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'This place is different'

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

Fr. Tom Iwanowski had just finished celebrating Mass (and baptizing four infants) on a sunny Sunday in May when we sat down to talk in a conference room of the rectory at Our Lady of Czestochowa Parish in Jersey City, N.J.

This is one of those parishes about which people say, after just a few minutes in the congregation, 'this place is different.'

Indeed, one of the more easily noted differences here is the age of parishioners. During the past 14 years as pastor, Iwanowski has revived this once moribund place into a vibrant center of Catholic life for a congregation where most members are between 25 and 50 years old.

He turns 60 in June and is moving on from OLC (or Our Lady of the Waterfront) as it is often referred to here in this gentrified corner of Jersey City.

Amid all the gloom one can encounter these days about the drop in numbers of Catholics going to church, the priest shortage and demographic shifts that are leaving behind ghost churches in the inner cities, this is a welcome story of success and vitality.

Young professionals ? many of them employed a 10 minute PATH train or ferry ride away in Manhattan in the areas of finance, law, computer technology and the arts ? find a temporary home here in this historic church before moving on to other neighborhoods and cities.

It is an interesting tale of contemporary evangelizing (marketing, exposure, working at making a place interesting and alive), circumstance and a relevant Catholic presence. Look for a more detailed report on my visit to OLC in the Archdiocese of Newark and my conversation with Fr. Iwanowski in the coming

days under the **In Search of the Emerging Church** series on the NCR website.

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