

**THE POLISH NATIONAL CATHOLIC CHURCH:
THE FOUNDING OF AN AMERICAN SCHISM**

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The Polish National Catholic Church (PNCC) traces its origin to the establishment of Saint Stanislaus, Bishop and Martyr Parish, in Scranton, Pennsylvania, in 1897, under the leadership of the Rev. Francis Hodur. It is the only surviving institution to emerge from Independentism (a religious movement among immigrant Catholics in the United States and Canada around the turn of the twentieth century who moved away from the Roman Catholic Church in America and formed and joined separate, yet still self-described “Catholic,” religious institutions) and as such is the only extant schism of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. The founding of the PNCC and its parishes reflects widespread conflicts in immigrant communities, not only between the Irish-dominated hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and non-Irish immigrant Roman Catholic laypeople, but also among members of individual Roman Catholic parishes. The Roman Catholic parish was a place where immigrants struggled not only with priests and bishops, but also with each other over church property ownership and their role in church governance. PNCC recruiters were able to gain converts from Roman Catholicism by appealing to their new sense of Polish nationalism, which many immigrants developed in the United States. Polish nationalist feelings also motivated many Roman Catholics to break away from Roman Catholic parishes and form independent Catholic churches, many of which later

joined the PNCC. Although many Polish immigrants came to equate their Polish identity with their Catholic identity, PNCC recruiters were able to convince many Roman Catholics that the PNCC was not only a legitimate Catholic church, but also more “Catholic” than the Roman Catholic Church itself. The PNCC appealed to immigrants’ sense of nationalism and Catholicism to convince Roman Catholics and members of independent Catholic churches to join the PNCC at a time when immigrants’ thoughts turned from returning home to staying in the United States.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“Father Aust’s Warring Polish Parishioners,” read a headline in the *Scranton Republican* on August 10, 1896.¹ Similarly sensational headlines followed that month, noting the unrest among Polish Roman Catholics in Scranton, the northeastern Pennsylvania anthracite coal mining and steel manufacturing center: “They Will Be Arrested,” “Police Use Clubs” and “Those Wrangling Church Factions.”² The scattered incidents of conflict between members of Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary Roman Catholic Church over their “Prussian” pastor, the Rev. Richard C. Aust, escalated into a “free-for-all” on the street in front of the church one Sunday in late-August 1896.³

Great crowds were coming from all sides to the Polish Church of Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary on Prospect Avenue. They were whispering mysteriously that strange things were to happen in the Church. Some of them saw in dreams a bloody handwriting, the biblical words: mane, tekem, ufarim – only they did not know for whom this terrible end was coming, for the people or for the priest or for the Bishop himself; - whilst others were saying that something was groaning in the mines and the words were heard; “Be not afraid; Be not afraid!”⁴

Around the little Church, there stood a great mass of people, interested, excited, and restless. All the time, they were discussing that neither the priest nor the bishop would listen to the modest petitions presented to them by the committee.

¹ John P. Gallagher, *A Century of History: The Diocese of Scranton: 1868-1968* (Scranton, PA: Diocese of Scranton, 1968), 215.

² *Ibid.*

³ Theodore Andrews, *The Polish National Catholic Church in America and Poland* (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), 26.

⁴ “Mane, tekem, ufarim” refers to “the writing on the wall” in Daniel 5 in the Old Testament. A disembodied hand mysterious appeared and wrote these words on a wall which Daniel interpreted for King Belshazzar of Babylon as an omen predicting the fall of his kingdom. Hodur wrote this account in 1901, five years after the incident and three years before the PNCC formally split from the Roman Catholic Church. This reference, however, seems to predict the PNCC’s break with the Roman Catholic Church and the challenge the PNCC will make to the Roman Catholic Church’s dominance in immigrant communities.

All at once, somebody gave the command: “Brethren, stand like a wall between the parsonage and the Church. Do not allow the priest to go to the altar. He is not worthy to offer the Holy Sacrifice. We have built the Church; we are on our own ground.”⁵

The author of this account, the Rev. Francis Hodur, led 250 families to break away from the Roman Catholic parish and build their own, declaring, “All who are dissatisfied and wronged in Scranton should organize and build a new church, with full claims to property ownership.”⁶

Later, Hodur traveled to Rome, but he failed to meet with Pope Leo XIII. A parishioner asked Hodur what he was going to do. He answered, “I shall not return under the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Bishop. I shall not return to the Roman Church.”⁷ The parishioner replied, “Then we shall not return either.”⁸ “A holy ardor overwhelmed the gathering,” reads an account of the incident. “They all stood up: men and women; raised their hands to show their indomitable [sic] decision and repeated: ‘We shall not return!’”⁹ In 1904, at the First General Synod of the Polish National Catholic Church in Scranton, Pennsylvania, lay and clerical delegates decided to break decisively with the Roman Catholic Church and elected Hodur as their bishop.¹⁰

The Polish National Catholic Church (PNCC) is the only extant schism of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. It traces its origin to the establishment of Saint Stanislaus, Bishop and Martyr Parish, in Scranton, Pennsylvania, in 1897, under the leadership of the Rev. Francis Hodur.¹¹ It is the only surviving institution to emerge from Independentism (a religious

⁵ Gallagher, *Century of History*, 216-217. Excerpt from Hodur, *The New Ways* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, 1901).

⁶ Leon Grochowski, “History of the St. Stanislaus P. N. C. Parish of Scranton, Pennsylvania,” in *Album, 1897-1957: Sześćdziesiątej Rocznicy Polskiego Narodowego Katolickiego Kościoła* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, 1957), n.p. Note: Hodur’s name, in Polish, is Franciszek Hodur.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Hodur served as Prime Bishop of the PNCC until his death in 1953. Note: Polish National Catholic Church, in Polish, is Polski Narodowy Katolicki Kościół

¹¹ Note: Stanislaus, in Polish, is Stanisław.

movement among immigrant Catholics in the United States and Canada around the turn of the twentieth century who moved away from the Roman Catholic Church in America and formed and joined separate, yet still self-described “Catholic,” religious institutions).¹² Although Independentism emerged in the last decade of the 1800s, the largest growth in PNCC parishes occurred from the beginning of World War I until the end of World War II, when nearly 70% of all PNCC parishes were established.¹³ The Polish nationalist fervor which motivated ex-Roman Catholics and PNCC founders in the 1890s to break away from the Roman Catholic Church, and which they used to recruit Roman Catholics to their numbers, saw its greatest impact near the end of the great wave of immigration from central, eastern and southern Europe to the United States in the 1920s.¹⁴ PNCC recruiters were able to gain converts from Roman Catholicism by appealing to their new sense of Polish nationalism, which many immigrants developed in the United States. Polish nationalist feelings also motivated many Roman Catholics to break away from Roman Catholic parishes and form independent Catholic churches, many of which later joined the PNCC.¹⁵ Although many Polish immigrants came to equate their Polish identity with their Catholic identity, PNCC recruiters were able to convince many Roman Catholics that the PNCC was not only a legitimate Catholic church, but also more “Catholic” than the Roman Catholic Church itself. The PNCC appealed to immigrants’ sense of nationalism and Catholicism to convince Roman Catholics and members of independent Catholic churches to join the PNCC at a time when immigrants’ thoughts turned from returning home to staying in the United States.

¹² I have adopted the term Independentism to label this religious movement. Currently, this term is used only by PNCC and Polonia (Polish-America) scholars such as Victor Greene and Joseph Wiczerzak. I, unlike Greene (who places “independentism” in quotations) and Wiczerzak, choose to capitalize the term.

¹³ This is my own estimation based on over 200 PNCC parishes (active and inactive) for which I was able to find foundation dates.

¹⁴ The Immigration Act of 1924 greatly reduced immigration to the United States, especially from central, eastern and southern Europe.

¹⁵ Independent Catholic churches that did not join the PNCC often returned to the Roman Catholic Church or eventually dissolved, usually with the death or desertion of their pastor.

II. CONFLICT AND CATHOLICISM IN U.S. HISTORY

The founding of the PNCC and its parishes reflects widespread conflicts in immigrant communities, not only between the Irish-dominated hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and non-Irish immigrant Roman Catholic laypeople, but also among members of individual Roman Catholic parishes. In overlooking this activity, historians of Catholicism often miss that such conflict occurred even within the churches of immigrant populations. The Roman Catholic parish was a place where immigrants struggled not only with priests and bishops, but also with each other over church property ownership and their role in church governance. The Poles who formed the PNCC were part of the largest wave of Catholic immigrants to enter the United States after the Irish immigration in the mid-nineteenth century: Catholics from central, eastern and southern Europe, the so-called “New Immigration.” These immigrants, writes James T. Fisher in *Communion of Immigrants: A History of Catholics in America*, “dramatically changed American life and reshaped the Catholic Church as well.”¹⁶ However, scholars have continually made these groups’ merger with the Roman Catholic Church in the United States seem unproblematic, when, in fact, the process was marred with conflict.

In his chapter “The American Church” in *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, Thomas Bokenkotter writes, “No missionary territory in the nineteenth century registered more sensational gains than the Catholic Church in the United States. Thanks to a massive influx of

¹⁶ James T. Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants: A History of Catholics in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 70.

Catholic immigrants – Irish, German, Italians, Poles, and others – the growth of the Catholic Church far outstripped the nation’s growth. The American bishops were able to successfully integrate these heterogeneous, polyglot newcomers into the Church structure and provide a huge network of schools, hospitals, and other institutions for them that were soon the envy of the Catholic world.”¹⁷ Although he does discuss the tensions between Irish and German Roman Catholics, Bokenkotter does not suggest any difficulties for later immigrants, nor does he explain how American bishops were able to “successfully integrate” new Catholics from central, eastern and southern Europe. The assumption is that they had little difficulty. Histories such as Bokenkotter’s do not hint at much conflict between Catholics, but rather inaccurately suggest that each group paved the way for those that followed. In *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States*, James Hennesey quotes Winthrop Hudson, who wrote, “the most spectacular development in American religious life in the latter half of the nineteenth century” was “the growth of the Roman Catholic Church.”¹⁸ Hennesey concludes, “Immigration transformed American Catholicism...The effect was massive.”¹⁹ Although he writes, “The Catholic community had its problems,” mentions how the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore (1884) “opened a period of conflict” and writes, “The year 1897 saw major explosions,” Hennesey makes no mention of the PNCC.²⁰ The “conflict” he focuses on is that between new Catholic immigrants and “nativist” Protestants. He overlooks conflict among Catholics. James M. O’Toole, in *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America*, likewise makes no mention of the PNCC. In his chapter titled “The Immigrant Church,” O’Toole largely

¹⁷ Thomas Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, Rev. and Expanded ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 365.

¹⁸ James Hennesey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 173. Quote from Winthrop Hudson, *Religion in America, an Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life* (New York: Scribner, 1965), 247.

¹⁹ Hennesey, 172.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 181 and 201.

supports the dominant narrative of Catholicism in the United States and the New Immigration, writing, “Catholicism came in the trunks of immigrants along with their other prized possessions.”²¹ He continues, “Supporting them in their faith was the growing sense that they were part of something much larger than themselves. Immigrants might be living in straitened and uncertain circumstances, but they could be heartened by the large and enduring institution of which they were a part.”²²

Few scholars give the conflict that occurred within the Roman Catholic Church in the United States more attention than a brief summary of the history of the PNCC. Those who demonstrate an awareness of the PNCC often seem to dismiss it as insignificant to the history of Catholicism in the United States by giving it limited attention in their writings. Joseph A. Varacalli, in *The Catholic Experience in America*, cites John Tracy Ellis’s observations on the PNCC from his *American Catholicism*, writing, “He speaks of a ‘quarrel over control of church property and ecclesiastical jurisdiction which broke out among a group of Catholics of Polish birth and descent at the end of the...[nineteenth] century. By 1907 these differences had developed into the only sizable and enduring schism in the history of American Catholicism, in what came to be called the Polish National Catholic Church.’”²³ Varacalli does not himself look any further into the PNCC, trusting the conclusions in the fifty-year-old book by Ellis, a Roman Catholic priest. In *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America’s Most Powerful Church*, Charles R. Morris, like Ellis, cites the PNCC correctly as “the only successful schismatic movement in American Catholic history.” He writes, “It is testimony of the strength of the Polish commitment to homeland and religion that the National Catholic Church not only

²¹ James M. O’Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 99.

²² *Ibid.*, 127.

²³ Joseph A. Varacalli, *The Catholic Experience in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 77.

survived but after a fashion prospered, with 50,000 members by 1939, 130,000 in 1953, and 250,000 today.”²⁴ Although Morris’s PNCC membership numbers are inaccurate, he does recognize the church’s significance. Interestingly, he does not write any more about it.

Peter W. Williams likewise mentions the PNCC in *America’s Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-first Century*, writing, “One offshoot of the Polish struggle for parity of representation was the formation of the Polish National Catholic Church by Francis Hodur in Scranton, Pennsylvania, in 1897. Despite the ferocity with which many of these interethnic battles were conducted, it is remarkable that the PNCC was for practical purposes the only even moderately successful schism from the Catholic Church in American history. In 2006 it claimed 126 parishes and about 60,000 members, down from some 280,000 members in 1960.”²⁵ Similar to Morris and Williams, Patrick W. Carey hints at some significance of the PNCC, writing in *Catholics in America*, “At times the conflicts became so intense and hostile that they led to permanent schisms – as was the case in the late 1890s with a few Polish Catholics who separated themselves from Catholicism and formed an independent denomination, the Polish National Catholic Church...”²⁶ After writing that no one knows how many Catholics left the Roman Catholic Church, he continues, “Although permanent schisms did occur here and there in American Catholicism, they were not the primary focus of Catholic immigrant attention during the first twenty or thirty years of the twentieth century. The primary problem for the numerous southern and eastern European Catholic immigrants was that of preserving their religious and social traditions while they adjusted to new conditions and tried to make a living.”²⁷ In

²⁴ Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America’s Most Powerful Church* (New York: Times Books, 1997), 128.

²⁵ Peter W. Williams, *America’s Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-first Century*, 3rd ed (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 296-297.

²⁶ Patrick W. Carey, *Catholics in America: A History*, Updated ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 71.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Catholicism and American Freedom, John T. McGreevy mentions the PNCC only to note, “a disproportionately high number of those Polish Catholics drawn to the socialist party also joined the schismatic Polish National Catholic Church.”²⁸ He does not provide any evidence to support this claim, only a reference in a footnote.

Even though most Roman Catholic parishes that experienced such tensions did not see schism, the same factors that caused schism and the formation of PNCC parishes were prevalent in Roman Catholic parishes that had a significant immigrant membership. In *Roman Catholicism in America*, Chester Gillis argues that Catholics in America were generally united by their common “Catholicism,” which “constituted an important part of their identity and a source of solidarity.”²⁹ Gillis notes that American society was “dominated by Protestant money and power,” and “immigrant Catholics,” though “eager to fit in” “found strength and solace in their religion.”³⁰ This perception that immigrants found solidarity within their ethnic groups and their common Catholic identity, which enabled them to successfully enter the Roman Catholic Church with minimal discomfort, dominates scholarship on the history of Catholicism and immigration in the United States. For example, Gillis downplays the significance of conflict within the Roman Catholic Church and suggests that the PNCC is not worth the closer attention of scholars by writing, “Despite ongoing disputes involving lay people, priests, and bishops, for the most part the church functioned as a cohesive unit in America. One exception to this cohesive unity led to the formation of the Polish National Catholic Church. This movement attracted only a small number of Polish-speaking churches, the vast majority of which remained faithful to Rome.”³¹ First, this conclusion ignores the impact of the conflict in communities where Roman

²⁸ John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 145.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Chester Gillis, *Roman Catholicism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 62.

Catholic bishops made concessions to avoid schism, such as permitting the foundation of “national” or “ethnic” parishes.³² Second, while the PNCC itself does not have accurate data on its past membership, the church had as many as 250,000 members in the United States and Canada. Membership in Poland, after first-generation PNCC members from the United States introduced the church there after World War I, has been estimated to have reached as high as 400,000 by 1939.³³

A. NUMBERS

In *The Churching of America: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, claiming that historians of American religion seem “ill at ease with arithmetic” and “‘borrow’ numerical claims from one another quite uncritically,” conclude, “When quantitative claims are involved, the opinions of people who fail to count, shouldn’t count.”³⁴ Although such writing has won them many critics, when examining a religious group that has received limited attention from scholars, such as the PNCC, Finke and Stark’s seemingly brash claim appears quite accurate. PNCC membership totals are an example of scholars’ tendency to repeat numbers without examining their validity. No one has ever been able to satisfactorily validate any numbers they claim for PNCC membership. Instead scholars trust PNCC

³² According to Gallagher in *Century of History* [162-3], in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Scranton, for example, the bishop (William O’Hara) approved the establishment of 28 national parishes from 1880 to 1900 in order to quell ethnic unrest. The PNCC resulted from one of two of his refusals to permit the founding of new parishes. Out of 30 total instances of unrest, thirteen occurred in Polish parishes, eight in Slovak, six in Lithuanian and three in Italian Roman Catholic churches.

³³ Mark Wyman, *Round-Trip to America: From Their Origins to the Twenty-first Century*, 3rd ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 177. Today, the PNCC claims more than 25,000 members in the United States and Canada. The church in Poland [renamed Kościół Polskokatolicki (Polish Catholic Church)], independent since 1951 due to tensions with the Polish communist government, has even less.

³⁴ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 2 and 242.

membership numbers they come across and interpret them as not being significant enough to merit further investigation. However, the perhaps as many as one-quarter of a million people who joined the PNCC hint at a larger discontent within the Roman Catholic Church in the United States — a feeling that involved more people than those who actually joined the schismatic church.

At the death of its founder, Francis Hodur, in 1953, PNCC membership numbered “several hundred thousand faithful – a great slice of American Polonia,” according to Hodur’s obituary in the *Polish Kuryer* (Milwaukee).³⁵ Roman Catholic sources, however, often claim that Hodur inflated PNCC membership totals, tending “to claim twice as many people as he actually had.”³⁶ For example, John P. Gallagher, ordained Roman Catholic priest, diocesan historian of Scranton, and author of *A Century of History: The Diocese of Scranton: 1868-1968* and *A Second Century Begins: The Diocese of Scranton: 1968-1993* repeatedly notes, in both books, that the PNCC never had more than 150,000 members. He does not, however, provide any evidence for his estimate, only the claim that PNCC members consistently, grossly inflated their church’s membership totals. The PNCC wanted to present itself as a legitimate church in response to constant criticism by Roman Catholics and to make itself more attractive to potential converts. Therefore, there is reason for scholars to question the church’s own membership estimates. However, Roman Catholic sources wanted to discourage Roman Catholics from joining PNCC parishes, and so wanted to discredit any PNCC membership claims. Therefore, scholars should question their estimates of PNCC membership, as well.

The PNCC itself does not have accurate data on its past membership, including the number of total parishes and priests who served in the church. Many PNCC parishes are

³⁵ *Album*, n.p.

³⁶ Gallagher, *Century of History*, 249.

nameless in church records. The 75th anniversary book of the Buffalo-Pittsburgh Diocese of the PNCC, for example, lists 50 parishes, half noted as “defunct,” five of which are without names.³⁷ The high number of “defunct” parishes in the PNCC provides some difficulty to researchers. Scholars can assume that much archival material has been lost. The quality of the collection of archival material at a parish depends on its pastor. If a priest, for example, did not keep an updated record book of the sacraments he performed in a parish, then there would be no such records available to researchers. Occasionally parishes have had their records microfilmed and preserved at nearby archives.³⁸ Such parish records contain information on parish members such as births, baptisms, confirmations, marriages and deaths (sometimes including the cause of death). They often also include minutes from parish meetings. A careful study of parish records from a range of PNCC parishes could help scholars better understand how quickly parishes grew and, as is the case today, started shrinking.

In its entire history, the PNCC has had at least 300 parishes (about half of which are currently inactive) under its jurisdiction in the United States and Canada.³⁹ A researcher in the History and Archives Commission of the PNCC, as of September 2008, has identified nearly 150 defunct PNCC parishes.⁴⁰ Even what would seem to be basic information on these churches (i.e.,

³⁷ *75th Anniversary, 1928-2003, Buffalo-Pittsburgh Diocese of the P.N.C.C.* (Orchard Park, NY: RW Publications, 2003), n.p. A debate arose in the publishing of this anniversary book over whether to include the names of defunct parishes. Even today, leaders within the PNCC associate closing churches with failure, in the midst of declining membership. Fortunately, this attitude about closed PNCC parishes does not reflect a consensus among PNCC members and clergy. The current Prime Bishop, Robert Nemkovich, for example, promotes the collection of PNCC archival materials within individual parishes and the depositing of such materials in the PNCC archives in Scranton. Centralizing such materials is becoming more important with the closures of smaller PNCC parishes, many of which have records of previously closed parishes.

³⁸ The Archives Service Center at the University of Pittsburgh in the Archives of Industrial Society, for example, has the microfilmed records of two PNCC churches: Holy Trinity Polish National Catholic Church in New Castle, PA (est. 1913), and Holy Trinity Polish National Catholic Church in Washington, PA (est. 1914).

³⁹ I have identified 289 PNCC parishes in the United States and Canada. 300 is my modest estimate at this point in my research. I expect the actual number to be somewhat higher.

⁴⁰ Joseph Seliga is currently spearheading an encyclopedia project for the PNCC for which I am a contributor. I have so far found PNCC members, both lay and clergy, to be quite enthusiastic about this project out of their strong concern to record and preserve church history.

name, location, date of foundation, date of inactivity and language of parish) is incomplete. This list includes only known PNCC parishes; more go unaccounted, but no one has yet even estimated how many there might have been. Priests have come and gone in the PNCC without leaving a trace, as many remain unaccounted for in church records. No one has estimated the number of Roman Catholics who were involved in independent Catholic churches, which includes PNCC parishes, those which remained independent and those which returned to the Roman Catholic Church, joined other churches or dissolved. Therefore, scholars have no data to support arguments that a closer study of the PNCC and Independentism is not worth their time, because we can neither quantify, much less qualify, its impact at this time.

B. SOURCES

The PNCC has published most of the major historical works about the church. This includes not only church-wide anniversary books, but also anniversary books published by individual parishes. Two of these books, *Po Drodze Życia W 25-ta Rocznicę Powstania Polskiego Narodowego Katolickiego Kościoła w Ameryce, 1897-1922* [*Along the Road of Life, Commemorating the 25th Anniversary of the Polish National Catholic Church in America, 1897-1922*] and *Księga Pamiątkowa "33": Polsko Narodowego Katolickiego Kościoła, 1897-1930, Scranton, Pennsylvania* [*Anniversary Book "33": The Polish National Catholic Church, 1897-1930, Scranton, Pennsylvania*] contain some of the best history written about the church.⁴¹

Neither has been translated into English, and both, being published by the PNCC, present an insider view of the church's history. Both histories are invaluable resources for researchers, as

⁴¹ *Po Drodze Życia W 25-ta Rocznicę Powstania Polskiego Narodowego Katolickiego Kościoła w Ameryce, 1897-1922* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, 1922); *Album, 1897-1957: Sześćdziesiątej Rocznicy Polskiego Narodowego Katolickiego Kościoła* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, 1957).

long as he or she is able to read Polish. Another church-wide anniversary book, *Album, 1897-1957: Sześćdziesiątej Rocznicy Polskiego Narodowego Katolickiego Kościoła* [*Album, 1897-1957: 60th Anniversary of the Polish National Catholic Church*], was published in 1957 in both Polish and English, but it does not contain the depth of the previous two books. These three books are the only church-wide anniversary books ever published by the PNCC. PNCC dioceses and individual parishes have published many of their own histories in the form of anniversary booklets. The older such publications are, the more detailed their writings of church, diocese and parish histories tend to be. This tendency toward more detail in older publications reflects a strong concern for early PNCC members to record and distribute their own parish histories. Being under frequent attack by the Roman Catholic Church, which tried to discredit and close PNCC parishes, early PNCC members did not expect their parishes to last long, and, in fact, many did not. Early PNCC histories reflect the concern of members that their struggle be remembered. Such early histories were written as a testament to the struggle of Polish immigrants with the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, which early PNCC members were not certain they could win or even sustain.

The most-often-cited, English-language, book-length history of the PNCC is Paul Fox's *The Polish National Catholic Church*.⁴² This book was published by the PNCC's School of Christian Living around 1956, although no publication date is given. Another book-length history of the PNCC, Theodore Andrews's *The Polish National Catholic Church in America and Poland*, was published in 1953 by the S.P.C.K. in London.⁴³ Combined, both books present a

⁴² Paul Fox, *The Polish National Catholic Church* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, [1956?]).

⁴³ The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge is an Anglican organization in London. Andrews was not a member of the PNCC, but of the Episcopal Church. As he explains in his preface, he became interested in the PNCC after moving to Passaic, New Jersey, a community which supported three PNCC parishes: a Polish parish (SS. Peter and Paul), the Slovak National Catholic Church cathedral (Holy Name of Jesus) and even an Italian parish (St. Anthony of Padua).

mere 200 pages of light skimming of the extensive history of the church, both written more than fifty years ago. Besides Fox's and Andrew's books, there are no comparable histories of the PNCC written in English. A few history books about the PNCC have been published in Poland as recently as 1997. Only one of these books, Hieronim Kubiak's *The Polish National Catholic Church in the United States of America from 1897 to 1980: Its Conditioning and Social Functions*, has been translated into English.⁴⁴

The Commission on History and Archives of the PNCC published 18 volumes of its journal, *PNCC Studies*, between 1980 and 1997. The journal is self-described as "a publication of studies devoted to the Polish National Catholic Church." Casimir Grotnik, a former priest and bishop in the PNCC, compiled notes of the early synods of the church and the early meetings of the Supreme Council and had them translated by Theodore Zawistowski, also a former priest in the PNCC. These sources are invaluable to researchers in the PNCC, as they present information that would not otherwise be readily accessible. The minutes of the early synods of the PNCC are contained in two volumes: one in the original Polish and one in English translation. Although the English translation is useful to non-Polish readers, it is abridged.

Hodur himself wrote and published a lot of the literature published by the PNCC. According to John Gallagher, former Diocese of Scranton Diocesan Historian, ordained Roman Catholic priest and author of *A Century of History: The Diocese of Scranton: 1868-1968*, Hodur was a "master propagandist," "an exploiter – not a propagator – of Polish disaffection."⁴⁵ Hodur started publishing the weekly *Straż* [*The Guard*] in April 1897, one month after the start of the unrest in South Scranton. This publication, which became the official organ of the PNCC in

⁴⁴ Hieronim Kubiak, *The Polish National Catholic Church in the United States of America from 1897 to 1980: Its Conditioning and Social Functions* (Warsaw, Poland: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1982).

⁴⁵ Gallagher, *Century of History*, 229 and 245.

1904, writes Gallagher, “became [Hodur’s] most potent weapon.”⁴⁶ It was, employing the language of the economic framework of Finke and Stark, a powerful and effective marketing tool. However, no one knows how well-circulated the *Straż* was, whether its articles appeared reprinted in other Polish newspapers, or how often other foreign-language periodicals reported on Hodur, the PNCC and unrest within Roman Catholic parishes. The *Straż*, having been printed so early in the church’s history, is especially valuable to researchers. For example, Hodur wrote numerous articles defending the PNCC in light of criticism of the church presented by Roman Catholics in early editions of the paper. Such articles were answers to articles published in various local and national Roman Catholic periodicals. *Rola Boża* [*God’s Field*] replaced *Straż* as the PNCC’s biweekly newspaper in 1923, and *Straż* became the organ of Spojnia, the PNCC’s fraternal benefits organization. The PNCC began publishing another weekly, *Przebudzenie* [*The Awakening*], in 1928 and a quarterly women’s magazine, *Polka* [*A Polish Woman*], in 1935.⁴⁷ Besides these periodicals, the PNCC has published a wealth of pamphlets and booklets, which reflect a concern to inform PNCC members about the church’s history, constitution, results of church-wide and diocesan synods and Hodur’s writings.

Although the PNCC approved an English-language Mass in 1958 and introduced it church-wide in 1961 (Mass had been exclusively in Polish since 1901), many PNCC parishes continued to use Polish as their official language of business into the 1970s. Therefore, a strong knowledge of both Polish and English (as the Polish of PNCC members was heavily influenced by English) is necessary for any researcher who might undertake a study of PNCC archival

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁴⁷ *Polka* was published by the United Societies of the Polish Women of the Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. The introduction to the first issue written by Hodur reads (my translation from the Polish): “The goal of the quarterly ‘POLKA’ will be: to aide in the understanding of life’s problems, to provide adequate and appropriate information with regard to the concerns of mothers, wives, workers, and the rest of the female members of the National Church, who are for all of us the Teachers and Guardians of our spiritual lives.” [Francis Hodur, “Jaki cel i jaka meta? Wstępne Słowo,” *Polka* 1, no. 1 (1935), 1].

material. Besides what materials extant PNCC parishes have in their own archives and what is available to researchers in various archives, the national archives of the PNCC and the archives of the Central Diocese (both in Scranton) have, by far, the most available material on the church in one place. For a scholar with Polish-language skills, the PNCC archives have a wealth of information that, due to the language barrier, goes largely unused.

III. RELIGIOUS ECONOMIES AND FOUNDATION NARRATIVES

In *The Churching of America: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark describe the history of religious bodies in the United States as a competition among varying groups for members. All religions are competing in a “religious economy.” Finke and Stark devised their model as a way to examine the rise in church affiliation in the United States, arguing that it is a much more recent phenomenon than Americans tend to believe. Colonial America, they argue, was largely “unchurched” because existing churches lacked competition. According to them, pluralism increased religious participation. Finke and Stark’s conclusions on which groups were “winners” and which were “losers” in the “religious economy” of the United States caused controversy among American religious scholars when their book was published. Whatever one may think about their conclusions, *Churching of America* presented a new and useful way to examine religious bodies. “Religious economies,” they write, “are like commercial economies in that they consist of a market made up of a set of current and potential customers and a set of firms seeking to serve that market.”⁴⁸ Finke and Stark argue that the “success and failure of religious bodies” depend on their “organizational structure,” “sale representatives,” “product” and “marketing techniques,” or, in “more churchly language,” their “polity,” “clergy,” “religious doctrines” and “evangelization techniques.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Finke and Stark's concept of a "religious economy" and their method of examining the ability of religious bodies to function in this economy can be used to examine the recruiting techniques of the PNCC.

In their book, Finke and Stark imagine the Roman Catholic Church in the United States as competing with Protestant sects to "recruit" the millions of immigrants from central, eastern and southern Europe who "were at best potential American Catholic parishioners."⁵⁰ From Finke and Stark's perspective, these immigrants "chose to become Catholics."⁵¹ They conclude, "A major achievement of the American Catholic Church was its ability, despite its overwhelmingly Irish hierarchy, to appeal to a broad spectrum of ethnic backgrounds and to prevent ethnic differences from producing major schisms."⁵² Finke and Stark entirely overlook how the Roman Catholic Church had to compete not only with Protestant sects for members, but also with Catholic schisms such as the PNCC and the real possibility of schism at the parish level. One reviewer, who also disagrees with Finke and Stark's conclusion, though for other reasons, writes, "The Catholic church had no serious religious competitors for the millions of culturally Catholic immigrants who came to the United States."⁵³ Like Finke and Stark, scholars of Catholicism and immigration in the United States tend to stress the tension between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant America, often overlooking conflict within the Roman Catholic Church, both between ethnic groups and within them. Schisms such as the PNCC were a real concern to members of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy in the United States, more real than the possibility of losing members to any Protestant sect. Although later Roman Catholic sources often note that members of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy exaggerated the threat of such

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵³ Joel A. Carpenter, review of *The Churching of America: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 4 (1994), 1449.

churches, actions taken by Roman Catholic bishops, priests and laypeople show a true concern for the spread and growth of schismatic churches. The Roman Catholic Church played an active and significant role in keeping its members from joining the PNCC, which was, and for many continued to be, an embarrassment to the Roman Catholic Church.

PNCC members actively recruited Polish Roman Catholics to join their church. They assumed Polish immigrants would want to join, but they also knew they had to make a good argument to compete with the Roman Catholic Church. Using foundation narratives presented via PNCC parish histories, scholars can determine which characteristics of their church PNCC members emphasized in order to compete for members in the “religious economy” of the early twentieth-century United States. David Yamane, a sociologist who has published frequently on Catholicism in the United States, describes narratives as “a primary linguistic vehicle through which people grasp the meaning of lived experience by configuring and reconfiguring past experiences in ongoing stories which have certain plots or directions and which guide the interpretation of those experiences.”⁵⁴ Since it is impossible to study “experiencing” when studying religious experience, Yamane writes, we “must study retrospective accounts” or “linguistic representations” of religious experiences.⁵⁵ He argues, “It is in the nature of experiencing and its linguistic expression that the two are loosely coupled and therefore we do not study phenomenological descriptions of experiences but how an experience is made meaningful.”⁵⁶ PNCC parish histories are attempts by converts to Polish National Catholicism to give meaning to their conversion experience. Yamane argues that we need to analyze “meaning in linguistic expression” in order to “grasp” the “meaning” of religious experience.⁵⁷ “To

⁵⁴ David Yamane, “Narrative and Religious Experience,” *Sociology of Religion* 61 (Summer 2000), 183.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

understand religious experience,” he writes, “is to know about its *meaning*, to understand how people make religious experiences meaningful, and to appreciate how that meaningfulness is conveyed.”⁵⁸ Therefore, “when people narrate events and experiences in their lives,” such as a member of a PNCC parish does when writing a parish history for publication in a parish anniversary book, “they are constructing and conveying meaning.”⁵⁹ Therefore, scholars can use parish histories to find not only who established a certain parish under what conditions, but also what part of that experience contemporary members found most valuable.

A parish history is an attempt by an author, usually a member of the parish he or she is writing about, to record the origin of a parish in a way that is agreeable first with members of the parish and its pastor, and second, with other lay and clerical members of the PNCC who might read it, including bishops. Scholars can use foundation narratives presented in anniversary books, published both at the parish level and by the PNCC in Scranton of two types of PNCC parishes (originally independent Catholic parishes that later joined the PNCC and those that organized within the PNCC) to determine what aspects of their origins members stressed the most. The majority of foundation narratives of parishes in the PNCC omit how the parish became part of the PNCC. Why a parish left the Roman Catholic Church, it seems, is more important to PNCC members than how the parish either formed as a PNCC parish or later joined the PNCC. Parish histories, especially older ones, emphasize founding members’ struggle with their previous Roman Catholic parish and how schism, in their eyes, was necessary. PNCC members emphasized what they believed most distinguished their church from the Roman Catholic Church: the Polish or national character of the PNCC and its “true” Catholic nature.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

IV. PNCC AS A “POLISH” AND “NATIONAL” CHURCH

A. IDENTITY

“Why is it that only the Poles cause trouble?” asked Ignatius F. Horstmann, Roman Catholic bishop of Cleveland, 1892-1908.⁶⁰ James Pula argues, “To understand why the Poles were so adamant in their religious dissent we must understand the cultural and historic experiences they brought with them from the Old World that shaped their responses within the American context.” In other words, scholars must place the immigrants they study in a transnational context, recognizing the significance of immigrants’ pre-migration culture on their post-migration actions. Therefore, in order to determine why Polish immigrants caused the most trouble within the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, scholars must begin their examination of this group before its emigration from east central Europe. William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki’s seminal work in Polish-American history, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, comprises five volumes tracing the development of Polish peasant communities in Europe to their post-migration reconstruction in the United States. It is a work of social history, written from the perspective of the Polish immigrant, or “from the bottom up.” According to the introduction to an abridged version of the text, Thomas and Znaniecki “inaugurated the first truly transatlantic

⁶⁰ James S. Pula, “‘Why is it that Only the Poles Cause Trouble?’: Cultural Determinism in the Founding of the Polish National Catholic Church,” *PNCC Studies* 15 (1994), 31. Quote from William J. Galush, “Faith and Fatherland: Dimensions of Polish-American Ethnoreligion, 1875-1975,” in Randall M. Miller and Thomas D. Marzik, eds., *Immigrants and Religion in Urban America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), 89. Cleveland was home to five PNCC parishes.

approach to European emigration.”⁶¹ Starting their investigation with an examination of the Polish peasant, they write, “peasant life in Eastern Europe holds an important key to behavior in America.”⁶²

Since the publication of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* in 1918, historians of Polish immigration to the United States have framed their studies as transnational histories: examinations of a group of people who not only went to the same place, the United States, but also left the same place, a Polish homeland.⁶³ For example, in beginning his book, *For God and Country: The Rise of Polish and Lithuanian Ethnic Consciousness in America 1860-1910*, Victor Greene writes, “Any study of American immigration must recognize how emigrants lived in the Old World conditioned their values and behavior in the New.”⁶⁴ Writing a decade later, John Bukowczyk begins his book, *And My Children Did Not Know Me: A History of the Polish-Americans*, “The history of Polish America begins abroad...”⁶⁵ Likewise, John Bodnar dedicates his first chapter of *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* to an examination of capitalism and immigrants’ homelands. Even Paul Fox begins *Poles in America* with a look at the “European background” of the Poles he studied in the United States.⁶⁶

In an article addressing Bishop Horstmann’s question, Pula argues that a “combination” of “religious” (i.e., “Catholic”) and “patriotic” “values and outlooks” “drew the Polish immigrant

⁶¹ Eli Zaretsky, introduction to *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America: A Classic Work in Immigration History*, by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, edited by Eli Zaretsky (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996), x.

⁶² Victor Greene, *For God and Country: The Rise of Polish and Lithuanian Ethnic Consciousness in America 1860-1910* (Madison, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1975), 14.

⁶³ The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ceased to exist in 1795, having been partitioned for a third time and thus split among its three neighbors: Prussia (later Germany), Russia and the Habsburg Monarchy (later Austria-Hungary). A Polish state would not reemerge until 1918, following World War I.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ John J. Bukowczyk, *And My Children Did Not Know Me: A History of the Polish-Americans* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1.

⁶⁶ Paul Fox, *The Poles in America* (New York: George H. Doran, 1922), 1.

inexorably into conflict in America.”⁶⁷ “As is well known,” he writes, “two of the most important values in late nineteenth-century Polish thought were patriotism and Catholicism.”⁶⁸ “Religious values,” he continues, “as is also well-known, had long been a significant component of the Polish psyche. During the long century of foreign occupation, including increasing efforts by some of the occupying powers to eradicate the Polish language and culture, Roman Catholicism had, in particular, become an even more important aspect of the collective Polish psychology.”⁶⁹ He argues that by the end of the nineteenth century, Polish patriotism was equated with Roman Catholicism. When those people who lived in parts of east central Europe, which we can identify as historically Polish land, became themselves “Polish” is of debate among historians. Polish nationalism, as Norman Davies recognizes, developed much earlier among the nobility than among the largely peasant masses, a surge which, Davies argues, was “provoked by the Partitions” (1772-95).⁷⁰ However, scholars disagree over the extent to which the peasantry felt themselves to be a part of a Polish nation.

Victor Greene argues that Polish national identity among immigrants was formed largely in the United States. Immigrants in the United States from central, eastern and southern Europe generally did not identify themselves as, for example, “Polish” or part of a so-called “Polish nation” or “Polonia” prior to immigrating. In *For God and Country*, Greene explores how peasants from Polish and Lithuanian lands in east central Europe came to think of themselves as members of ethnic groups. He argues that this rise in “ethnic consciousness” occurred in the United States and was well-developed by the start of World War I, when Poles living in the United States strongly supported an independent Polish state. Greene stresses the importance of

⁶⁷ Pula, 35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 236.

determining immigrants' group consciousness upon arrival to the United States. He divides "ethnicization," or the process of "ethnic consciousness-making" into three categories of nationalism: ethnic "naïveté," "cultural" or "polycentric" nationalism, and nationalism itself.⁷¹ Polish immigrants, he argues, displayed an ethnic "naïveté," meaning that they shared similar characteristics with other immigrants, such as a common language, but "they had little or no feeling of membership in an ethnic nation."⁷² They mostly identified themselves with their local or regional origins, such as their village or province. Greene argues that immigrants developed a sense of Polish nationalism (according to Greene, "the most advanced national group sentiment") only after coming to the United States.⁷³ The very name chosen for the new religious body in 1897, the Polish National Catholic Church, reflected the growing consciousness and value Polish immigrants placed on their Polish ethnicity. This value is reflected in foundation narratives of PNCC parishes, which often stress the national character of the church.

Breaks with the Roman Catholic Church were made only as a last resort. In many Roman Catholic parishes, Polish members turned to the church hierarchy for help. They were concerned about the lack of "Polishness" in the church. They requested Polish representation in the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church; they wanted a Polish bishop. These concerns fell on deaf ears, and the demanding Poles were labeled as "disobedient."⁷⁴ Such was the case in the Sacred Heart of Jesus Roman Catholic Church in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Their solution was to build their own Polish parish. When the Poles had gathered enough money to start to build their new church, they asked their bishop, William O'Hara, if he would bless it and appoint them a priest (they intended that the new church would be a Roman Catholic church). He said that the

⁷¹ Greene, 3-4.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁴ Andrews, 26.

only way he would do this was if the title for the property would be made in his name.⁷⁵ Wanting nothing less than complete control over their new church, they refused to sign it over to O'Hara and proceeded to try to find a resolution to the dispute within the Roman Catholic Church. A former assistant priest at the Sacred Heart of Jesus Roman Catholic Church, the Rev. Francis Hodur (who was to become the first bishop of the PNCC), was asked to return to Scranton to help the new church. On his arrival he declared, according to a church history published 25 years later, "All the dissatisfied and wronged in Scranton are to organize and build a new church, one in which the property will be in the hands of the people. Later we will manage what should happen next."⁷⁶ The new Saint Stanislaus Church attracted an initial membership of 250 families and was declared by Hodur "the first free Polish National Parish in the world."⁷⁷ Even at this point, though, the new church still attempted reconciliation with the Roman Catholic Church and operated basically as a Roman Catholic church.

The PNCC in Scranton declared itself the first church to use the adjective "national" in connection with a church, the first church to write a National Catholic Constitution and the first church in the United States to truly be a "free Polish Church."⁷⁸ The first sentence of the Preamble of the Constitution of the PNCC states (as it originally was written in 1907, in translation): "The first and most important task of the Polish National Catholic Church in

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁶ *Po Drodze Życia W 25-ta Rocznicę Powstania Polskiego Narodowego Katolickiego Kościoła w Ameryce, 1897-1922* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, 1922), 12. Translated myself from the Polish: "Wszyscy niezadowoleni i pokrzywdzeni w Scranton niech się zorganizują i pobudują nowy kościół, którego własność będzie spoczywała w rękach ludu. Potem będziemy radzić, co należy dalej czynić."

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 13. Translated myself from the Polish: "pierwsza wolna polsko narodowa parafia na świecie."

⁷⁸ "Scrantońska Parafia Narodowa: obrazy i wspomnienia," in *Księga Pamiątkowa "33": Polsko Narodowego Katolickiego Kościoła, 1897-1930, Scranton, Pennsylvania* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, 1930), 24.

America is the sanctification and salvation of the Polish emigrant in America.”⁷⁹ Later, in the same opening paragraph, the document reads: “To create a hearth for the Polish people in the emigration around which they can warm themselves when they have been made cold and indifferent in the struggle for existence, to show an infallible light, to give a foundation upon which they could lean with complete confidence, this is our dream, our ideal.”⁸⁰ These statements, which begin the constitution of the church, affirm that the main concern of the PNCC was a national one. From the beginning, the PNCC played the role of protector and preserver of Polish national identity. It did so in response to the rising demands of Polish Catholic immigrants in America who, under the influence of their newfound and highly valued Polish identity, wanted their church to take on such a role. The main legitimacy of the PNCC was that it, as opposed to the Roman Catholic Church in America, was Polish. This was true both in terms of its members, priests and hierarchy (who identified themselves as Polish), and in the essential characteristic that the church, both spiritually and physically, truly belonged to its members, the Polish people of America.

B. PROPERTY

Wacław Kruszką begins his four-part work on Polish immigration, *A History of Poles in America to 1908*, with the saying, “The soil is the mother life-giver [*alma mater terra*].”⁸¹ His work, published ten years before Thomas and Znaniecki’s *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*,

⁷⁹ Joseph W. Wiczerzak, “‘Purposes and Principles’ of the Polish National Catholic Church in America: The Preamble to the First Constitution,” *PNCC Studies* 9 (1988), 83. The original Polish was written by Hodur in 1907. This translation is from a slightly modified 1916 version.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸¹ Wacław Kruszką, *A History of the Poles in America to 1908*, trans. Krystyna Jankowski (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 13. Originally published in 1908.

establishes a tie between Poles in the United States and their homeland. He writes that although Polish immigrants changed soil, American for Polish, they did not change their “fatherland.”⁸² He argues that immigrant Poles closely linked their identity to the land where they were born. Thomas and Znaniecki also make this claim in their work, recognizing the importance of “the idea of ancestral land,” derived from the organization of the peasant family and from the communal lives they lived.⁸³ Polish immigration historians continue to emphasize this characteristic of Polish immigrants in their studies. Greene, in *For God and Country*, also recognizes Polish immigrants’ strong tie to their ancestral land. He, like Thomas and Znaniecki, establishes his study of Polish immigration to the United States in the pre-migration peasant culture of which his research subjects were a part. For them land was not only how they got their livelihood, most immigrants being agricultural workers prior to immigrating, but also where they derived their identity. They lived in a “land-based” culture.⁸⁴ Farming was more a way of life than a business. Land had both an economic and psychological significance. The land was “ancestral land, not private property.”⁸⁵ It was owned communally, not individually. The father, as head of the household, therefore, acted as a supervisor of the land, not as its owner. This sense of communal ownership of land would later translate to immigrant workers’ sense of communal ownership of, for example, a steel mill that employed most of the workers in a town or their local church.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 13. “fatherland” cited here is the translator’s translation of the Polish term “ojczyzna,” which derives from the word “ojciec,” which means “father.” However, since it ends with an “a,” it is a feminine word, unlike “ojciec,” which is masculine. It means the country (“kraj”) where someone was born and is also the home of his or her countrymen or people of the same nationality or ethnicity (“rodacy”). [*Nowy słownik języka polskiego*, edited by Elżbieta Sobol (Warsaw: PWN, 2003), 591]. I did not have access to Kruszk’a’s original Polish-language publication. Therefore, I cannot confirm his use of the word “ojczyzna,” nor his Polish translation of “alma mater terra” [see previous page]. I assume he used “ojczyzna” in both instances.

⁸³ William I. Thomas, William I. and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America: A Classic Work in Immigration History*, edited by Eli Zaretsky (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 87.

⁸⁴ Greene, 15.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

Status in nineteenth-century central Europe was based on land ownership. Peasants transferred their self-identification within a social hierarchy based on land ownership to the United States. Frequently, this value of land ownership would translate into a return to one's homeland and a purchase of land there. However, as Greene argues, those who stayed in the United States would transfer this desire for land into a desire for home ownership. In *For God and Country*, Greene argues that Poles living and working in the United States transferred their zeal for land in Poland to a zeal for real estate in the United States. John Bodnar, Roger Simon and Michael Weber, who revive Greene's argument in *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960*, provide evidence for this occurrence in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. According to Greene, overpopulation and a land shortage tempted peasants to move to urban areas to find work in industry. Austria, Russia and Germany had all initiated land policies that abolished feudalism by the 1860s and initiated land reform. This was done partly to prevent peasants from siding with Polish nationalists and possibly revolting against the foreign occupiers of their ancestral land. Estates were divided evenly among male heirs, which by the mid-to-late 1800s led to small plot holdings not large enough to support successful farming, or even subsistence farming. One solution, which was at first considered temporary, was to leave to find work elsewhere. Greene argues that those who emigrated had property but left out of fear of descending the social scale. In other words, those who chose to emigrate were not the completely destitute. They left, according to Greene, "for psychological rather than simply material reasons."⁸⁶ Regardless of where a Polish emigrant went to seek work, Greene argues, he went mainly "to earn enough to return to his village, buy land, and live as an independent farmer."⁸⁷

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

The First Plenary Council of Baltimore was held in 1852 after Rome granted the request of the Seventh Provincial Council of Baltimore to sanction a plenary synod to address the needs of a larger Roman Catholic Church, no longer limited to the single diocese of Baltimore (est., 1789). Two more plenary councils were held in Baltimore in 1866 and 1884. All three were national in character, and as such their decrees applied to all members of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. These councils helped form the context within which immigrants came into conflict with members of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy and each other in the late nineteenth century. Title nine of the twelve titles of the Third Plenary Council came to be of particular concern with immigrant Roman Catholics. The emergence of Independentism was partly the result of a single sentence in the decree: “The bishop is the guardian and supreme administrator of all diocesan property.”⁸⁸ One PNCC source summarizes: “The decree asserts that the Church property which they had built and maintained by their own hard earned money, like all other Church property, automatically becomes the rightful possession of the Church hierarchy – the Irish and the German bishops.”⁸⁹ The author remarks, “In the eyes of the immigrants this was an abomination.”⁹⁰ The author of another PNCC source writes, “The Baltimore Council of the Roman Catholic Bishops... was the clarion call which awakened the Polish people in America to renew their struggle for religious freedom.”⁹¹

Thus, Polish Roman Catholics left the Roman Catholic Church and founded independent Catholic churches out of a concern over property rights. Founders of such churches believed that such control was essential in maintaining a “Polishness” in the church, which was in turn

⁸⁸ William Fanning, “Plenary Councils of Baltimore,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907). <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02235a.htm>>

⁸⁹ “Bishop Hodur,” *Rola Boża/Przebudzenie/God’s Field: Bishop Franciszek Hodur: 1866-1966* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, 1966), 19.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ “The Polish National Catholic Church,” in *35th Anniversary of the Holy Family Polish National Catholic Church, McKeesport, Pa. Pamiętnik 35-cio letniego jubileuszu Parafii Św. Rodziny Polsko Narodowego Katolickiego Kościoła, McKeesport, Pa.: 1921-1956* (McKeesport, PA: Holy Family Polish National Catholic Church, 1956), n.p.

essential for carrying out the duties of the church in regard to the Polish-American immigrant population. Such beliefs grew out of the Polish immigrants' pre-migration values and understandings of property and property control, and, more significant, their growing consciousness of and attachment to their Polish identity. Since first-generation and second-generation Polish-Americans established nearly 70% of all PNCC parishes between World War I and World War II, the immigrants who founded PNCC parishes were no longer "birds of passage." They were in the United States to stay. They were the ones purchasing homes in the United States, as examined by Greene and Bodnar, Simon and Weber. They became less mobile with the coming of World War I and the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, and the stability brought a change in their consciousness.

The founding of the PNCC in the United States makes it an American denomination. From the outset, the PNCC was intended to be a democratic church, which distinguishes it from the Roman Catholic Church. For example, in the PNCC priests and lay delegates elect bishops, and parish property (including the buildings) belongs to the members. Original demands made by would-be founders of the PNCC to Pope Leo XIII included such requests for more democracy within the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. Needless to say, their demands fell on deaf ears. PNCC writings testify that the church's constitution, originally written by Hodur in 1897, "is patterned after the Constitution of the United States of America."⁹² "This same form of government [democracy]," writes Leon Grochowski, second Prime Bishop of the PNCC, "was established in the Polish National Catholic Church, patterning itself after the early Apostolic Church. It is our conviction that the Apostles having spent three years in the Seminary of our Lord Jesus, were instructed by their Master on what governing principles they might establish

⁹² Leon Grochowski, "New Paths," in *Rola Boża/Przebudzenie/God's Field: Bishop Franciszek Hodur: 1866-1966* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, 1966), 45.

His future Church and how its mission should be led.”⁹³ In other words, Jesus intended that his church be a democratic church unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which Grochowski hints at by writing, “History has proven that dictatorships have not proven practical.”⁹⁴

The final principle in the *Eleven Great Principles of the Polish National Catholic Church* reads, “The owners and controllers of National Church property are the Polish people, those who build, maintain and believe in this Church. The bishops and priests are its guardians with the consent of the people...”⁹⁵ In Article XVII, “The Procedure of Organizing Parishes,” the PNCC Constitution reads, “The government: - This Church (Congregation) is a democratic body, it means, that in matters of economics and of social nature, is subject to the control of those, who constitute the organization.”⁹⁶

C. HODUR’S PETITION TO ROME (1898)

Hodur, seeing himself as a representative of the entire Polish immigrant community in the United States, not just his flock in Scranton, traveled to Rome in February of 1898 to deliver the following petition to Pope Leo XIII:

- 1) The bishops and their consultors know neither the language nor the character of the two million Poles in North America, and therefore cannot be mediators between the faithful and pastors.
- 2) Many pastors, even the most unworthy ones, real tyrants, enjoy the greatest possible favor on the part of the bishops and if the people murmur against those impious servants of God, they are forced to obey even by civil force.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Interestingly, Grochowski, as Prime Bishop of the PNCC (1953-1969), made moves to establish better relations with the Roman Catholic Church. For example, he invited several Roman Catholic priests to attend the Twelfth Synod of the PNCC in 1967, one of which actually attended.

⁹⁵ *The Confession Of Faith and the Eleven Great Principles of the Polish National Catholic Church in Polish and English* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, 1975), 38.

⁹⁶ *PNCC Constitution* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, 1940), 31.

3) Very many priests are occupied more with the collection of money than with the labor in the vineyard of the Lord and then on the Lord's day, instead of preaching the Gospel to the faithful, invite them to games, lotteries and other worldly amusements directed by the priests in the name of the Church.⁹⁷

Hodur failed to meet with the pope. His petition was rejected by Cardinal Ledochowski, Prefect of Propaganda of the Faith, who told him, according to a later PNCC source, "Return quickly...and remember for all time that the Holy See shall not pass separate laws or elect separate bishops for a handful of Catholics in America. Your sentiments have no sense or the slightest hope of support in Rome."⁹⁸ Regardless of his failure to deliver his petition, the document reflects a widespread sentiment among Polish Roman Catholics in the United States and Rome's ignorance of the tensions that were growing between the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church in America and its newest members.

Title VII, "Of Promoting Uniformity of Discipline," of the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore (1866), reads, "Entrance money should not be collected at churches."⁹⁹ Even though the members of the council met before Roman Catholics from central, eastern and southern Europe began immigrating to the United States and joining Roman Catholic parishes in large numbers, this decree was written to address a real concern among the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Therefore, such practices as collecting "entrance fees" very well may have still been a reality in many Roman Catholic parishes in the late nineteenth century. Even if such practices were not common, stories about them were circulated within the Roman Catholic immigrant population. For example, one such story from a PNCC publication reads as follows:

⁹⁷ Joseph Wiczerzak, *Bishop Francis Hodur: Biographical Essays* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1998), 87-88.

⁹⁸ "A Brief History of the P. N. Church," *The New Life [Nowe Życie]* (November 1950), 11. This periodical was published monthly by the PNCC in Scranton "for the Youth of the Polish National Catholic Church."

⁹⁹ Fanning.

They came to the familiar house of worship but found it strangely a publican – a tax gatherer. With booths or tables placed at the Church doors, they found that an “entrance fee” was exacted from them. In Detroit, one of the newly arrived immigrants having no money to pay, tried to force his entry into the Church. He could not understand why the “silver tax” should bar him from worship. It was a cold winter Sunday and the door men did only what they considered their duty, - they pushed him out. He was killed as he fell down the icy stairs.¹⁰⁰

This account is from a PNCC anniversary booklet published in commemoration of the centennial of Hodur’s birth in 1966. It reflects an awareness among PNCC members of such cruelties enacted on immigrants by members of the Roman Catholic Church acting by order of their priests and bishops. Its rather late publication in a booklet intended for church-wide dissemination reflects a concern of PNCC members that such cruelties should not be soon forgotten.

Stories about violence and brutality ordered by Roman Catholic priests and bishops onto dissenting immigrant parishioners are common in PNCC publications, especially in church-wide and parish anniversary books and booklets. One of the most well-known and shocking incidents occurred in Dupont, Pennsylvania, a coal mining town about ten miles outside of Scranton, in 1916 when state troopers were called to accompany the Rev. Francis Kurkowski to his new assignment at the Roman Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (est. 1902). Although he was Polish, many parishioners saw Kurkowski as too closely aligned with the Irish hierarchy of the Roman Catholic diocese. Hundreds of people gathered around the church to bar the new priest’s entrance. Some shouted, supposedly, “We paid for this church ourselves. *Our* church. No one gets in but us. You get the hell out of here!”¹⁰¹ In the end of the struggle between the parishioners and the police, seventy-one were arrested, two were hospitalized and one died.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ “Bishop Hodur,” 18.

¹⁰¹ Katherine Mayo, *Mounted Justice: True Stories of the Pennsylvania State Police* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 217.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 241-242.

One PNCC publication summarizes the incident as follows: “Bits of hair, scalp and blood flowing into the cellar and spattered on the metallic fence around the church were mute evidence of the brutal police ‘round up’, all too reminiscent of the tyranny and the savagery of their European oppressors.”¹⁰³

The riot made the front page of the *New York Times* on January 17, 1916. The headline read, “One Dead, Two Dying After Church Riot,” with the following description: “Pennsylvania State Troopers Charge Into a Mob of 1,000 Persons. Scores Badly Injured. Stones, Mustard, and Pepper Flung at the Police – Many Rioters Arrested.”¹⁰⁴ The incident became so well-known that it soon attracted the attention of a writer outside of the PNCC who included its retelling in a chapter in her book *Mounted Justice: True Stories of the Pennsylvania State Police*, published in 1922. Since the author casts the story as a triumph of the Pennsylvania state police in their ability to quell the strife in the parish, her chapter, titled “Advertising Mustard,” provides a telling non-PNCC perspective of an incident of religious unrest in an immigrant community. The author describes the meticulous care the parishioners put into preparing for the riot: “cartloads of stones” placed in “a certain mathematical precision” were “stacked in methodical order.”¹⁰⁵ Everyone was armed and anticipating the riot. “Some carried mine-steaks, some crow-bars, some pick-axes, some oaken clubs studded with spikes. Some grasped lone ‘two-by-fours,’ through whose ends were driven new steel nails so that the sharp shafts stood out, firm and far, like the prongs of a long-tooth rake. . . . The yard was a sea of yelling heads.”¹⁰⁶ The author continues, describing the riot itself, “The rioters, male and female, fought like the Mad Mullah’s fanatics – like homicidal madmen – like a pack of hydrophobic wolves, while their leaders howled them

¹⁰³ “Bishop Hodur,” 19.

¹⁰⁴ “One Dead, Two Dying After Church Riot,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1916.

¹⁰⁵ Mayo, 219.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

on.”¹⁰⁷ The description not only exemplifies commonly held stereotypes of the time of new immigrants, but also notes the extreme intensity with which immigrant Roman Catholics fought for control in their parishes. “You can kill me where I stand,” one woman screamed directly at a state trooper, “but I’ll stay here till you do.”¹⁰⁸ Upon hearing of the riot in Scranton, Hodur sent representatives of the PNCC to Dupont to help organize a new parish. Holy Mother of Sorrows Polish National Catholic Church was formed that spring, attracting members from the Roman Catholic parish. Although the riot brought “sadness and even despair” to the community, “The present Polish community in Dupont,” reads the parish’s entry in a PNCC anniversary book published six years later in 1922, “thanks God that He opened their eyes and gave them the opportunity to better know Christ and the obligations of Poles to God, their community and their homeland, Poland.”¹⁰⁹ Supposedly, a cross long marked the spot where George Guzior was shot dead by a state trooper.¹¹⁰

Hodur’s 1898 petition to Pope Leo XIII was a response to such actions, including violent episodes like the Dupont riot, towards new immigrant Roman Catholics by those who held positions of power within Roman Catholic parishes and the church hierarchy. Hodur intended to reflect the concerns of all Polish Americans in his petition, not just his followers in Scranton.¹¹¹

After his list of grievances, Hodur’s petition requested the following as a solution:

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 229. Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, nicknamed “Mad Mullah,” led a resistance movement against British, Italian and Ethiopian forces in Somalia for nearly 20 years in the early 20th century. Mayo’s comparison of the rioting Catholic immigrants in Dupont with this Somali religious and nationalist leader would have been quite effective among her contemporary readers, since her book was published just two years after Hassan’s death.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁰⁹ *Po Drodze Życia*, 108. Translated myself from the Polish: “Obecnie gromadka polskiego ludu w Dupont dziękuje Bogu, że jej otworzył oczy i dał sposobność poznać lepiej Chrystusa i obowiązki polaka względem Boga, społeczeństwa ludzkiego i swojej Ojczyzny Polski.”

¹¹⁰ Matthew S. Fliss, “The Development of the Church at Dupont, Pennsylvania,” *PNCC Studies* 14 (1993), 95.

¹¹¹ Besides the movement in Scranton, there were several independent movements in the immigrant Polish Catholic population in the United States in the late 1880s. The largest were those led by Anthony Kozłowski in Chicago (est. 1895) and Stephen Kamiński in Buffalo (est. 1895). Most of these parishes joined the PNCC after Kozłowski’s death in 1907 and Kamiński’s in 1911. It can be argued that one significant reason for the PNCC’s success, both in its

- 1) That the Polish people in the United States have a bishop or representative to the Delegate of the Holy see in Washington who can use the Polish language.
- 2) The material goods of the churches, that is, schools, residences, and church offices be entirely the property of the faithful.
- 3) That the people have some influence on the election of their pastors.¹¹²

Out of all of these requests, only the first one would have been seen as reasonable by members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Rome. The other two went completely against the decrees passed by the three plenary councils held in Baltimore. Hodur must have known that his requests were impossible to fulfill. He was told, according to a PNCC source, “the rules passed by the Baltimore Synod and approved by the Pope are for all Catholics. Who listens and abides by them, is a member of the church, who does not is an outcast. The Pope will do nothing for the Poles.”¹¹³

Although Hodur never met with Pope Leo XIII, his petition was read and taken seriously. Before he even returned to Scranton in 1898, Hodur, as well as the parish of Saint Stanislaus Church and a number of other “independents” in America, was excommunicated.¹¹⁴ According to PNCC lore, Hodur read the sentence of excommunication from the pulpit in Scranton, then burned it and threw the ashes into a nearby brook, declaring, “we shall not return!”¹¹⁵ Hodur declared the Polish people the owners of their churches which they built and cared for, as stated in Article VIII of early versions of the constitution of the PNCC.¹¹⁶ Members of the church were

competition with other independent Catholic churches and the Roman Catholic Church is that Hodur lived long enough to oversee the establishment of a strong church by the time of his death in 1953.

¹¹² Wierczak, *Bishop Francis Hodur*, 88.

¹¹³ Daniel Cyganowski, “Works of Francis Hodur,” *Francis Hodur: Priest – Bishop – Primate: Centenary Observance, 1866-1966: Sunday, October 23, 1966 Conrad Hilton Hotel Chicago, Illinois* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, 1966), n.p.

¹¹⁴ Wierczak, *Bishop Francis Hodur*, 89.

¹¹⁵ *Album*, n.p.

¹¹⁶ “Konstytucja, Czyli Zasady i Ustawy Polskiego Narodowego Katolickiego Kościoła,” in *Księga Pamiątkowa* “33,” 98.

given legal control over church property, as well as the right to choose their pastors.¹¹⁷ The struggle for power led directly to the breakaway from the Roman Catholic Church and the formation of the PNCC. It simply was not possible for the members of any parish to have control over the property of their churches under Roman Catholic canon law. The only way to gain such control, Hodur learned, was through schism.

On July 4, 1897, Hodur blessed the cornerstone of Saint Stanislaus, Bishop and Martyr Parish, in Scranton, “for the glory of God and the edification of the Polish people.”¹¹⁸ On that same day, he celebrated a Solemn High Mass for the parish’s dedication. These details were recorded by an anonymous author in the church’s 60th anniversary book, which continues, “July 4th is a memorable day in the calendar of the Polish National Catholic Church. To the American it stands for political freedom; to the faithful of our church it is a day of double freedom – political and religious.”¹¹⁹ Born in Poland in 1866, educated in Kraków, immigrated to the United States and ordained in 1893, Hodur led a group of first-generation Polish-Americans to break away from their Roman Catholic faith at the age of 31, just four years after becoming a priest. He was elected bishop at the First Synod of the PNCC in 1904 and consecrated a bishop in Utrecht, Holland, by the head of the Old Catholic Churches in Europe on September 29, 1907, the ninth anniversary of his excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church.

Hodur was the third Polish ordained Roman Catholic priest in the United States to be consecrated a bishop by the Old Catholic Church. Anthony Kozłowski, leader of the Polish Old Catholic Church centered in Chicago, and Stephen Kamiński, leader of the Independent Polish

¹¹⁷ *Po Drodze Życia*, 15.

¹¹⁸ *Album*, n.p. These words are taken from the document enclosed in the cornerstone of the church building: “For the Glory of God and the edification of the Polish people, in the tenure of Grover Cleveland as the President of the United States, this building having been commenced on the 10th of January, 1897, its cornerstone is blessed by the Rev. Francis Hodur on this 4th day of July of the same year, for the Church of St. Stanislaus B. and M.”

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Church of America, were both consecrated in the 1890s.¹²⁰ For all three priests, consecration was not only appealing, but seen as necessary, because it gave the priests in their movements unquestionable orders and apostolic succession, which the Old Catholic Church maintained from its break with the Roman Catholic Church. Apostolic succession, in particular, was extremely important for Hodur to obtain for his church, because it connected him, as the first prime bishop of the PNCC, with Peter, supposedly the first bishop of the Catholic Church.¹²¹ The Old Catholic Churches are a group of national churches in Europe that broke away from the Roman Catholic Church in the late 1800s. They are sometimes referred to as the churches of the Union of Utrecht and are united by their acceptance of the Declaration of Utrecht (1889), which Hodur accepted at his consecration. The Old Catholic movement in Europe was a reaction against certain claims of the Roman Catholic papacy, including the doctrine of papal infallibility, promulgated by the First Vatican Council of 1870. The Declaration of Utrecht accepts “the unanimously accepted decisions of the Ecumenical Councils held in the undivided Church of the first thousand years,” or those councils held before the Great Schism of 1054.¹²² “We therefore,” continues the declaration, “reject the decrees of the so-called Council of the Vatican,” arguing that the doctrine of papal infallibility is “in contradiction with the faith of the ancient Church.”¹²³ The declaration also recognizes the legitimacy of national churches: “We also renew the ancient protests of the Catholic Church of Holland against the errors of the Roman Curia, and against its attacks upon the rights of national Churches.”¹²⁴

¹²⁰ The Old Catholic Church refused to consecrate Hodur at his first request, seeing two Polish bishops in the United States as adequate. Fortunately for Hodur, Kozłowski died in 1907, giving him an opportunity to successfully renew his plea for consecration.

¹²¹ New Testament, Matthew 16:18.

¹²² “The Declaration of Utrecht: A Translation of the Profession of Faith, or Declaration, Formulated by the Old Catholic Bishops Assembled at Utrecht, Holland September 24, 1889,” in *The Constitution and Laws of the Polish National Catholic Church* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church, 2006), 7.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

According to the Declaration of Utrecht, the PNCC is doctrinally similar to the Roman Catholic Church only in its recognition of the ecumenical councils held before 1054. Although the PNCC would remain a liturgical church, in many ways ritualistically similar to the Roman Catholic Church, early PNCC members took advantage of their new independence and made some changes to distinguish themselves from their Roman Catholic origins. For example, the PNCC maintained seven sacraments but modified them: Baptism and Confirmation were combined into one sacrament, and the sacrament of the Word of God was added; the remaining five sacraments (Penance, Holy Eucharist, Extreme Unction, Holy Orders and Matrimony) were maintained from Roman Catholicism.¹²⁵ Hodur and early PNCC members also made changes that distinguished their church from the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, which was hierarchically dominated by ethnic Irishmen well into the twentieth century, long after the Irish ceased to comprise the majority of Roman Catholics in the country. The PNCC rejected the Roman Catholic concept of purgatory and a “fire and brimstone” conception of hell, thereby distancing itself from the Irish-influenced contemporary Roman Catholic theology heavily based on sin and guilt.¹²⁶ Irish priests’ strong emphasis on sin was intended to create a sense of guilt among Roman Catholics which would encourage them to seek absolution via private confession

¹²⁵ *A Catechism of the Polish National Catholic Church* (Scranton, PA: Mission Fund Polish National Catholic Church, 1962), 6. Baptism and confirmation were celebrated as two separate events, the first in infancy (“as soon as possible after birth”), the second in adolescence. The PNCC interpreted confirmation as “the completion of baptism,” since one was not physically able to understand and accept baptism for him or herself in his or her infancy. “Confirmation is the completion of baptism because: 1. By baptism we are made members of Christ’s Church. 2. By confirmation we are strengthened to live a Christian life within the Church and defend its truths” [*Catechism*, 58]. The Sacrament of the Word of God was celebrated by the reading of the Bible at Mass, typically one reading from the Old Testament, one reading from the New Testament and one reading from the Gospels. “The Word of God is the sacrament through which we: 1. Learn to know the Divine Will of God. 2. Become strengthened in faith. 3. Are united with Christ our Lord. 4. Become better qualified to labor for the Kingdom of God” [*Catechism*, 59]. “We should receive the Sacrament of the Word of God because Christ commanded us to receive and proclaim it. Holy Scripture says this: 1. ‘Go ye therefore, and teach all nations.’ Mat. 28:19. 2. ‘The seed is the Word of God.’ Luke 8:11. 3. ‘Blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it.’ Luke 11:28. 4. ‘You have been born again...through the living and abiding Word of God.’ 1 Peter 1:23. 5. ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’ Mat. 4:4” [*Catechism*, 59-60].

¹²⁶ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 121.

to a priest. The PNCC moved away from this largely Irish tradition when, in 1921, it introduced general confession, thereby allowing its members to receive absolution without having to confess their sins privately to a priest. Also in 1921, PNCC members instituted a major change from their Roman Catholic origins: the abolition of mandatory clerical celibacy. The reduced importance of private confession, permission for priests to marry and elections for bishops made PNCC priests more like their parishioners, greatly changing the Irish-instituted perception of the priest as “God’s oracle” on earth.¹²⁷ By deemphasizing the power of its clergy, early PNCC members consciously made their church less authoritarian than that which the Irish had established in the United States in the nineteenth century. These differences greatly distanced the PNCC from the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and would provide for a unique experience of Catholicism for its members. Another significant change from the PNCC’s Roman Catholic origins was Hodur’s translation of the PNCC liturgy into Polish in 1901. Both the abolition of mandatory clerical celibacy and the introduction of the Polish liturgy were justified by early PNCC members’ attempts to connect the PNCC to an older Catholic church, one in which priests were allowed to marry and the liturgy was in the vernacular.¹²⁸

D. LANGUAGE

The tenth principle in the *Eleven Great Principles of the Polish National Catholic Church* reads:

All religious rites in the Polish Church and Polish home should be conducted in the Polish language; since they are the outward signs of the relation of the Polish soul and

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹²⁸ Hodur and early PNCC members connected their Polish-language Mass to the Old Church Slavonic Mass, as introduced to the Slavs of central and eastern Europe by Saints Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century. This Mass in the vernacular predates the introduction of Roman Catholicism in Poland with the baptism of Prince Mieszko I in 966, and is therefore, according to PNCC sources, more authentically “Catholic” than the Latin Roman Catholic liturgy. The Roman Catholic Church would not allow the use of the vernacular in the Mass until the reforms made in the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

Polish people to God. Christ prayed to God, his Father, in Syro-Chaldean (Aramaic), that is, in the language of His own people; He ministered in this tongue the Holy rite at the Last Supper and in the last moment of the most dreadful tragedy that ever took place on this earthly sphere; He cried out to God in the tongue of His own people, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?”

Why then should Polish priests, followers of Jesus Christ the Lawgiver, show disdain for the marvelous Polish language, the language of a great immortal people and meditate between a Polish person and God in the alien Latin tongue, the language of a dead people?¹²⁹

Since 1901, the language of the liturgy of the PNCC was to be in the language of the people of the congregation of whichever parish the liturgy of the Mass was performed in. This did not commit the language of the PNCC to always be Polish, but instead permitted room for variation when necessary and possible. In this way the language of the liturgy in a parish reflected the language of the members of that parish and hence the language of their larger community. The use of the Polish language in the liturgy of the PNCC was done primarily so that the members of the church, as participants in the ritual, could hear the words of the liturgy and thereby hopefully understand it better. The PNCC, initially formed primarily to fulfill the desire of members to have some control over their parishes, came to focus on and emphasize its national Polish character. Throughout most of the PNCC’s history, its members’ “Polishness” (their Polish national identity) was maintained partially through the use of the Polish language in the liturgy.

The first Polish-language Mass in the PNCC was performed in 1901. Polish was introduced as quickly as possible, and the Polish liturgy was basically a word-for-word translation of the Roman Catholic Latin liturgy. However, because language changes as its speakers change, the language of the PNCC changed accordingly. In 1958, the first English Mass was approved at the Tenth General Synod of the PNCC. This change in the language of the

¹²⁹ *Confession Of Faith*, 37-38. The footnote which is given for this passage reads: “From the context of number 10 we conclude that in 1923 Bishop Hodur was concerned with the Polish language as the language of the people of the Church. However, the Tenth General Synod held in July 1958 at Chicago, Illinois decreed that parishes may institute the practice of having Mass in English in addition to the Polish. The English Mass was introduced in 1961 and is practiced throughout the Church.”

liturgy reflected the change in the Polish immigrant community that founded the PNCC: it was becoming more “American.” The second generation grew up speaking both Polish and English, and by the fourth generation, Polish was almost entirely gone. The church-wide introduction of the Polish Mass in 1961 was not applied in all parishes of the PNCC as soon as it was published. In most cases the introduction of the English Mass followed the following pattern: one English Mass was said a month, then gradually more and more were added, until one Polish Mass was said a month and the rest were in English. The revised liturgy published in 1973 was written in both Polish and English, with Polish at the front of the book and English at the back. It was reprinted in 1978 with Polish on one side of the book and English on the other. These half Polish/half English versions of the liturgy and the gradual introduction of the English Mass reflected the changing language of the church community.

Today the language of the PNCC is English. The Polish liturgy is almost entirely gone. It would be inaccessible to the church’s current non-Polish-speaking majority. Likewise, the Polish language is almost entirely gone from the population that grew from the ethnic Poles who immigrated to the United States around the turn of the twentieth century. The PNCC introduced a new liturgy in 1990. It is written entirely in English with no Polish translation. The change in the liturgy of the PNCC reflects the changes in the Polish immigrant community in the United States. As the community of the early twentieth-century church became more “American,” so did the liturgy of the church. This can be seen especially in the gradual change of the language of the liturgy from Polish to English. In the transition, something was lost: The PNCC today seems only remotely “Polish.” But it would have been impossible to maintain the Polish language in the liturgy of the Mass without Polish speakers in the church. Therefore, the PNCC had to change to adapt to its changing community. Today, PNCC members have continued to practice other ways

of maintaining their Polish identity and the Polish character of their church. Such practices include singing Polish songs (in Polish and in English translation) during the Mass, carrying on Polish traditions such as distributing *oplatek* (Christmas wafers) for parishioners' traditional *wigilia* dinners and having priests bless Easter baskets, sponsoring Polish choir retreats and Polish folk dance groups, practicing distinctively Polish devotions such as the Bitter Lamentations during Lent, holding *pierogi* and Polish craft sales for fundraisers, providing classes in Polish language and organizing regular trips to Poland. Although fewer and fewer PNCC members can speak Polish, many continue to take pride in their Polish identity and the "Polishness" of their church.

V. PNCC AS A “CATHOLIC” CHURCH

In *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present*, Jay P. Dolan writes that in the nineteenth century, “Catholicism had become a church of immigrants.”¹³⁰ “Whether talking about the rural frontier or the urban metropolis,” he continues, “historians have increasingly come to acknowledge the importance of religion in shaping the identity of the immigrants.”¹³¹ Historians of Polish immigration, for example, typically display a keen awareness of their research subjects’ “Catholicism,” generally interpreting it as a faithful adherence to the Roman Catholic faith and obedience to the Roman Catholic Church. The stereotype “*Polak-Katolik*” (Polish-Catholic) embodies the intertwining of Polish national identity with Polish Catholic identity. However, scholars should reevaluate their tendencies to make claims such as James M. O’Toole in *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America*: “Catholicism came in the trunks of immigrants along with their other prized possessions.”¹³² In reality, supposedly “Catholic” immigrants, in the words of Finke and Stark, “were at best potential American Catholic parishioners.”¹³³

Scholars agree, for example, that Poland traces its origin as a nation to 966 with the baptism of Prince Mieszko I, and have documentary evidence that Article I of the Polish May 3rd Constitution (1791) declares the Roman Catholic faith as the dominant national religion of

¹³⁰ Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 161.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² O’Toole, *Faithful*, 99.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 177.

the country.¹³⁴ From these historical instances, scholars can say with certainty that the Roman Catholic Church in Poland has had an important historical connection to the state from its very origin. Some earlier commentators have made exaggerated claims, such as that of Paul Fox, in *Poles in America* (1922): “The Poles are a very religious people, possessed of a deep religious instinct and a temperament particularly susceptible to religious impressions. Religion permeated the Polish peasant’s thought, speech, and daily life. The names of Christ and the Virgin are on his lips all the time. His legends and folklore are religious in character. His patriotism and his religion are inseparably linked together in his mind. A good Pole is expected to be a good Catholic.”¹³⁵ Although scholars cannot assume that every Polish immigrant identified himself as Roman Catholic, such perceptions have continued to influence modern scholarship. For example, in *For More Than Bread: Community and Identity in American Polonia, 1880-1940*, William Galush writes, “In its traditional Roman Catholic form, religion has pervaded Polish-American existence, fostering a rich spirituality and evoking extraordinary material sacrifices from lower-class immigrants. As the one institution that transcended the partitions in the period of mass immigration, the Roman Catholic Church was intimately linked with national identity.”¹³⁶

Members of the PNCC identified themselves as “Catholics,” not Roman Catholics. They did not equate “Catholicism” with the Roman Catholicism of the Roman Catholic Church. Foundation narratives of PNCC parishes and the church itself show an emphasis, particularly of early members, of the “true” Catholic nature of the PNCC. It was important for PNCC members to successfully argue that their church was a “Catholic” church in order to attract members in the “religious economy” of the early twentieth-century United States. PNCC histories connect the

¹³⁴ Davies, 249; Christopher Kasperek, “Poland’s Constitution of May 3, 1791,” *PNCC Studies* 3 (1982), 48.

¹³⁵ Paul Fox, *The Poles in America* (New York: George H. Doran, 1922), 107.

¹³⁶ William J. Galush, *For More Than Bread: Community and Identity in American Polonia, 1880-1940* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2006), 80.

Catholicism of the PNCC to an older Catholic church in Poland. This church predates the introduction of Roman Catholicism in Poland and traces its origins to the Christian church introduced to the Slavic peoples by Saints Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century.¹³⁷

According to PNCC histories, Mieszko I of Poland converted to Roman Catholicism in 966 as a political move to thwart German oppression. Doing so had the effect of permitting German clergy, with support of the Vatican, “to eradicate and destroy the church organized by Saints Cyril and Methodius.”¹³⁸ Later, in the sixteenth century, Polish reformers, inspired by the Protestant Reformation, tried to revive an older Catholic Church in Poland, one that closer resembled the church established by Cyril and Methodius.¹³⁹ One such reformer, Andrew Frycz Modrzewski, prepared the following recommendations at a general synod of Christian churches in Poland which he then presented at the Council of Trent (1545-1563):

1. The Bible is the only criterion of Divine teaching.
2. The clergy should be permitted to marry, as they did without hindrance to the year 1123 when celibacy became mandatory in the Roman Church.
3. The liturgy should be celebrated in the language of the people.
4. Each nation should have its own National Church.¹⁴⁰

Although those in attendance at the council “evaded” the issues Modrzewski raised by promising to consider his recommendations but then never doing so, Modrzewski’s recommendations

¹³⁷ Cyril and Methodius also introduced a Slavonic liturgy, which inspired Hodur to introduce a Polish liturgy in the PNCC in 1901.

¹³⁸ “Krótką Kroniką Parafii P.N.K.K. im. Świętej Rodziny W McKeesport, Pennsylvania,” in *35th Anniversary of the Holy Family Polish National Catholic Church*, n.p.

¹³⁹ PNCC sources mention such Polish reformers as Jan Ostroróg (1436-1501), Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski (1503-1572) and Stanisław Orzechowski (1513-1566).

¹⁴⁰ “The Polish National Catholic Church,” *35th Anniversary of the Holy Family Polish National Catholic Church*, n.p. According to Polish historian Andrzej Walicki, Modrzewski (1503-1572) was “one of first great theorists of political nationalism” in Poland. [Andrzej Walicki, *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: The Case of Poland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 68]. Besides advocating for the establishment of a Polish national Church, he also “proclaimed that laws should be the same for all estates, that everybody should work, that burghers and peasants should be treated as free citizens [serfdom was not abolished in all three Polish partitions until the 1860s], and that the peasants should be granted security of tenure and should pay rent to their lords in amounts strictly defined by law.” [Walicki, 17]. His book, *De Republica Emendanda* (1554), notes Walicki, “is considered to be ‘the first treatise in Europe to discuss the problems of State as a whole.’” [Walicki, 17]. Jakub (or Jacob) Uchański, Roman Catholic primate of Poland (1562-1581), was also a strong supporter of a Polish national church and a good friend of Modrzewski’s.

reflect the sentiments of sixteenth-century Polish reformers.¹⁴¹ According to PNCC sources, the Roman Catholic Church successfully stifled the reform movement in Poland by sending Jesuits to evangelize among the easily influenced “unenlightened village folk,” thus more solidly establishing Poland as a Roman Catholic country.¹⁴² Leon Grochowski summarizes this failed attempt at reform thus: “Polish tolerance of religious faiths was a source of irritation to her neighboring countries and especially to the propagators of Roman Catholicism. Poland became invaded by the Jesuits who took over the youth and the education and corrupted the two.”¹⁴³

Citing Polish historian Jan Grabiec, an author of a PNCC history notes, “This persecution [by the Jesuits] severed the Ukraine from Poland, incited chaos among the people, dampened the fires of patriotism and dug a grave into which Russia, Prussia and Austria buried Poland with three notorious partitions, enacted in 1773, 1792 and 1795. Thus, the curtain fell on the second attempt to bring religious freedom to Poland... But the desire for religious freedom did not die, it continued to live in the hearts and minds of the Polish people.”¹⁴⁴

By connecting their movement to an older Polish Catholic church, Polish National Catholics felt that they could rightly claim that their church was part of the “One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church,” even going so far as to argue, at times, that the Roman church was not “Catholic.” In a pamphlet simply titled “The Polish National Catholic Church,” the unknown

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Grochowski, “New Paths,” 45.

¹⁴⁴ “The Polish National Catholic Church,” *35th Anniversary of the Holy Family Polish National Catholic Church*, n.p. Jesuits first arrived in Poland in the mid-sixteenth century and were employed with the promulgation of the decrees of the Council of Trent. Through their actions, mostly in educating the Polish gentry, they became “a providential tool in the battle against Reformation” [Stanisław Obirek, “Jesuits in Poland and eastern Europe,” in Thomas Worcester, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Jesuits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 137]. Although the first generation was mostly educated in Rome, successive generations of Jesuits were heavily recruited from the Polish gentry. In some places, such as Wilno (now Vilnius, Lithuania), Jesuits were welcomed, while in others, such as Kraków, they were “violently rejected” [Obirek, 141]. Jesuits, writes Obirek, “were seen as an alien element in Polish society and too close to the royal court” [Obirek, 138]. Their opponents also attacked them for being too supportive of the Habsburg Monarchy. Jesuits were suppressed in Austrian Poland (Galicia) following the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This is important to note, because Hodur was from Galicia and educated in Kraków.

author (most likely a member of the PNCC himself, quite possibly of its clergy) writes, “No one branch of the Christian Church can truthfully claim and assert that of all the Christian Churches, it alone is Catholic. Every church which teaches the whole Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and preserves the teachings and practices of the Apostles and accepts the decisions of the first four Ecumenical Synods of the undivided Church is Catholic...The word ‘Catholic’ means universal. It is used in connection with the Christian religion to show that the teachings of our Lord, Jesus Christ, are universal; that what Jesus taught is meant for all peoples, all nations and for all time. A Church proves its Catholicity by its teachings and practice, for Jesus had but one Gospel for all His followers.”¹⁴⁵ “The Roman Catholic Church,” he argues, “claims that it is the only Catholic Church. It claims a monopoly on truth and authority and is violently intolerant toward members of other Christian denominations who assert their Catholicity.”¹⁴⁶ PNCC priest Walter Slowakiewicz in a pamphlet titled “I am a Polish National Catholic” writes, “We wish to make it clear that we are not a new church.”¹⁴⁷ ““But how can this be? Some of our interrogators may enquire,” he writes, ““Does it not imply, when you say ‘Polish National Catholic’ that you are propagating your own type of catholicism?” Not at all. We adhere to the one and only Church founded by Jesus Christ. The Church which remained undivided historically until the year 1054.”¹⁴⁸ He continues, “To keep the purity of the Catholic Faith Bishop Hodur and his co-organizers rejected all the admixtures attempted by the Church of Rome and arched over Her back to the era of the Undivided Church. Our Faith, therefore, is the Faith of One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ “The Polish National Catholic Church” (private collection), n.p.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Walter Slowakiewicz, “I am a Polish National Catholic” (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo-Pittsburgh Diocese of the Polish National Catholic Church), n.p.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Roman Catholics repeatedly asserted the Roman Catholic Church's exclusive right to the use of the word "Catholic." "In a word," one Roman Catholic author writes, "a state of schism unchurches any part of the Church which chooses a separate existence. Catholic unity, and with it all right to the Catholic name, is lost to the schismatical body."¹⁵⁰ One pamphlet published by Akcja Apstolska in 1931 and stamped with the imprimatur of the Roman Catholic archbishop of Baltimore, titled *The Independent Church is Hodur's Church, Not Christ's*, reads: "We have all surely met here in America some of these so-called independents. What is the meaning of this word 'independent' and from where have they gained independence? Independence is the same as apostasy and the faction of Poles who have thus denied their religion have fallen into error and heresy."¹⁵¹ The unknown author of this pamphlet argues that, according to the Bible, Jesus said to Peter, "But I tell you, you are the rock, and on this rock I will build my church," therefore, "Who is not in communion with the successors of Peter, as the deputies of Christ on Earth, does not belong to the true Church."¹⁵² "Christ the Lord warns us," he writes, "Be aware of false prophets... True religion and the true Church is where are Peter and his successors. And Peter founded his capital in Rome and his successors are today in Rome... A church called 'independent' cannot be called the Church of Christ, because Christ founded only one Church, which is the direct successor of the Apostle Peter."¹⁵³ Therefore, Hodur, the author concludes, is a "heretic" and his independent church (the author makes no direct mention of the PNCC) is "heretical."¹⁵⁴ PNCC Prime Bishop Leon Grochowski, in an "Open Letter," describes the debate within the Roman Catholic Church at the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) over the meaning of

¹⁵⁰ Propagandist, "Catholicism and Schism," *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* vol. 38, iss. 149 (Jan. 1913), 135.

¹⁵¹ *Kościół niezależny to kościół Hodura a nie Chrystusa* (Washington, DC: Akcja Apostolska, 1931), 1. Translated myself from the Polish.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2-6.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

the word “rock” as it appears in the Bible in Matthew 16. Archbishop Francis Patrick Kendrick of Saint Louis, he writes, explained how “rock” can be interpreted as Peter, his Apostles, “the Faith which Peter had professed,” Christ and “the faithful themselves.”¹⁵⁵ “Unless it is certain that by the rock is to be understood the Apostle Peter in his own person,” Grochowski cites Kendrick, “and not in his capacity as a spokesman for the Apostles, the word supplies no argument whatever, I do not say in proof of papal infallibility, but not even in support of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome.”¹⁵⁶ Grochowski, using the words of a Roman Catholic archbishop, shows the disunity within the Roman Catholic Church itself over the definitions the PNCC’s opponents used to dispute PNCC members’ right to use the word “Catholic.”

Those who belonged to independent Catholic parishes, including the PNCC, thought of themselves as no less “Catholic” than those “Catholics” who never participated in any independent activity and remained within the Roman Catholic Church. Members of the PNCC, for example, continued to identify themselves as “Catholic,” even after they were excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church and were frequently discredited as not true “Catholics” by anti-independent Roman Catholic propaganda. Before schism, independent Catholics perceived their actions as being within the Roman Catholic Church. They saw themselves as reformers, not schismatics, identifying with sixteenth-century reformers who sought to return the Catholic church in Poland to its pre-“Romanized” condition. After schism, independent Catholics, such as those who became members of the PNCC, separated themselves from the “Catholicism” of the Roman Catholic Church and instead identified with what they considered a truer “Catholic” church.

¹⁵⁵ Leon Grochowski, “Open Letter” (1960), 4-5. This letter is addressed to those “who are gathered for the Seventh Triennial National Convention on May 10, 11, 12, 1960 A. D.”

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

“Pure” Catholicism, just as “pure” religion, does not exist. The Roman Catholic Church functions as a hierarchy within which power flows from top to bottom: from the pope, to the college of cardinals, to archbishops and bishops and, finally, to the laypeople. Thus, it is hierarchical, but, scholars must recognize, it is also institutionally flexible. It claims to be universal, yet it exists in local varieties. In *Roman Catholicism in America*, Gillis describes the Roman Catholic Church in the United States as “pluralistic.”¹⁵⁷ “[T]here is,” he writes, “simply no singular experience of Catholicism.”¹⁵⁸ Catholics are not a “uniform” group, as they may appear to an outsider.¹⁵⁹ They, Gillis writes, “differ widely in their beliefs and religious practices.”¹⁶⁰ Such variation that exists within Catholicism is true for any religious group, and, some scholars have argued, is especially characteristic of religious groups in the United States. In *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective*, Peter Williams writes, “The religion that surrounds us so pervasively is not just that which is found in the churches and denominations.”¹⁶¹ Williams argues that this is especially true in the history of religion in the United States. “Almost from their collective beginnings,” Williams writes, “Americans have been reluctant to accept the established religions of the Old World without question or dissent.”¹⁶² “Americans – or those who were to become Americans – continually broke the bounds of their traditional modes of expression and organization, and gave rise to new symbols through which they hoped to come to terms with the problematic character of life in a universe whose pattern and meaning seemed continually to be shifting and eluding their grasp. In the New World, all bets were off: anything might happen, and often seemingly

¹⁵⁷ Gillis, 4.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Peter W. Williams, *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 2.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

did.”¹⁶³ In *The American Catholic Experience*, Dolan writes, “Not only did they [the millions of Catholics who immigrated to the United States in 1820-1920] transform the ethnic profile of the Catholic Church, but they created an incredibly diverse religious denomination.”¹⁶⁴ “In 1820,” he continues, “the Catholic church included no more than three foreign-language groups; a century later it was a cosmopolitan church speaking twenty-eight languages.”¹⁶⁵ Gillis claims accurately that diversity has increased within American Catholicism in the last fifty years since Vatican II, but we must also be aware that diversity has long existed within Catholicism and the Roman Catholic Church.

With Americanization, PNCC members also reevaluated the “Catholic” nature of their church. The emphasis Polish National Catholics placed on the difference between their sense of their “Catholicism” and that of the Roman Catholic Church, although strong in the first two generations, faded in the third, resulting in a view that emphasizes similarity with the Roman Catholic Church. “Remarkably,” reads a history published 100 years later in a PNCC parish anniversary book, “the early history of the PNCC marked with the pain of separation from the Roman Catholic Church, finds itself hopeful at the close of this century.”¹⁶⁶ The author continues, “The animosities of the first years of this century have given way to words of love and mutual respect at its close. Both Churches join in Christ’s eternal hope that ‘we may be one’ as we look forward to the new millennium.”¹⁶⁷ An author of another PNCC parish anniversary books writes, “We are happy, in our generation’s time, to witness cordial relations that now exist

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶⁴ Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 135.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *75th Anniversary: Holy Family Parish Polish National Catholic Church McKeesport, Pennsylvania, 1921-1996*. (McKeesport, PA: Holy Family Polish National Catholic Church, 1996), n.p.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

between the Polish people of the two Catholic churches.”¹⁶⁸ In 1984, the PNCC began dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, hoping, reads the PNCC website, “to end animosity between the two Churches and live in harmony with mutual respect for each others traditions, teachings and practices.”¹⁶⁹ The PNCC has since published two reports of their dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, both titled *Journeying Together in Christ*. In 2005, PNCC Prime Bishop Robert M. Nemkovich attended the funeral of Pope John Paul II in Rome, where, the PNCC website notes, he was greeted by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Cardinal Walter Kasper.¹⁷⁰

This year, in 2009, Holy Family Polish National Catholic Church and Saint Mary of Częstochowa Roman Catholic Church, both in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, celebrated the so-called “Bitter Lamentations” (Gorzkie Żale) together on two occasions: once at St. Mary of Częstochowa in English and once at Holy Family in Polish.¹⁷¹ Older participants noted how far the PNCC and the Roman Catholic Church have come since their memories of Roman Catholics in McKeesport being forbidden to even mention their schismatic neighbors in conversation. As late as 1967, the preamble to the PNCC constitution still read, in terms similar to its original 1907 statement, “To build for the Polish people a hearth around which they can rally, warm and strengthen themselves in their fight for religious freedom which the Polish people are waging in America and Poland against the Roman Catholic Church seeking to subjugate and annihilate them – this is the Church’s ideal and dream.” After some significant editing, the 1975 PNCC

¹⁶⁸ Chester Bentkowski, *A Historical Study: Saint Mary’s Polish National Catholic Church, South Bend, Indiana, 1915-1990, 75th Anniversary* (South Bend, IN: Saint Mary’s Polish National Catholic Church, 1990), n.p.

¹⁶⁹ Robert M. Nemkovich, “Historical Timeline of the PNCC,” 4. Available on PNCC website. <<http://www.pncc.org>>

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ “Bitter Lamentations,” a traditional Polish Lenten service, is described as follows in a handout prepared by the pastor of Holy Family PNCC in McKeesport, PA and made available for download on the church’s website <<http://www.hfncc.org>>: “In this cycle of songs and readings we meditate upon and enter into our Lord’s Passion. In its entirety, the service includes all three Parts and Intentions. All three Parts may be done together, or may be divided over several weeks. When the service is conducted in its entirety, each Part is opened with the initial meditation, ‘Come, O Bitter Lamentation,’ and each part is closed with the concluding petition, “Lord, for us your wounds were suffered.” The Polish-language service was broadcast live on WPIT-AM, a mainly Christian talk radio station that broadcasts a variety of ethnic music programs every Sunday afternoon.

constitution was modified to state: “This Church’s ideal and dream is to build for the Polish people and all others united with them a hearth around which they can rally, warm and strengthen themselves in their religious belief.”¹⁷²

¹⁷² *The Constitution and Laws of the Polish National Catholic Church as adopted by the XIV General Synod September 30, October 1, 2, 3, 1975. Buffalo, NY* (Scranton, PA: Polish National Catholic Church), 5. The preamble of the most recent PNCC constitution (2006) reads very much the same as the 1975 one.

VI. CONCLUSION

The PNCC still recognizes the Declaration of Utrecht as “a normative document of faith,” including the full text in the church’s most recent constitution (2006) between the “Faith and Principles of the Polish National Catholic Church” and “The Confession of Faith of the Polish National Catholic Church.”¹⁷³ Although, since 2003, the PNCC has not been affiliated with the Union of Utrecht, it still recognizes the important differences from the Roman Catholic Church as stated in the document. The PNCC still maintains ties with the Polish Catholic Church in Poland (Kościół Polskokatolicki), which was founded by PNCC members after World War I but forced into independence by tensions with the Polish communist government in 1951. The PNCC broke ties with the churches of the Union of Utrecht in 2003. In 1976, it parted ways with the Episcopal Church, with which it had intercommunion with since 1946, largely over the ordination of women.¹⁷⁴ As mentioned earlier, the PNCC today has roughly 25,000 members and fewer than 130 parishes in the United States and Canada. Most remaining parishes are in more urban and populated regions that still retain a sizable, self-identifying ethnically Polish population. Although PNCC parishes were established in both urban and rural areas (especially in coal mining areas, such as northeastern Pennsylvania, and small factory towns), many rural PNCC churches closed as a result of deindustrialization and the loss of major employers in such small towns. Most PNCC parishes today are quite small. The tensions between the PNCC and

¹⁷³ *The Constitution and Laws of the Polish National Catholic Church* (2006), 6-9.

¹⁷⁴ Nemkovich, 4.

the Roman Catholic Church have eased, and while its members continue to assert a right to call themselves “Catholic,” the fieriness over the use of this term has died down significantly since the 1960s, when it was still hotly debated. PNCC members today see themselves as more similar to Roman Catholics than different. Some members even look forward to an eventual reunion with the Roman Catholic Church, which a few see as inevitable in midst of declining membership.

American religion historians — particularly those interested in Catholicism, immigration and labor — can benefit from the inclusion of the PNCC in their research. However, it will require a decent history of the PNCC, because secondary literature on the church is lacking. The founding members of the PNCC and its parishes were working-class people. Most often, their motive for immigrating to the United States was to work hard, make money and send that money back home or save enough to return home to purchase land. The immigrants who founded the PNCC in the 1890s were part of a transient society, one that was moving back and forth across the Atlantic, whereas the immigrants who founded independent Catholic and PNCC parishes at the height of the church’s growth in the 1920s were committed to staying in the United States. The PNCC saw its largest growth at a time when conflict was endemic in United States society. Many PNCC parishes were established during periods of high unrest in immigrant communities, unrest which originated in the workplace. This conflict played a role in the development of a significant internal challenge to the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, which, in the case of the PNCC, led to schism.

Seemingly low PNCC membership totals in the eyes of scholars do not reflect the lack of appeal of the church’s message a century ago. Scholars should not dismiss the PNCC as insignificant to the history of religion in the United States simply because it failed to attract even

a sizeable minority of Polish immigrants. Total membership estimates do not quantify discontent and conflict within the Roman Catholic Church in the United States during the period of the “New Migration” from central, eastern and southern Europe. Instead, they reflect widespread conflicts in immigrant communities, which involved more people than those who actually joined the schismatic church. A measurement of such conflict within in the Roman Catholic Church around the turn of the twentieth century can begin with a thorough examination of the PNCC, the only independent Catholic religious organization to survive repeated attempts by Roman Catholics to discredit and eliminate Independentism (a religious movement among immigrant Catholics in the United States and Canada around the turn of the twentieth century who moved away from the Roman Catholic Church in America and formed and joined separate, yet still self-described “Catholic,” religious institutions). Currently, scholars focus on conflict between the Roman Catholic Church and a largely Protestant America. Although this conflict was real and significant to the history of Catholicism in the United States, this Catholic versus Protestant perspective tends to lead scholars to imagine the Roman Catholic Church as a more cohesive religious body than it actually was. A closer look at the PNCC shows that conflict occurred not only between the Irish-dominated hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and non-Irish immigrant Roman Catholic laypeople, but also among members of individual Roman Catholic parishes. Incorporating such inter-church conflict in their understanding of the history of Catholicism in the United States would indeed enrich scholars’ understanding of religion and immigration in this country.

Polish National Catholics believed themselves to be true “Catholics.” Especially to early PNCC members, the true “Catholic” nature of their church was at least as important as its Polish national quality. PNCC members did not have to persuade anyone that their church was “Polish,”

though they consistently defended their use of “Catholic” in their name. PNCC sources reflect a strong concern by early PNCC members and their Roman Catholic contemporaries on who could rightfully call themselves “Catholic.” According to Roman Catholics, since PNCC members were excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church, they lost any claim to Catholicism. PNCC members, on the other hand, understood Roman Catholicism as a type of Catholicism, and not the only Catholic church. However, quarrels over the PNCC’s use of the word “Catholic” continued between PNCC members and Roman Catholics well into the 1960s. Saint Stanislaus Cathedral in Scranton, for example, changed its name to Saint Stanislaus Polish National Catholic Church only in 1968, as the Roman Catholic Diocese of Scranton had previously threatened legal action over the word “Catholic.”¹⁷⁵ In the “religious economy” of the late-nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century United States, the PNCC had to compete with the Roman Catholic Church for members. PNCC membership grew largely due to the absorption of former Roman Catholics and newly independent Catholics who were convinced to join PNCC parishes not only out of their new concern for maintaining their Polish national identity, but also because they were convinced that the PNCC was a “true” Catholic church.

¹⁷⁵ The church was renamed St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Polish National Reformed Parish in its 1903 charter, although this name never appears in PNCC publications.

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