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Interview: From Bydgoszcz to Highland Creek

Michael Jurkowski

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From Bydgoszcz to Highland Creek

Spiritan faces and accents in Canada are changing. No longer exclusively Irish, Canadian, Portuguese or Trinidadian, they are becoming Nigerian, West African and Polish. **Fr. Michal Jurkowski**, Associate Pastor, St. Joseph's Parish, Highland Creek, Toronto, plays a key role in this development. In a recent interview he talked with *Spiritan*.

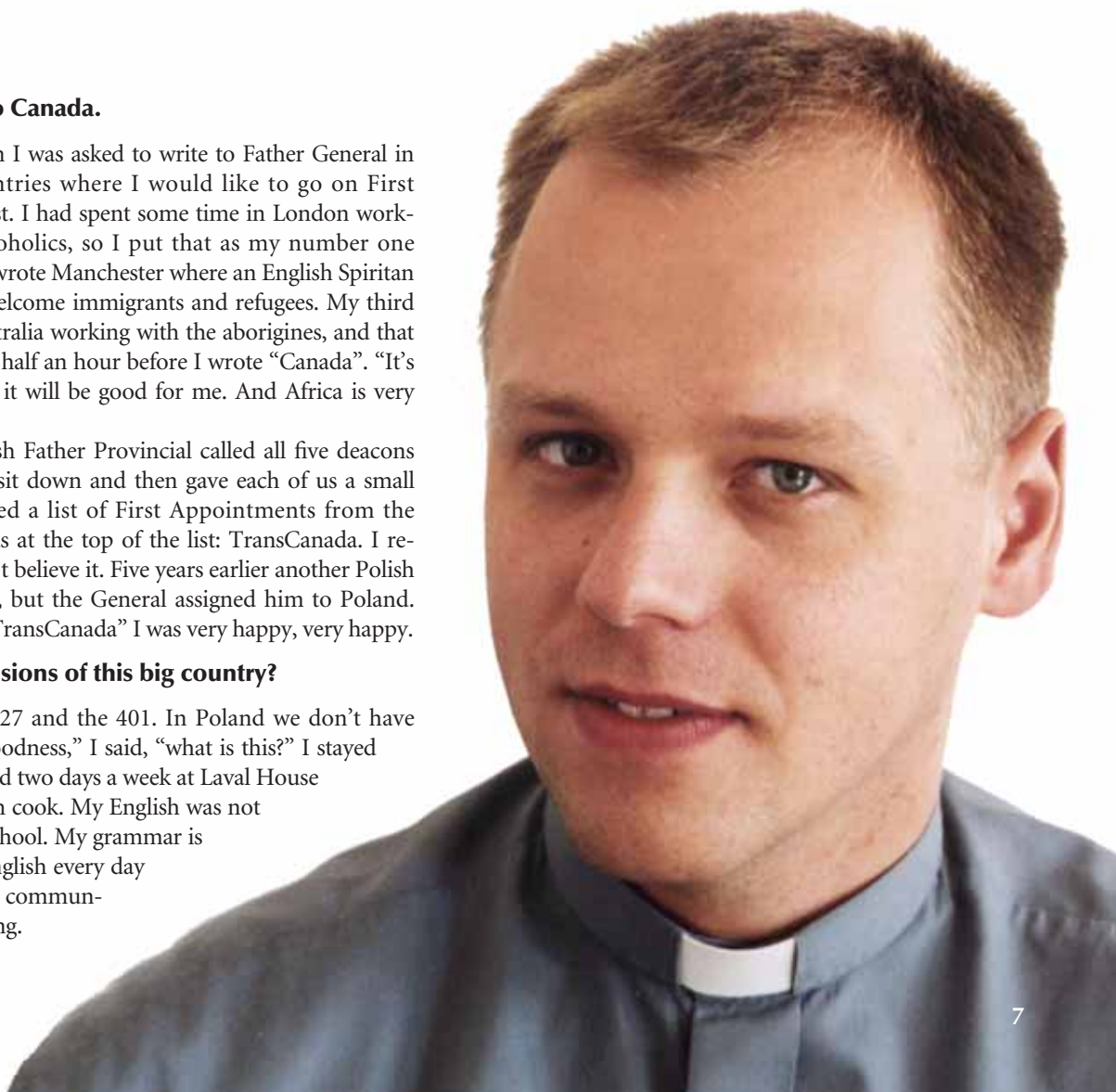
Talk about how you came to Canada.

Before I was ordained a Deacon I was asked to write to Father General in Rome mentioning three countries where I would like to go on First Appointment as a Spiritan priest. I had spent some time in London working with drug addicts and alcoholics, so I put that as my number one choice. For my second choice I wrote Manchester where an English Spiritan works with Lay Associates to welcome immigrants and refugees. My third choice? I was torn between Australia working with the aborigines, and that big country Canada. It took me half an hour before I wrote "Canada". "It's cold there," I thought. "Maybe it will be good for me. And Africa is very hot... I'll write TransCanada."

Some months later the Polish Father Provincial called all five deacons into his office. He asked us to sit down and then gave each of us a small candle. He said he had received a list of First Appointments from the Superior General. My name was at the top of the list: TransCanada. I remember I cried a little. I couldn't believe it. Five years earlier another Polish Spiritan had requested Canada, but the General assigned him to Poland. When the Provincial told me, "TransCanada" I was very happy, very happy.

What were your first impressions of this big country?

My first big surprise was the 427 and the 401. In Poland we don't have highways like those. "Oh my goodness," I said, "what is this?" I stayed at Des Places apartments, worked two days a week at Laval House and there I met Alina, the Polish cook. My English was not very good. I went to language school. My grammar is still not very good, but I talk English every day and live in an English-speaking community, so little by little it is improving.



I remember when Fr. Mike Doyle went with me to the language school and told me I should take the subway home. After classes I went along the street looking for the Subway... Subway... Subway. "Ah, there it is," I said. I opened the door and found myself in a shop very like McDonald's. I asked them where I could buy a ticket and was told I was in the wrong kind of subway. If only Fr. Mike had told me that what is called the Underground in London is called the Subway in Toronto.

Here we have everything and I think we must all thank God for the people here and this country. Yes, the culture is different, the mentality is different. But if we are flexible all will work out.

What did you find difficult when you came to Canada?

The weather. First it was too cold, then too warm. I learned what it means to be hot and humid at the same time. But I think God gave me Canada. God gave me a good Spiritan community, maybe a little old. But if we have good connections it's not very important how old priests are. What matters is that we have the same love.

Being the first and only Polish Spiritan in TransCanada is not always easy. So it would be good to have another Polish Spiritan here with me: someone to talk with when difficulties arise, someone with the same mentality, the same language, the same culture. It would be a comfort to me to have a Polish Spiritan nearby, a friend.

Every day I pray, "Thank you, God, because you give me everything." Michal, my Spiritan friend in Madagascar, doesn't have what I have: electricity, running water, a shower. He has a prison in his parish. Last year forty-eight prisoners died because of no food. So three days a week he cooks rice and brings it to the prisoners. Here we have everything and I think we must all thank God for the people here and this country. Yes, the culture is different, the mentality is different. But if we are flexible all will work out.

How did you become a Spiritan?

My family lived in a Spiritan parish and the schools I went to always had a Spiritan catechist. He was usually a seminarian doing some practice teaching before being or-

ained a Deacon. One catechist was particularly good. He played the guitar; we played basketball with him and prayed with him. So I was close to the Spiritans as I grew up.

I went to a technical high school and then to university for two years to study construction and electrical engineering. This was my father's trade and I intended to follow in his footsteps. We were a very close family, my mother and father and two sisters. My father worked very hard — usually twelve to fourteen hours a day. I remember

every evening we waited for him to come home and then we prayed together as a family. Yes, I know I looked at my watch as the minutes went by, counting them one at a time and waiting for the prayer to end. But looking back now I remember what was going on and how good it was.

After my second year in high school I went on a pilgrimage to Jasna Gora, the famous sanctuary of the Black Madonna. We went as a group of seven. The first time we went — I was sixteen — it took us twelve days to walk the 300 kms from Bydgoszcz to Czestochowa in continuous rain: not bad for a group of teenagers. The following year I thought about it again, I felt I should give twelve days of my two months' summer holidays to God — that wasn't too much to expect.

My friend Michal said to me, "I need to see what people are doing on this pilgrimage." So he joined our next group. He never went to Communion at our Masses, but today he's a Spiritan in Madagascar and I'm a Spiritan in Canada. I still keep in regular contact with him and I try to help him out. His mother died recently. Her name was Eva. My mother's name is Eva, both of them born in the same year. He has two brothers. I have two sisters. We studied together for five years in high school, went to the novitiate together, and spent seven years together in the seminary. Now he's a priest and I'm a priest. We have very good connections.

I first thought of going to the seminary after I had done the Jazna Gora pilgrimage

for the fifth or sixth time. I wanted a missionary seminary so I had to choose between the Spiritans and the Vincentians. I really don't know why I went to the Spiritans. Maybe the Holy Spirit was guiding me.

What was seminary life like?

During our two years of Philosophy it was work-pray, work-pray. I remember those years very well. We had the opportunity to go to France to see where the Spiritan Congregation was born — Paris, where Poullart des Places studied and Saverne, Francis Libermann's home town. I went to London to study English for six weeks and to work with drug addicts and alcoholics. Every three years during Holy Week there was a meeting of Spiritan seminarians studying in Europe. We got to know Spiritans from other countries, speaking different languages: French, Portuguese, Spanish. We also met the African Spiritans studying in Europe and got to know them.

You're now in St. Joseph's Parish, Highland Creek. Talk about your life there.

My introduction to St. Joseph's was during a school break from language classes. Fr. Peter Fleming was pastor then and he phoned Our Lady Queen of Poland Parish in Scarborough so that I could spend one day a week in a Canadian parish where they spoke my language. It was not the same as a parish in Poland. Now I am full time in St. Joseph's as Associate Pastor with Fr. David Okenyi.

I notice some differences. For example, on Holy Thursday in Poland the priests wash the feet of twelve men. In St. Joseph's there are eighteen people, women and men. That came as a big surprise to me. But if that is what is done here, I will gladly do it. Another difference — in Poland the wedding ritual calls for the priest to place a stole over the joined hands of the couple as they exchange their vows. Sometimes I do that at Canadian weddings. A third difference — I found it very strange going to a mausoleum at a funeral and entombing the dead person. In Poland we always bury the dead in a grave.

How about your visits to the schools in the parish?

I visit three of the schools in the parish — St. Jean Brebeuf, St. Brendan and St. Dominic Savio. When I go there I see how Toronto is one of the special places in the



Subway... Subway... Subway. Ah, there it is!

Photo by Paul McAuley, CSSP

world — so many nationalities here. This came as a big surprise to me — but a very happy one.

I'm very happy to celebrate Mass in the schools for the students, teachers and some parents. I don't ever remember that happening in Poland. I love to celebrate with the children. At first I used to prepare a homily and read it. But that's not the same as talking to them and having a connection with them. Now I prepare what I want to say and then go in and talk to them rather than read to them. The children listen and don't just sit there and look at me reading. Afterwards when I see them in church, they come up to me and say, "Hello, Father" and give me fives. I love this.

St. Joseph's has many parishioners actively involved in parish life and church activities.

Yes, yes, this is very beautiful. In Poland the priest does everything. But the church

is not only the priest's church. It is the Catholic Church — so if you are a Catholic you help out. We are two priests in St. Joseph's with about 3000 families, maybe more. If we had to do everything we'd be dead after two years. I think it is beautiful to see so many groups doing so many things in the parish. Lay people should be allowed to become more active. Too many churches have become too boring, too boring. Every week is the same; every week only the priest talks. No, we must change this. Here in St. Joseph's I think it is excellent.

What are your responsibilities as Associate Pastor?

I go to the three schools and two nursing homes as part of my regular duties in the parish. I am chaplain to the Knights of Columbus and the Legion of Mary. I'm still learning more and more about my new situation. I don't yet know the answers to all

the questions people ask me — it's still new to me.

Canada is your First Appointment. Do you see yourself going someplace else after that?

My First Appointment is for six years. But I remember Fr. Michel Jolibois telling us we must not think six years, but give our whole life to the place and people to whom we are sent. A First Appointment may turn out to be a lifelong appointment. The Spiritans in Canada need more hands to work. Theirs is a special situation where the average age is high. So I think we need more new blood. When Robert DiNardo (Spiritan candidate) asked me if I would be moved after six years, I answered, "I will stay longer if the TransCanada Province needs me. I will stay here because this is my home, my family. The Holy Spirit has given me this country and if I am needed here I'll be staying here." ■