Poles. He became the first priest to serve St. Albertus, which had a membership of seventy families at its beginning.<sup>9</sup> This is the familiar story, however romanticized, of religious liberty, of immigrants pulling themselves up by the bootstraps and staking their claim in the urban pangea of the would-be Motor City.

Shortly after its establishment, St. Albertus was the site of a series of riots, demonstrations, and intra-institutional conflicts over more than a decade that rocked the Polish community and were widely reported in the news. The charismatic Father Dominic Kolasinski was appointed pastor of St. Albertus in 1882. Shortly after completing the newly expanded church, Kolasinski was charged with financial mismanagement and sexual misconduct by several of his parishioners, leading to his removal in 1885. This sparked spirited, sometimes violent, riots from his supporters and the formation of rival factions, became known as the “Kolasinski Affair.”<sup>10</sup> The Affair's infamy may in part be attributed to the dramatic unfolding of events, which makes for an undeniably interesting story. The violence and in-fighting reported in the Affair also seemed to confirm some unsavory

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<sup>7</sup> Swastek, *Detroit's Oldest Parish*, 34.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> “An Event of Interest...,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 11, 1897, 15.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the Kolasinski Affair, see L. D. Orton, *Polish Detroit and the Kolasinski Affair* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981); Leslie Woodcock Tentler, “Who Is the Church?: Conflict in a Polish Immigrant Parish in Late Nineteenth-Century Detroit,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 25 (April 1983): 241-276.

attitudes towards Detroit's newest arrivals as separatists and religious fanatics. Looking back, it seems like a strange event in need of explanation: parishioners rioting against, boycotting, and even physically attacking their own clergy is not something you see every day.

Even more intriguing, this was not the only instance of Poles rioting over the governance of Catholic Parishes in Detroit, but rather one of many. Over the first decades of major Polish settlement in Detroit and Hamtramck, cases of parish violence and factionalism abound. As Margaret Renciewicz points out, these moments of contention and lay dissension reveal how the Polish American parish was not simply the doorway to acceptance into American and American Catholic culture. Rather, the parish itself served as one of the major battlegrounds on which Polish laity fought to discern their place in the religious and ethnic landscape of America. Through shared religious services and language, ethnically-based social groups, and a common desire to resist the perceived or real threat of assimilation<sup>11</sup> into an Irish-dominated Catholic culture, Polish laity developed both parochial and national identities which impacted the very landscape of the city.

## II. OKOLICA

Polish immigration to Detroit peaked between the 1880s and 1920s, when the Immigration Act of 1924 put a clamp on the incoming immigrant population. Poles quickly became the largest immigrant group in the city, and their growing settlement was marked by the erection of Polish Catholic churches, as well as Polish Protestant churches and Jewish temples. Looking at a map of Catholic churches in the city by 1910, the Polish

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<sup>11</sup> The intricacies and history of the concept of assimilation is far too broad for the scope of this work. See Catherine S. Ramírez, *Assimilation: An Alternative History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020) for a thorough examination of assimilation theory and its evolution in popular use and in academic scholarship.



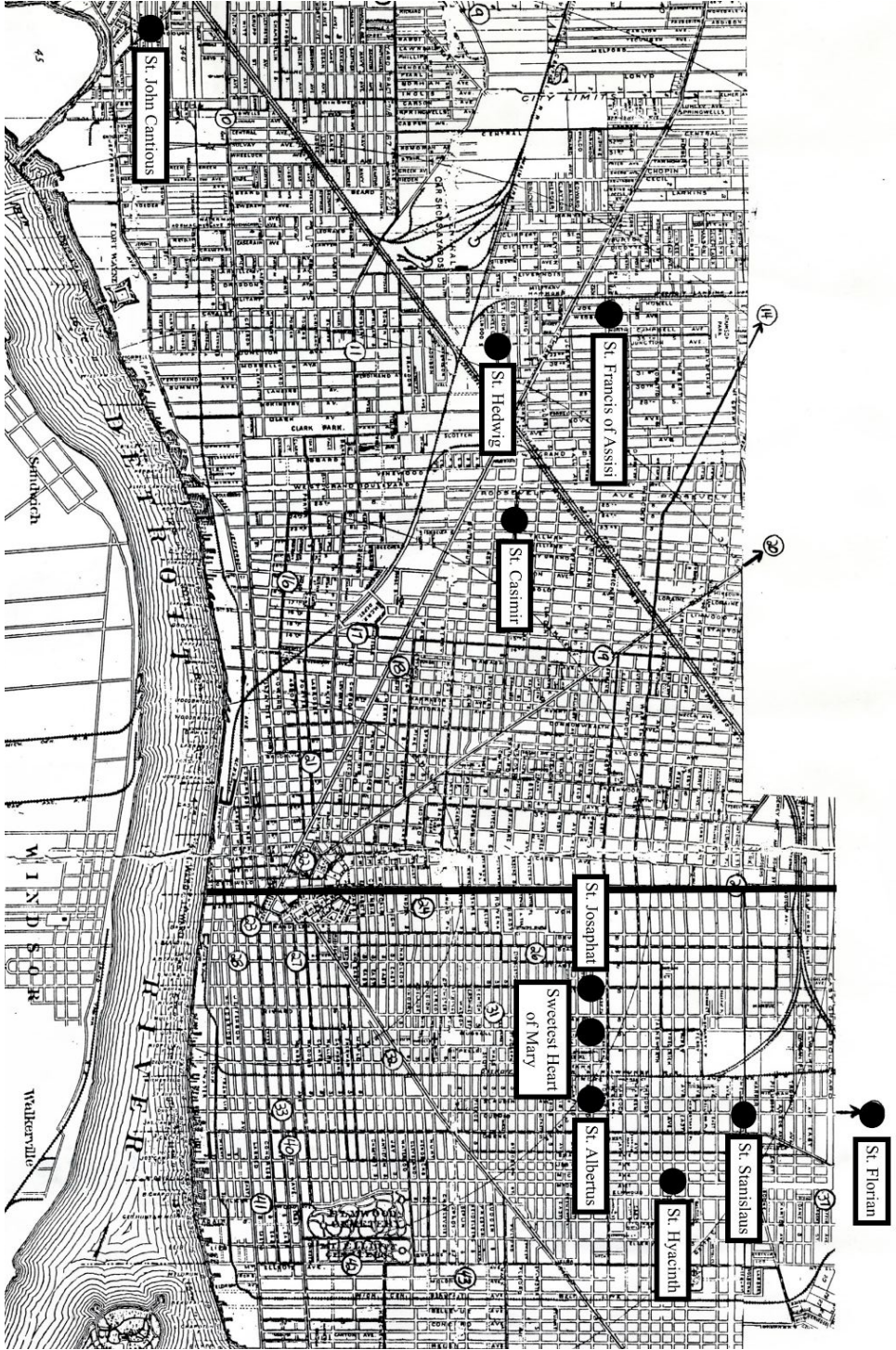


Fig. 5: *The Catholic Church in the City of Detroit and Its Immediate Vicinity Before Nineteen and Ten by Dorothy (Penny) Arble, based on a 1916 map of Detroit from the Detroit Library.*

parishes are clustered in the northern half of the east and west sides of Detroit. Where the 1874 map of Detroit<sup>12</sup> indicates underdeveloped (or insignificant) swaths of land, the 1910 map reveals expanding neighborhoods to the north and east of St. Aubin and Canfield. This is the intersection where St. Albertus was established, sparking the growth of Poletown and several Polish parishes on and within the border of what would become Hamtramck. The designated Polish parishes straddle a strip of German parishes—including St. Joseph—established roughly along Gratiot Avenue between the 1830s and 1880s. To the southwest, a group of Irish parishes radiate from Corktown, where most Irish Catholics settled in the mid-19th century, attracted to Detroit not only for its economic prosperity but also for its French Catholic heritage.<sup>13</sup>

While a degree of ethnic segregation is evident in the map of Catholic churches by 1910, the reality of parish boundaries in the city was more complicated. Neighborhoods were inevitably diverse, one excellent example being Chene Street, just a few blocks east of St. Albertus. Chene was home to Polish Catholics, East European Jewish immigrants, and African Americans in the 20th century.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Poles established a strong monopoly over the properties surrounding parishes, leading to the creation of majority-Polish neighborhoods. Priests encouraged parishioners to purchase homes within the parish, and home ownership among Poles was exceptionally high.<sup>15</sup> The legacy of the

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<sup>12</sup> See page 10.

<sup>13</sup> Seamus P. Metress and Eileen K. Metress, *Irish in Michigan*, Discovering the Peoples of Michigan (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2006): 17-18.

<sup>14</sup> I suggest exploring the excellent digital humanities project on the history of Chene Street organized through the Institute for Research on Labor, Employment, and the Economy (IRLEE) and the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan: <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/detroitchenestreet/>.

<sup>15</sup> John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 19.

resulting trend towards ethnic and racial segregation,<sup>16</sup> thanks in part to the parish system, can be seen still today in mappings of the racial distribution across the city.<sup>17</sup> Other social and legal barriers to settlement also shaped the ethnic and racial boundaries of Detroit at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>18</sup> Native-born Detroiters were likely hesitant to live among non-English speaking immigrants, not to mention economic hurdles that prevented working-class immigrants from buying homes in neighborhoods already populated by middle- and upper-class native-born residents. A 1923 article in the *Christian Science Monitor* noted that the “efforts to break up...racial communities” in Detroit “have not met with success” and speculated that “perhaps one of the opposing influences is that of the English-speaking peoples who object to foreign neighbors.”<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Jim Crow laws sanctioned discrimination against black Detroiters in the work force and housing market,<sup>20</sup> contributing to the formation of racially segregated neighborhoods, which were further enforced by social prejudice and racial tensions between both native- and foreign-born white residents and black residents.

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<sup>16</sup> McGreevy describes the history of racialization in the American Catholic church at length in *Parish Boundaries*.

<sup>17</sup> For a visual, I suggest exploring the Detroit area in the “Racial Dot Map” created by the Demographics Research Group at the University of Virginia. <https://demographics.coopercenter.org/racial-dot-map/>. The boundaries of Hamtramck are highly visible, given the majority white and Asian population in Hamtramck, versus the majority black population of the surrounding areas in Detroit.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the economic and legal barriers that black residents faced in the 19th and early 20th century, see Reynolds Farley, Sheldon Danziger, and Harry J. Holzer, “Detroit’s History: Racial, Spatial, and Economic Changes,” in *Detroit Divided* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2000), 14-52.

<sup>19</sup> “Problem of Americanization Challenges the New Detroit: Tendency of Some Races to Congregate in Separate Colonies Is Difficult to Overcome,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 12, 1923: 7.

<sup>20</sup> The black population in Detroit grew from only 1% in 1910 to 4% in 1930, with a large portion of that increase due to black migration to the city from the Southern US during the industrial boom of the 1920s, as Detroit became the ‘Motor City.’ Farley et al., *Detroit Divided*, 29.

The Polish parishes in Detroit are a type of national parish, which were first established in North America in the late 18th century to meet the needs of immigrants who did not speak the language of the majority population. Polish parishes were identified as such since they were created to meet the needs of a growing Polish Catholic population in the city, which required space to worship as well as Polish clergy and Polish-language services.<sup>21</sup> Particularly during the height of Polish immigration, when Poles struggled against the dominance of Irish Catholicism in the U.S. and a strong German Catholic presence in Detroit, creating parishes to serve Poles' particular religious needs was a decisive action which carved out a new space in the religious geography of the city. Like the surrounding neighborhoods, in practice these parishes were not completely exclusive; the description of the dedication ceremony for St. Albertus—the first Polish parish in Detroit—included German, Irish, Belgian, and Czech Catholics.<sup>22</sup> A German Catholic, Paul Giese, assisted in collecting funds for the new church and was chief marshal of the celebratory parade.<sup>23</sup> While Polish parishes catered to the specific needs of Poles, they were also accessible at least to other Catholic groups in the area. This was true for the German parishes that served early Poles, and the French parishes that tended to the needs of earlier Irish immigrants.<sup>24</sup> However, this boundary-crossing was often framed as an inadequate solution, a placeholder until a group could gain its own parish.

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<sup>21</sup> St. Albertus, which has been discussed at some length in this chapter, was a German-language parish for German-speaking Poles in particular, as membership and leadership were Polish. As Polish immigrant demographics shifted from Prussian Poles to Galicians and others, the Polish language was favored in new parishes.

<sup>22</sup> Swastek, *The Oldest Polish Parish in Detroit*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Metress, *Irish in Michigan*, 17-18.

Membership in a national parish extended to all those in the relevant community, although it is not clear-cut how this community is defined. It was necessary, therefore, for immigrants to recognize themselves as “Poles” in order to feel allegiance to a Polish parish. This allows for some mobility between parishes, although loyalty to a particular parish and priest were built up over time. Further, having built their houses near a parish, Poles were more likely to remain a member of that parish, strengthening the geographic aspect of even national churches.

Multiple contemporary scholars have explained the nature of the Polish Catholic parish as the American reincarnation of the Polish *okolica*, roughly meaning “village” or “community.” Whether or not the religious function of the church was significant to Poles in America, its role as the social and geographical center of the Polish Catholic community was indispensable.

The parish church in Poland, while important, never had the social and institutional importance that its immigrant counterpart attained. The Polish-American parish was in the fullest sense a new creation, made with Polish cultural and intellectual components but created to serve an American context.<sup>25</sup>

According to Radzialowski, the parish in America took on new social and institutional roles in America, providing not only spiritual nourishment but also a communal connection between Poles who had not imagined themselves as belonging to the same ethnic community in Poland.

Further, as Wrobel puts it in *Our Way*,

The unique power of the parish in Polish-American life, much greater than even the most conservative peasant communities in Poland, cannot be explained by the predominance of religious interests...the parish is, indeed, simply the old primary community, reorganized and concentrated...In its

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<sup>25</sup> John Radzilowski, “A Social History of Polish-American Catholicism,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* Vol. 27, No. 3 (Catholic University of America Press, 2009): 28.

institutional organization it performs the functions which in Poland are performed by both the parish and the commune.<sup>26</sup>

Here, Wrobel goes even further to diminish the spiritual service of the parish in immigrant life, arguing that the parish served primarily to “[blend] Polish and American patriotism” with “the intense localism of the *okolica*.”<sup>27</sup> Essentially, the Polish idea of the *okolica* is a useful framework for understanding how Polish immigrants created new communities in America based around parishes within a given city. It encapsulates the disjointed way in which Detroit was imagined by Catholics as a collection of self-contained parishes that provided everything from religious services to education, financial and community support, and social activity. Even Poles who were not active in the church were theoretically counted as members of these Polish parishes and were additionally connected to the parish through family ties.

Typically, this resulted not only in communal unity, but also division based on parish alliances, as well as intra-parish factional alliances. In *View From a Polish Ghetto*, Radzialowski explains how “the rivalry and suspicion that often existed between parishes was not unlike that which had characterized villages in Europe.”<sup>28</sup> One anonymous Polish Detroitier even claimed that questions of religious legitimacy arose between parishes; her father was reportedly “never sure that they were *really* Catholic over there” at the neighboring parish.<sup>29</sup> Such skepticism likely grew out of distrust of a certain parish priest, the important local leaders who had more direct impact on the daily lives of Poles than the

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Wrobel, *Our Way: Family, Parish, and Neighborhood in a Polish-American Community* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 34.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>28</sup> Thaddeus Radzialowski, “The View From a Polish Ghetto. Some Observations on the First One Hundred Years in Detroit,” *Ethnicity* 1 no. 2 (July 1974): 132.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Holy See ever could since local priests had immediate connections with the congregation. Priests differed in their styles of management, their ethnic background, and personal histories and reputations in the city. While parish membership was theoretically based upon the geographical boundaries of the parish, personal choice was also a factor in which church, and which priest, Polish immigrants drew allegiances to, leading to competition and rivalry.<sup>30</sup>

Not only the laity, but the clergy as well were responsible for fighting between parishes. Parishes were not only religious communities, but competitive economic entities. Priests relied on parishioners' trust and money to fund the daily functions of the church, including their services. Naturally, threats to priests' authority, parishioners, or land were met with fury. In 1903, in light of recent "Polish troubles," a certain "well-informed Polish citizen" expressed his lack of surprise at the reaction of his "fellow country-men" towards the actions of Polish priests. "These priests work to undermine each other; they speak irreverently and maliciously of one another," he claimed. "The priests should at least practice what they preach in temporal affairs as well as in religious matters."<sup>31</sup> This report does seem to be backed up by evidence of priests gathering factions to themselves and fighting over parish territory. In 1904, for instance, Father Gzella of St. Stanislaus complained that his territory was being "invaded" by men from St. Albertus who were canvassing his parish with the object of erecting a new church there. "I am not opposed to the building of more Polish parishes," he reported to the *Detroit News*, but he insisted that

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<sup>30</sup> An extreme example of this is present in the Kolasinski Affair, in which parishioners of St. Albertus who sympathized with Kolasinski left that parish and followed him to found a new parish.

<sup>31</sup> "Criticism of Polish Priests, declared example of some of them not elevating to the laity," *Detroit News*, November 27, 1903, 1.



one priest had no right to impede on another's territory.<sup>32</sup> Father Gzella's comments reveal the strain of a rapidly growing Polish Catholic community in Detroit, causing competition over space and parish loyalty. This competition reveals the significance of Polish laity in the history of Catholicism in Detroit. Lay allegiances and lay funding were powerful motivations for clergy to sympathize with Polish immigrants and their needs—although there was a limit to this sympathy, as the prevalence of intra-parish conflict illustrates.

The parish was at once a space of inclusion, world-building, and heritage preservation for Poles, as well as an exclusive, contested space where Poles actively fought for their say in church governance, and struggled against programs of Americanization—from English language classes in parochial schools to crusades against particular Polish customs in the church. Polish Catholic laity were not passive victims of assimilation, nor were they willing to back down when they felt they were treated unjustly by the Irish-controlled American Catholic hierarchy. They invested in their communities and in their own spiritual needs by establishing parishes that tangibly altered the sacred and ethnic landscape of the city. They supported their Polish communities through churches that offered opportunities for education, socialization, cultural preservation, financial and material aid, and of course salvation.

### III. "THE HOPED-FOR WORLD"

The Polish Catholic Church in America—as might be said of most religious communities across space and time—served as a spiritual balm for immigrants, addressing the needs of their souls as well as their bodies. As Radzilowski says in *A Social History of the Poles in America*, "Polish Catholic parishes stood in the gap between the hoped-for

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<sup>32</sup> "New church in same parish, Fr Gzella of St. Stanislaus complains his territory may be invaded," *Detroit News*, February 18, 1904, 10.



world of stability and prosperity toward which the immigrants strove and the unstable reality in which they existed.”<sup>33</sup> Polish immigrants, especially in the first decades of their immigration to America, were known for their extreme poverty and poor quality of life in the city. The Polish parish was a sanctuary from urban isolation and an answer to the vicissitudes of life. The brick and mortar of their churches promised stability in an uncertain existence; their soaring arches and bell towers, hope and proximity to the divine.

The opulent, expensive churches that Polish immigrants commissioned to be built as their houses of worship attest to both the significance of parishes to the community as well as their dedication to leaving their mark on the sacred landscape of the city. St. Florian’s in Hamtramck, which was originally dedicated on January 10, 1909 and was replaced with a larger sanctuary in 1928, is an excellent example. Citizens employed the prolific architect Ralph Adams Cram to design the new building. He created a magnificent modified English Gothic structure that won an award from *American Architect* magazine in 1929.<sup>34</sup> Radzilowski eloquently describes what a feat this was, that despite the paucity that many Polish immigrants in the city lived in, they were willing to put their hard-earned cash towards the parish as a necessity.

Former peasants, immigrants on the margins of American society, were commissioning a scion of America’s Anglo-Protestant elite, the architect of Princeton University Chapel, to make a place that would tower over the dirty, noisy, degrading factories where they worked and the cramped houses in which they lived.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Radzilowski, “A Social History of Polish-American Catholicism,” 30.

<sup>34</sup> Kathryn Bishop Eckert, *Buildings of Michigan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 113.

<sup>35</sup> Radzilowski, “A Social History of Polish-American Catholicism,” 36.



Fig. 6: St. Florian's Church, interior, ca. 1940. Courtesy of the Detroit Historical Society.

Radzilowski frames this almost as an act of subversion. Polish immigrants didn't just hire anyone to build their church—they amassed \$500,000<sup>36</sup> to commission a new edifice designed by Cram, a prominent East Coast Episcopalian who represented something of the American ideal. During the same time that Cram was designing St. Florian, a church built for immigrant Catholics in the Midwest, he was serving as supervising architect of Princeton University, the fourth oldest institution of higher education in the country and a major symbol of the American elite. It is perhaps no coincidence that Cram, although a member of the Protestant elite, was himself vocally opposed to the anti-Catholic rhetoric that emerged in response to the growing Catholic presence in America.<sup>37</sup> This was a symbolically charged gesture which demanded that these Polish immigrants be recognized. By building a grand church in their new home, these “former peasants”<sup>38</sup> made a bold statement that they were here to stay. That they would make room for themselves in the city and nation they called home.

The significance of the parish and its going-ons to Polish immigrants is also evident in news stories from the era of increasing Polish immigration to the city. “The great Polish element in this city is at no time more apparent than on some occasion which relates to one of their churches, when they turn out en masse...”<sup>39</sup> one reporter claimed. At the blessing of the bells at St. Casimir's, Polish men and women wore their finest and braved the freezing winter cold for hours in order to see the bishop and to celebrate. “Most of the

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<sup>36</sup> “Will Dedicate New Church,” *Detroit Free Press*, October 20, 1928, 8.

<sup>37</sup> “Cram backs Smith at Bigotry Protest,” *The New York Times*, September 14, 1928, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Not all Polish immigrants in Detroit were from the peasant class, although many immigrants from the 1880s to the beginning of the 20th century were. There were also artisans and businessmen, even aristocrats who had escaped during the Russian Revolution.

<sup>39</sup> “Blessed By The Bishop.: Five New Bells Of St. Casimir's Polish Cathedral,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 20, 1893, 5.

women wore bright shawls. Some of the girls, also, had shawls and others hoods of yarn, which they had made themselves and only donned on a special occasion...Most of this headgear was evidently made at home by a hand not trained to the latest devices of fashion.”<sup>40</sup> In a typical manner for such accounts which sought to carefully distinguish between the various ‘types,’ grouped by race and wealth, in the city, the reporter was careful to distinguish that while the Poles could manage their finest attire for the occasion, it was mostly handmade and out-of-style. While Polish immigrants—much like any other immigrant group—were regarded as foreign, quaint, and sometimes pitiful by outsiders like this reporter, it was in the enclosed community of the parish that Poles could hope to be shown dignity and equality among their peers. Even if many Poles lived humbly in their cramped urban homes, together they had succeeded in building impressive churches that still mark the city’s landscape today.

In most cases, Polish clergy officially aligned with the visions of their parishioners by expressing their intention that their parishes served to preserve Polish faith and tradition in America. When St. Hyacinth’s was first opened a few days before Christmas in 1907, the preacher proudly said, “You built this chapel in 16 days, and that is an omen of what this parish will one day become—one of the most influential bulwarks of the faith in Detroit, in which your religion, your nationality, and your language will be preserved.”<sup>41</sup> The negotiation between Polish laity and clergy over what constituted an ethnically unique Polish Catholic practice and identity in the parish played a significant role in shaping a Polish national identity in America.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> “Hundreds kneel in snowy fields, 1500 worshippers unable to gain admittance to St. Hyacinth’s,” *Detroit News*, December 23, 1907, 2.

Many scholars of Polish American history are quick to attribute the early immigrant parish with a fully formed Polish nationalism. This is in part due to the messianic overtones which became intertwined with Polish history and were carried over to America by Poles who retained a sense of Polish independence despite the nonexistence of a sovereign Polish state between 1795 and 1918. As Reverend Casimir Stec boldly put it, “to the Poles Catholicism and Polish nationalism were synonymous.”<sup>42</sup> This sentiment was enacted through celebrations in Poland and in America which bound Catholic devotion to national identity. One example is the numerous parades memorializing Polish national holidays that ended with a Catholic mass and often some inspiring remarks from the pastor. This has a few implications. For one, it implies that Polish Jews and Protestants either lacked national sentiment or were excluded from the Polish national narrative. Tellingly, in a 1918 study, Thomas and Znaniecki reported that parishioners of St. Michael’s on Chicago’s south side told them that to their understanding “everyone who isn’t a Pole is a Jew.”<sup>43</sup> Jewishness was diametrically opposed to Polishness, and Polishness was intimately tied to Catholicism.

More broadly however, Polish national awareness developed in the church through the push and pull between Polish laity and non-Polish leadership over the definition of Polish Catholicism. Fittingly, Margaret J. Renczewicz prefers to identify late-19th century Catholic laity not as nationalized, but “nationalizing.”<sup>44</sup> The pre-existing framework of the

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<sup>42</sup> Casimir Stec, “The National Orientation of the Poles in the United States,” Thesis (Marquette University, 1946), 45-46.

<sup>43</sup> John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 26.

<sup>44</sup> Margaret J. Renczewicz, *Pray, Pay and Disobey: Conflict and Schism in Catholic America, 1870-1939* (University of Pittsburgh, 2015), 6.





Fig. 7: *Poland in Chains*, ca. pre-WWI. Rich with symbols of Poland's struggles for independence after the partition. Adam Cardinal Maida Library, Orchard Lake Schools.

national parish provided Polish Catholics a tangible space within which their religious, historical, and national education would all take place, nurturing a new understanding of Polishness. Karol Wachtl expresses the fundamental role of the parish as an organizing institution for the development of Polish nationalism in America:

The parish in America is the mother of Polish nationalism (*Polonism*), first after our native country. The parish is the fundamental type of organization of the Poles in America and to this day continues to be the mainstay, the hearth of all social and national activities undertaken by them...To the church, the parish, its clergy, and the Polish parochial school was entrusted the role not only of the spiritual, moral guides, but also teachers of Poland's history, of her greatness, they emerged as the creators of national idealism among the Polish immigrants in America.<sup>45</sup>

The parish, its leadership and pedagogical institutions, nurtured lay Polish participation in national formation and memorialization. While the institution of the church offered structure for nationalist and political activities, it also enforced a greater degree of control over these activities than in other spaces such as social halls. For instance, in 1902, Bishop Foley banned political meetings in Detroit churches due to his concern that Polish parishioners were being taken advantage of by local politicians,<sup>46</sup> asserting his own authority over the social, sacred, and political lives of Polish immigrants, and therefore how Polish laity were allowed to define their ethnic identities and how they interacted with local powers.

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<sup>45</sup> Karol Wachtl, *Polonja w Ameryce: dzieje i dorobek. Słowo wstępne napisał ks. Władysław Zapala*. (Filadelfja: Nakład autora [Polish star Publishing Co., Inc.], 1944), 65. Cited in Stec, "The National Orientation of the Poles," 42...48.

<sup>46</sup> "Bishop Foley Says There Will Be No More Political Meetings Held in His Church Buildings," *Detroit News*, October 13, 1902, 1. The issue arose after a meeting was held by Tom Navin at St. Francis' Polish Catholic church school. Navin was a member of the Michigan Republican state central committee. Navin was urging Polish parishioners to register to vote, although Foley determined he was misleadingly trying to sway the Polish vote in his favor.

In simplest terms, this parochial definition of ‘Polishness’ came to mean the distinctly Polish devotional practices that were not directly shared with other national parishes. A 1977 survey catalogued some of the unique Polish Catholic practices that Hamtramck residents were familiar with. The list included special masses, like a 4:00 AM mass during Advent, as well as the blessing of candles brought to church in honor of the purification of the Virgin Mary and the blessing of Easter foods and flowers.<sup>47</sup> The Christmas midnight *pasterka* (“shepherd’s mass”) is still celebrated at the remaining active Polish churches with *koledy*, Polish carols. Newspapers from the late 19th and early 20th century took note of “unique” and “old world” celebrations taking place in Detroit like showering beans and hickory nuts upon parishioners entering the church on St. Stephan’s Day to commemorate his stoning. “The ceremony is a custom religiously observed in some parts of former Poland, but very seldom seen in this country,” the *Free Press* reported.<sup>48</sup>

In 1968, Carol Williams interviewed a first-generation Polish immigrant, “Mrs. Y,” about her experiences. Mrs. Y told Williams about the parish celebrations in the Polish village she grew up in, explaining how the priest would bless the food before Easter. On Easter day at 5 AM, “there was a procession three times around the church” and a cannon was shot.<sup>49</sup> Corpus Christi was celebrated by a procession of girls dressed in white.<sup>50</sup> She repeated over and over how “beautiful” all the traditions were, and noted how “here,” in

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<sup>47</sup> William J. Szpont, “Hamtramck, Michigan, A Study in Ethnic Geography,” Thesis (Northern Michigan University, 1977), 55-57.

<sup>48</sup> “Shower of beans marks Saints Day, worshippers at St. Josephat’s observe anniversary of St. Stephan in old world way,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 27, 1909, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Carol Williams, “Life History of a Polish Immigrant,” *Polish American Studies* 25, no. 2 (1968): 94.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*



America, “we” (i.e., Poles) try to keep these traditions.<sup>51</sup> All the important holidays were celebrated with feasts of special foods, lovingly prepared by women.

All of these traditions were framed, by their practitioners and by onlookers, as distinctly Polish in juxtaposition to the American Catholicism they were consciously or unconsciously measured against. The acknowledgment and active preservation of traditions perceived by Poles as uniquely Polish was important to how they conceptualized a “Polish Catholicism.” Disputes over the centrality of the Polish language and customs to parishioner’s faith lives revealed a tension between Poles and the governing bodies of the Catholic Church about how Polish their parishes could be while remaining part of a universal church.

Poles in Detroit took seriously their efforts to preserve the Polish language and traditions in the parish. As Rencewicz describes, “by strategically adopting language to highlight ethnic differences, lay Catholics sought to gain support for their causes both within their parishes and from without.”<sup>52</sup> For instance, in March 1906 twenty-seven Polish fraternal societies petitioned Bishop Foley, an Irish Catholic, to address the issue that children were being instructed in the English language in Polish parochial schools. They demanded that religion be taught exclusively in the Polish language. They also petitioned Foley to appoint Polish clergymen to oversee the parochial schools and to install a school board of laymen elected by parishioners. Bishop Foley claimed that he was unaware that religious education was being conducted in English, and that this was the result of an oversight by the priests he had appointed to inspect the schools. Foley affirmed, sympathetically, that “it is impossible to take the little children from Polish homes and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Rencewicz, *Pray, Pay and Disobey: Conflict and Schism in Catholic America, 1870-1939*, 6.

make them understand religion in the English language” and that he was “anxious” to “have things right.”<sup>53</sup>

The role of the Polish language in the parish and parochial schools was just one, very important, component of the balancing act between Americanization efforts and the preservation of heritage in Polish Catholicism. While Poles petitioned (and won) for their children the right to a proper Polish religious education, the Americanization Committee in Detroit worked ardently to establish and fill English-language classes in parish schools for Polish adults, in hopes that they could soon become naturalized. Americanization committees perceived both Poles and Italians as the newest, most rambunctious and particularly difficult group of immigrants to train as proper American citizens,<sup>54</sup> and looked to the church to help them better integrate Poles into American society. Badaczewski summarized this seeming conflict of interests: “in Poland the church was the main source of resistance to foreign domination, while in America the Poles encountered a church leadership dedicated both to centralizing its authority and swift assimilation.”<sup>55</sup> For instance, in 1906 Bishop Foley abolished the traditional Polish use of “Easter confession tickets”<sup>56</sup> in his parishes in an attempt to curb the potentially “dangerous” or subversive

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<sup>53</sup> “Object to English, Poles want religion taught in Polish language,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 13, 1906, 5.

<sup>54</sup> “Detroit’s immigrants are now primarily of the New Immigration, namely Poles and Italians, whose standards of living are lower than the Germans and English, and whose Americanization will require more united community effort.” Raymond E. Cole, “The Immigrant in Detroit,” May 1915, 2, Americanization Committee of Detroit Correspondence, Minutes, Reports, and Misc. Material, Undated, Americanization Committee of Detroit papers, 1914-1931, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>55</sup> Dennis Badaczewski, *Poles in Michigan*, Discovering the Peoples of Michigan (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 27.

<sup>56</sup> “During the Easter season the priests issue confession cards, on which are printed the words: Signum Communionis Paschalis. Each card is numbered, and a record is kept of the numbers and names of those to whom cards are issued. These cards are returned by penitents in the confessional and the names are cancelled. Thus a record is kept of all those who have satisfied their Paschal obligation.” George Herbermann, et. al., “Poles in the United States” in *The*

practice and aid in “Americanizing” the Poles. In Polish parishes, priests would traditionally issue confession cards to parishioners, which were then returned by penitents in the confessional to keep a record of those who satisfied their Paschal obligation to confess. In an American context, influenced by Protestant preconceptions about Catholic indulgences,<sup>57</sup> the practice was misconstrued as potentially unorthodox. One priest complained to the *Detroit News* that Foley was trying to Americanize the Polish people “too quickly” by attacking Easter confession cards as impermissible and un-American. This comment reveals that “Americanization” was an undisputed goal in the minds of American clergy for the Polish people, but also that such a process required moderation and patience—lest frustrated Poles leave the church altogether, taking their tithes with them.

#### IV. “TROUBLE WITH THE POLES”

From the start, Americanization committees regarded Poles as a ‘difficult’ group of immigrants to deal with.<sup>58</sup> They were not privileged to speak and worship in English as their native language like Irish Catholics. By the time Poles arrived in Detroit in great numbers, German Catholics had long been established, and did not stir up the same sort of trouble that Poles seemed to pose to the Archdiocese. Time and time again, Poles across the country argued with Catholic authorities over their rights: their children’s right to

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*Catholic Encyclopedia: an international work of reference on the constitution, doctrine, discipline, and history of the Catholic church*, vol. 2 (New York: Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1913).

<sup>57</sup> Full or partial remission of the punishment of sin granted to Catholics who performed various types of penance. During the Crusades that began in the 11th century, financial contributions to the church became an important form of penance, leading to controversy over the practice which was famously denounced by Martin Luther in the 16th century.

<sup>58</sup> As previously mentioned, Raymond E. Cole, “The Immigrant in Detroit,” May 1915, 2, Americanization Committee of Detroit papers, 1914-1931.

catechism in the Polish language; their right to sympathetic Polish clergy; their right to lay governance of the parishes that they had built and nurtured. While such disputes were not exclusive to Polish immigrants, they were particularly prevalent among Poles. As Leslie Tentler points out in her coverage of the Kolasinski Affair,

Polish parishes in the late nineteenth century were more prone than others to serious conflict and their conflict more likely to erupt into violence. Most major centers of Polish settlement experienced at least one disruptive parish dispute in the 1880s and 1890s...In a number of these conflicts women were reported to have been remarkably violent participants.<sup>59</sup>

As Tentler states, the prominent role that lay women held in the parish<sup>60</sup> as the most frequent churchgoers and those responsible for the religious upbringing of children extended to participation in these conflicts. While women were not often identified as the leaders and organizers of parish factions, they were ardent participants in the struggle for autonomy in the church.

Most scholars and chroniclers of the time attributed this “dissension and struggle of clique against clique, parish against parish, and parishioners against clergy” at least partially to “Old World regional differences.”<sup>61</sup> However, I argue that most recorded parish disputes in Detroit arose as a result of Poles struggling for lay representation and some semblance of democratic governance in the parishes that they had helped build. Poles in Detroit participated in a 19th century American tradition of trusteeism, a system of parish administration, Protestant in origin, which invested lay trustees or churchwardens with

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<sup>59</sup> Tentler, “Who Is the Church?,” 244.

<sup>60</sup> For an excellent history of the Archdiocese of Detroit with particular attention to the participation of lay Catholic women, see Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Seasons of Grace: A History of the Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit* (Wayne State University Press, 2018), especially the chapter “Religion and Parish Life: The Experience of the Laity,” 56-82.

<sup>61</sup> Radzialowski, *Polish Americans In the Detroit Area*, 11.

wide control of parish temporalities.<sup>62</sup> Within the parish, working-class Poles gained and avidly protected a degree of self-governance and autonomy that was often denied to them in the urban factories they worked in. Polish women asserted their authority in the parish politics that affected their families and daily lives in a time when they had no right to participate in American democracy at large.

Many, if not most, church conflicts began as a dispute over the appointment of a clergy member who was either lacking in sufficient knowledge of the Polish language and culture or who was too domineering in parish governance. As “heads of communities,” “intermediaries” with the larger society, and “symbols” of a parish’s collective identity, the choice of parish priest could make or break a church.<sup>63</sup> In return for their financial and social contributions, Poles expected the Archdiocese of Detroit to meet their needs by providing priests that were cooperative and sympathetic. They demanded fair representation of laity in church decisions, including over their appointed religious leadership. This reading of parish conflicts illuminates the Kolasinski Affair, mentioned earlier as the first and most memorable conflict in Detroit *Polonia*, as a struggle for greater lay control of the church government. When Fr. Kolasinski was removed by the Archdiocese and replaced with Fr. Joseph Dombrowski, parishioners (whose petitions had been ignored) began a riot which resulted in the tragic killing of a 24-year-old. Later, dissenters went on to follow the disgraced Fr. Kolasinski in establishing an entirely new parish, Sweetest Heart of Mary, seeking justice for themselves and peace in the community.

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<sup>62</sup> For more on trusteeism in the Catholic Church, see Patrick Carey, “The Laity’s Understanding of the Trustee System, 1785-1855,” *The Catholic Historical Review* Vol. 64, No. 3 (July, 1978): 357-376.

<sup>63</sup> Wrobel, *Our Way*, 88.

At St. Casimir's in 1903, a dispute over the appointment of Rev. Gutowski and the failure of his assistant Fr. Conus to aid in his disposal led to more violence between clergy and congregation. According to the *Detroit Evening News*, it was customary in large parishes for the pastor "to appoint a committee to assist in the conduct of the temporal affairs of the congregation" but that in January of that year the "antagonistic faction" who opposed Gutowski had "named a committee composed of its own members and insisted on being recognized."<sup>64</sup> It would appear, therefore, that this was a decisive attempt at gaining power over parish activities and finances; the story in the *Detroit Times* recounted an increasingly violent struggle between the assistant priest and his parishioners specifically over collection money and parish records, illustrating the nature of the disagreement. Poles, having donated their money to the church, expected a say in how it was run, and when that was threatened, then they were not being fairly represented by their clergy and had a right to rebel.

Again, Polish laity asserted their role in parish governance in the summer of 1905, when St. Hedwig's on the West side of Detroit was rocked by a controversy which resulted in the excommunication of five congregants for their attempt to replace their priest, Fr. Mueller, at any cost. In their frustration with Fr. Mueller as an incompetent leader, the church trustees took all financial records and responsibilities away from Fr. Mueller and into their own custody and petitioned Bishop Foley to replace him.<sup>65</sup> The grievances of the church committee towards Fr. Mueller included his alleged issuing of a contract for the

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<sup>64</sup> "Fr. Anthony Conus hit with a chair, Asst Priest of St. Casimir's knocked down in the church," *Detroit News*, November 16, 1903, 1.

<sup>65</sup> "St. Hedwig Poles Scrapping Again: Circulating A Petition To Have Pastor Removed. Bishop Foley To Be Asked To Displace Fr. John Mueller," *Detroit Free Press*, April 7, 1904, 5; "Will close church, 5 members of St. Hedwig's to be excommunicated," *Detroit Free Press*, June 15, 1905, 5.

building of the church in violation of the committee's wishes, his keeping parish books in English rather than Polish, referring to some parishioners as "pigs" and "hogs" in a sermon, and his refusal to read the names of contributors to the church fund.<sup>66</sup> The committee accused Fr. Mueller of ignoring his parishioner's intentions, and of being insensitive to their needs. The *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News* both alleged that Fr. Mueller being a Prussian Pole had caused discontent among his Galician parishioners,<sup>67</sup> but no such issues were raised by the leaders of the anti-Mueller faction.

What is clear, however, is the dissidents' concern over church governance and the place that laity has within it. Unlike in the earlier Kolasinski Affair, they decided to deal with the matter non-violently. Members of the anti-Mueller faction posted notices on telephone poles calling a meeting of parishioners over the dispute.<sup>68</sup> They discussed taking their matter to court to decide whether Bishop Foley or Fr. Mueller had the right to take the church books from them. "[The books] belong to the parish and not to the pastor or the bishop,"<sup>69</sup> claimed the leaders of the faction, distinguishing between the rights of the parish (composed of laity) and its religious leadership in temporal affairs.

Allegedly, six hundred members of St. Hedwig's gathered in a hall "not far from the church" and voted unanimously to stand by the rebelling trustees. For refusing to hand

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<sup>66</sup> "Priest's Home in a Room of School: Fr Mueller Forced Through Dissension in His Flock to Abandon His Private Residence," *Detroit News*, Night Edition, May 24, 1905, 4.

<sup>67</sup> The news articles attributed the hard feelings to the fact that Mueller was a Prussian Pole, and many of his parishioners were Galician. "Bishop To Settle It: Will End Trouble In St. Hedwig's Parish," *Detroit Free Press*, May 24, 1905, 11. Also see "Bishop's edict stuns parish," *Detroit News*, June 13, 1905, 5.

<sup>68</sup> "Never Will Give In: So Declare Anti-Mueller Faction Of St. Hedwig's May Appoint New Trustees Committeemen Refused To Hand Over Church Books To Sheriff's Deputies-interest Centers On Today's. Parish Meeting-there Is Talk Of Taking Their Quarrel Into Court," *Detroit Free Press*, June 18, 1905, 5.

<sup>69</sup> "St Hedwig's Church under police guard, Bishop Foley's order excommunicating committeemen excites riot," *Detroit News*, June 16, 1905, 1.

over the parish books, the trustees of St. Hedwig's were excommunicated by Bishop Foley.<sup>70</sup> In the end, the controversy at Hedwig's was suppressed under threat of hellfire and gunfire, but not before the parishioners had their complaints made known to the bishop, and effectively to the entire city, who watched the conflict unfold in Detroit newspapers over the course of several months. The dissenting parishioners defined their role as laity within the church and defended their right to a competent, sympathetic, Polish priest who would allow laity the degree of influence and acknowledgment they felt they were due. While losing their communion with the universal Catholic church, the leaders of the anti-Mueller faction exercised community organization that was informed by a democratic strain in American Catholicism, and perhaps even by the labor movements that were sprouting up in the city.<sup>71</sup>

Over time, it seems that Foley grew more impatient with the Poles and their demands, meeting their complaints with threats. In March 1909, another faction had formed, this time in St. Florian's church against Fr. Zmijewski. "All we ask is a priest that we like and who likes us," one parishioner reported.<sup>72</sup> Part of the issue was the high cost of building the church, which parishioners had not been given a say in and were expected to help pay off in the church collections. Men boycotted the church, but their confrontation spurred police to guard the next Sunday mass. As for Foley, he asserted his power (he had already excommunicated Poles for other factional disturbances, remember) by declaring: "I am bishop of all Catholic churches in this diocese. I take my orders from a superior. You

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<sup>70</sup> "St Hedwig's men show 1st sign of surrender," *Detroit News*, June 18, 1905, 1.

<sup>71</sup> During the economic depression of the 1890s, "impoverished Polish workers played a key role in the riots over unreasonably high fares against the Detroit City Railway Company" and "on several occasions gangs of unemployed Polish workers attacked" other workers, supervisors, and sheriff's deputies. Radzialowski, *Polish Americans In the Detroit Area*, 20.

<sup>72</sup> "Poles Declare They Won't Quit," *Detroit Free Press*, March 18, 1909, 12.





Fig. 8: Bishop Foley, ca. 1889. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

must take yours from me. I must be obeyed and should any person or persons disobey my warning I will have to keep them out of this church for all time to come.”<sup>73</sup>

By regulating their access to the church—the physical parish to which they belonged, as well as to the community, the *okolica*, formed by its invisible boundaries—

<sup>73</sup> “Bishop says he won’t have war; tell Hamtramck Poles further trouble will mean strict action by him,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 22, 1909, 1.

the Irish bishop asserted his leverage over the Polish laity and kept their demands in check. This conflict, too, was resolved uneasily with the congregants submitting to the pressure of Bishop Foley and police presence. Given the blatant dismissal with which some Polish parishioners spoke of Foley and church leadership in general as a result of these confrontations, and the dismissal with which Poles' complaints were met, it comes as no surprise when a mass meeting of "all the Polish residents of the city" was held in 1912 in Polonia Hall to petition Rome in an attempt to obtain Polish bishops to represent them as well as to implement reforms in Polish parochial schools.<sup>74</sup> In 1924 they would get their wish, when a Polish bishop, Joseph Casimir Plagens,<sup>75</sup> was elected to serve the Detroit Diocese for the first time.

## V. CONCLUSION

The various factions, dissensions, and conflicts in Polish Catholic parishes at the turn of the century were driven by competition over land, power, and accessibility to resources in the Detroit diocese. These conditions were in many ways inherent to the parish system, put under strain by the influx of Catholic immigrants to a single city. Having funded and built their local parishes, lay Polish immigrants (who had little to spare) perceived that they had the right to leverage some power over parish governance. This democratic model of trusteeism that lay people at St. Casimir's, St. Hedwig's, St. Florian's and others championed led to conflict with the Detroit Archdiocese that sought to use the parish as a vehicle for integrating Poles into American Catholicism, which was at odds with certain Polish devotional practices and nationalist activities. Although the

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<sup>74</sup> "Det Poles to plead for Bishop, will hold mass meeting Sunday as petition to Rome," *Detroit News*, February 2, 1912, 11.

<sup>75</sup> Edward Kulik, "Polish-American Roman Catholic Bishops," *Polish American Studies* 24, no. 1 (1967): 27.

Archdiocese was officially very sympathetic towards their needs for Polish language services and education, unique traditions, and Polish clergy, the numerous protests and riots spurred on by Polish immigrants who demanded the degree of autonomy that they felt they had earned only resulted in harsher retaliation from Bishop Foley. Nonetheless, the parish remained a crucial center of community and of education in Polish and American national history, language, and identity, albeit under the increasing surveillance of the Archbishop.

The unique ethnic parish celebrations and the sometimes violent conflicts that occurred in Polish Catholic parishes drew attention from outsiders to the Polish immigrant community, leading to assumptions that Poles were “troublesome”—both for their struggles against American Catholic leadership and for stubbornly retaining traditional Polish religious customs that did not conform to the ‘universality’ of American Catholicism. For the most part, however, Polish ethnic parishes were fairly exclusive, linguistically and ethnically, allowing Polish laity to preserve some autonomy over parochial management and practice away from the prying eyes of other religious and ethnic communities in Detroit. On the other hand, public religious celebrations, both parish-based and not, invited a greater degree of observance and interaction with other groups. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Polish Catholic religious and pseudo-religious parades, pageants, and processions through the city offered Polish laity an opportunity to present themselves and their national identity in particular ways, both emphasizing their uniqueness while also advertising the strength and piety of their communities and parishes.

## CHAPTER 2: THE STREETS



Fig. 9: *Polish Funeral Procession, Detroit, ca. 1900/1910.* Bentley Historical Collection, University of Michigan.

## I. “SPATIALLY INTEGRATED, SOCIALLY SEGREGATED”<sup>1</sup>: THE STREETS OF DETROIT POLONIA

In the context of the Polish parish, religion became the battleground upon which clergy and laity struggled to define Polish Catholicism within the ‘universal’ church. New parish boundaries shaped the growing city of Detroit and later Hamtramck, its social and racial borders. Public rituals such as religious parades and processions, pageants, and funerals, also helped delineate the social boundaries of the Polish Catholic community. These practices straddle the line between public and private devotion, being exclusive but highly visible in the city, often moving through the streets for anyone to see. Polish laity organized and funded these public rituals, which celebrated particular holidays or community members, while also articulating Polish immigrants’ religious and national identity to outsiders—projecting an image of Christian piety, fashionability, and national pride.

This public visibility acted as a two-way street, at once causing Poles to sometimes alter their practices for public (non-Polish and often non-Catholic) consumption, as well as impacting the sacred and social landscape of the city as Poles stepped beyond the enclosed spaces of church and home and laid claim to the surrounding urban streets, which were then as now both religiously and racially diverse.

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Standing in the Hamtramck Historical Museum—in a building that was generously donated in 2013 by two prominent and anonymous Jewish families to support the growing museum, and which once housed Wisper and Schwartz, Hamtramck’s first department

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<sup>1</sup> Dominic A. Pacyga, “To Live Amongst Others: Poles and Their Neighbors in Industrial Chicago, 1865-1930,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16, no. 1 (1996): 56.

store<sup>2</sup>—one of the first things that visitors notice is the enormous colorful mural that wraps around the room. Entitled “Coming to Hamtramck,” each scene in the mural by Dennis Orłowski depicts a different ethnic origin of Hamtramck including American Indians, French, Germans, Polish, African Americans, Albanians, Yemeni, Bosnians and Bangladeshi. It weaves together past and present, overlaying founders and firsts with portraits of citizens who still call Hamtramck home. Bustling 19th century skirts and various traditional costumes, elegantly embroidered, brush up against mid-century tailored suits and contemporary jeans and tees. Delis, churches, mosques, grocery stores and factories crowd the background, many of which still operate in the city, and many of which have been transformed or destroyed by time.

While this mural is an homage to Hamtramck in particular, the diversity it represents is applicable to Detroit and in particular the East Side of Woodward Avenue (where Hamtramck is located, a city within the city just North of historic Poletown). In 1896, the *Detroit News* featured an ethnographic account of the “Polish quarter” and of the East Side. The author described with curiosity and fascination the district that had become, in the second half of the 19th century, increasingly populated by foreign-born immigrants:

[The East Side] has the churches, the synagogues, the breweries and the beer gardens that for elegance and desirability cannot be excelled in any other portion of the city...[It] includes nearly all the foreign populations of the city, the greater majority of the Poles, the Germans, the Platt-Deutch of Russel and Chene streets, and the remnants of the old French population that has not been absorbed by the native born element. The colored people and the Russian Jews all have colonies upon the east side.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jewish Historical Society of Michigan, *Michigan Jewish History* vol. 53 (Fall 2013): 71.

<sup>3</sup> “The East Side Has an Environment All Its Own,” *Detroit News*, September 6, 1896, 13.



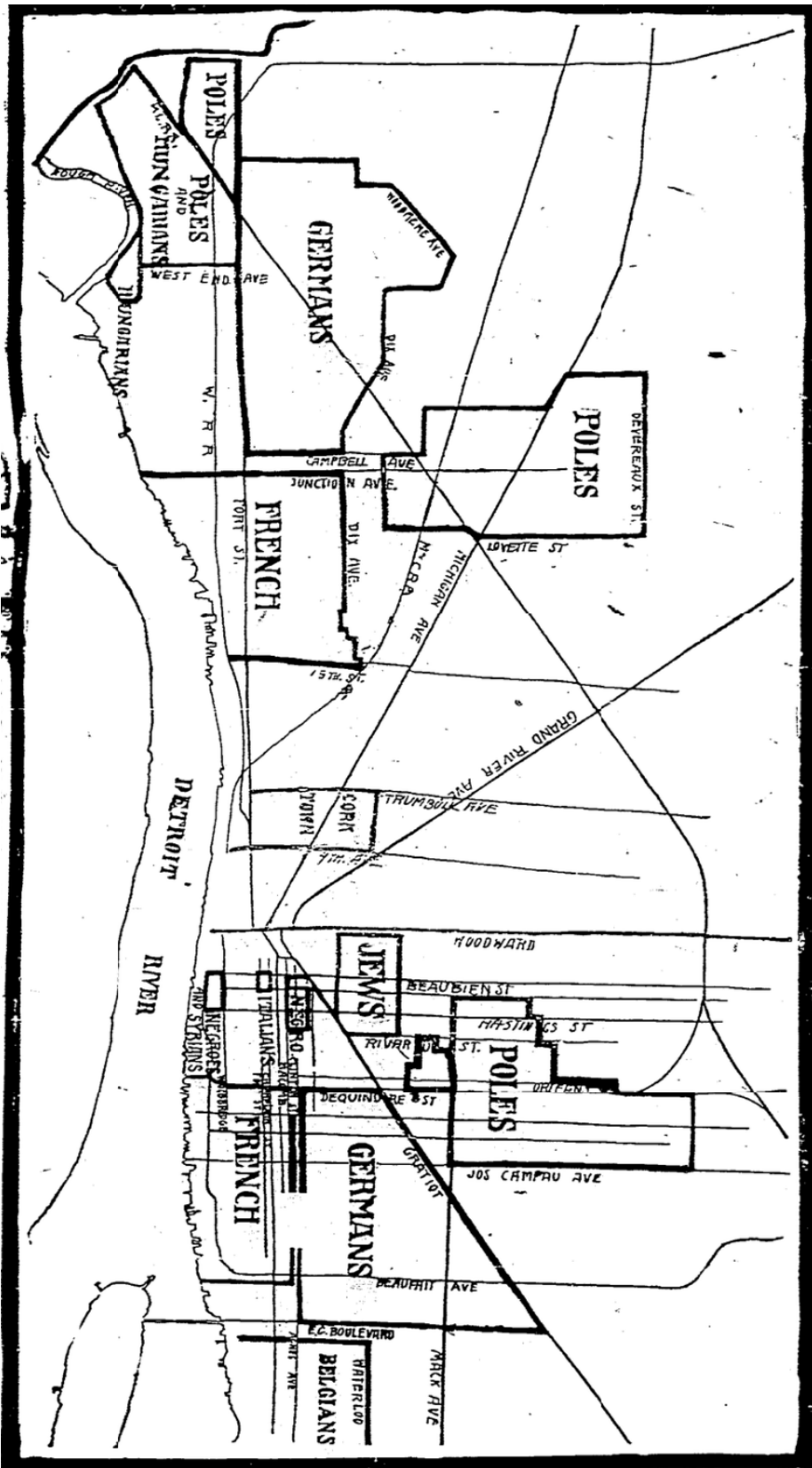
Here, the author distinguished between the West Side of Detroit and the allegedly more interesting East Side,<sup>4</sup> where they described a commingling of ethnicities, religions, and cultures that is reflected in the Hamtramck mural. While the author perceives these various groups as living in close proximity to one another, they also refer to the ethnic groups as individual “colonies”—a phrase that paints immigrants as foreign invaders who intend to remain isolated from the rest of the city. Most interestingly, the author groups together “colored people” with the other “foreign populations,” which speaks to the assumption that perhaps all it takes to be ‘foreign’ in the city is to not be a *white* American-born English-speaking person.

To some extent, there was (and still is) a degree of geographic segregation between ethnic groups in the city. A 1904 report of Detroit’s demographics even attempted to map out the settlements of foreign-born residents, which reflects the map of various ethnic churches in the city. Besides the logic behind wanting to settle in proximity to those who speak the same language and share a similar cultural background, the role of religious institutions in family life and cultural preservation also contributes to the geography of a city. Because of the parish system, it is unsurprising that adherents to any particular national church would build their neighborhoods around their places of worship—not to mention a similar pattern around synagogues. Despite the clearly defined boundaries drawn into this map of Detroit, these barriers separating ethnic communities were not concrete. Especially on the East side of Detroit, neighborhoods in the 19th century were shared between Poles and Hungarians, Russians, Germans, Italians, and American-born citizens

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<sup>4</sup> These are not true cardinal West and East, but more accurately the Northwest and Southeastern sides of Woodward Ave (see the next image, where the layout of Detroit has been tilted and cropped to make the East/West designation more obvious).

Fig. 10: "Map showing the sections of the city in which Detroit's foreign-born population live," *Detroit News*, August 21, 1904.





black and white, wealthy and working-class.<sup>5</sup> It wasn't until the Great Migration, beginning around the 1920s, that black residents were forced to settle in increasingly densely populated black neighborhoods like Black Bottom and Paradise Valley.<sup>6</sup> White homeowners (including working-class Poles) treated the influx of black migrants as a threat, refusing them housing outside of predominantly black neighborhoods and threatening to use violent force against black residents who did not comply.<sup>7</sup>

Describing the social and geographic boundaries that Poles shared with their neighbors in industrial Chicago, Dominic Pacyga identified immigrant populations as “spatially integrated, but socially segregated” during the first two generations of life in the United States.<sup>8</sup> This rings true for Poles in Detroit, who lived and worked alongside many other groups, but cultivated more exclusive spaces, such as their ethnic parishes and the *Dom Polski* (“Polish Houses”),<sup>9</sup> Polish social clubs that included meeting halls, reading rooms, gymnasiums, and auditoriums designed to host the activities of the Polish community.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, certain public religious rituals that Polish Catholics practiced

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<sup>5</sup> See the Chene Street History Project, organized through the Institute for Research on Labor, Employment, and the Economy (IRLEE) and the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan, for an in-depth look at just one of the streets that many Polish Catholic immigrants settled on in the early 20th century, also occupied by Polish and Russian Jews, African Americans, and various other European immigrants: <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/detroitchenestreet/>.

<sup>6</sup> Although not named as such on the 1904 ethnic mapping of Detroit, Black Bottom corresponds roughly to the southernmost area marked as a “negro” settlement, bordering the Detroit River. Paradise Valley grew to the north of this neighborhood, eventually bordered on the north by Hamtramck. In 1904, when this map was created, these neighborhoods were not as developed, or nearly as predominantly black, as they would become over the next three decades of black migration from the south.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas J. Surgue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 23-24.

<sup>8</sup> Pacyga, “To Live Amongst Others,” 56.

<sup>9</sup> The most popular and well-known *Dom Polski* in Detroit was erected in the West side Polish district in 1917 at 3426 Junction Street. There was at least one earlier *Dom Polski* on the East side.

<sup>10</sup> “Cornerstone of Polish Home Laid,” *Detroit News*, December 9, 1912, 11.

crossed into and connected various public spaces in the city and were highly visible to people within and without their ethnic communities. It was in the public sphere that the Polish American community defined itself in opposition to and by the exclusion of other groups.

Unlike parish-based activities, religious rituals that move throughout the city, as opposed to being confined by parish walls, are particularly potent boundary-markers. As Sciorra writes, “cities’ heterogeneity and density offer fertile conditions for myriad forms of cultural and religious life to emerge...The expressive cultures of religious individuals and communities are formidable in the imagining and shaping of cityscapes.”<sup>11</sup> In the early decades of Detroit Polonia, leading up to World War I, religious and quasi-religious processions and parades were for many important vehicles for articulating and communicating Polish Catholic tradition within a new urban context. Polish national and religious processions tied together parishes, homes, social spaces, and specific neighborhood streets, therefore weaving these locations into a cohesive web of Polish immigrant life within the pluralistic city. At the same time, the public nature of these processions invited scrutiny from outsiders to the community, some of whom regarded them as alien and ‘Old World’ customs. This pressure to modernize and Americanize worried many in the community who feared that their children would abandon the traditions in an attempt to gain respectability in America.<sup>12</sup> In response to this pressure, parades and processions became opportunities for Polish immigrants to combat negative

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Sciorra, *Built with Faith: Italian American Imagination and Catholic Material Culture in New York City* (Chicago: The University of Tennessee Press, 2015), xvii.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Hipolit Wagner’s concern (quoted in Introduction) that Polish immigrants forget their language and religion in America.

perceptions of themselves and to establish respectability through commercial displays and by emphasizing a shared Christian narrative.

In this chapter I will discuss some of the important public rituals in the lives of Polish Catholics between 1870 and 1939. Many events in the social and religious lives of Polish Catholics coincide with the liturgical calendar—annual feast days, Corpus Christi in summer, Christmas and Easter, and a variety of other special days that were celebrated with mass, symbolic clothing, the preparation of food, and sometimes processions. Alongside these were celebrations of national holidays, both Polish and American—the Fourth of July, the Battle of Vienna, and the celebration of Poland’s May Constitution to name a few—which, while not explicitly religious, often incorporated religious motifs and were connected to local parishes. Besides these regular processions and parades, church dedications,<sup>13</sup> the installations of new priests, and funeral processions<sup>14</sup> were also important public episodes in the religious life of the Polish community.

## II. PUBLIC RELIGIOUS PROCESSION AND PERFORMANCE

The liturgical calendar shaped the typical rhythm of religious life for practicing Polish Catholics—any practicing Catholics for that matter—yet the way that Catholic holy days were celebrated differed between communities and changed over time. Polish

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<sup>13</sup> Church dedications were sometimes celebrated with processions like the ones discussed in this chapter. See for example “St. Casimir’s Church: Programme of the Procession for Sunday’s Dedicatory Exercises,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 28, 1883, 1.

<sup>14</sup> The funerals of important figures drew in thousands of citizens, who visited the homes of the deceased and joined the procession from the church to the cemetery. Particularly well-attended funerary processions were those that celebrated the passing of a parish priest, but the death of a beloved community member also attracted crowds of Polish mourners through the streets. In 1909, the funeral for the beloved midwife Anna Lukasek, “kumotrze” of the East side Polish district, was allegedly attended by 10,000 people, many of them women who she had helped through childbirth. “Mourners Many At Her Funeral: Thousands of East Side Polish Men and Women Follow Bier of Mrs. Anna Lukasek,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 4, 1909, 5.

immigrants practiced a variety of unique devotional traditions, which attracted curious attention when these practices exceeded the church walls, such as special processions on feast days. The liturgical year begins with the Christmas season, which itself aligns roughly with the secular celebration of New Year. For Polish immigrants the Christmas celebration began with fasting on Christmas Eve followed by an evening supper, the *Wigilia* (Vigil) feast held before midnight mass or *Pasterka* (Shepard's Mass).<sup>15</sup> Beyond these common traditions, depending on the part of Poland that immigrants came from, there were a range of possibilities for celebrating the birth of Christ. On Christmas Eve, for instance, some Polish children were visited by the gift-giver *Gwiazdor* or by the Christ Child rather than Saint Nicholas or Santa Claus.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the many specifically Catholic and specifically Polish Christmas traditions that immigrants held, by the late 19th century Christmas in America was already becoming a commercialized holiday and was recognized as relatively common ground by Christians from all backgrounds. The Christmas traditions observed by the first few generations of Polish immigrants were frequently compared by local onlookers to other immigrant traditions as well as to the typical "American" celebrations of the holiday. Detroit newspaper articles described the visitation of "Gwizt"<sup>17</sup> to Polish homes in Detroit as compared to Christmas traditions in the households of Armenians, Italians, Russians, French, Swedes, and other immigrant groups.<sup>18</sup> In doing so, outsiders to all these traditions,

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<sup>15</sup> These Christmas traditions are still held by self-identified Polish residents in Hamtramck and Detroit.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Strybel, "DID YOU KNOW?" *Polish American Journal* (Buffalo, N.Y.: National Ed., 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Likely a botched reference to *Gwiazdor*, mentioned earlier.

<sup>18</sup> John Greusel, "Christmas in the Foreign Quarters: How People From Other Lands Celebrate The Great Yule-tide In Detroit," *Detroit Free Press*, December 23, 1906, C7.

looking on, stressed the ethnic uniqueness while acknowledging the easily accessible and acceptable shared Christian holiday of Christmas. Peculiarities practiced by different ethnic groups became public domain and popular entertainment in the so-called “‘melting pot’ days”<sup>19</sup> of the turn of the century, through newspaper stories like these and through similar ‘multicultural’ Christmas pageants.

Poles themselves performed their religious traditions for public consumption through Christmas pageants that emphasized national distinction. In 1919, secretaries of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) teamed up with foreign-born women in Detroit to publicly present their “old-world manners” of celebrating Christmas. A miracle play (a reenactment of biblical or popular miracles which dates back to the Middle Ages) was put on by twenty Polish children. Likewise, Hungarians, Armenians, Italians, and “Czech-Slovaks” performed their own ‘unique’ Christmas practices and native-language carols.<sup>20</sup>

The YWCA, founded by the philanthropist and Protestant missionary Mary Jane Kinnaird in 1855 to offer housing, education and support to women, is itself a non-Catholic organization, unlike the immigrants included in this pageant. This should give us pause concerning the motivation behind putting together such an event. Part of the YWCA’s reason for highlighting immigrant culture in Detroit with an emphasis on family traditions—mothers and children, especially—may have been the organization’s then-recent shift away from their earlier objective to insulate women, morally and socially, from urban life. During the 1910 World YWCA conference in Berlin, thousands of working

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<sup>19</sup> “Problem of Americanization Challenges the New Detroit: Tendency of Some Races to Congregate in Separate Colonies Is Difficult to Overcome,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 12, 1923: 7.

<sup>20</sup> “Foreign born to present old Christmas customs,” *Detroit News*, December 14, 1919, 14.

women from the United States pleaded for recognition, leading the organization to focus on the social and industrial problems that women were facing.<sup>21</sup> A Christmas pageant showcasing the ethnic uniqueness of immigrant traditions for the public was one way to find common ground with working-class Catholic women over a shared, implicitly Eurocentric form of Christianity while also encouraging a Protestant ideal of family life. The sort of publicity surrounding events like these both undermined immigrants as ‘Old World’ and worked to fit their myriad of foreign traditions into the schema of American Christianity and respectability.

In some cases, however, Polish Catholics resisted the attention that their more public religious traditions were receiving. The inherent visibility of processional rituals within the context of a heterogeneous population like Detroit held consequences for the format of the rituals over time, perhaps in response to the pressure of a Protestant American impulse to privatize religious activities.<sup>22</sup> As early as 1911, congregations were abandoning the custom of leading large processions through the Polish districts and around churches to celebrate the Feast of the Three Kings, held on January 6th, “because of the attention that it attracts in the large cities.” To avoid this attention, congregants began to confine their procession to the interior of the church,<sup>23</sup> retaining the movement so important to the

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<sup>21</sup> See Dorothea Browder, “A ‘Christian Solution of the Labor Situation’: How Workingwomen Reshaped the YWCA’s Religious Mission and Politics,” *Journal of Women’s History* 19, no. 2 (2007): 85–110.

<sup>22</sup> The concept of religious privatization is complicated and carries a multitude of meanings. In this case, I am referring to a general Protestant resistance to overt materialism and ritualism in religious practice, two aspects that are very present in a celebration like a Catholic feast procession. Stephen Hart outlines some of the many meanings of privatization in American religious culture in “Privatization in American Religion and Society,” *Sociological Analysis* 47, no. 4 (1987): 319-34.

<sup>23</sup> “Feast of the Three Kings Celebrated by Detroit Poles on January 6th,” *Detroit News*, January 1, 1911, 3.

ritual's meaning (namely, the journey of the Magi) while enforcing a degree of privacy from the prying eyes of the public. Anxiety over how these devotional traditions were viewed by outsiders was also reflected in a statement from an anonymous Pole, interviewed by the *Detroit News* in the same article which explained the end of at least some religious processions in Detroit. He complained that "Americans don't understand" their customs and that Polish children would be laughed at for their traditions until they abandoned them altogether.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the scaling-down of certain practices, other aspects of the same feast day retained their transient nature. Each year, the Polish boys in the neighborhood built a crib,<sup>25</sup> which was decorated and made home to a figure of the Christ child and then carried from house to house accompanied by Polish carols. To my knowledge this is no longer practiced in Hamtramck. But at the turn of the 20th century, this ritual strengthened the social bonds of the Polish community. By being able to recognize welcoming Polish homes and decide where to carry the Christ child in His crib, the carolers attested to their deep knowledge of the social landscape of the city. Even in a "Polish district," not every resident was a Pole and not every Pole was a Catholic, nor even a Christian. But through their procession from one Polish Catholic home to the next, these carolers ritually mapped out the social network of Poles who were bound by their Catholic faith, illustrating how "ceremonial display is a dramatic way of delineating the edges of community domain."<sup>26</sup> It is also a possibility that practices like these also excluded, passed over, certain Polish Catholic homes as a form of social regulation. By determining their route, the carolers could have decided who in the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Sciorra, *Built with Faith*, 174.

neighborhood and in their religious-ethnic community was *worthy* for Christ to symbolically enter their homes.

While many public rituals solidified communal bonds, participation was also limited by, often gendered, divisions of labor and availability. For instance, Easter was a highly mobile celebration, given the expectation that practicing Polish Catholics attended mass nearly every day during Holy Week and usually multiple times a day, trekking back and forth between their homes and churches. However, women and children were particularly present, since working men often did not have the opportunity to participate in celebrations during the day, particularly the sort of weekday masses and processions that occurred during important holidays like Easter. One exception was the evening of Holy Saturday, when it was Polish custom to bring some of the food they would eat after mass on Easter day to the church to be blessed. The streets in Polish neighborhoods would become crowded with entire “families bound on the same mission,” neighbors and friends greeting one another in Polish, laughing and jostling.<sup>27</sup>

On Easter Sunday, the “gaiety” of the celebration was evident in Polish parishioners’ attire: many women “discarded their scarfs for hats, on which flutter[ed] a few flowers.” And although not every Polish Catholic in the neighborhood could afford a new dress, hat, or white shirt for the occasion, it was deemed “indispensable” to those who could afford it.<sup>28</sup> During the Easter morning mass, “young maidens” dressed in white of any material from plain cotton to silk, along with the priests and the rest of the congregation walked around the church four times while singing Easter hymns over the ringing of church

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<sup>27</sup> Margaret G. Doyle, “The Polish Church Parade, an Easter Scene in St. Aubin Avenue,” *Detroit News*, March 23, 1902, 46.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*



bells. The bells and songs, many of them in Polish vernacular,<sup>29</sup> could be heard by the surrounding neighborhoods. Although most of the Easter preparation and observance took place in the home and in the church itself, processions between home and church and around the church were publicly visible. This contributed to the “indispensable” need, for those who could afford to do so, to buy new clothes for Easter. It was a time to be seen and heard, to perform as well as to pray.

The social and religious landscape of Polish Catholics was negotiated through these important religious processions, both formal and informal. Such ceremonies, like the carrying of food to and from church to be blessed on Easter, can be regarded as what Tweed referred to as “religious flows”:

Religious flows...move through time and space. They are horizontal, vertical, and transversal movements. They are movements through time, for example, as one generation passes on religious gestures to the next...And religious flows move across various “glocalities,” simultaneously local and global spaces...<sup>30</sup>

These “religious flows” connect individuals to divinity and individuals to one another in a community, to the exclusion of outsiders. For instance, when Polish parents brought their children from the home to church to have the food blessed for the Easter feast, they passed along to their children the traditions and beliefs (in the Resurrection story, in the power of the priest to bless) that articulated their relationship to divinity and to those specially ordained by God, as well as their relationship to other practicing Polish Catholic members in the local parish and in the Catholic church at large. Simultaneously, they crossed boundaries from home to street to church, from the city into the ritually charged place of

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<sup>29</sup> Felix Seroczynski, “Poles in the United States,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 12 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911).

<sup>30</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 62.

the church, and back. While in some cases the public nature of these processions was regarded as potentially exposing, as with the Feast of the Three Kings procession, public processions and parades could also be ways that Polish immigrants asserted their own sacred places within the pluralistic space<sup>31</sup> of the city.

Following the Easter season, as the notorious gardens in the Polish districts began to burst with the fruits of summer, came Corpus Christi. What was for some Poles a nine-day event in Poland<sup>32</sup> was condensed into one day in Detroit parishes. Like other Catholic churches in the city,<sup>33</sup> Polish churches celebrated by lavishly decorating their altars and with prayers and processions around the church. The day was made more special by episcopal visitations. On Corpus Christi in 1891, Bishop Foley, who had only been appointed as bishop three years earlier, made a point to visit St. Casimir's, St. Albertus', and St. Josephat's Polish parishes.<sup>34</sup> Foley was known for his ministry among the Poles in Detroit, and his presence in parishes in both the East and West side Polish settlements on such a feast day helped connect him to the community, just as he connected the Polish communities to one another and to all other Catholic parishes under his administration.

The feast day was also popular for First Communion celebrations. In 1905, Corpus Christi was observed at St. Albertus with a procession of 257 children receiving their First

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<sup>31</sup> In the studies of both geography and anthropology, 'space' is abstract whereas 'place' holds particular meaning and emotion for an individual or community. For a discussion of religious geography and space versus place, see Catherine Brace, Adrian R. Bailey, and David C. Harvey, "Religion, Place and Space: A Framework for Investigating Historical Geographies of Religious Identities and Communities," *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 1 (2006): 28–43.

<sup>32</sup> Carol Williams, "Life History of a Polish Immigrant," *Polish American Studies* 25, no. 2 (1968): 94.

<sup>33</sup> "The Feast Of Corpus Christi: Celebrated Appropriately in the Different Catholic Churches," *Detroit Free Press*, June 1, 1891, 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

Communion, as well as their parents and other parishioners.<sup>35</sup> The parade began at the St. Albertus school, then proceeded from the church to Father Mueller's house and then back to the school and churchyard. The children were lovingly dressed in white frocks, ribbons, badges and flowers. Many of the First Communion dresses were likely hand-made. These celebrations were a great investment of time and money for the community. Even the flowers and candles that adorned the churches during these celebrations were paid for through community donations. As public events, such processions were opportunities to boldly display the strength and wealth of the congregation—especially to those who associated Polish immigrants primarily with dire poverty and cultural backwardness.<sup>36</sup> This particular Corpus Christi parade was described as “one of the most imposing church processions ever seen in the Polish districts of the east side,”<sup>37</sup> a testament to the swelling population of the Polish districts, and a promising future for the particularly large upcoming generation of Poles who either immigrated as children or were born in America.

Religious processions and performances were a significant investment for the Polish immigrant community in Detroit. They served as an opportunity for community-building and sacred connection while also displaying ethnic identity to other Detroiters. Public religious rituals also revealed tensions in the Polish community—particularly by the 20th century as the population of American-born Polish descendants was growing—over

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<sup>35</sup> “Little Ones By Scores: Class Of 257 Children Received First Communion, Feast of Corpus Christi Observed at St. Albertus Church,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 26, 1905, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Detroit Newspapers in 1900's and 1910's reported the ‘quaintness’ and ‘thriftiness’ of Polish immigrants in Detroit, and the impoverished conditions of some Polish districts, while also reporting on the increasing wealth of those who had established themselves in America. See “The alley dwellers of Detroit,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 10, 1903, 1; “Polish Settlement,” *Detroit News*, March 19, 1905, Illustrated Section, 5; “Prosperity among Detroit's foreign born,” *Detroit News*, November 4, 1906, Illustrated Supplemental Section, 1; “Swarming places of Detroit poor,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 9, 1907, Miscellaneous Section, 1.

<sup>37</sup> “Little Ones By Scores,” *Detroit Free Press*, 5.

how to retain their traditions and pass them along to their children without making a spectacle of their culture. Amidst perceptions of their religious “medievalism” and growing nativist fears among Americans in the first decades of the 20th century,<sup>38</sup> Polish immigrants sometimes altered their practices in order to garner the respectability that would allow traditions to be accepted and carried on by future generations.

### III. NATIONAL PARADES

While national parades were not explicitly religious, they were comparable to the religious processions and performances that we have already discussed in that they often incorporated Catholic motifs, including a celebration of mass and speeches from religious leaders in the community, and were attended by Polish Catholic organizations. Attesting to the thin line between national and religious processions, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* entry on Polish Catholics in 1911 mentioned Polish national parades in their discussion of their Polish customs.

Poles are lovers of processions, flags, banners, uniforms, and marshals' batons. A Polish church on festal days resembles some national fane whither the battle-flags of nations have been brought from fields of glory...The observance of national festivals is religiously kept. May recalls the adoption of Poland's famous Constitution; November, the Revolution of 1830; and January, Poland's last war for freedom, the Revolution of 1863. The various organizations vie with one another in preparing these celebrations, which serve the useful purpose of affording instruction in Poland's history to the younger generation and to the invited Americans.<sup>39</sup>

Here, the entry points out that Polish churches were often decorated with national banners and flags for Catholic feast days, and likewise describes how Poles observed national holidays just as “religiously” as holy days. Further, the Polish parade is explicitly framed

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<sup>38</sup> For an overview of the history of nativism in America, including anti-Catholicism and attitudes toward Slavic immigrants, see Peter Schrag, *Not Fit for Our Society: Immigration and Nativism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Seroczynski, "Poles in the United States," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1911.

as a pedagogical tool to teach Poland's history not only to Polish descendants but also to the "invited Americans," highlighting the public and performative nature of these celebrations, which articulated Polish Catholic identity in ways similar to religious rituals.

Besides Polish holidays and ethnic parades, Polish immigrants also participated in labor parades and American national celebrations, which were less explicitly religious but provided a structure which Polish Catholics could use to celebrate their own communities, with marches, music, picnics, speeches, and demonstrations. While Poles were not often the organizers of labor parades, Polish workers and unions were listed in the attendance of many large Labor Day celebrations in the late 19th century.<sup>40</sup> Poles also attended city-wide parades on the Fourth of July to celebrate American independence and drew strong connections to their own fight for a Polish nation independent from German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian control. On July 4th, 1907, the Polish Falcons of America<sup>41</sup> held a massive parade from Polonia Hall<sup>42</sup> to Forest Avenue, to St. Aubin Avenue, to Canfield, then to the Detroit Athletic Club on Woodward. Polish church societies marched alongside the Falcons, as well as civil organizations, women's aid societies, singing societies, and various other clubs. This was just the beginning of a four-day event, featuring Polish speakers, national music, and a petition by Polish orders seeking "equal recognition" with

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<sup>40</sup> Some examples that mention Polish participation: "Labor Day!: Its Celebration Was A Magnificent Success, Ten Thousand Sturdy Toilers Were In Line, Ten Times Ten Thousand Saw The March, Parade A Grand And Inspiring Spectacle, Delightful Picnic On The Island Afterward, Attended By Fully 40,000 Friends Of The Celebrators, Games And Races And Who Won Them," *Detroit Free Press*, September 3, 1895, 1; "Labor's Outing: Yesterday's Celebration Was Impressive And Successful," *Detroit Free Press*, September 8, 1896, 1; "Muscular Relaxation: Celebration Of Labor Day By The Trades Unionists, A Magnificent Parade And A Pleasant Picnic," *Detroit Free Press*, September 4, 1894, 1.

<sup>41</sup> A Polish fraternal benefit society.

<sup>42</sup> A Polish social hall.

orders of other nationalities before the church<sup>43</sup>—taking advantage of the ample attention and good press that Poles were receiving during the festivities to stake their claim to support from the Catholic church.

Many Polish national parades—celebrating, for instance, the Polish constitution of 1791,<sup>44</sup> or the revolt against Russia in 1830<sup>45</sup>—began or ended at a church, reflecting the significance of the parish community and Catholic rhetoric in these ‘secular’ performances. Mass was often held, speeches were given by priests, and the events were well attended by lay Catholic organizations. An 1883 street parade<sup>46</sup> celebrating the 200th anniversary of King Sobieski's victory at the Battle of Vienna serves as an interesting case study in public religion and ethnic identity, connecting important religious nodes in the city and intertwining national and religious symbolism. The Battle of Vienna was fought against the invading Ottoman Turks under Kara Mustafa and acquired near-mythical religious importance to Christians. The parade was framed as a commemoration of the decided “supremacy of the cross over the crescent.” Early in the morning, Polish residents “adorned with rosettes,” assembled at St. Albertus Church at the corner of Fremont and St. Aubin. The crowd grew so large that the street became “impassable.” An artillery salute by the Kosciusko Polish Guard kicked off the celebration of a solemn high mass at St. Albertus—with “thousands” unable to even enter the packed church, kneeling with their prayer books

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<sup>43</sup> “Polish Falcons Of America To Be Here Today: Event Is Of Great Importance To Detroit's 75,000 Citizens Who Love Land Of Kosciusko,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 4, 1907, 10.

<sup>44</sup> “Polish Catholics' Union Will March In Parade May 10: Celebration Will Be Part of 1791 Constitution Festivities,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 3, 1914, 12.; “Polish Catholics Of Detroit Ready For May Festival: Societies of Union to Open Celebration With Parade,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 10, 1914, 4.

<sup>45</sup> “Celebrate Polish Revolt in Detroit,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 1, 1913, 5.

<sup>46</sup> All quotes concerning this parade from “A Grand Celebration: The Polish Citizens Observe The 200th Anniversary Of King John Sobieski's Victory Over The Turks,” *Detroit Free Press*, September 13, 1883, 1.

and rosaries outside—where Father Kolasinski completed a “sermon appropriate to the occasion.” Afterwards, the parade proceeded south to the Church of SS Peter and Paul before returning to the St. Albertus school grounds, although the exact route is unclear. The parade was headed by twelve mounted marshals, with Chief Marshal Nieldsmauski representing King Sobieski in royal garb. One of the parade carriages carried local Polish priests. Decorated wagons bore figures of the King and Queen through the streets, passing Polish homes decorated for the occasion.

At the school grounds after the parade, the celebration continued with a picnic. Mayor Thompson applauded the Poles as patriots—to America and to Poland—because of their shared enemy as Christians, the “Mahomedan power.” Patriotic symbolism was mixed with religious symbolism—flags both Polish and American were displayed with the Christian cross. While not an explicitly religious procession, this nationalist parade acquired religious meaning which was enhanced by a solemn religious ritual (the high mass) and through the words and intentions of those attending. The parade not only delineated the important boundaries of the neighborhood, emanating from St. Albertus parish and connecting this religious space to the school, but it created an ideological boundary within which Polish American identity was defined, one which associated Polishness to a common, mythologized Christian past.

Other Polish national parades similarly intertwined the significant nodes of Polish life in Detroit. In 1913, on the seventy-third anniversary of the Polish revolt against Russia, Poles celebrated in Detroit with a procession from the *Dom Polski* on Forest Avenue near Chene Street to St. Josaphat's Church where Reverend John Rzadkowolski gave a sermon

in commemoration of the insurrection.<sup>47</sup> The route of this parade, a celebration of Polish national history, effectively associated a greater Polish national identity with local spaces of socialization and with the Catholic faith—this to the exclusion of non-Catholic Poles. Compared to a celebration of the same event two years later in 1915, however, it is clear that the rhetoric of the parade had begun to shift in light of World War I. In the 1915 celebration, Poles related the 1830 insurrection to the state of Poland during the war, “pillaged, burned, and devastated...praying for peace.”<sup>48</sup> These parades, which combined religious ritual and patriotic performance, seemed to counter mounting nativist fears over Polish alliances by shoring up sympathy and by emphasizing a common enemy in the war. Poles “redefined American patriotism, furthered the homeland cause, and prepared for U.S. entry into World War I” by changing the emphasis of their parades toward a hyphenated Polish-American national identity.<sup>49</sup> So too did they gain respectability and compromise by articulating a common Christian vision that was united against any perceived threat to Christianity, and against the apparent enemies of (American *and* Polish) freedom.

Other ethnic groups in Detroit also held religious and/or national parades in the late 19th and early 20th century, parades being a typical medium for celebration of ethnic pride. Irish churches organized lavish parades and speeches for St. Patrick’s Day and German immigrants arranged processions in downtown Detroit to celebrate ‘German Day,’ the anniversary of the founding of Germantown in Pennsylvania and a commemoration of the beginning of German settlement in America. Poles participated in these forms of national

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<sup>47</sup> “Celebrate Polish Revolt In Detroit: Seventy-third Anniversary Of Fight With Russia Observed With Parade And Speeches,” *Detroit Free Press*, Dec 1, 1913, 5.

<sup>48</sup> “Rising of Poles Against Russian to be Celebrated,” *Detroit News*, November 28, 1915, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Megan E. Geigner, “Performing the Polish-American Patriot: Civic Performance and Hyphenated Identity in World War I Chicago,” *Theatre History Studies* 34 (2015): 59-78.



celebration as a sort of American tradition, despite the emphasis on their own ethnic heritage. In doing so, they shared in a collective commemoration of their own communal history and their national history, while also curating a particular Polish national identity to other Detroiters—including other immigrants—that was intimately tied to a Catholic religious identity.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Public religious rituals—including parades and processions for Catholic and national holidays, pageants, and funerals—were both exclusive yet highly visible in the city. For Polish immigrants at the turn of the century, this public visibility acted as a two-way street. In some cases, Poles altered their practices for public (non-Polish and often non-Catholic) consumption or discontinued public rituals altogether for fear of perpetuating a public image of Polish immigrants as ‘Old World’ and backward. At the same time, public ritual was an important part of community-building for the first generations of Polish immigrants in the Detroit area, allowing them to display the piety and grandeur of their congregations and to connect the central nodes of Polish life and socialization within an urban context. These sorts of rituals helped Poles articulate for themselves and for outsiders to their community what was important to them: national pride, religion, and family. Over time, and particularly in the years leading up to and during World War I, their public parades and performances increasingly emphasized a shared America and Polish vision of Christianity and national liberation that helped shape a Polish American identity into the 20th century.

While performance and visibility played a large part in the shaping of public Polish Catholic celebrations, both nationality and devotion were framed differently in the

domestic sphere, which offered more flexibility and privacy from both Catholic leadership and other communities in the city. At home, Polish Catholics participated in a rich material culture that allowed them to commemorate both national history and personal memory and tradition through national and religious imagery, feasts and prayers, and holy cards that served sacred, pedagogical, and social functions, as we will explore in the next chapter.

### CHAPTER 3: THE HOME

*For the Polish nation is not dead! Its body, indeed, is in the tomb, but the soul has ascended from the surface of the earth; that is, from public life to the abyss, or domestic life—to the homes and hearths of those who endure distress and oppression in their country, and far from their country, in order to be witness there of their suffering, and of their misery.<sup>1</sup>*

*(Pál Attila Illés, “The Cornerstones of Polish Culture.”)*

*For the home is considered sacred, almost like a shrine.<sup>2</sup>*

*(Paul Wrobel, Our Way.)*

#### I. BUILDING A HOME IN DETROIT

Wrobel penned this quote in the early 1970’s in his study of contemporary working-class Polish Americans in Detroit. To late-19th century Detroiters, however, this would have likely seemed to be a bold claim. Detroit’s early Polish settlements were known primarily for their impoverished, densely crowded neighborhoods; for homes too cramped with children and the few simple furnishings that immigrants could afford to be considered sacred ground. Nonetheless, Polish immigrants did not leave religion at the doorstep. They participated in a rich material and ritual Catholic culture in their homes. They composed informal shrines, prepared feasts for holidays imbued with symbolic meaning, cured ailments, lit candles, and prayed. ‘Folk practices’—rituals and beliefs preserved from pre-Christian Poland and those which exceed the bounds of the official doctrine of the Catholic Church—flourished in the domestic sphere, uninhibited by public scrutiny and episcopal intervention. While Polish immigrant’s domestic religiosity was an extension of and complementary to public and parish devotions, the privacy of the home provided

<sup>1</sup> Pál Attila Illés, “The Cornerstones of Polish Culture and National Identity,” *Colloquia, Journal for Central European History*, no. XVII (2010): 78-9.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Wrobel, *Our Way: Family, Parish, and Neighborhood in a Polish-American Community* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 47.

possibilities for greater personal freedom and control over religious expression. Because of this, the materials of home devotion were especially multifaceted symbols.

Although the first major wave of immigrants to America were known as *za chlebem* ("for bread") immigrants—generally used to refer to the poor Polish peasants who came seeking economic opportunities that could not be found at home—most Poles who could afford to emigrate to America were upwardly mobile peasants and laborers or even middle-class entrepreneurs.<sup>3</sup> While not wealthy, many immigrants had the means to build their own homes in Detroit. The cost of land, permit, and materials in the Polish districts was between \$400 and \$600 at the end of the 19th century, much cheaper than what native white Detroiters spent, an average of \$1,400-\$2,400 for the entire venture.<sup>4</sup> Building a home required an established network of friends and relatives in the city, which not every immigrant had. Badaczewski describes the typical Polish home in Michigan:

The immigrants usually built their own homes with the help of friends, relatives, and fellow parishioners...The Polish houses were typically of wood frame construction and were composed of three rooms in a line from front to back. Often the front room was rented out to another Polish family that was saving to build their own home. Nearly 70% of Polish families lived in multiple family dwellings, most containing two families. The typical Polish family consisted of a husband, wife, and three or four children...<sup>5</sup>

Poles were known for their high rates of home ownership compared to other Detroiters, especially other immigrants. The high priority that Polish immigrants placed upon land ownership has been attributed as a legacy of the intersection between class and land ownership in Poland, where virtually all of a family's money was in the land they owned

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<sup>3</sup> John J. Bukowczyk, *And My Children Did Not Know Me: A History of the Polish-Americans, Minorities in Modern America*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Dennis Badaczewski, *Poles in Michigan, Discovering the Peoples of Michigan* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

and passed on for generations. The peasants who immigrated to America had owned no land in Poland, and to do so in the New World—no matter how small a plot—was a goal that symbolized their social and financial mobility, a new start.<sup>6</sup>

Most houses built by early Polish immigrants were small and claustrophobic, especially given the financial necessity of living in multiple-family households. Many Polish families kept pigs, geese, chickens, and gardens full of cabbages and corn on their land in the midst of the city, to the amusement of some Detroiters in the late 19th century.<sup>7</sup> Some Polish immigrants did live in tenements, which had a poor reputation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as overly crowded, even dangerously so, much like in other large cities in the industrial North. Some of the worst conditions in 19th century Poletown were in tenements known as “Wolonski’s flats” on Hastings street which were always crowded to full capacity, and where the “stench” was “simply horrible.”<sup>8</sup> A 1906 *Detroit News* article implied that tenement overcrowding in the Polish districts had improved since the 1880s—instead, the Italian immigrants who lived around Larned street were accused of being the most “regular offenders.”<sup>9</sup>

Work kept most Polish men away from home much of the time. By 1900, 53% of Poles were identified as ‘laborers’—meaning day laborers, defined as people who work “on the road”<sup>10</sup> or “for the city, town, or at odd jobs”<sup>11</sup>—although in earlier decades this

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> “Life Among the Poles: May Bell’s Trip Through Polacktown Slums,” *Detroit News*, December 9, 1888, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “Swarming places of Detroit’s poor,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 9, 1907, Miscellaneous section part 4, 1.

<sup>10</sup> William C. Hunt, *Occupations at the Twelfth Census*, Department of Commerce and Labor Bureau of the Census Special Reports (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), ccxlviii.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., ccxlix.

percentage was higher. Others worked in skilled occupations as factory workers, professionals, or business owners.<sup>12</sup> While some women remained at home to look after young children, many were employed in factories, domestic labor, seed farms and market gardens, in addition to ad hoc sewing and laundering jobs. Keeping house was itself an arduous affair. Women had to look after children, collect wood and keep the fire burning, prepare food, clean constantly in often crowded conditions, tend to animals and crops, and make and mend clothing. Children of all ages were expected to help with household tasks, and older immigrant children also helped supplement the family income with outside work.<sup>13</sup>

The necessity for many Polish women and children to work inside and outside of the home in industrial Detroit, and the often crowded conditions in which Polish immigrants lived in the 19th and early 20th centuries, conflicted with the American middle-class ideal of domestic life, which was intimately tied to a Protestant moral standard. By the time that the first wave of Polish immigrants were settling in Detroit, Victorian family reformers had long established the idyll of the American suburban home in direct opposition to increasingly populous city residences where the large immigrant population, the poorer classes, industrial pollution and endemic urban crime and disease were directly correlated to perceived widespread moral debauchery.<sup>14</sup> The rhetoric of family reformers sacralized the suburban home as a space for parents (women especially) to cultivate and

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<sup>12</sup> Badaczewski, *Poles in Michigan*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> "Life Among the Poles: May Bell's Trip Through Polacktown Slums," *Detroit News*, December 9, 1888, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Clifford Edward Clark, *The American Family Home, 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 100.

teach Christian virtue, in which the family should be like “a *small* church in which the young are to be trained to righteousness.”<sup>15</sup>

These attitudes pervade many of the articles which describe, or rather hyperbolize, Polish immigrant life at the turn of the 20th century in Detroit as the antithesis of the Victorian idyll. Reporters made disparaging observations about abject poverty, “swarms of babies” and unattended “barefoot” children, and the casual nature of crime in Polish districts.<sup>16</sup> One author claimed that the sorts of labor Polish children were responsible for on a daily basis would “break the heart of a true American boy or girl.”<sup>17</sup> According to these reports, the Polish immigrant home had no space for the proper religious upbringing prescribed by Victorian reformers. To the contrary, some of the perceived discrepancies of Polish families can perhaps be attributed to the role of Catholic doctrine in shaping domestic life. When asked, for example, why Polish families were commonly so large—presumably in comparison to the American middle class, and to other populations in the city—Father Meathe, a Catholic priest, replied that it was because “these people [i.e. Polish immigrants] live according to the commands of God.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, parochial schools bore the responsibility of official religious education for Polish children, rather than parents, because of the hierarchical authority of the priests and nuns who provided Catholic instruction.

Polish Catholic immigrants in urban America *did* participate in a variety of home devotional and material rituals that made the home into a sort of shrine—despite the

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<sup>15</sup> Wrote one anonymous critic in *Harper's Monthly*. Quoted in Clark, *The American Family Home*, 101.

<sup>16</sup> “Human Hives: Childhood’s Joys in the Polish Quarter,” *Detroit News*, September 6, 1896, 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

pretensions of Protestant family reformers to the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the urban working-class. By collecting religious images, figures, and objects, performing religious rituals for celebration, safety, and healing, and engaging with children in prayer and devotion, Polish immigrants nurtured Polish Catholic traditions within the home. Through domestic practices that extended from the official practices of the Church and also those which challenged Church authority, Poles participated in a rich variety of textual and material literacies which were at once distinct from the Protestant middle-class ideal of domestic religiosity, and which were gradually influenced by them as Poles themselves gained greater social and financial mobility in America.

## **II. BUILDING A SHRINE**

Polish immigrant women were particularly involved in religious labor and devotional activities outside the home. Barred from many masculine spaces of both leisure and political activity, women asserted their influence in the parish and religious organizations. Despite the fact that the parish was governed by male clergy and lay male committees, women were tasked with parish decoration and care, and were more likely to be able to attend masses. Although many women were responsible for generating income for the household—through factory work, agriculture, textile labor, and domestic work—the majority of homecare fell to them as well. This was particularly true of Polish women with small children and those in higher-income families. Women were therefore also largely responsible for domestic religion: the creation of feasts, the arrangement of religious materials in the home, and the organization of home rituals and religious education outside of school.



Because women were more likely to be home during the day, the job of taking the children to church fell mostly on them, particularly during holidays when multiple masses would be held over the course of a few days. During Holy Week, Polish women and children attended mass all day Thursday, then returned home to have a “meager” supper before returning to church along with the fathers who had returned from work.<sup>19</sup> Women were responsible for decorating the church for Good Friday and Easter, tasked with arranging plants and hundreds of candles around the altar, but they also had to ready their own homes for the elaborate Easter feast following the deprivation of the Lenten season. On Holy Saturday, the cooking and baking began. The means and preferences of Polish families varied greatly, but at least for middle class immigrants, the Easter feast might have included some boiled meat, *baba*, white cakes and bread that took all day to prepare. In the evening, it was (and still is in many Polish churches) a Polish custom to bring morsels of the food prepared for Easter day to the church to be blessed. Between masses on Easter day, a breakfast of eggs, meat and bread, prepared the day before, was served, followed by a dinner with much of the same, perhaps along with the cakes and wine.<sup>20</sup> The Christmas *Wigilia* was another symbolic feast orchestrated by the women of the house.

Mothers also led the family through rituals of prayer and protection in the home. Robert Strybel, a journalist known as the “Polish Answer Man,” recalled his childhood in Hamtramck in the late 1940’s. His grandmother (*babcia*)—a woman named Katarzyna Kupczynska, a first-generation immigrant who arrived in America before World War I—

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<sup>19</sup> Margaret G. Doyle, “The Polish Church Parade, an Easter Scene in St. Aubin Avenue,” *Detroit News*, March 23, 1902, 46.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

would always light the *gromnica* (“thunder”) candle during storms with a prayer to the Virgin for protection, a tradition connected to the celebration of Candlemas.

As a child I would often visit my Babcia in the tiny beer, wine and sweet shop she ran in Detroit's then predominantly Polish suburb of Hamtramck. Once, when it started thundering, she closed the shop and hurriedly took me by the hand to her home two doors away. There she lit a *gromnica*, hoping the storm would soon pass over. I was only 7 or 8 back then and no longer recall whether Babcia simply made the Sign of the Cross or said some prayer, but Polish prayer books often contain a "Modlitwa w czasie burzy" (Prayer during Storms).<sup>21</sup>

Not only did lay women like Katarzyna Kupczyńska make important financial contributions to the household (sometimes running businesses like her beer and wine shop), but they were also often integral to the performance of traditional devotional practices. They passed along rituals like the lighting of the *gromnica* and their meanings to children and grandchildren, as Strybel, recalling this over 60 years later, can attest to.

Few records of immigrant home devotion and material culture at the turn of the 20th century exist. Some evidence can be gleaned from outsider's accounts of Polish immigrant life, ethnographies that were published in Detroit newspapers, like May Bell's experience ‘slumming it in Polacktown’<sup>22</sup> in 1888. In her article, Bell explains that she felt compelled to investigate the lives of Detroit's Polish community firstly because of the attention and curiosity that it was attracting lately “owing to its church complications”<sup>23</sup> (i.e., the ‘Kolasinski Affair’). Additionally, most residents of the city who were not of

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Strybel, “Swieto Matki Boskiej Gromnicznej - Our Lady of the Thunderbolt,” Commentary, *Polish American Journal* (Buffalo, N.Y.: National Ed., 2016), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Referring to the Polish district, what would become known as Poletown. Today “Polack” is recognized as an ethnic slur, with negative connotations. While it was common parlance (an Anglicization of *Polak* for a Polish male) in the 19th century and well into the 20th century, Polish immigrants had expressed their dislike of the term early on. See, for instance, “The Polack quarter,” *Detroit News*, November 29, 1883, 3.

<sup>23</sup> “Life Among the Poles: May Bell's Trip Through Polacktown Slums,” *Detroit News*, December 9, 1888, 2. All references to Bell's article are from the same page.

Polish descent were allegedly unwelcome in their neighborhoods, driven away by “mongrel dogs” and armies of bad-mannered children, giving this insider operation an air of mystery. Her account is riddled with pretension, but as a reporter she took care to describe not only the Polish district, but the interiors of certain homes. Bell writes:

Traversing a number of alley-like streets swarming with children and odorous with all sorts of smells, with garbage, old tin cans and broken crockery, frozen in the muddy ditches green with slime, we arrived at length to Leland street...

On Leland Street she visited the Petrovsky family, “consisting of blind Albert, his wife, who supports them by working in the rag shop, and his son.” This family lived in a small two-room house painted bright blue with yellow painted floors. One room was entirely taken up by their two beds and in the other room was a stove, a table and three wooden chairs. The only decoration that Bell noted was “a crucifix, rosary and a picture of Christ on Calvary” that hung between the two narrow windows of the little cottage, which was “spotlessly clean, but poor in the extreme.” While working-class Polish immigrants like the Petrovsky’s could not afford much, they took care to invest their money in these devotional materials, both to beautify their home and to ‘make’ religious space by assembling shrines of religious objects and images within the intimate space of the home.

In a later 1932 article by Murray Godwin, he described a similar configuration in the house of one of his Polish neighbors, Mrs. Kurowski, on Detroit’s east side:

The pictures in her [Mrs. Kurowski] home were flamingly colored chromos of saints and virgins, with Polish inscriptions. There were images, too, and a crucifix, and small fonts of holy water, and a knotted strip of palm from the previous Lenten season. She did not favor prayerbooks, but rosaries, medals, and scapulars were carried or worn with devotion by herself and her considerable family.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Murray Godwin, “Motor City Witchcraft,” *The North American Review* 233, no. 6 (1932): 530.



Fig. 11: Illustration of a Polish ‘Lady of the House,’ her dogs and children chasing away visitors, throwing stones and mud. From “Life Among the Poles,” *Detroit News*, December 9, 1888, 2.

While we should take Godwin’s account with a grain of salt, by pointing out that Mrs. Kurowski preferred devotional objects to texts suggests the particular potency of the *material* of religion—not necessarily as an alternative to other forms of religion, but in addition to. Anthropologists of religion have written at length about how “icons, paintings, clothing, figurines, relics, etc.” contribute an intimate and sensual register to religious imagination because materials “can be seen, heard,

touched, tasted, and smelled,” unlike text or immaterial doctrine.<sup>25</sup> Catholic laypeople and clergy alike participate in a rich material culture, which extends from the eucharist, incense, candles, and decor of the mass to the cheap prints of saints that Mrs. Kurowski hung in her house.

Godwin was himself not Polish. As a young man he “found [him]self marrying the daughter of a Polish immigrant,” causing him to move from the “north end” of Detroit near St. Luke’s, which had an Irish pastor, to the east side Polish district.<sup>26</sup> There he frequented Polish saloons, the *Restauracya Krakowa*, *grocery*, and *ksiegarnie* (bookshops), where

one saw plaster saints and virgins, painted in a blare of nakedly contrasting colors, and between and among them appeared books by Boccaccio, Jack London, Rosny, Balzac and Paul de Kock. There were rosaries, books of devotion, medals, scapulars, votive lights, and pious mottoes, and there were figurines of peasants and nude females, dolls and toys, communist hymnals, broad-gauge comic weeklies, almanacs with colored covers showing gay girls in scant lingerie...<sup>27</sup>

Mrs. Kurowski and the other Polish Catholics in the neighborhood likely went to local *ksiegarnie* like these for their religious items, in addition to collecting objects like palms and holy cards from mass and funerals.

Godwin stresses the juxtaposition between the sacred and profane in these commercial spaces, where you could buy both a statue of the Virgin Mary and a nude figurine. He remarks, snidely, that “many Poles of common stock have an alien quirk which

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<sup>25</sup> See Omar M. McRoberts. “Beyond Mysterium Tremendum: Thoughts toward an Aesthetic Study of Religious Experience,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 595, no. 1 (2004): 190–203; David Morgan, *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London/New York: Routledge, 2010). Referenced in Daniel Winchester, “‘A Part of Who I Am’: Material Objects as ‘Plot Devices’ in the Formation of Religious Selves,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 1 (2017): 86.

<sup>26</sup> Murray Godwin, “Hamtramck vs. Ford: A Polish-American Retrospect,” *The North American Review* Vol. 233, Iss. 5 (May, 1932): 452.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 454.

prevents their discerning the sharp difference between what is highbrow and what is lowbrow.”<sup>28</sup> Although this was fairly evidently a prejudiced criticism of working-class Poles engaging in culture and literature that was “beyond [their] depth,”<sup>29</sup> Godwin may also have been responding to the comprehensive nature of the Polish Catholic religious world, which sometimes collided the sacred with the so-called profane through material devotion like the medals and plaster saints he saw for sale among figurines, toys, and almanacs.

Godwin tends to write condescendingly of Mrs. Kurowski and other working-class Poles, despite his friendship and camaraderie with many of them in the neighborhood. Elsewhere he writes that “among the Polish-Americans [he] found a peasant-like passion for religion at its supernatural richest,”<sup>30</sup> and is shocked at Mrs. Kurowski’s genuine belief in bewitchment.<sup>31</sup> She diagnoses Godwin’s colicky daughter by telling him that she must be baptized, and attributes her own daughter’s swollen neck glands as a result of her constant high-pitched singing.<sup>32</sup> While Godwin takes issue with what he perceives as Mrs. Kurowski’s stubborn denial of modern science in favor of “peasant-like” religiosity, an internal war was occurring within the Catholic church in Detroit to combat what clergymen deemed as immigrant “superstition.”

The struggle in the Detroit archdiocese over immigrant superstition and Catholic respectability was not often explicit. Bukowczyk explains that “clergymen and nuns desired less to obliterate the panoply of magical objects and practices” held by Polish

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 455.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Godwin, "Motor City Witchcraft," 532.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 529.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

immigrants, “than to substitute institutionally controlled devices—holy water, medals, scapulars, religious statues, crucifixes, holy pictures, consecrated candles, and rosary beads—that had quasi-magical properties.”<sup>33</sup> Rather than strip Poles of their unique customs and their beliefs in witchcraft, the evil eye, and other so-called “superstitions,” the Detroit clergy—Polish and not—sought to discourage less acceptable forms of religiosity for substitutes more readily accepted by the American public. Nonetheless, Mrs. Kurowski is a testament to the limited reach of the church in controlling private, domestic forms of religious practice and belief.

In January 1917, these tensions between private and public devotion were revealed when neighbors accused 16-year-old Celia Wroblewski of both Protestant sacrilege and witchcraft. Wroblewski, a cigar factory worker like many other Polish girls and women in the urban North, was accused specifically of being able to transform herself into a lion, a bear, or a devil depending on the source.<sup>34</sup> Believers, curious locals, reporters and then police attempting to diffuse the situation crowded around her house at 28th street at Buchanan, part of the Polish settlement on the West side of Detroit. Many dismissed the accusation as ridiculous “superstition,” including the officers sent to protect her from the throng and the Rev. Fr. Bernard F. Jarzemblowski of St. Francis, where Wroblewski attended church.<sup>35</sup> “Sermons showing the absurdity of superstition” were preached from the pulpits of Detroit, Toledo, and Cleveland as a result of Wroblewski’s persecution. Father Jarzemblowski called it “stupid nonsense” that had “started in Hamtramck, but

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<sup>33</sup> John J. Bukowczyk, “The Transforming Power of the Machine: Popular Religion, Ideology, and Secularization among Polish Immigrant Workers in the United States, 1880–1940,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 34, no. 34 (1988): 31.

<sup>34</sup> “Believe Girl Turns into a Lion,” *Detroit News*, January 24, 1917, 1.

<sup>35</sup> “Bear girl says woof, crowd runs, officers outside Wroblewski home disgusted by boobs,” *Detroit News*, January 26, 1917, 25.

spread over to the west side” of Detroit, to the “great injustice” of the innocent 16-year-old girl.<sup>36</sup> Wroblewski herself reported that it was a playful story she had heard from schoolmates, which was only later pinned on her. Nonetheless, plenty of locals, many of them Polish, believed in or at least cautiously feared this alleged witch. Tellingly, the story spread among her Polish Catholic neighbors that she was guilty of sacrilege. Neighbors claimed that she had become engaged to a Protestant and proceeded to steal the host from a local Catholic church to divide with him and eat; when they broke the host, it bled.<sup>37</sup>

Although Detroit was a historically Catholic city, making it a tempting choice for Catholic immigrants from the Irish to the Italians and many central and eastern European Catholics, America was then as now a predominantly Protestant country, and Protestant denominations were becoming increasingly present in Detroit by the 19th century.<sup>38</sup> Catholic Poles were suspicious of their Protestant neighbors. They expressed their misgivings both subtly, and occasionally, with all-out aggression. In 1887, Polish Catholics invaded a meeting held in Fredro Hall—just north of current-day Hamtramck—of Baptist missionaries led by Reverend Antoszewski, who the *Detroit Free Press* boldly claimed was “the only Polish Baptist minister in the world.”<sup>39</sup> Reverend Antoszewski was met with sneers, giggles, and physical threats from the Catholic Poles before police could intervene. One of the aggressors reportedly said: “The Poles have been Catholics for 1,000 years. We don’t want any Protestant preaching to us.”<sup>40</sup> While not every Polish Catholic immigrant

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<sup>36</sup> “Persecution of girl moves priests to act,” *Detroit News*, January 27, 1917, 1.

<sup>37</sup> “Believe Girl Turns into a Lion,” *Detroit News*, January 24, 1917, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Brian Wilson, “The Spirit of the Motor City: Three Hundred Years of Religious History in Detroit,” *Michigan Historical Review* 27, no. 1 (2001): 25.

<sup>39</sup> “As Bad As Bedlam.: Almost A Riot At A Polish Religious Service In Fredro Hall. Had The Police Not Interfered The Polish Baptist Missionary Would Have Been Mobbed,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 4, 1887: 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*



shared this view, it does speak to an assumption that to be Polish is to be Catholic, and to be otherwise is abnormal. Most Protestants in Detroit at the turn of the century were not Polish. This only served to compound fears that Polish Catholic girls like Celia Wroblewski would be seduced into abandoning their religion *and* their national traditions in order to conform to non-Polish and non-Catholic ideals. Accusations of witchcraft, jokingly or not, may have been one way that Wroblewski's community could surveille her and check her behavior as a young, working Polish Catholic woman who was likely expected to evade male attention until she married an acceptable Polish Catholic man.

The persecution of Celia Wroblewski, which stirred up the Polish community on the West side, is a powerful illustration of the anxiety that Polish Catholics may have experienced in proximity to a growing Protestant population, in a country where Protestantism was already the more powerful and populous religion. It also may have been an expression of other fears concerning the new urban life that Polish immigrants encountered in Detroit. Like most alleged witches, Wroblewski was regarded as particularly susceptible to corruption as a young and independent woman. As a cigar worker, she was often unaccompanied in the city; communal fear about the vulnerability of women and girls in the industrial modern world was perhaps channeled into fear of witchcraft and possession. Further, Father Jarzemblowski's blunt dismissal of any belief in witchcraft and the demonic, as well as snide remarks about 'medievalism' and 'superstition' on the part of reporters and onlookers, reveals a tension within the community and within the local Catholic church over the boundaries of respectable religious belief. Other such 'suspicious' or 'dangerous' beliefs, such as Foley's crusade against Easter confession tickets as potentially heretical as discussed in Chapter 1, were

often framed by church leaders as not only un-Catholic, but un-American. It is these beliefs which would gradually diminish, under pressure from the church and community, as Polish immigrants became what they and others could identify as Polish Americans.

### III. “THE NEW GOSPEL”: A CASE STUDY

By the 1920s and 30s, the effects of Americanization efforts in Detroit and the adoption of English into the daily educational and devotional lives of lay Polish immigrants was reflected in their evolving religious material culture. An analysis of one such artifact, a Roman missal filled with holy cards owned by an American-born descendent of Polish immigrant parents in Detroit named Wanda Klimowics in ca. 1935, reveals a developing bilingual, even trilingual, devotional culture in Polish Catholic churches, schools, and homes.

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In 1923, Ella Mae McCormick published an article in which she described the new gospel that was being preached among the Polish immigrants of Detroit, a growing phenomenon dubbed “Americanism.” It was spreading like wildfire among the youngest generations of Poles born in America who, unlike their parents, had attended public schools and had learned English right alongside their ‘mother tongue.’

The Polish child going to the public schools speaks and acts like the hundred and one other American children of whatever parental nativity, but the moment that child enters his own home or goes among the poles of the community he becomes a Pole, speaking the Polish language and slipping into the demeanor the Polish parent expects of his child.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “With Home Folk in Detroit’s Polish District: They Have Brought Here Patriotism, Love Of Family Life, Thrift and Simple Pleasures From The Fatherland,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 24, 1923, 42.

McCormick diagnosed this new trend not only to public schooling, but also to “the regained political freedom of Poland.” Without the noble cause of national liberation to rally around, she surmised, Polish immigrants in America apparently had little reason to fight against the forces of “Americanism.”

While McCormick’s depiction of second generation Poles in Detroit being largely swept up by the “gospel” of Americanism—that thing which made them indistinguishable from other American schoolchildren, yet something that could be thrown off as soon as they went home, having to do with both language and “demeanor”—is certainly a hyperbole, her observation does convey the sorts of fluid identities that Polish immigrants adopted, particularly American-born generations who were educated from birth in both Polish and English. Polish immigrants were exposed at work, at school, and at church, to Americanization efforts, from English lessons to inspections and corrections of acceptable hygiene and social decorum. At the same time, the ethnic ‘enclaves’ that many Poles lived in—where they are, according to McCormick, allowed to again “become” Poles—continued to nurture Polish language, community, food and material culture.

Relatedly, an article also published in 1923 by *The Christian Science Monitor* described how, in Detroit,

Churches with services conducted in the vernacular, stores with signs in the prevailing tongue, markets, where bargainers in the tongues of southern Europe chatter the neighborhood gossip, are common. In this atmosphere children are reared, and in the majority of cases must themselves throw off the restraining influences of race and caste.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “Problem of Americanization Challenges the New Detroit: Tendency of Some Races to Congregate in Separate Colonies Is Difficult to Overcome,” *The Christian Science Monitor*,” October 12, 1923: 7.

In this article, the persistence of areas where many members of a given ethnic identity settled together in American cities like Detroit is identified as a definite problem to be solved for the sake of America's wellbeing, and even for the sake of immigrant children who were apparently struggling to throw off the oppressive influences of "race and caste"—although how these were restrictive, and who was doing the restricting, is unexplained. At the same time, the illustration of Hamtramck and the Polish districts in Detroit as places where Polish-language churches, stores, and casual conversation between neighbors was typical reveal the vibrant Polish culture that itself likely attracted Polish immigrants to live there.

By the time both of these articles were published, the nature of Americanization programs in Detroit was shifting, which helps to explain the conflicting points of view: one celebrating Polish immigrants' dual identities as both Polish and American, and the other communicating fearful concern due to the persistence of Polish language and customs in immigrant communities. Over the span of its career, between 1915 and 1931, the Americanization Committee of Detroit (ACD) reframed its rhetorical depiction of immigrants and its organizational practices, "transform[ing] itself from a volunteer businessman's group that preached complete assimilation into a professionally staffed social agency that advocated the selective preservation of immigrant cultures."<sup>43</sup> As opposed to their earlier emphasis on English night schools and factory-based educational programs<sup>44</sup> that were designed to tame the threat of a potentially dangerous immigrant

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<sup>43</sup> Anne Brophy, "'The Committee... Has Stood out against Coercion': The Reinvention of Detroit Americanization, 1915-1931," *The Michigan Historical Review* 29, no. 2 (2003): 2.

<sup>44</sup> One of the best examples being the Ford model. In 1914, Henry Ford created the Ford Sociological Department to investigate and monitor the personal and work lives of his employees, many of them non-English speaking immigrants, especially Poles. The Sociological Department deployed investigators who conducted home visits, checked bank deposits, and monitored

workforce by (sometimes forcefully) instilling in immigrants the language and social expectations that could allow them to become useful fodder for the American industrial machine, in the 1920s the ACD shifted its focus to viewing immigrants as themselves a vulnerable population who required social education through the “sympathetic” use of their own languages and respect for their ethnic traditions. Although efforts to educate Polish immigrants in English and in American culture, as the ACD defined it, were still widespread, this new model allowed for some flexibility in what immigrants were expected to sacrifice for citizenship and cultural acceptance.

Under either model, the forces of Americanization however presented were never complete in their mission. Rather, immigrants practiced a degree of ethnic fluidity in different spaces. Many Polish immigrants continued through the 1920s to live and work in Detroit with minimal English skills; some with complete fluency in both English and Polish. Immigrants may have spoken English at the factory, but sang Polish hymns at church, and shopped at Polish markets near their homes. Children spoke English at school and learned American history, then went home to speak Polish and hear stories about Poland’s past.

With these developments in mind, we will look at the black-cover “Small Roman Missal for All Sundays and the Principal Feasts of the Year: Containing Moreover a Collection of Approved Prayers Compiled from the Best Sources, In Accordance with All

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children's school attendance as well as divorce filings. Advisors provided hygiene instruction, financial and legal advice, and worked with the English School to teach Ford's immigrant workers English. See Brophy, “The Committee.” The Henry Ford Museum also has an online guide to their archival material on the Sociological Department and English School at <https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-resources/popular-topics/sociological-department>.

Recent Pontifical Decrees”<sup>45</sup> which was owned by Wanda Klimowics, who wrote her name and address—3889 Garvin—inside the cover. Judging by the publishing date of the missal and the dates of prayer cards within the book, she likely received the book around 1935, when she would have been about 10 years old.<sup>46</sup> Her father Antony migrated from Russian Poland in 1909, and her mother Kate from Galicia in 1901, making them part of the largest wave of Polish immigrants to America preceding World War I. Her father was educated; he could speak English as well as his native Polish, and he could read and write.<sup>47</sup> By 1920 he reported working in the Auto Industry,<sup>48</sup> like many other Polish immigrants who flocked to the employment opportunities offered by the Ford, Dodge, and Packard plants that had recently opened—the Highland Park Ford Plant in 1910 with its famous \$5 per day salary, and the Dodge auto factory in 1911. Wanda’s mother was uneducated, could not read or write, but did learn to speak English at least by 1930. Unlike her husband Antony, Kate was not naturalized as a U.S. citizen.<sup>49</sup> Wanda, who was born in Michigan, received an education and could read, write, and presumably speak, in both English and Polish.<sup>50</sup>

Wanda Klimowics’ identity as a second-generation Polish immigrant is reflected in the form and content of her holy card collection. Together with the missal, they reveal a 20th century Polish American Catholicism which incorporated Latin, Polish, and English, and which drew upon distinctly American commercial forms of artwork and reproduction

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<sup>45</sup> On display at the [Hamtramck Historical Museum](#).

<sup>46</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 1930 United States Federal Census, Detroit, Wayne, Michigan, page 1B, Enumeration District: 0403, FHL microfilm: 2340782, accessed on Ancestry.com.

<sup>47</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 1920 United States Federal Census, Hamtramck, Wayne, Michigan, roll: T625\_820, page: 23B, Enumeration District: 750, accessed on Ancestry.com.

<sup>48</sup> 1920 United States Federal Census, Hamtramck, Wayne, Michigan, page: 23B.

<sup>49</sup> We have information on her naturalization status up to the 1930 census, where she is still identified as an Alien. 1930 United States Federal Census, Detroit, Wayne, Michigan, page: 1B.

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 1940 United States Federal Census, Detroit, Wayne, Michigan, roll: m-t0627-01862, page: 10A, enumeration District: 84-730, accessed on Ancestry.com.

to disperse and engage with religious imagery. The missal contains texts in both English and Latin, which was at the time the official language of Catholic devotion, although actually understood by very few. If the missal represents official American Catholicism, English being the language of American citizenship alongside the traditional Latin, then the cards lovingly tucked into its pages illustrate the lived, daily experience of Polish Catholics. The majority of the cards contain prayers in Polish, or in both Polish and English, with only a few cards—one memorial card from 1938 and one from 2005<sup>51</sup>—containing full prayers in exclusively English. Even while many of the cards, and the missal itself, contain English and speak to the expectation that, by the 1930s, Polish immigrants would likely be educated in and would encounter English in their devotional lives. Even so, the Polish aspect did not disappear; it was preserved lovingly.

The symbolic and iconographic vocabulary of these cards and the variety of saints they depict form an additional visual ‘literacy’<sup>52</sup> in Polish Catholic material culture. Many cards contain images of Christ, Mary, and/or Joseph, although they also represent a pantheon of popular saints including St. Teresa of Lisieux, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, St. John the Baptist, and St. Aloysius. Although these saints are all accepted in the Catholic canon, the veneration of saints through portable material culture like these cards represents the sort of popular, private practice that Poles participated in outside of the church and which was therefore not easily regulated by it. While holy cards like these could be found in Polish churches, most were used and distributed outside of church, through institutions

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<sup>51</sup> The cards in the missal span from the 1930s to the early 2000’s, but the majority of the cards are dated from the 1930s, which is why I have chosen to include them in this study.

<sup>52</sup> For more on holy cards and alternative literacies, see Diana George and Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori, "Holy Cards/Immaginette: The Extraordinary Literacy of Vernacular Religion," *College Composition and Communication* 60, no. 2 (2008): 250-84.



Fig. 12: One of the Holy Cards found in Wanda Klimowics' Roman Missal, in commemoration of Władysława Truskowska, 1937. Courtesy of the Hamtramck Historical Museum.



like funeral homes in the case of memorial holy cards.<sup>53</sup> Because of this and because of the largely iconographical nature of the cards—in opposition to the textual missal, which offered strict guidance to proper Catholic devotion—they lent themselves to a plurality of possible interpretations and uses by laity. Despite belonging to the realm of ‘popular’ religious devotion, however, the fact that Wanda held these two forms of devotional practice—the missal and the cards—in such close proximity suggests that she saw no theoretical division between them.

The holy cards also seem to have served a social and educational purpose in Wanda Klimowics’ life. Many of the cards are marked as gifts from friends or, in one case, a nun. Much like advertising trade cards of the same era,<sup>54</sup> holy cards were exchanged presumably as much for their beautiful and often colorful pictorial representations as for the prayer intentions that they contain. The form of late 19th and early 20th century advertisement trading cards, intended for collection and consumption, and contemporaneous holy cards were tellingly similar, revealing a strain of American consumerism within these objects that were intended for sacred use.

One card is marked as having been received by a Sister teacher, implying another layer of pedagogical expectation in the gift, which includes a handwritten phrase on the front in Polish: “Najśłodszy Jezu, nie bądź mi Sędzią ale Zbawicielem” (Beloved Jesus, do not be my Judge but my Savior). Holy cards were known to be distributed as gifts to

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<sup>53</sup> Veronica (Vera) Bozek, owner of the former Bozek’s Funeral Home on Martin Avenue, Detroit, interviewed by the West Side Detroit Polonia American Historical Society, January 15, 2005, <https://www.detroitpolonia.org/veronica-vera-bozek-interview/>.

<sup>54</sup> For more on trade cards, see Ellen Gruber Garvey, “Scrapbook, Wishbook, Prayerbook: Trade-Card Scrapbooks and the Missionary Work of Advertising,” in Susan Tucker, Katherine Ott, and Patricia Buckler, eds., *The Scrapbook in American Life*, 97-115, Temple University Press, 2006.

students to encourage good work,<sup>55</sup> which may have been the case here. Even if this were not the case, holy cards such as this could serve as mnemonic devices<sup>56</sup> by which Polish Catholics could keep Bible verses and prayers close at hand for reflection and memorization. By writing on these cards, they became associated not only with the holy figures that they depicted, but also with the person who Wanda received them from.

Finally, the many memorial cards collected in Wanda Klimowics' missal offer a material glimpse into an extensive network of Polish Catholic friends, family, and neighbors, anchored in and around Hamtramck and connected through their faith and communion with one another. Although officially holy cards were meant to help Catholics remember and reflect upon the prayers and holy imagery they contained, memorial cards in particular served also as souvenirs of loved ones in the community and of their funeral ceremonies. Most of the cards—the bulk of which are from the 1930s—note the location of the funeral as being in Hamtramck or Detroit, though the most recent card from 2005 commemorating the life of Dorothy Jancowski is identified with Ford Funeral home, which is in the surrounding suburbs. The geographic shift from Detroit and Hamtramck to other areas of Michigan was followed by many Polish Americans following World War II. Wanda herself would later settle in Alpena, Michigan, where she died in 2014.<sup>57</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

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<sup>55</sup> Garvey, "Scrapbook, Wishbook, Prayerbook: Trade-Card Scrapbooks and the Missionary Work of Advertising," 103.

<sup>56</sup> See Santos Grazziotin, Luciane Sgarbi, and Maria Helena Camara Bastos, "To Civilize for Devotion: The Cultural Practice of Holy Cards in Christian Formation Rituals (XXth Century)," *History of Education & Children's Literature* 12, no. 1 (January 2017): 575–92.

<sup>57</sup> "Wanda V. McDonald Obituary," March 21, 2014, U.S., Obituary Collection, 1930-Current (Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com).

Despite not conforming to the Victorian and Protestant ideal of suburbanized domestic religiosity, Polish immigrant lay people in industrial Detroit participated in their own rich forms of domestic ritual and devotion. The private religious culture that Polish immigrants practiced in their homes provided a degree of possibility, fluidity, and creativity that was not always warranted in the parish and in the public sphere: pictures of Christ both beautified and blessed the Polish household; holy cards were unofficially coveted consumer treasures as well as mnemonic devices for official Catholic education. Although both the American church hierarchy and Detroit Americanization committees sought to make Poles worship, speak, dress and eat in ways that were deemed more acceptable than what they called immigrant “medievalism,” Poles used private religion to continue to express a religious culture that incorporated elements both official and extra-institutional, to express identities both American and Polish.

## CONCLUSION

It is easy to take for granted the number of ethnic Catholic churches, or former ethnic churches, that stipple the Metro Detroit area. But when early Polish immigrants built and dedicated new spaces for particular religious activities, they changed and continue to change both the physical and social landscape of the city. By funding their churches, struggling for lay governance, organizing parades and processions, and upholding Polish Catholic practices in the streets of Detroit and Hamtramck as well as in the privacy and intimacy of their homes, immigrants reshaped the city and forged a religious tradition and communal identity that was both Polish and American, as they perceived it.

Early Polish Catholic immigrants to Detroit nurtured their communities on the stability that brick-and-mortar churches, made *especially* for Poles, provided. The turn of the 20th century saw the development of Polish neighborhoods surrounding these parishes, binding together a growing Polish community and creating spaces within the city where Polish Catholics were the majority, and outsiders to this ethnic-religious community were marginalized. Polish immigrants adopted distinctly American methods of parochial lay governance and, when all else failed, protested to keep their churches ‘Polish’ according to their own (contested) understanding of Polishness as a linguistic, religious, and historical identity.

Especially in the early 20th century as immigration sparked nativist fears in America, Polish Catholic laypeople’s struggles with the Detroit archdiocese and with the dominant Irish Catholic and growing Protestant presence in the city led to a public perception of Poles as foreign troublemakers, a perception that Poles themselves challenged by adjusting their religious practices and by reframing their identity in an

American national context. One way that Polish laity did this was through projecting a curated image of patriotism, piety, and respectability through public ritual. Their religious and quasi-religious processions and parades helped articulate the social boundaries of Detroit Polonia, connecting Polish neighborhoods and churches as well as secular and social ethnic spaces to one within a pluralist urban context. At the same time, pressure and unwanted attention from outsiders to their community caused Polish immigrants to alter their public rituals, in some cases bringing their processions off the streets and into the more exclusive sacred space of the parish church.

Polish Catholic laity had greater flexibility and personal autonomy over their religious expression in the domestic sphere, which offered privacy equally from unsympathetic clergy and other Detroiters. Because of this, extra-institutional ‘folk practices’ flourished. Despite not conforming to Victorian expectations of idealized suburban and middle-class Christian domesticity, Polish immigrants participated in a rich material and ritual culture in their homes that allowed them to commemorate their national history and personal memory. Through prayer, feast, ritual, and interaction with devotional materials from wax saints to collectable holy cards, Polish immigrants made the urban home into sacred space. Although less visible in the historic record, these daily and intimate rituals were central to how Polish laity preserved and reenacted a perceived sense of ethnic uniqueness in industrial America.

## AFTERWORD

In the spring of 2004, the Hamtramck City Council voted to uphold an amendment to the city's noise ordinance in order to protect the right of mosques to broadcast the Muslim call to prayer over loudspeakers. The decision sparked an ongoing conversation over the nature of religious freedom in the densely populated and diverse city amid recent immigration and demographic shifts. Since the end of the 20th century, the city has seen a rapid influx of immigrants from Bangladesh, Yemen and other largely Muslim countries. Poles are no longer the largest immigrant population in the city; Bangladeshis are. Yet, the established Polish population—some, 70 or 80 years old, people who have lived there their entire lives—is still struggling to adapt to the changing face, and sounds, of the city. Those who opposed the call to prayer argued that it was a everything from a noisy inconvenience to the forceful imposition of Muslim culture upon the historically Christian city, and everything in between. Others, Polish and not, embraced it as an expression of piety and tradition, a welcome contribution to the sounds of traffic and church bells that resonate regularly through the streets of Hamtramck. Still others, silent on the issue, were entirely ambivalent.

Dr. Karen Majewski, then-president of the City Council and now mayor of Hamtramck, was taken aback by the “human drama, the individual drama” that ensued following the amendment.

For the people who opposed the call, I had a lot of sympathy: individually, psychically, dealing with their world changing around them...And the immigrants coming in who want the community they live in to reflect themselves, and feel at home in that community: they are making their home literally in front of us, building a home and building a community and building an identity... You come to a place where you don't know the language, the terrain is different, the houses are different ... every little

aspect of your life is changed. That is such a brave thing to do, and such a hopeful thing to do.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Majewski describes the newest Muslim immigrants to Hamtramck in terms familiar to the Polish Catholics of Hamtramck and Detroit, whose immigration to the area peaked about a century ago. And likewise, both groups' religious customs are integral to how they built—are building—their communities and identities in the urban north. The call to prayer controversy in Hamtramck brought to light blatant xenophobia and Islamophobia, but it also encouraged a complicated discourse over the public and private realms of religion. It made clear how religious practices impact everyone in a city, religious or not, regardless of ethnicity and age.

Like the Polish Catholic parades that were popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the explicitly public nature of the call to prayer has invited public scrutiny. Unlike Polish Catholics immigrants, who were able to find common ground—literally and figuratively—with Christian Detroiters by emphasizing the narrative of a shared European and Christian past through these public rituals, and in light of World War I a shared national cause, recent Muslim immigrants have to contend with being neither Christian nor, usually, 'white.' Nonetheless, the two cases illustrate an enduring tension in America over how public religion should be, especially when certain religious practices do not conform to the implicitly Protestant acceptable norm.

One of the common complaints from Christian residents who opposed allowing the call to prayer to be broadcasted in Hamtramck was “I don't mind your religion, but keep it

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Majewski, interviewed by the author of “A Call to Prayer,” Hamtramck, Michigan, August 13, 2014. “A Call to Prayer,” The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, <https://pluralism.org/a-call-to-prayer>.

to yourself.”<sup>2</sup> As we have seen, this is a nearly impossible request. Public religious rituals, from Corpus Christi processions to the call to prayer, not only help bind a religious community, but they carve out a space within the urban landscape for that community to exist. Public rituals create sacred space amid the cacophony of the city. The issue is perhaps less about mere noise and more about the displacement of sacred space—generations of Polish Catholics who have worked to claim the space as theirs, only for a language as foreign to them as Polish was to those 19th century English-speaking Detroiters to rise above their bell towers and curl around their neighborhood streets. But sacred space is both malleable and layered, across time and people; the boundaries shift and swell. In today’s Detroit, Our Lady of Czestochowa—peering from living rooms and shop windows over the streets that Polish immigrants transformed into their own sacred space—listens in on the *adhan* and to the myriad other prayers that continue to drift through the Motor City.

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from a comment on the article “Residents Complain That ‘Call to Prayer’ Is Too Loud” by Charles Sercombe in the *Hamtramck Review*, <http://www.thehamtramckreview.com/residents-complain-that-call-to-prayer-is-too-loud/>. I will keep the commenter’s name anonymous.



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