

Chicago Catholic Immigrants Conference: The Poles

Saturday, November 14th, 2015

Panel 9: Chicago Polish Catholicism for the 21st Century Perspectives from Loyola Students

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Class of 2016

I was asked to write a little about what *Polishness* means to me, so I'll start with something that always made me laugh growing up. When someone would find out that I was Polish, or if I would mention it in passing, 100% of the time without fail, the first thing that they would say is "COOL! Say something!" I was always at a loss as to what to tell them, so I threw a *cześć* or *jak się masz* at them, and they would think it's the coolest thing in the world. Or, another favorite of mine is, "How do you say my name in Polish?" Their name would be something like Anna or Maria and I'm like "Anna?" They always seemed a little disappointed by their lack of a "Polish name." Both of my parents are from Poland.

My mom is from Myślenice, a small town near Krakow, and my dad is from Stare Bystre an even SMALLER TOWN, honestly probably more like a village, near Zakopane. I grew up in a small town about two hours away from Chicago, with a very small population of Polish immigrants. There were numerous people who had great grandparents from Poland, but only about two or three families, mine included, where our parents immigrated here to the United States. For me, growing up in a Polish household was an amazing experience. Our family get-togethers were huge; hugs were plentiful; there was always more food than you

could eat; conversations never stopped; and there was always that one uncle that would stay until 3:00 am and all I could hear from my bedroom was “*Na zdrowie!*” Seeing the differences in family structure between my friend’s families and mine was always interesting. Language, of course, was one of the biggest differences.

Speaking and understanding another language is a remarkable thing and I am very fortunate that my parents encouraged me to keep up with the language even though we lived too far away for me to attend Polish school. Church was another major part of our Polish tradition. My friends would want me to go to a movie or something and I’d be like, sorry I have to go to church. And they are like but it’s a WEDNESDAY. It was never a chore to go to church like some people may think, that was just the way it was, and to me it was completely normal. There is no distinction between being Polish and being Catholic. Those two aspects are very much intertwined. Making Easter baskets to get blessed on Saturday for Easter breakfast on Sunday, no meat on Christmas Eve, and visiting the cemetery on all Saints day are very important aspects of “being Polish” and they are also very much Catholic things as well. My mom, dad, brother, and I would say the rosary once a week together, and I think that that made us closer as a family.

I am more than grateful that my parents took the time to familiarize us with these Polish customs, because the family connection that was forged from these traditions is amazing. I know for a fact that I will keep the traditions alive whenever I decide to have a family, because they have made me who I am today.

Dziękuję.