

Introduction:

It's a great joy for all of us to gather in St. Conleth's Church here in Newbridge to mark the tenth anniversary of Polish Chaplaincy in our Diocese. I am delighted Bishop Jim is here for this very important celebration, because he was the one who established the contact with the SVD Order and drew up an agreement of what the chaplaincy might look like.

It's also great that so many other priests who have experience of the outreach to the Polish Community are also present. And most importantly it's great that the great that so many from the Polish Community all around the Diocese with their Irish neighbours and friends are here today.

The scripture readings on this thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time reminds us that God is always faithful and he rewards those who imitate his faithfulness.

You the Polish Community has been most faithful in your integration into the life of our Diocese and for that we are most grateful. Our Diocese is now your Diocese; our parishes are now your parishes and our communities are now your communities.

As we gather to celebrate this Sunday afternoon, let us call to mind our sins that have made us unfaithful to God, unfaithful to one another and unfaithful to ourselves as we mark our Penitential Act with this Polish song ...

Homily:

We all know that a 25th Anniversary celebration is called a 'Silver Anniversary'; a 50th is a 'Gold Anniversary'; I wonder do many of you know what a 10th Anniversary is known as? Well it's a Tin Anniversary! So to the Polish people I say: *Szczesliwy Dziesiata Rocznic!* Happy Tenth Anniversary!

Your arrival here in 2006/2007 was into a very different country then. The story of Catholicism in Poland goes back to 966AD, the big 1,050th celebration was marked earlier this summer. There are 41 Catholic Dioceses in Poland and 10,000 parishes. 85.6% of the Polish people are Catholic. The Irish statistics are equally interesting. Our story of faith goes back much further to the great Brigid, Patrick and Conleth. 84.2% of Irish people see themselves as Catholic, if we include Northern Ireland, that figure drops somewhat to 71.8%. There are 26 Catholic Dioceses and about 2,500 parishes.

As a Bishop in one of those twenty-six Dioceses, I spend alot of time visiting parishes, sometimes a sacramental moment like Confirmation, often for an event like the Novena here in Newbridge, where I'm booked to open on April 24th next year. Earlier today and last evening I celebrated Mass and visited the two Prisons in our Diocese – Midlands last evening and Portlaoise this morning. One third of the prison community population in Ireland are in those prisons; the Midlands is the largest prison in the country. This weekend the Jubilee Year of Mercy emphasis was on that Corporal Work of Mercy 'to visit the prisons'. Our prisons have many nationalities in their communities.

Coming to our Diocese from Poland you have brought with you great customs such as the 'Blessing of Food Baskets' on Holy Saturday morning. I think I can safely say if the numbers who attend for those Blessing Rituals was replicated on other Sundays we would be building churches in Kildare and Leighlin to accommodate new ethnic congregations! Also the blessing of bread at Christmas and the sending of blessed bread in greeting cards to family and friends. Our school roll books are interspersed with Polish Christian names such as Karolina, Mateusz, Kamil and Marta. The Polish insistence on going to Confession a number of times before celebrating Marriage is laudable and one that could be adopted by Irish couples.

Having a Polish Chaplain was very necessary ten years ago as you settled in a strange environment and were unfamiliar with Irish customs and traditions. Fr. Tadeusz is to be thanked for walking with you over this time. What is a chaplain? Over the past twenty-four hours I had the privilege of getting a

deeper understanding of prison chaplains; we have chaplains in our hospitals, our schools, sometimes even our clubs. Perhaps Sarsfields and Moorefield have their particular chaplain? A chaplain is in my book 'present' to those he or she is responsible for; a chaplain accompanies the community, the group or the institution. In the initial stages the Polish Chaplaincy was seen as having an outreach here in Newbridge, Naas, Kilcock, Edenderry, Portlaoise, Portarlinton, Carlow and Tullow. In more recent years that outreach has established itself every week here in Newbridge, twice a month in Portlaoise, nine times a year in Kilcock, once a month in Carlow and Christmas and Easter in Edenderry. For me this development suggests that the Polish community have integrated beautifully into the life of our diocese and this is exactly as it should be. You serve on Parish Pastoral Councils; you work in Parish Centres; you volunteer with community groups; one of you is even a student for the priesthood for our Diocese and this is exactly as it should be, as it was meant to be, as it was intended when Bishop Jim, along with the assistance of Fr. Joe McDermott inaugurated this chaplaincy support ten years ago.

Apparently the Polish gentry used to have a toast in past centuries when Poland was still a kingdom: "*God, honour, fatherland*". God was then and is now in the leading position, God is such an important element of Polish consciousness and identity. Your Christian identity, your Catholic faith is possibly a response to the borders you shared with the Muslim peoples such as the Tartars and the Turks. Like us you love St. John Paul II; your Czestochowa is our Knock. My prayer in marking this tenth anniversary of your presence amongst us, you are now one of us and like 9/11 soon there will be no need to mark the date, because you will have become Irish/Polish. I still recall on one of my Confirmation visits, a Polish boy, attending a Gaelscoil in Kilcock who took an Irish name and was confirmed that day by a Polish priest working in our Diocese. This is exactly as it should be and we give praise and thanks to the Lord for this and for much more this day. Amen.