

**Homily for the 100th Anniversary of Our Lady of Częstochowa Church
St. Mary and St. Mark Parish
Madison**

**The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2012**

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Dear Father Holtman, Sister Georgiana, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it gives me great joy to celebrate with you the 100th anniversary of the founding of Our Lady of Częstochowa church. I thank you for your warm and gracious welcome and I greet joyfully in the Lord and congratulate you on this important milestone.

So many people today are searching for a purpose to their lives, especially following the great tragedy in Newtown. Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, is no stranger to the tragedies that so often mark our lives; her sufferings are greater than ours and yet still she remains a woman of joy and of hope because of her confidence in her Son who “shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the LORD, in the majestic name of the LORD” (Micah 5:3).

We see her confidence even in the image of Our Lady of Częstochowa as she holds the Christ-Child in her left hand and points to

him with her right. One hundred years ago, immigrants from Poland settled here and pointed to Jesus as the center of their lives by building a church dedicated to Our Lady of Czestochowa.

My own ancestors came from Poland to the United States over one hundred years ago. It was a time when Poland did not exist on the map, having been partitioned between Russia, Prussia and Austria until Poland was re-established as an independent country after World War I. But the identity of the Polish people remained strong during the years of partition, largely due to their language and their faith.

Because of its central location in the heart of Europe, Poland has had to face challenges from foes from the north, south, east, and west, sometimes each seemingly taking turns individually one after the other, at other times enemies collaborating with each other.¹ In the face of these pressures and challenges, the image that has graced the people of Poland has been Our Lady of Czestochowa, a copy of which we have on display today here in this church.

The miraculous picture known as the Black Madonna of Czestochowa has been the chief treasure of the Paulite Monastery on the hill known as *Jasna Góra* in Czestochowa since August 31, 1384, when the

Duke presented it as a gift to the Paulite monks.² In the second half of the fifteenth century, a Polish historian wrote that the monks at Częstochowa “show a picture of Mary, the most glorious and the most venerable virgin, the queen of the world and of the Poles, which has been executed with a strange and extraordinary skill, with a serene expression on her face from whatever direction you look at it. They say it is one of those [pictures] painted by St. Luke the Evangelist himself.”³ The picture was painted virtually anew in 1434, but it appears to have been modeled on a Byzantine icon in Constantinople dating from the fifth century.⁴

The first reports of miracles attributed to “Mary, Queen of Poland” date from 1402.⁵ An example of the extraordinary events associated with this image of Our Lady of Częstochowa is described with reference to a robbery which occurred at the Monastery on Easter Sunday in the year 1430. This raid was carried out by a band of robbers consisting of Czechs, Germans, Ruthenians and even Poles, believing that the monastery possessed immense treasures and money. Not finding such plunder, they sacrilegiously stole chalices, crosses and ornaments. “They even stripped the Picture of Our Lady of precious stones and jewels with which it had been embellished by pious believers. They did not stop at that but slashed

the image with a sword and broke the panel on which the picture was painted ... Having committed this felony, more disgraced with their crime than made richer, they fled with a small amount of ill-gotten gains.”⁶

The resulting scars on the cheek of the Blessed Mother remain the most familiar and distinctive characteristics of this icon. The Virgin Mary is shown in the tradition of iconography as “One Who Shows the Way.” In it the Virgin directs attention away from herself, gesturing with her right hand toward Jesus as the source of salvation. In turn, the child extends his right hand toward the viewer in blessing while holding a book of Gospels in his left hand.

The event which best portrays Mary's miraculous intervention under pressing circumstances was during the defense of the monastery at *Jasna Góra* during the Swedish attack of 1655. The direct reason for the attack was “Sweden's desire to conquer the entire southern coast of the Baltic, after already capturing its eastern and western shores.”⁷ The Poles were tremendously outnumbered by the Swedes.⁸ The siege lasted six weeks and ended when the attackers were not able to overcome the staunch resistance of the defenders, with their firm and sincere confidence in Our Lady. The defense of *Jasna Góra* was attributed to the miraculous intervention of the

Blessed Mother. In 1764, the Polish parliament decreed Poland's perpetual indebtedness to the Virgin.⁹

In the 18th century, when Poland lost its independence and was partitioned, Our Lady of Częstochowa “became the patroness of every resistance and the protectress of liberty and the national sovereignty.”¹⁰ Indeed, many persons alive today can testify to their reliance on the help of Our Lady of Częstochowa during the devastation of the Second World War and the long, lean years of Soviet Communism.

Our late Holy Father, the great Blessed Pope John Paul II himself spoke of his own devotion to the “Black Madonna” of *Jasna Góra* when he visited Częstochowa on June 4, 1979: “The call of a son of Poland to the Chair of Peter contains an evident and strong link with this holy place, with this Shrine of great hope: *Totus tuus* (I am all yours), I had whispered in prayer so many times before this image.... Mother of the Church! Once again I consecrate myself to you ‘in your maternal servitude of love’: *Totus tuus!* I am all yours! I consecrate to you the whole Church --even to the ends of the earth! I consecrate to you all humankind; I consecrate to you Europe and all the continents.... Mother, accept us. Mother, do not abandon us. Mother, guide us!”¹¹

Mary teaches us that in all things we must look to her Son, we must seek his face, if we are to find our peace. We must remember, as Pope Benedict XVI said recently, that

What illuminates and gives full meaning to the history of the world and of man begins to shine in the cave of Bethlehem; it is the mystery that soon we will contemplate at Christmas: the salvation which is realized in Jesus Christ. In Jesus of Nazareth, God shows his face and asks man to choose to recognize and follow him.¹²

It is in the Holy Infant that God has heard and answered the prayer of the Psalm: "Rouse your power, and come to save us" (Psalm 80:3).

Today we come to the altar of the Lord, here in this church dedicated to Our Lady of Częstochowa, because we long to look upon the face of her Son, Jesus Christ, who is our peace (cf. Psalm 80:4, Micah 5:4).

Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI has given us this Year of Faith, which providentially coincides with the anniversary of the founding of this church, so that we can come to know his peace more profoundly. At the heart of this Year of Faith is the encounter with Jesus Christ, before whom Saint John the Baptist joyously leaped in the womb of his mother Saint Elizabeth (cf. Luke 1:41). Indeed, in his apostolic letter announcing the Year

of Faith, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of “the need to rediscover the journey of faith so as to shed clearly light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ” (*Porta Fidei*, 2). The same joy that filled Elizabeth and John the Baptist is the same joy that should fill us when we encounter the Child of Bethlehem whose birth we soon will celebrate.

Indeed, just as “Mary set out and travelled in haste to a town of Judah,” so should we also set out in haste to Bethlehem (Luke 1:39). We may not be able to make the physical pilgrimage to the land of the Savior’s birth, but we can make the journey interiorly, in our hearts, before our Nativity sets; spiritually we can travel in haste to Bethlehem.

As we hasten to Bethlehem, it is necessary for each of us to live with a spirit of “self-abandonment, in a continuous crescendo, into the hands of a love that seems to grow constantly because it has its origin in God” (*Porta Fidei*, 7). This is what we call discipleship.

The word “disciple” has its roots in the word *disco* – not a genre of music from the 70s, but Latin for “I learn.” The disciple is one who learns from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. This learning is not from dusty tomes or ancient manuscripts, but from the very person of Jesus Christ, risen and alive today, through an immediate and personal relationship

with him and his Church. This relationship does not – indeed, cannot – leave a person as he or she was before. The true disciple is the one who becomes such a student of the Master that his very life conforms to the life of Christ in all things. We see such a life so clearly in the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

What can we say to reignite the fire of faith in those who have left or drifted from the Church? What can we say to our family and friends, our neighbors and co-workers? What is Christ inspiring us to do to proclaim the faith anew to these lost sheep who have withdrawn from the Good Shepherd? These questions lie at the heart of the Year of Faith.

Of this task, the Holy Father wrote: “To rediscover the content of the faith that is professed, celebrated, lived, and prayed, and to reflect on the act of faith, is a task that every believer must make his own, especially in the course of this Year” (*Porta Fidei*, 9). To this end, I would like to propose to a three-fold plan to make the most of this Year of Faith and to strengthen St. Mary and St. Mark Parish so that through the example of your faith, the lost sheep “will no more withdraw from” the Lord but will call upon his name and be given new life (Psalm 80:19).

First, we must be grateful for the faith we have received, for our encounter with the Lord. Families should strive to make their homes places where the family prays together, reads the Scriptures together, and is nourished together at Sunday Mass. Families should strive to allow their faith to influence everything they do, rather than reserving their faith only for an hour or so on Sunday.

Second, we must endeavor to understand all the more clearly the faith we profess. If a friend, family member or co-worker asks us a question about the Catholic faith, can we provide an adequate – and correct – answer? We ought to be able to do so. If we do not know the faith we profess we cannot communicate it to others.

Third, we must share our faith, not only with our family and friends, but with our co-workers and everyone we meet. As the Holy Father reminds us, “Confessing with the lips indicates in turn that faith implies public testimony and commitment” (*Porta Fidei*, 10).

This three-fold plan is the way of discipleship and through it we learn to apprentice ourselves to Jesus Christ, as did Our Lady of Czestochowa, your heavenly patroness and intercessor. With her as your guide and model, you must devote yourselves to helping those who do not

know – or who have perhaps forgotten – the love that Jesus has for them.

Let each of us endeavor to seek out the lost sheep and bring them with us

as we hasten to Bethlehem to behold the face of God in Jesus Christ.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) 342-347.

² Zbigniew Bania, Jan Glonka and Stanislaw Kobielus, trans. Bogna Piotrowska, *Jasna Góra: A Companion Guide* (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1986) 10.

³ Janusz S. Pasierb and Jan Samek, 2d ed. *The Shrine of the Black Madonna at Częstochowa* (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1985) 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ J. Zbudniewek, "Częstochowa," in *Dictionary of Mary* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1985) 63.

⁶ Pasierb and Samek, *The Shrine of the Black Madonna at Częstochowa*; 7.

⁷ Bania, Golonka and Kobielus, *Jasna Góra*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁹ Zbudniewek, "Częstochowa," 64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ A. Rum, "Częstochowa," in *Dictionary of Mary* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1985), 66-67.

¹² Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience Address, December 12, 2012.