

The Role of Polish and American Identities in the Future of the Polish National Catholic Church

by

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Social scientists have observed that every social movement identifies itself through what Erving Goffman identified as “framing.” In framing, a group adapts current events to lend legitimacy to contemporary actions. Framing refers to the “schemata of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label” a social movement.¹ Framing has been described as having three elements. Movement leaders first diagnose the social problem by identifying the victims and the offending process. Second, a social movement offers a prognosis by identifying its unique solution to the problem. Finally, the movement’s planned action must be perceived as legitimate and the diagnosed social problem as relevant to both individual lives and the common welfare. The establishment of both legitimacy and imperative serve to motivate the social movement’s mobilization.² Rhys Williams, a scholar of comparative social movement explains: “To achieve their aims of social change, movements *must* produce rhetorical packages that

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¹Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: an Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 74.

²Della Porta and Diani, 77-79.

explain their claims within extant, culturally legitimate boundaries.”³ Social movements define and legitimate their claims through both rhetorical and symbolic communication. The social movement of which the Polish Nature Catholic Church was born has traditionally featured two frames.

In the last decades before 1900 the social and economic conditions of Polish-Americans were not favorable. Slavic immigrants faced poverty while living in urban working-class communities. While adapting to a new country, language and culture, the Roman Catholic Church was the cultural lifeline which many grasped for stability. It was their Roman Catholic faith which bound Polish-Americans together during the transition into American society. When the lifeline was perceived to be corrupted by abusive church leaders, Polish Americans naturally circled their lifeboats in order to survive. In a nationalistic, “us-versus-the-world” outlook, the Polish National Catholic Church broke free from the authority of both the Pope and his non-Polish, allegedly abusive fellow bishops in the United States. The divorce from the Roman Catholic Church was an act to ensure that Polish American families and communities were culturally and ideologically supported. The PNCC, led throughout its growth by Rev. Francis Hodur, presented itself through the two cultural frames of its target population: Polish nationalism and American ideals of democracy and self-determination.

After a century of existence, the needs of Polish American communities have changed. Shrinking membership suggests that the Polish National Catholic Church has developed an unprecedented disconnect from its traditional Polish American pool of support. The original framing of the movement for the independent church appealed to Polish Americans through the use of the ethnic language. However, Mass in the PNCC today is almost always celebrated in English and the presence of Polish-language text, even in new documents issued from church headquarters in Scranton, Pennsylvania, is now an exception. Such changes might lead one to believe that the church is following its own demographic trends in an effort to stay relevant among its members. However, the loss of Polish language usage and other nationalistic symbols are indicators that the ethnic Polish framing that made the church unique is slipping into the past. The Polish National Catholic Church must determine and project its new identity if it is no longer a “Polish” church. Indecisiveness regarding identity may be as devastating as no identity at all.

Despite these difficulties, a unique set of doctrines within the Catholic tradition has developed a rich theological history associated with the Polish National Catholic Church. These doctrinal disciplines distinguish the PNCC among all Christian denominations in the United States. The evolution of doctrine in the PNCC is a result of the movement’s other framing mechanism, one which fea-

³Rhys H. Williams, *From ‘Beloved Community’ to ‘Family Values’: Religious Language, Symbolic Repertoires, and Democratic Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 247-65.

tures a democratic power structure and a populist desire to place a responsible level of decision-making abilities at the feet of common parishioners. This unique trait of the PNCC is referred to in this study as within the American framing mechanism. The existence of these two social framing mechanisms, Polish and American, shows that the PNCC is a product of both cultural references. Each trait was vital to the ultimate establishment of the Polish National Catholic Church in 1904.

The second perspective of the Polish National Catholic Church is that of a theologian trained in the history of American Catholicism. The formation and existence of the small Polish National Catholic Church was a result of the national and ecclesial context in which these Polish Catholics found themselves in the late nineteenth century. The PNCC could only have been conceived and born on American soil. Unlike in Poland, the political, ethnic, and economic conditions in the United States were ripe for a small theological revolution within the Catholic tradition. Densely-populated pockets of Polish Americans existed throughout the manufacturing towns of the American Rust Belt: places like Chicopee, Massachusetts; Buffalo and Rochester, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Pittsburgh and Scranton, Pennsylvania; and Cleveland, Ohio. These are communities which formed strong networks of social capital in response to living in their new country. When these communities faced adversity in the form of ethnic prejudice or from the non-Polish officers of their own Catholic Church, the communities were well suited for the struggle to maintain their national identity.

The United States offered a unique “theo-political opportunity structure” which allowed for the successful creation of a church whose doctrines were sensitive to both the Polish and American identities of its membership. The founding members created the Catholic and distinctly Polish Church they desired while also preserving localized power to suit the challenges their ethnic group faced while living in the United States. Important modifications, such as optional celibacy for clergy and group reception of the sacrament of penance were results of a democratic power structure. Despite these modifications, the PNCC claims to theologically reside within the Catholic tradition.

Another portion of the unique theo-political opportunity structure is rooted in the history of Catholicism in the United States. Religious tolerance and self-determination are ardently defended civil rights in the United States. Moreover, Catholicism in the United States has a history of autonomy due to its vast geographic distance from Rome. Since the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, Catholicism and democracy have engaged each other. Knowledgeable theologians such as Bishop John Ireland have also applied an ecclesiology of exceptionalism regarding American Catholics in relation to the universal church. The Polish National Catholic Church was not fathered by theological or political extremists; rather, it is part of a Roman Catholic tradition of religious self-determination in the United States.

Both the Polish and American sides of the PNCC’s identity were communi-



Franciszek Hodur as a young priest.
*Courtesy of the Polish National Catholic Commission on
History and Archives.*

cated to the public and were vital to the movement's success. The Polish National Catholic Church thereby distinguished itself among the vast array of Christian denominations in the United States. The PNCC found a niche for itself within American Catholicism. In terms borrowed from economics, the ecclesial market in 1904 demanded a place for nationalistic, Catholic Polish Americans. Vast numbers within this group joined the Polish National Catholic Church, resulting in a membership of over a quarter million members in the 1950s.⁴

⁴Helen Buckley, "Polish National Catholic Church Celebrates Centennial—Sto Lat!" *Polish Heritage* (American Council for Polish Culture), 1997.

ETHNIC POLISH IDENTITY

At the turn of the twentieth century, millions of ethnic Poles had migrated to the industrial centers the United States. Immigrant Poles generally took manufacturing jobs involving manual labor, long working hours, and working-class compensation. Meanwhile, the immigrants faced learning a new language and adapting to life in a democratic system. In becoming a product of two cultures, Polish Americans treasured both older symbols of their ethnic culture and embraced new democratic institutions which governed their lives.

The Roman Catholic Church had been tightly intertwined with Polish culture for many centuries when the “national church” movements began to organizing among Poles in the United States. Immigrants had left behind in Europe a society whose communities revolved around the life of the church. Since the latter decades of the eighteenth century, historically Polish territories became subject to foreign rulers—Russians, Prussians or Austrians. The Roman Catholic clergy supported the January Uprising in 1863 which sought to re-establish the Polish state.⁵ In the wake of the Russian suppression of the January Uprising and the subsequent policies of russification, Poles began to define their ethnic identity “in terms of cultural norms and attributes.”⁶ The Roman Catholic Church in Poland, itself thought to be threatened by the Orthodox Christianity dominating Russia, actively sought to associate itself with Polish identity. This connection was forged upon nine hundred years of Catholic tradition in Poland, but also the continued support of Polish nationalism and therefore specific political ideologies.⁷ Polish immigrants came to the United States having experienced the Roman Catholic Church as a partner to their nationalism, one which was loyal and respectful to their specific needs as a besieged ethnic culture.

Polish American immigrants in the United States discovered a different Roman Catholic Church than the one in their European communities. The American church was not led by Poles but rather a mix of Irish and German bishops drawn from the previous waves of Catholic immigration from Europe.⁸ Even as the twentieth century dawned and Poles comprised over ten percent of the total Catholic population in America, the church included no ethnic Polish bishops.⁹ As the new century commenced, two hundred ethnic Polish parishes existed in the United States and “demand for new parishes outstripped the Roman Catholic

⁵Konrad Sadkowski, *Catholic Power and Catholicism as a Component of Modern Polish National Identity, 1863-1918* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 13.

⁶Sadkowski, 14.

⁷Sadkowski, 15.

⁸Joseph Wiczerzak, “A Brief History of the Polish National Catholic Church and Its Origins,” *Journeying Together in Christ: the Report of the Polish National Catholic-Roman Catholic Dialogue* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Division, 1990), 37.

⁹Wiczerzak, 38.

Church's willingness to create them."¹⁰ Poles could not establish a new parish without the approval of the local bishop. A bishop's rejection of a project inherently forced the congregation to assimilate with a non-Polish parish. If the bishop approved the ethnic church he retained the power to appoint a Polish or non-Polish pastor. Although church construction was completed with the limited financial and labor resources of the congregation, the local Bishop retained all property rights to the parish. Non-Polish bishops also held authority to command the Polish parish schools to not teach their ethnic language and culture.¹¹

The bishop's power over ethnic parishes and the lack of Polish representation in the church hierarchy fed the perception that the American Roman Catholic hierarchy was deliberately abusing or neglecting the immigrant Polish population. Such mistreatment was particularly offensive to ethnic Poles because of the large investment of their culture in the Roman Catholic Church. The congregation of Sacred Heart in Scranton understood its existence as a reaction to an attack on its ethnic identity. Rev. Hodur, the young Polish-born priest, was invited to lead St. Stanislaus' independent movement because he "had already endeared himself by participating in social work, publishing one of the first parish newspapers, and otherwise showing concern for their welfare."¹² Hodur took over the parish leadership on March 21, 1897.¹³

Roman Catholicism could not be easily shed from the identity of the Scranton Polish Americans since they had been raised and nurtured in the church. Rev. Hodur was a Roman Catholic priest and dutifully made an effort to reconcile the needs of his newly independent parish with Vatican authorities. He travelled to Rome in early 1889, not long after assuming leadership of St. Stanislaus Parish. Though not given an audience with Pope Leo XIII after several trips to Rome, Hodur was allowed to present to church authorities a four-point plan to support Polish Catholics in the United States. These points included the appointment of ethnic-Polish bishops, parish property rights, greater control of the congregation to self-government, and to select its own pastor.¹⁴ Rather than a constructive response to his efforts, Hodur was excommunicated by Bishop O'Hara of Scranton in September 1898.¹⁵

The actions of Roman Catholic bishops to hinder the development of ethnic Polish parishes were seen as direct, prejudiced attacks on Polish American identity. As the First Synod of the Polish National Catholic Church declared in 1904: "[I]f Roman-Irish Bishops expropriated the churches, schools and cemeteries of

¹⁰Buckley.

¹¹Buckley.

¹²Buckley.

¹³Buckley.

¹⁴Wieczerzak, 46.

¹⁵Franciszek Hodur, *Apocalypse of the Twentieth Century* (Scranton, PA: Haddon Craftsmen, 1930), 2.

the faithful people, they committed violence, plain theft, forbidden by the Seventh Commandment....”¹⁶ Polish immigrants felt like “second class citizens”¹⁷ in the institution on which they relied for support in their new country.

In response to the perceived attacks on ethnic Poles, Rev. Hodur framed his independence movement as a vehicle to preserve and promote Polish culture and nationalism. An accomplished rhetorician, Hodur appealed to the nascent church’s ethnic nationalism to inspire unity and attract nationalistic members. He is said to have possessed a “deep, well-modulated voice”¹⁸ and easily gave a “powerful delivery” without reading from notes.¹⁹ Hodur’s sermonizing was a very important means of communicating his movement’s message. Around the turn of the twentieth century “sermons lasting half an hour were common and hour-long sermons were not unusual.”²⁰ Hodur effectively associated Polish nationalism with the Polish National Catholic Church, thereby spurring its growth. The nationalist appeal was especially effective due to the unique Polish sensitivity to outside intrusion into cultural institutions. Polish American immigrants had lived in Europe as subjects to Prussian, Russian, or Austrian regimes. Immigrants recalled their families left behind in Europe when Hodur asked rhetorically in 1899: “Will we die devoured by the Germans or the Muscovites? ... [W]ill we be capable of self-existence?”²¹ The PNCC’s First General Synod of 1904 plainly stated: “[W]e condemn the encroachments of Irish and German bishops on our nationality.”²²

As Rev. Hodur identified the movement’s anti-Polish enemies, followers were encouraged to unite behind this nationalist fervor. Hodur described Polish Americans as “part of the Polish nation” and the PNCC as “established with the objective of saving the whole nation.”²³ The “Resurrection of Poland” was a priority for the nascent church.²⁴ Hodur told his congregation in 1899 that “we should be proud that we are subjugated and yet we do not walk with our heads like slaves ... may our whole nation awaken itself ... we will have a Polish state

¹⁶Casimir J. Grotnik, ed., *The Polish National Catholic Church: Minutes of the First Eleven General Synods (1904-1963)* (Boulder, CO: Eastern European Monographs, 2002; transl. Theodore L. Zawistowski), 17.

¹⁷Buckley.

¹⁸Casimir J. Grotnik, ed., *Bishop Francis Hodur: Sermon Outlines and Occasional Speeches 1899-1922* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1999), 7.

¹⁹Grotnik, *Bishop Francis Hodur*, 7.

²⁰Grotnik, *Bishop Francis Hodur*, 7.

²¹Grotnik, *Bishop Francis Hodur*, 13.

²²Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 17.

²³Francis Hodur, “The Creed of the Polish National Catholic Church,” *Polish National Catholic Church. Warsaw Synod* (Warsaw, Poland: Polish National Catholic Church, 1928), 10.

²⁴Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 19.

in the twentieth century.”²⁵

Rev. Hodur labeled enemies of the newly-established movement according to their non-Polish identity. He would describe the need to “take up battle with the Roman priests” while speaking in a particular vicinity.²⁶ Abusive bishops in the United States were usually referred to as “Irish” bishops, who naturally were described with such colorful language as “serpent-monsters with gleaming, bewitching eyes but terrible intentions.”²⁷ The Polish “nation” in the United States was described as a “sacrificial lamb” at the hands of the “Roman Catholic Irish Church.”²⁸ This Polish framing became permanent when the First General Synod established the Polish National Catholic Church in 1904, appointing Hodur its first Prime Bishop. As bishop, his rhetoric likewise vilified Rome as the seat of a foreign ruler who exacted great influence over the lives of Poles. The Pope was an easy target of ridicule from the perspective of working-class immigrant Poles. Hodur spoke about “how differently His so-called Vicar lives and teaches from the Vatican. This is a powerful lord, residing in a palace of 11,000 rooms.”²⁹ Hodur also attacked the Pope as specifically anti-Polish: “[I]n this battle the Pope is standing on the side of the German Protestant Emperor oppressing the Catholic Polish nation.”³⁰ Of particular scorn was the doctrine of infallibility which arose from the Vatican Council in 1870. Hodur described this by positing that the Roman Catholic Church “dislodged Christ the Lord and sat the Pope.”³¹ In 1910, Hodur also asked “who would pay attention to papal infallibility, the authority of the church on earth above the earth and in heaven?”³² Hodur maintained his nationalistic rhetoric throughout his life, stating in 1928 that “Poland should never belong to a foreign Pope.”³³

The declaration of the First Synod echoed its new bishop’s rhetoric, describing the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church as “transforming Poles into Irishmen.” To deliberately maintain the cultural association with Catholicism, the synod condemned the American “Roman” Church as “un-Catholic.”³⁴ At the same time, the PNCC is self-described as a spirited reaction to preserve “our nationality, language and national customs.” Regarding Polish lands in Europe, the first PNCC synod “pledged fidelity such as every child promises its beloved

²⁵Grotnik, *Bishop Francis Hodur*, 17.

²⁶Grotnik, *Bishop Francis Hodur*, 39.

²⁷Grotnik, *Bishop Francis Hodur*, 51.

²⁸Grotnik, *Bishop Francis Hodur*, 50.

²⁹Grotnik, *Bishop Francis Hodur*, 40.

³⁰Grotnik, *Bishop Francis Hodur*, 51.

³¹Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 38.

³²Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 43.

³³Hodur, “Creed,” 9.

³⁴Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 17.

mother.”³⁵ Clearly, the establishment of the Polish National Catholic Church was driven by its members’ desire to preserve their Polish identity and culture. This theological movement was principally framed as primarily a “Polish” action; the “democratic” framing mechanism was secondary in importance during the church’s early years.

The communication of this social movement’s framing did not rely solely on its bishop’s rhetorical skills. In addition to an effective homilist, Hodur was an aggressive journalist who began publishing a newspaper even before his invitation to lead the independent movement in Scranton. Print media was a natural resource for the young, idealistic and nationalistic Hodur. *Straż* [The Guard] began publication only weeks after Hodur arrived to lead the independent parish in Scranton.³⁶ This Polish-language weekly newspaper was the official communications organ of the PNCC beginning in 1909.³⁷ It came to be called the “sword and shield” of the new church. *Straż* continues to be published weekly and is the oldest continually published Polish American weekly newspaper.³⁸ *Rola Boża* (God’s Field), first published in December 1923, served to supplement rather than replace *Straż*. In the first years after the church’s establishment, Bishop Hodur personally wrote brochures, books, hymns, the first Polish Missal, prayer books, the Confession of Faith, and the Eleven Great Principles of the PNCC.³⁹ These documents served to educate Polish National Catholics in their church’s theology, the first editions being published in the Polish language.

Bishop Hodur also encouraged his followers to read the newest generation of nationalistic Polish authors, describing “messianic” writers Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Ignacy Krasieński as “great minds.”⁴⁰ These three writers have also been described as “Bishop Hodur’s favorite literary trio.”⁴¹ Messianic literature was popular among the congregations of the PNCC, especially those which had come to label Poland as the “Christ of nations” that would eventually be resurrected.⁴² The first PNCC “Special Synod” in 1906 described Mickiewicz and Słowacki as heroes for their courageous literary attacks on the Pope and encouraged every Polish family to own not only the Holy Scriptures, but also the works of these three writers. The synod especially recommended *Księgi*

³⁵Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 18.

³⁶Wieczerzak, “Brief History,” 46.

³⁷Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 50.

³⁸*The Church and Spójnia Working “Hand in Hand”* (Scranton, PA: Allied Printing Trade Council, 1986).

³⁹Franciszek Hodur, *Apocalypse of the Twentieth Century* (Scranton, PA: Haddon Craftsmen, 1930), 3.

⁴⁰Grotnik, *Bishop Francis Hodur*, 15.

⁴¹Joseph W. Wieczerzak, “From the Polish National Catholic Church: A Tale of Two Archives in One City,” *Polish American Studies*, Vol. LX (2003), 42.

⁴²Wieczerzak, “Brief History,” 48.

Pielgrzymstwa Polskiego (Books of the Polish Pilgrimage), as well as mentioning Jan Ostroróg and Stanisław Orzechowski as Polish literary heroes who had advocated for a “national” or otherwise more autonomous Catholic Church in Poland.⁴³

Communications emanating from the movement sought to reinforce the PNCC’s identity as a haven for disaffected Poles seeking to preserve their cultural identity in the United States. The Polish framing of Hodur’s independent movement also was manifest in the tangible and intangible symbols surrounding the new church. Nationalistic enthusiasm among Polish Americans demanded a church that *looked* and *acted* Polish. The deliberate symbolism surrounding the movement served to reinforce the nationalistic rhetoric which leaped from the pulpit and the pages of *Straż* and *Rola Boża*. The first sign of Polish identity was the name “Polish National Catholic Church.” The decision on the church’s name was not a matter of course. The First Special Synod in 1906 “resolved that the National Church shall be named the Polish-National in America” only after a “lengthy debate.”⁴⁴ The choice to insert “Polish” into the name of the National Church was to inspire unity among its dominant ethnic demographic. The use of the “Polish” identifier in this context was a clear example of framing the movement to its target population.

The movement’s headquarters in Scranton was an ideal place to discover the symbolism that Polish National Catholics associated with their movement. St. Stanislaus Church in Scranton, like other PNCC parishes afterwards, made an effort to create worship spaces that appeared distinctively Polish within the Catholic tradition. This objective was not difficult or unprecedented. At the time of the PNCC’s founding, over 200 distinctively Polish Roman Catholic parishes were operating in the United States. Naturally, a Polish saint was chosen to grace the name of what became Scranton’s St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Church. Homage was also paid to the great Polish religious heroes in the form of visual representations. St. Stanislaus in Scranton featured a painted scene of Sts. Cyril and Methodius baptizing the Polish nation, and large murals of St. Stanislaus, the icon of the Black Madonna, and Our Lady of Czestochowa were prominent. The First Special Synod established the first unique feast days in the PNCC calendar, among them the “Holy Day of Brotherly Love and the Union of the Polish people in the emigration” to be celebrated on the second Sunday in October.⁴⁵

Polish National Catholic parishes further distinguished themselves from Roman Catholic parishes by honoring secular, national heroes in addition to those associated with the Catholic Church. Non-religious symbols of Polish glory honored great cultural figures such as the poets Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, both of who have their likeness in the stained glass of St. Stanislaus in

⁴³Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 38, 41.

⁴⁴Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 45.

⁴⁵Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 47.

Scranton.⁴⁶ Other secular symbols popular around PNCC parishes included the traditional red and white Polish flag and, later, the likeness of Józef Piłsudski. Polish-language hymns became very popular through the growth of the PNCC. Also popular in the early years of the church was *Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła* (Poland is Not Yet Lost).⁴⁷

Perhaps the most radical symbol of Polish separatism from the Roman Catholic Church was the introduction of a Polish-language Mass on Christmas Day in 1901.⁴⁸ Through the remainder of his life, Bishop Hodur insisted on the exclusive usage of the Polish language for the celebration of Mass.⁴⁹ More than sixty years before the Second Vatican Council was convened, the Polish National Catholic Church mandated its' parishes to uniformly celebrate Mass in a language other than Latin. Old Catholic churches had celebrated the vernacular Mass since before the Declaration of Utrecht in 1889.⁵⁰ However, the PNCC was the only Catholic Church to do so in the United States, soon becoming the largest non-eastern Catholic church in the world to do so. Naturally, PNCC congregations chose ethnic Polish pastors for their parishes who were competent to say Mass.

Another tangible symbol of the PNCC movement was the ubiquitous presence of written Polish. Church missals, parish bulletins, and official church documents and periodicals were all distributed in the Polish language. The church's Third General Synod in 1914 resolved to completely disallow the use of Latin for Mass in any PNCC parish.⁵¹ In addition, it appointed a special translation committee to complete the preparation of missals and other Mass-related material in the Polish language. The PNCC continued these Polish framing efforts, leading to a fast pace of growth. By 1958, the PNCC comprised 162 parishes and reported over 270,000 members.⁵² This growth must be attributed in great measure to the ethnic Polish framing that Hodur, and others, placed around the movement. Polish-specific framing was not abandoned as the church became formally established. Rather, it encouraged his followers to build their new church as a part of the "Polish nation."

Soon after the establishment of the PNCC in 1904, Bishop Hodur organized the Polish National Union (Spójnia) in 1908 as a fraternal society to promote the

⁴⁶"Stained Glass Windows," St. Stanislaus Polish National Catholic Church, 2006, <http://saintstanislauspncc.org/vsItemDisplay.dsp&objectID=DD79FB9A-F0A1-40C4-88F1E681217F1D85&method=display>.

⁴⁷Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 77.

⁴⁸Wieczerzak, "Brief History," 48.

⁴⁹Hodur, *Apocalypse*, 3.

⁵⁰"History," Union of Utrecht Old Catholic Churches, www.utrechter-union.org/english/start.htm.

⁵¹Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 86.

⁵²Buckley.

financial security of Polish National Catholics.⁵³ Although formally independent of the PNCC, Spójnia provided its members with financial services, educational opportunities, and care for elderly and disabled members. Spójnia also established a history of providing direct humanitarian assistance to Poland as early as World War I.⁵⁴ The resolutions of the PNCC's First Special Synod in 1906 make the extraordinary mission of the PNCC clear: "[T]o take active part [in assisting Poland] through donations for active defense ... supporting Polish industry, the Polish school, Polish literature, by preserving the national language, customs, and traditions. If there should arise the need ... we shall stand in the ranks with our brothers on the banks of the Vistula, Warta, Niemen, and Bug [rivers], and we will pay our debt to the Fatherland."⁵⁵

Along with relief aid to Poland, the PNCC invested in establishing a missionary presence back in its ethnic fatherland. This concept was first pursued in earnest after the PNCC's Third General Synod in 1914 when Bishop Hodur stated: "[A]n even greater effort awaits us beyond the sea ... in our Fatherland, Poland.... They first arose in the free, blessed land of America, and then they will arise one after another on the liberated land of Poland."⁵⁶ Hodur and other PNCC leaders believed the mission of their church in Poland was not simply to evangelize among their countrymen for Christ, but rather to liberate their homeland from foreign oppression. To these Polish National Catholics, the entrenched Roman Catholic Church was one form of foreign oppression that accompanied Russian, German, and Austrian domination.

After the church had become established, the 1928 Synod met in Warsaw where Bishop Hodur proclaimed a mission of the PNCC as "freeing the Polish nation from under foreign control, the Roman Church."⁵⁷ One hundred and twenty-two PNCC parishes were operating in Poland during the early 1950s, at which point the PNCC assumed the role of an advisor to its sister church in Poland.⁵⁸

The ethnic identity of the PNCC continues to be easily discernable to the newcomer who attends Mass in one of its parishes. An icon on the wall, a particular song, or the presence of the Polish language in official church or parish documents still profess a loyalty to the ethnic group on which the church was founded. These objects or customs deliberately connect the parishioners to their ethnicity by subscribing to the Polish traditions. However, the modern PNCC does not communicate its Polish identity with the nationalistic fervor of a century ago. Polish identity is no longer a framing mechanism of the PNCC movement, if it

⁵³*Church and Spójnia.*

⁵⁴*Church and Spójnia.*

⁵⁵Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 43.

⁵⁶Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 79.

⁵⁷Hodur, "Creed," 11.

⁵⁸Theodore L. Zawistowski, "Recent Research on the Polish National Catholic Church and Related Movements," *Polish American Studies*, Vol. XLIX (1992), 78.

remains a “movement” at all. Without nationalism as a motivation to unite, many of the strongest intangible Polish symbols have either greatly diminished in importance or become extinct altogether. The Polish-language mass is no longer commonly celebrated. The Tenth General Synod in 1958, soon after the death of Bishop Hodur, who had insisted on the use of Polish alone, decided to allow an English-language Mass to be celebrated where expedient. As parishes have shrunk and succeeding generations are raised without the Polish language in the household, the practicality of a Polish-language Mass has diminished. Even at the St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Cathedral in Scranton, only the 7:30 AM Mass on Sundays is celebrated in Polish.⁵⁹ Many PNCC parishes no longer celebrate any Masses in Polish. For similar reasons, the presence of Polish text around the PNCC parishes and in official communications from Scranton has diminished to near non-existence. Parish bulletins are generally printed exclusively in English; Polish words being most prevalent in the form of family surnames listed when requesting prayers for the sick. The newest official PNCC missal was released in late 2006, containing a letter from the Prime Bishop, instructions for Mass preparation, three versions of the Mass itself, and five Eucharistic Prayers.⁶⁰ In all of these sections, there is not one printed Polish word. The missal is completely printed in English, only the two hymns and prayer for exposition of the sacrament are accompanied by a Polish-language translation. These English language-only documents published in Scranton are meant to serve the entire church.

The periodicals associated with the PNCC have also generally shed the use of the Polish language. *Rola Boża* is currently published bi-weekly in English, save for a small two-page Polish-language section focused not on church news, but rather Polish National Catholic history. Either the PNCC no longer has the resources to translate dozens of pages of text each week from English to Polish, or there is no demand for such a translation. Exiled to the very last pages of *Rola Boża* each week, the Polish-language section appears to be a nostalgic gesture to please those few subscribers who read Polish and place great importance on their own ethnic identity and that of their church.

The PNCC priesthood is no longer universally of Polish ethnicity. Some clergy of Polish ancestry no longer speak the language. As one PNCC priest relates, “I was taught to celebrate the Mass in Polish while in the seminary, but I only understand some of the words that I say.” The ranks of the clergy also include men who were once Episcopalian pastors, but converted in the wake of the Church of England’s decision to ordain women. Since his ordination in 2004, a Palestinian priest is the pastor of the PNCC parish in Houtzdale, Pennsylvania.⁶¹

⁵⁹St. Stanislaus PNCC, <http://saintstanislauspncc.org/>.

⁶⁰*Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Polish National Catholic Church* (Scranton, PA: PNCC, 2006).

⁶¹Ramzi R. Musallam, “Father Ramzi R. Musallam Ordained to the Holy Priesthood of Christ,” *ACTS*, May 2004, 11.

It is unclear whether PNCC parishes accept non-Polish priests because of their willingness to diversify their parish's ethnic identity, or their necessity to have any priest at all. The presence of a non-Polish priest certainly dilutes the ethnic framing mechanism. Ironically, the large number of Polish-born priests who come to the United States may have a negative influence on church stability. According to an analysis of the 2007 PNCC directory, half of the church's ninety-eight priests were born in Poland.⁶² These clergy may have limited English language skills, and otherwise struggle to build parish relationships without the cultural knowledge and contacts of an American-born priest. Although the presence of Polish-born priests serves to reinforce the church's ethnic framing mechanism, the overall result for the church may be negative if he fails to effectively administer his duties and facilitate a healthy, growing parish. The extreme scarcity of Polish National Catholic priests has also removed the congregations' ability to choose pastors, forcing them to take whoever is available. Yet, Polish blood remains at the top of the PNCC's elected hierarchy. The surnames of the PNCC bishops are obviously of Polish origin, much like the majority of the church membership. However, fluency in the Polish language is not a requirement, official or *de facto*, for service at the highest levels of the church's administration.

As intangible, personnel-driven symbols of Polish identity have diminished, the ethnic heritage of the PNCC is observed generally through the tangible symbols around places of worship. However, tangible symbols have begun to disappear as well. Some parishes have removed "Polish" from the signs outside the church. In Rochester, New York, "St. Casmir's National Catholic Church" is advertised today on street signs, parish bulletins, and the pastor's business cards. The stained-glass windows featuring Polish heroes still remain in the older parishes, and Polish cultural events are held for children to make *szopka* or celebrate *Wigilia*. Today, the symbols of "Polishness" are present only through a concerted effort by parishioners who care about their ethnic identity. In light of diminishing tangible and intangible cultural symbols, some PNCC parishes have experienced a gradual movement to only a *passive* Polish identity. Extra efforts to maintain parish ethnicity through cultural events are attempts to resuscitate an *active* Polish identity. These efforts appear to be made most strongly on the parish level rather than from any concerted action led by Scranton.

AMERICAN IDENTITY

The notion of a "National Church" for the Polish nation is centuries old. The first significant Polish-language literature was recorded during Poland's golden age of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Polish authors such as Mikołaj Rey and Jan Kochanowski were influenced by both the Protestant Reformation spreading through Europe and Poland's own progressive policies of religious tol-

⁶²2007 PNCC Directory (Scranton, PA: PNCC, 2007).

eration. Both Rey and Kochanowski encouraged reforms to the Roman Catholic Church. The use of Latin in the Mass rather than the Polish vernacular was an issue of dispute in the sixteenth century and the idea of a national church had supporters among an influential group of reformers.⁶³ The Polish *Sejm*, or parliament, passed a number of restrictive laws on the power of Roman Catholic bishops in Poland. The *Sejm* also made several progressive demands to the Council of Trent, including the creation of national councils and the ability to celebrate Mass in the vernacular.⁶⁴ The Council of Trent did not adopt these reformist demands, while their influence declined in Poland also as its golden age passed in the seventeenth century. Roman Catholicism was thenceforth deeply entrenched in Polish culture and the theo-political opportunity structure for progressive reforms ended. The partitions of Poland between Russia, Prussia and Austria in the late eighteenth century completed the decimation of the political power of ethnic Poles. The next opportunity for Polish engagement in theological reform came to the immigrants living in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The United States not only provided a free society to facilitate a theological movement, but also a progressive Catholic tradition. The vast majority of early American Catholics lived in the colony of Maryland, which featured the most favorable political and social structure for non-Protestants. The Roman Catholic population grew from a very small minority in the United States in the early nineteenth century to comprise its largest single Christian denomination by 1900. Being a religious minority perceived to favor a hierarchical, authoritarian structure of power, meant the Roman Catholic Church faced significant public hostility in the young American nation. The progressive theology of John Carroll, the first Roman Catholic bishop in the United States, served to inject liberal philosophy into the American church and minimize the chasm between Catholics and Protestants. As Catholic theologian John T. McGreevy describes the tension: "Democracy was a culture, not a set of propositions. Catholics obviously lived among Americans, but were they *of* them?"⁶⁵

It became the task of John Carroll to serve Catholics in a nation dominated by Protestant Christianity. Significant public dispute reigned throughout the nineteenth century over the acceptance of Roman Catholics as loyal American countrymen. The hypocrisy seen between living in a democratic society and pledging obedience to a vicar in Rome could not be reconciled in the minds of some Americans. Bishop Carroll sought to ease fears regarding Catholic Americans by encouraging assimilation into American society. Carroll publicly referenced

⁶³*Polish National Catholic Church in America* (Rochester, NY: St. Casimir's PNCC, 1933), 1.

⁶⁴*Polish National Catholic Church in America*, 1.

⁶⁵John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 169.

national leaders and symbols within and outside the Mass. Significantly, Bishop Carroll also supported the election of bishops in the United States, as opposed to their appointment by the Vatican.⁶⁶ This particular reform—the election of church leadership—was to become an important distinguishing factor between the Roman Catholic Church and the PNCC for Polish Americans. The efforts of Bishop Carroll to reconcile the Catholic Church with the freedom of American society must have been at least partially successful, as Alexis de Tocqueville described the American Roman Catholic Church in 1831 as contributing to the “maintenance of a Democratic Republic in the United States.”⁶⁷ A conservative Catholic movement became popular in the United States by the middle of the nineteenth century, putting an end to the legacy of Archbishop Carroll’s “irenic” approach.⁶⁸ The conservative movement, led by groups such as the American Redemptorists, believed it their “duty to take the offensive and expose ... the erroneous doctrines of Protestantism and impiety.”⁶⁹ Although the perspective of the Catholic Church toward the American nation evolved with its leadership, the debate began with Archbishop Carroll. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church could choose to embrace its American context and create a mutually influential, assimilation-based relationship, or the church could conservatively maintain a hostile relationship with the Protestants who overwhelmingly dominated American society.

Various levels of anti-Catholicism existed in the United States throughout the nineteenth century. The Roman Catholic Church was continually perceived as anti-American due to its hierarchical structure headed by an infallible Pope. However, Catholics in the United States were also identified with specific ethnic immigrant groups. Not only were these immigrants poor, but they might not speak English, and on top of it all they were Catholic. Anti-Catholicism was magnified by anti-immigrant and xenophobic beliefs. The continued hostility of some Roman Catholic groups to Protestantism also offended large numbers of Americans.

The Americanist movement represented the radical thought occurring in the American Roman Catholic Church at the time the PNCC movement was born. Led by Archbishops John Ireland and John Keane, the movement envisaged the church in the United States as leading the rest of the world through the “divinely initiated broad cultural shift from east to west.”⁷⁰ Archbishop Keane believed that America would be the site of a re-unification of Christian churches. He was condescending towards the Catholic Church in Europe, going so far even to label it

⁶⁶McGreevey, 11.

⁶⁷McGreevey, 21.

⁶⁸McGreevey, 27.

⁶⁹McGreevey, 27.

⁷⁰Thomas Wangler, *The Belief of the American Catholic Community in the Late 19th Century* (Boston College), 13.

“Satan’s Camp.”⁷¹ Archbishop Ireland used metaphysics and historical references to build the Americanist movement’s philosophical position toward society. Ireland observed the church to lack a drive to engage the “natural order” of man, a tendency he labeled a “pusillanimous and self-satisfied sanctuary religion.” Ireland’s philosophy required the church to begin a “manly engagement in the political, social and economic issues of the day.”⁷² Such an engagement could only occur within the context of a free, democratic society. Americanism was a reform movement which saw the American political society as a model that would eventually spread throughout the earth, and therefore one which the church must adapt to suit its purposes. Although Archbishops Ireland and Keane would never applaud the independent movement led by Bishop Hodur, the Polish National Catholic Church was another model of engaging the unique American context. The response of the Polish National Catholic Church to this context was to disengage and create an independent church. Bishops Ireland and Keane embraced the engagement between Catholicism and American democracy.

The United States also provided the social and political conditions to facilitate an otherwise radical theological movement within Catholicism. Hostility toward the PNCC generally originated from the Roman Catholic community, most specifically the conservative members of the Polish Roman Catholic Union of America.⁷³ Unlike the governments that partitioned Polish lands in Europe, the United States Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and of assembly to its citizens. Bishop Hodur’s journalistic inclinations may not have been satisfied in Poland where freedom of the press was not guaranteed, but progressive, nationalistic Poles found in the United States a population inclined to sympathize with democratic and progressive social movements. The large majority of Americas felt no moral allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. These differences in government, history, and population between the United States and the rulers of partitioned Poland were fundamental to the critical reason why a Polish National Church first arose among Polish immigrants on a foreign shore.

The Roman Catholic Church during the United States’ industrial age was structurally foreign to those from whence the German, Irish, Italian, Polish and other immigrants came. Immigrant groups sought to live in America amongst their own ethnic communities catering to their unique cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions. Ethnic-based parishes naturally occurred in the scattered immigrant communities, creating a unique Roman Catholic organizational structure in America. The ethnic parish, whose congregation is formed on the basis of ethnicity rather than geography, does not serve simply as a place of worship for

⁷¹Wangler, 16.

⁷²Wangler, 17.

⁷³*A Guide to Conversion for Our Separated Brethren of the “Polish National Church”* (Scranton: Diocesan Guild Studios, 1954).

its congregation. As a gathering place in an immigrant community, the ethnic parish also becomes the cultural focus of the community. The ethnic community is bound together in America by shared faith, language, and tradition. These three concepts came together when the community gathered for Mass. The popularity of ethnic parishes exploded in the United States as a result of the massive immigration from eastern and southern Europe in the final decades of the nineteenth century.⁷⁴ As the American Roman Catholic Church diversified with immigrants from many nations, demand for ethnic parishes increased.

Despite the growing ethnic dimension of the Roman Catholic *parishes* in America, the hierarchical structure continued to be geographically-based, as it was throughout the world. Bishops were appointed in America's established dioceses with the task of managing a plethora of ethnic interests in one geographically-based diocese. Unlike in Europe, immigrants could not expect their appointed bishop to look like themselves, to speak their language, or understand the unique needs of their community. Although the parish structure changed in the American Roman Catholic Church, its hierarchy did not adapt to the non-geographic jurisdictions, such as ethnicity, which dominated the experience of immigrant Catholics. A request was made to Rome in the mid-nineteenth century to establish an ethnic-German diocese in the United States, but was subsequently denied.⁷⁵ The creation of ethnic-based dioceses would have been a radical theological innovation for the Roman Catholic Church. However, the request alone shows the important structural challenges that ethnicity-based parishes create for the traditional Roman Catholic hierarchical jurisdictions.

Most American bishops were naturally of Irish or German descent due to the seniority required for the position. Large waves of Irish and, to a lesser extent, German Catholics migrated to the United States an entire generation before the large migrations from Eastern and Southern Europe. The American societal and political context facilitated the conflict between nationalistic Polish immigrants and non-Polish decision-makers within the Roman Catholic Church. If removed from the American immigrant experience, the confrontational hostility that developed between the Roman Catholic leadership and the first Polish National Catholics could not have developed. The political and social environment in the United States not only facilitated the conflict from which the independent movement sprouted, but also an eventual solution in the form of the Polish National Catholic Church.

The PNCC established its democratic-yet-Catholic identity at its First Synod, though at that point the Polish framing was primary in importance. The First Special Synod of the PNCC held in 1906, describing the difference between the PNCC and the "Roman-Irish" church, explained that the former was "the demo-

⁷⁴Wieczerzak, "Brief History," 64.

⁷⁵Wieczerzak, "Brief History," 65.

cratic, people's ideal, in matters purely religious as also in matters economic and social."⁷⁶ This secondary identity was first asserted through the rejection of the Pope as the leader of Catholic Christianity. The PNCC's First General Synod clearly described the "relationship of the Pope ... to Jesus Christ ... as unfounded, based on falsity and bad will, and the dogma of the infallibility of the Roman Pope as a blasphemy against God."⁷⁷ The First Special Synod asserted its belief that the Roman Catholic Church was not the *only* Catholic Church, but rather a member of the universal church.⁷⁸

The democratic identity of the PNCC takes its visible form in synods held every five years at rotating locations. Synods are defined as "a gathering of clerical and lay representatives of parishes for the purpose of discussing and resolving important church matters."⁷⁹ The synod constitutes the highest level of authority in the Polish National Catholic Church. The executive branch, which accompanies the synod's legislative power, is manifested by the office of the Prime Bishop, who is elected by the synod and presides over its proceedings. The Prime Bishop also appoints and consecrates bishops in the church, as he is a member of the apostolic succession. He also serves as the rector to the Savonarola Theological Seminary. The Prime Bishop presides over and is assisted by members of the Supreme Council comprised of all the bishops of the PNCC, diocesan clergymen, and laymen, all of whom are elected to serve. The most significant duty of both the Prime Bishop and the Supreme Council is to regulate all revenue and expenditures of the church. Both the legislative and executive branches of the PNCC government are bound by the PNCC Constitution, which itself is subject to change by the synod.⁸⁰

A prominent and highly visible doctrinal difference between the Polish National Catholic and Roman Catholic churches concerns the celibacy of priests. This doctrinal development can be attributed directly to the democratic power structure of the PNCC. The subject was briefly taken up at the First Synod directly after the body unanimously agreed to break all associations with the Roman Catholic Church. With extra time in the meeting, a delegate began a discussion of optional celibacy for priests. The synod notes describe the topic as "after the papal questions ... one of the most typical reforms of a new Church and ... already had ... a substantial number of adherents."⁸¹ The issue was tabled and seriously engaged at the Third General Synod in 1914 when the Commission on the Question of Celibacy presented research showing the practice began, not in

⁷⁶Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 35.

⁷⁷Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 18.

⁷⁸Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 36.

⁷⁹Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 6.

⁸⁰Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 8.

⁸¹Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 28.

patristic tradition, but rather by command of Pope Gregory VII in 1074.⁸² Being quick to reiterate the non-affiliation between the Polish National Catholic and Roman Catholic churches, the report cited examples of an optional celibacy rule used within the Eastern Church and the early Western Church.⁸³ The optional celibacy rule is the most visible doctrinal difference between the PNCC and the Roman Catholic Church. The practice continues to be popularly embraced by Polish National Catholics.

Another democratizing reform of the PNCC was the elevation of God's word—both heard and preached—to join the six other holy sacraments. The issue was first emphasized at the 1906 First Special Synod which resolved: “[T]he Word of God is the food of the world; it points to us our bond with God, it lights the way....”⁸⁴ The Second General Synod of the PNCC, held in 1909, declared the “Word of God preached according to the teachings of Christ the Lord and the Apostles, has sacramental force, that is, it causes in us the same effects as does the receiving of the other sacraments.”⁸⁵ The PNCC's adoption of scripture into a more structurally prominent place in its theology must also be seen as a product of the American religious context. The religious scene in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century was dominated, as it is today, by Protestant Christianity. The PNCC was founded within a society shaped by the dominant influence of Protestants in the nation's religious scene. It cannot be assumed that American society's Protestant-influenced acceptance of the Holy Bible as the sole source of Christian theology had no effect on the PNCC's decision to elevate scripture to sacramental significance.

As the United States encompasses people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, Polish immigrants found themselves living in ethnically diverse communities which differed from those left behind in Europe. Reflecting this American context, the PNCC has historically shown a tendency to seek out affiliation with other Christian denominations. This practice would seem to betray the strong Polish Catholic identity that Bishop Hodur and other PNCC members worked within to frame their independence movement. Yet, under the leadership of Bishop Hodur, the PNCC actually reached out to non-Poles and non-Catholics. The first outreach was toward Old Catholics in Europe. To remain within the Catholic tradition of apostolic succession, and thereby consolidate legitimacy for his elected leadership, Bishop Hodur sought consecration from a bishop, eventually being consecrated by the Old Catholic bishops in Utrecht, Holland, on September 29, 1907.⁸⁶ The desire of the PNCC leadership to incorporate their

⁸²Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 80.

⁸³Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 81.

⁸⁴Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 38.

⁸⁵Grotnik, *Polish National Catholic Church*, 50.

⁸⁶John F. Swantek, “The P.N.C.C. and the Union of Utrecht,” *Rola Boża*, March 4, 1989, 1.

church with the line of apostolic succession also forged an association between the church and the Old Catholic movement. Bishop Hodur's signature was affixed to the Union of Utrecht Declaration in 1907, establishing the PNCC as the only significant Old Catholic Church in North America. The PNCC has also historically been the largest member of the Union. This affiliation endured for almost an entire century until the marriage ended in 2003 when the PNCC ceased sending its representative to the Union. This action was taken by the church's Scranton-based leaders due to the increasingly prevalent practice of female ordination among the Union's member churches. Consequently, the Union voted to expel the PNCC from its ranks.⁸⁷ The PNCC still considers itself to exist in the Old Catholic tradition in that it continues to abide by the Union of Utrecht Declaration.⁸⁸ From the perspective of the PNCC, the member churches in the Union of Utrecht abandoned Catholic tradition and the Declaration.

The PNCC itself has a history of ethnic diversity within its ranks, despite the strong Polish identity framing employed by Bishop Hodur. It has included at one point during its history "not only Polish but also Lithuanian, Slovak, Czech, Italian, Croat, Anglo-American and Hungarian parishes."⁸⁹ These parishes joined the PNCC in response to the church's democratic identity, not its Polish framing. Due to the recent decline in the number of PNCC parishes, very few of these non-Polish parishes remain in the church. The two remaining active and explicitly non-Polish churches in the PNCC in 2008 are in New Jersey: one parish serves a Czech congregation, the other a Slovak congregation.

Intercommunion existed between the PNCC and the Episcopal Church in America beginning in the 1920s. The relationship between the two churches was based on a similar understanding of Holy Communion. Through the association, joint sacramental services were held and the churches generally found ways to help each other on the parish level.⁹⁰ The end of this ecumenical relationship came in 1977 when the Episcopalians sanctioned the ordination of female priests. This evolution in Episcopal doctrine was seen by the PNCC leadership as a move away from Catholic tradition. As a result of the break, joint sacramental services ceased. At the Fifteenth General Synod, Prime Bishop Zieliński explained: "[O]ur clergy and laity would equate intercommunion with a tacit approval of erroneous doctrinal and moral teachings."⁹¹ The teachings under dispute were "centered on the question of women's ordination, but also involved the issues of homosexuality, abortion, secularization of the Church, and other serious depar-

⁸⁷"Our History," PNCC, www.pncc.org/who_history.htm.

⁸⁸"Our History," PNCC, www.pncc.org/who_history.htm.

⁸⁹Zawistowski, 77.

⁹⁰Stuart Elliot, "St. Casmir's Cuts Ties with Episcopalians," *Rochester Times-Union*, February 5, 1977, 2b.

⁹¹Bishop Zieliński, "Prime Bishop's Address," 15th General Synod of the Polish National Catholic Church, 1978.

tures from Holy Scripture and Apostolic tradition.”⁹²

Hostile relations existed between the PNCC and the Roman Catholic Church in the decades after their divorce. However, it is between these institutions that the strongest potential lies for the construction of a future relationship. The PNCC broke relations with both the Episcopal Church and the Union of Utrecht over the practice of ordaining women, a doctrine that has also been consistently defended by the Roman Catholic Church. The two churches also are uniquely matched in their stance on abortion, sexual contraceptives, and homosexuality. The Polish National Catholic-Roman Catholic Dialogue began in 1984 as a result of a special intention of the Polish-born Pope John Paul II. The several scheduled talks between church leaders each year have led to increased mutual understanding and appreciation of the many theological beliefs shared by the two Catholic Churches. The dialogue’s greatest achievement came in 1991, when canon law 844.2 and 844.3 was added to allow members of both churches to share the sacraments of Eucharist, penance, and anointing of the sick.⁹³ The respect shown for the PNCC’s Catholicity and validity of orders within the church have encouraged the Polish National Catholics to continue the collegial dialogue to the present day.⁹⁴ Another step was taken in 2006 when the dialogue issued the “Joint Declaration on Unity” which proclaimed the goal of the two churches as “full communion.”⁹⁵

Though it continues to evolve, the PNCC remains defined in a significant way by its democratic characteristics. These traits are a product of the American context which influenced PNCC members in every generation of its existence. This democratic niche is still relevant to its parishioners and their fellow Americans. While the Polish nationalist framing mechanism has experienced diminished expression and effectiveness, the church’s American identity continues to be strongly expressed. The democratic traits of the PNCC constitute the distinction between its structure and that of other churches in the Catholic tradition.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the two frames which comprise the identity of the Polish National Catholic Church. The movement’s establishment and development has been informed by both the passion of Polish Catholic nationalism and

⁹²Zielinski, “Prime Bishop’s Address,” 7.

⁹³Robert M. Nemkovich and James C. Timlin, eds., *Journeying Together in Christ: the Journey Continues 1989-2002* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Division, 2003), 10.

⁹⁴John F. Swantek, “Good News” *Rola Boza*, August 3, 1985, 1.

⁹⁵*Joint Declaration on Unity. The Roman Catholic-Polish National Catholic Dialogue* (Fall River, MA: U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops, 2006).

the desire for democratic self-determinism. These frames are also responsible for attracting large numbers of Polish-Americans to the PNCC. As discussed, both mechanisms were critical to the growth of the church through its first half-century. Both framing mechanisms were relevant to Bishop Hodur's target demographic—the working class Polish-American. The degree to which the framing was effective can be assumed to match the movement's membership trends.

The Polish National Catholic Church experienced approximately fifty years of growth and a subsequent fifty years of membership decline. In 1958, total membership was reported to be over 272,000 members.⁹⁶ Today, estimates are generally less than 25,000. This figure is less than nine percent of the 1958 total. The loss of nearly a quarter-million members, nearly the entirety of the church membership, occurred over a long period of time. For such sustained attrition to occur, the PNCC must be guilty of non-responsiveness to the mobilization needs of its followers and, moreover, its potential followers.

The PNCC has largely eluded intra-church controversy on a large scale. It has consistently chosen to doctrinally remain within its understanding of Catholic tradition. Inter-communion with the Episcopal Church and the Union of Utrecht ended due to the PNCC's reluctance to compromise its understanding of that Catholic tradition. The lack of any controversial doctrinal developments of its own has protected the PNCC from rifts or divisions among members that may have explained the membership decline. The conservative perspective actually attracted a number of lay and clergy Christians to the PNCC from the Episcopal Church which underwent a radical doctrinal evolution. Any event that injured the PNCC's ability to sustain membership levels must have originated from outside the church.

The most important event in twentieth-century Catholicism is unquestionably the Second Vatican Council between 1962 and 1965. The reforms of the council eliminated many of the doctrinal separations between the practice of Roman Catholicism and Polish National Catholicism. The promulgation of the *Novus Ordo Mass* in 1969 by Pope Paul VI eliminated the PNCC's monopoly on the vernacular Catholic Mass. This diminished niche distinction within Catholicism effectively neutralized the Polish-nationalism framing device that had distinguished the PNCC. In the wake of Vatican II, Polish Americans could practice Roman Catholicism while respecting their ethnic language and traditions; they also could look to the Polish-born Pope John Paul II for leadership.

Pope John Paul II brought great pride to Poland and fed the new wave of nationalism during the nation's final decade of Communist rule. The reforms of Vatican II also presented a clear contrast between the foreign-imposed Communist system and the indigenous Roman Catholic Church. Poland was the first nation in the Soviet bloc to manifest a massive, sustained social movement against the Communist regime. The Polish liberation movement, led by the trade

⁹⁶Buckley.

union *Solidarność*, was openly associated with the Roman Catholic Church. *Solidarność* was framed as a Roman Catholic movement through the use of rhetoric and symbolism. Its religious framing was very effective in organizing a broad, grassroots mobilization in the nearly universally Roman Catholic nation. In addition, *Solidarność* was extremely popular among Americans, especially nationalistic Polish Americans. Unlike eight decades prior to *Solidarność*, the Roman Catholic Church was now undeniably an ally of nationalistic Poles. Although Polish members of the PNCC certainly supported the democratic movement in Poland and were grateful for the Polish Pope's leadership, its previous framing rhetoric forced the church to maintain its separate identity despite the wildly popular association between Polish nationalism and Roman Catholicism.

The election of Pope John Paul II and the rise of *Solidarność*, in the wake of Vatican II, effectively destroyed the PNCC's framing targeting nationalistic Poles. No longer could the Papacy be seen as a "foreign power" lordling over Polish lands. Additionally, the Roman Catholic Church no longer appeared to be attacking the ethnic identity and culture of Poles in the United States or in Europe. The ethnic framing of the PNCC had no counter-mobilization to distinguish itself favorably to Polish Americans. Vatican II, the election of Pope John Paul II, and the religious framing of *Solidarność* made the PNCC appear radical and disconnected from Polish culture. About 97 percent of Poland's population currently professes to be Roman Catholic.⁹⁷ The percentage is also extremely high among Polish Americans. Without a threat on their traditional ethnic Christian denomination, Bishop Hodur's appealing rhetoric of an earlier era about the need for Polish unity and to fight against oppression now appears to be obsolete. The nationalistic Polish framing of the Polish National Catholic Church has suffered a nearly complete loss of its power to attract new members or to mobilize those who remain. This development clearly contributed to the PNCC's membership attrition to today's level of less than ten percent of the peak membership in the 1950s.

While Polish nationalist framing was rendered ineffective by various events outside the church, the PNCC still retained its distinctive democratic-American identity. As a social movement, the church needs to maintain this unique niche in American Catholicism to remain relevant. This position need not be based on its non-hierarchical power structure and democratic processes alone. These organizational principles have over time established a series of doctrinal evolutions which have not been matched by the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, the PNCC provides an answer for many of the remaining criticisms of Roman Catholicism.

Contemporary Roman Catholics in the United States are nearly never as mobilized as when their parish or parish property is forcibly closed or otherwise

⁹⁷*Demographic Yearbook of Poland 2007* (Warsaw: Poland Central Statistical Office, 2007).

acted upon by the local Bishop. In the face of declining revenue streams, many American Roman Catholic dioceses have consolidated parishes and Catholic schools as a means of lowering costs. In one extreme example, the Archdiocese of Boston not only closed parishes and schools, but also sold large, valuable tracts of land in order to finance losses from lawsuits due to sexual abuse scandal. Members of the PNCC have no need to fear an unpopular decision of a bishop concerning their parish property. If an effort is made by the congregation to preserve their operations, no hierarchical authority governs their actions. For example, in the 1930s a PNCC congregation in Minnesota mortgaged individual members' homes to financially preserve their church.⁹⁸ Many cases have shown that even despite an extraordinary effort on the part of a parish to preserve itself or its school, a Roman Catholic bishop still chooses to consolidate.

The acknowledgement of the Word of God as a sacrament is satisfying to those who believe that Roman Catholicism errantly emphasizes tradition over scripture in the formation of doctrine. Also, the sometimes-maligned sacrament of reconciliation is not practiced by adults individually but rather as a group in the PNCC. The approach to these two sacraments distinguishes the PNCC from other churches in the Catholic tradition.

Optional celibacy for clergymen in the PNCC creates a visible difference from the practice in the Roman Catholic Church. The traditional vow of chastity has been debated within the Christian community since the time of the Church Fathers. Modern Christians are still divided on this issue regarding their spiritual leaders. The PNCC offers faith within the Catholic tradition along with the ability to serve God in the priesthood without making a vow of celibacy.

Between the congregational control of parish property, differences in sacramental understanding, and non-celibate priests, there still remain many visible and functional differences between the faith life of a Roman Catholic, a Protestant, and a Polish National Catholic. Despite the loss of the Polish nationalistic framing mechanism, the PNCC continues to serve a niche in the American and Canadian Catholic communities which should allow it to not only survive or sustain a healthy membership, but also to grow. The niche lies not in the Polish framing device of old, but rather the acknowledgement of the PNCC as a truly democratic Catholic church in which its members may have greater control of their religious lives.

The PNCC is no longer distinguished in American Christianity for serving the needs of nationalistic Polish Americans. That "market" has ceased to exist in any significant form, which has led to the decline in PNCC membership. The church is now distinguished in American Christianity for its alternate framing identity. The American identity of the PNCC, which resulted in its democratic power structure, continues to be relevant. A demographic of Christians exists who seek to practice the Catholic faith, but prefer the doctrinal evolution which has

⁹⁸Buckley.

taken place in the PNCC. This market is not currently being fully addressed by the PNCC, which continues its attempts to serve a dwindling Polish-American population.

If not already, the PNCC will soon be forced to make decisions about the purpose of its continued existence. The most current version of the PNCC Constitution explains that “the first and foremost objective and aim of this church is the salvation and sanctification of the Polish people and of all others united with this church.” Having broken intercommunion with both the Episcopal Church of America and the Union of Utrecht, this statement clearly applies to Polish people almost without exception. As the “Polish” framing mechanism in the PNCC has become increasingly ineffective in attracting new members, the church must ask itself how it is actively pursuing this objective. Is the current form of the PNCC best suited to bring about the “salvation and sanctification of the Polish people?” Thinking further, church leaders and synod bodies will be forced to consider how the objective will be met as the church continues to shed members. If ethnic Poles are the “first and foremost” target for evangelization, the PNCC must find a way to serve this population whose ethnic communities are almost completely dispersed from their industrial-age neighborhoods. The challenge is also rooted in the societal assimilation of succeeding generations who now have no cultural incentive to become a Polish National Catholic. If these challenges are too difficult for this ever smaller community to reasonably engage, the PNCC should reconsider its targets for “salvation and sanctification.”

The best chance for the survival of the PNCC lies in what makes it unique. This distinction rests upon the combination of strong faith in the Catholic tradition and separation from many controversial Roman Catholic doctrinal and disciplinary issues. Therefore the democratic, American framing mechanism should be emphasized as the embraced identity of the Polish National Catholic Church. The PNCC movement can continue if its leaders evangelize among disaffected Christians and non-Christians of other practices, much like it did under Bishop Hodur’s mobilizing charisma. The difference for the PNCC in the twenty-first century is that it cannot be specifically focused on Polish Americans. In attempting to serve the Catholics within a theological niche, the church cannot afford to narrow its scope of evangelization to within one ethnic group.

This transformation has already begun for many individual parishes of the PNCC. At least a few parishes have removed the word “Polish” from their signage, and many no longer offer Mass or literature with Polish text. Continued transformation of the PNCC will require its leadership to understand that a loss of officially emphasized Polish framing does not compromise the theological beliefs of the church within its treasured Catholic tradition. In an effort to become more universal—more “Catholic”—the future PNCC will be required to aggressively reach out to other faith communities to position itself and its modern niche within the spectrum of American Christianity.