NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

# Rebuilding a parish, pastor comes to love people more

Tom Roberts | Jun. 12, 2009

Fr. Tom Iwanowski

**Jersey City, N.J.**

Our Lady of Czestochowa Church was packed for the 12:30 Mass on Mother's Day. Four families waited at the rear of the church with their infants who were to be baptized. In the congregation, there were dozens of young families with young children and scores of young singles.

Fr. Tom Iwanowski looked out familiarly on a congregation whose primary membership is made up of people between the ages of 25 and 50, a demographic that most religious leaders would covet. In little more than a month he would be moving on from this community where he had arrived 14 years ago, at the request of the previous archbishop of Newark, with the simple mandate to "go and change the direction of the parish."

Change it he did.

The story of the transformation of OLC, or Our Lady of the Waterfront, both tags now popularly used to refer to the Jersey City parish, is a tale simultaneously of how disruptive change can be, of the ease with which the Vatican's attention can be turned toward relatively unimportant local matters by a vocal minority, of the professional skills and enormous work it takes to be a successful pastor today and of the arbitrary nature of Catholic existence where the character and work of a community can be undone in an instant.

That latter point was perhaps the most compelling matter the day of my visit. It hung over everything. What will happen, was the prevailing question, when Fr. Tom leaves?

The question was probably much the same for the few Poles who still inhabited the parish 14 years ago: What will happen when we get the new guy?

By most accounts I heard, both at the parish and around the archdiocese, the parish 14 years ago, a traditionally Polish community, was on its final legs. It was a moribund place with few parishioners, a physical plant in disrepair, not a lot of money and dwindling collections and little presence in the wider community.

In many ways, what happened when Iwanowski arrived 14 years ago is the tale of many nationality parishes in

the Northeast in recent decades: reality checks everywhere are showing that the numbers ? of members, of the collection, of the bank account, of funerals, of baptisms, of new parishioners ?simply won't work. There is no future in these places.

Iwanowski was assigned to the parish by now retired Cardinal Theodore McCarrick in 1995. By 2000 Iwanowski realized there was little need for a Polish Mass, especially since St. Anthony's, a Polish parish that gave birth to OLC in 1905, was just a mile away.

"What happed is some Polish activists and some other people who were not happy with the parish ? said I had transformed OLC into a community center for yuppies and that I had mini-skirted nightclub singers singing and that I was a Unitarian," said Iwanowski, during an interview in a conference room at the parish following Mass. The language was amplified by extreme right Catholics and at least one of their publications and people began showing up for protests. They called Iwanowski an "ethnic cleanser."

They protested weekly for nearly five years and created such a stir "that I was investigated three times by Rome, twice by the Congregation for Clergy, once by the papal nuncio, and then Cardinal Josef Glemp came to see me," said Iwanowski. Glemp at the time was the archbishop of Warsaw and primate of Poland.

Ultimately, peace prevailed and the parish prospered, but it took the support of Archbishop John J. Myers, who had a reputation as a staunch conservative and who took over for McCarrick in 2001.

"When he came in 2001, they were protesting and they thought, 'OK, now Myers is coming ? he would get rid of me.' Well, Myers gave me a second term for six years and was supportive" even when the activists took their protests to the cathedral in Newark. Myers intervened with Rome. "He refused to give in," Iwanowski said, "and he also came here for Mass. He was 100 percent supportive of me and what we were doing here, that we were moving in the right direction."

The right direction didn't occur without another considerable gamble.

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When Iwanowski arrived as pastor at age 46, the average age of parishioners was between 65 and 70. The church had no readers, no Eucharistic ministers and no music program. "It was just going through the motions and acting as if it was 1950, but it was now 1995. They really did not see what was going on around them. It was a matter of trying to get people to see what was there and to make the changes that were necessary."

The church is a few hundred feet away from the intersection of Sussex and Warren streets in Jersey City. Iwanowski bounds into the intersection to show a visitor that if you look straight South on Warren it looks like the Statue of Liberty is floating there, right at the end of the street. Look east on Sussex, and you can see the emptiness in the Manhattan skyline that used to be the towers of the World Trade Center.

The larger point perhaps, beyond the geographical curiosity, is that this little church is within easy commuter distance of New York City and, like nearby Hoboken, it holds a significant attraction for young people anxious to make their mark in the Big Apple while avoiding that city's exorbitant rents. Jersey City is part of what the Archdiocese of Newark has dubbed the Waterfront, and it has nothing to do with Brando-esque thugs and corruption. This waterfront, as Iwanowski discovered, is teeming with young people waiting for an invitation to something.

"I recognized that the liturgy is most important," said Iwanowski. "I always say that people are judging the homily, the music, the sense of welcome, the liturgy in general. They don't hold up numbers, but they're always making a judgment. I knew it was silly to try to bring people in because the liturgy was so bad it would just drive people out."

So he took the plunge and hired musicians who at the time cost him $400 a week against a collection that was only $1,200 on a good Sunday. "It was a risk to do that but I knew that we had to have good music. Then I established readers, Eucharistic ministers, and then we started to get the church known in the neighborhood."

As early as 1996 the parish had a Web site -- way ahead of the curve for most institutions at the time, especially churches. Then he initiated an event called Spring on Sussex Street, which the parish put on for 10 years -- a street fair "just to get people to know that the place wasn't closed, just so people knew there was life in the building."

The parish followed that with a program called Festival of Christmas Song, an outdoor festival of Christmas music, again "so the neighbors would know we were there."

The neighborhood took notice. The people began to arrive. They were young, working in finance, technology, the arts. They lived in apartments and commuted to Manhattan by ferry or the PATH train. If that earlier era was anything like today, they marveled at Iwanowski's capacity to remember names and the ease with which the short but focused and well-delivered homilies roll off his tongue. People keep talking about the gifts he has for remembering names and preaching.

Iwanowski laughs a bit at that assessment. If there is a gift involved it is the gift of hard work. The self-described shy pastor does remember names, but it hardly comes naturally. He explained that from the beginning of his ministry here, whenever he meets someone, he writes the name on a small card and later enters it into a diary he keeps. He still does that, and every week before the Sunday masses begin, he consults the diary to refresh his memory.

"Sometimes I'll see someone and I'll forget their name. I'll run back to my room and check the diary to get the name."

When people join the parish, they meet with Iwanowksi for at least 45 minutes and he takes their picture. That gets entered into a parish data base of sorts that he consults -- names with faces. In that meeting, he said, "I find out about you, and it changes our relationship because now I know you and you know me."

Good music. Well-trained readers and ministers. A sense of welcome. And then there's the sermon.

Iwanowski writes a great deal to his parishioners. Each Sunday in the bulletin he does a Pastor's Column, a kind of overview of what's gone on around the place. It's often filled with names and appreciation for things that people on the staff and volunteers have done to make events, liturgical and otherwise, possible. He also does a brief box in the bulletin each week on stewardship, tying the idea of giving time, treasure and talent to the weekly readings or a theme of the season. Each Wednesday parishioners receive an e-mail from the pastor titled, "Looking to Sunday." It is an artfully presented, inspirational reading based on the coming Sunday's readings. A recent one was four thoughtful paragraphs on the nature of prayer.

All of that thinking and writing and his own reading of preaching aids and scriptural reflections feeds into his sermons, which he completes by 10 p.m. every Friday because that's when he calls "a dear friend" he met in seminary, though the friend left before ordination. Every week he goes over the homily with his friend. "And he tells me whether it's good or bad." Sometimes the friend tells him to start over, sometimes "he gives me a star."

Sometimes Iwanowksi also passes the sermon around to people on staff or other friends to get reaction before he delivers it. He does all of that because he thinks the Sunday liturgy, sermon especially, is the most important thing he does in terms of contact with his entire congregation.
"The homily and the celebration of the liturgy, what more important things can you do? That's where you're going to see the most people. That's the most important thing you do in terms of preaching the word and celebrating the liturgy."

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He's a bit torn about leaving OLC, but he also feels it's time to move on to do other things, perhaps a sabbatical, some writing, before taking on another assignment. However, he shares the apprehension of many of his parishioners because he knows that the vibrancy of the parish depends on a kind of evangelism peculiar to this place. His young parishioners may be deeply committed to the parish and work hard at volunteering and sustaining ministries, but they don't stay around very long. Careers take them elsewhere, and if that doesn't happen, they often marry and begin to have children. It's difficult to find affordable two- and three-bedroom apartments here, so the young families end up leaving.

Iwanowski estimates that his congregation largely "turns over" ever three to four years. He said he sometimes feels like a college chaplain trying to maintain continuity while also recruiting new congregants each year.

Will the new guy understand all of these dynamics?

"I think that's a genuine fear," said Iwanowski, who has advocated, as part of the Waterfront Ministry Task Force, "that when we change people and parishes change, that you need to pick people who have the sense of what needs to be done, and you should bring them in so that the person who is replacing me should come in six months to a year ahead of time. They would learn what is going and then transition seamlessly, but we're horrible in terms of that."

Whoever comes in will find a thriving parish with a school, 425 families, a Sunday collection that has risen from $1,200 a week to between $6,000 and $7,000 a week, a Christmas collection that brought in $127,000 last year and an Easter collection that garnered $44,000, both well above the goals set. And the plant that was deteriorating has been rehabbed throughout, including the church, at a cost of several million dollars.

The pastor has gone through a bit of rehab, himself.

"I've come to recognize that the most important way that I experience the presence of Christ is in the celebration of the liturgy, which the people are key to. ? I always say, the power is in the pews -- they are the people of God. I think I've grown more comfortable with people because I've recognized them as the presence of Christ. I think I've come to love people more."

It's an old prescription for leading what's emerging in the church.

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Tom Roberts, NCR editor at large, is traveling the country reporting on parish life. He is on the first of several trips he plans to take, this time moving through Ohio, eastward into New Jersey and on to the nation?s capital. His e-mail address is troberts@ncronline.org. Read the full series here: **In Search of the Emerging Church** [1].

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