

Father Gerald Keller honored by Polish American Priests Association

April 19, 2018

Cleveland hosted the 28th annual convention of the Polish American Priests Association this year. It was the second time in the past 11 years PAPA met here.

“Our annual fraternal gathering, which affords us the opportunity to meet, socialize and refresh our friendships, also give us the important chance to discuss issues of significance and impact to our communities, parishes and ministries. In addition, to matters formally discussed, this camaraderie refreshes and inspires us to return to our own little portion of the Lord’s vineyard with mind and heart renewed,” said Father Eric Orzech, convention chairman and pastor of the Shrine Church of St. Stanislaus in Cleveland’s Slavic Village. He also serves as president of PAPA’s Cleveland chapter.



St. Stanislaus, founded in 1873, is known as Cleveland’s Mother Church of Polonia. Then-Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, who later became Pope St. John Paul II – the first Polish priest to become pope — visited the parish and celebrated Mass in 1969. A shrine in his memory was installed in the church.

Cleveland Bishop Nelson Perez was the principal celebrant at the solemn convention Mass on April 13 at St. Stanislaus. Concelebrants included Detroit Auxiliary Bishop emeritus Francis Reiss and about 50 other priests from around the country who attended the convention.



Bishop Perez wore the chasuble that Cardinal Wojtyla had worn when he celebrated Mass at the church in 1969. He also wore a miter that had been given to him as a gift. The miter previously belonged to Bishop Alfred Markiewicz, a Polish-American priest from the Diocese of Rockville Centre who became bishop of Kalamazoo, Michigan. Bishop Perez had been an auxiliary bishop in Rockville Centre before being named bishop of Cleveland.

“It is a great honor to wear this chasuble,” Bishop Perez said, noting he had been pastor of a Polish parish during his years as a priest in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

Father Maciej Mankowski, PAPA national secretary, was homilist at the Mass. In addition to sharing reflections on the readings, he talked about the devotion of the Polish people to their faith, country and heritage. “We must stand up for what we believe in,” he said.



The apostles were witnesses to Jesus’ message, but they suffered. “Our Polish ancestors suffered also,” he said, noting some came to the United States seeking opportunities, some to escape from the Nazis in World War II and still others came after the war because they refused to live under communism.

“They worked hard and built Polish churches then schools to ensure their Polish identity would be preserved. Their faith is deeply rooted,” Father Mankowski said. “God, honor and homeland are three attributes of Polish-Americans.” He also said despite years of oppression, Poles never gave up hope for a free Poland. “We are the sons and daughters of true patriots who love their country more than their lives. We are faithful to our homeland and our Catholic faith and are living proof that with God, all things are possible.”



Father Gerald Keller, pastor emeritus of St. Adalbert Parish in Berea, was presented with the Father Leopold Moczygemba Award, PAPA’s highest award, in recognition of his 34 years as pastor of St. Adalbert, the oldest Polish parish in Ohio.

During his pastorate, he completed several major projects at the parish, including adding an outdoor mosaic shrine to Our Lady of Czestochowa. In presenting the award, he was recognized for maintaining the Polish character of the parish by celebrating the traditions of faith liturgically and culturally with new generations being enriched in the process.

Since his retirement in 2008, Father Keller has remained active by assisting with Masses at St. Peter Parish in Lorain and ministering at area nursing homes. The presentation noted that “after a lifetime of still-continuing priestly service, he is our worthy recipient of the Father Leopold Moczygemba Award.”

The honor is named after Father Moczygemba, known as the patriarch of American Polonia. He was born in Poland and ordained as a Franciscan priest in Italy. In 1854, he accepted an invitation to become a missionary in Texas. He also ministered in 11 other states. He rose to the highest position in his religious order in America, was chairman of the first Polish convention in the United States and co-founded the Polish Seminary of SS. Cyril and Methodius in Detroit.



“I am glad to be retired, but I really miss the people,” Father Keller said after accepting the award. He said receiving the award “was a wonderful way to salute heritage, values and traditions,” adding it is important to retain family values in parish life.

Two awards of merit were presented to Father Christopher Henyk and Father Mankowski, both of whom were born in Poland.

Bishop Perez talked about the importance of celebrating and retaining heritage. He said it is common for second and third generations to distance themselves from their culture, but he noted that often by the third or fourth generation, there is a renewed interest in culture and heritage.



“I see this in my diversity work with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops,” he said. The bishop also said he was “privileged to visit Poland, the homeland of one of my favorites – John Paul the Great.” He recalled as a teenager seeing him at Madison Square Garden.

“He turned the world of 20,000 teenagers – including the one speaking to you now – upside down. He was Poland’s gift to the world, along with others like Maximillian Kolbe and St. Faustina. He (Pope St. John Paul II) didn’t do things halfway; he wasn’t just a priest, he became pope. He showed us how to live life intensely.”

Bishop Perez thanked the priests for the good works they do and for doing their part to keep their faith and Polish culture alive.



During the four-day convention, PAPA members had meetings, social time and visited several Northeast Ohio churches with Polish ties, including Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Lorain; the Basilica and National Shrine of Our Lady of Lebanon in North Jackson; St. Columba Cathedral in Youngstown; and St. Casimir in Cleveland.

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