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## The Sacred in the City: Polonian Street Processions as Countercultural Practice

by  
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From spring through fall, the streets of urban American Polonia are home to a series of sacred processions honoring the Virgin Mary and significant feasts of the Roman Catholic calendar. With the city streets temporarily blocked by police, parishioners perform an elaborate public display of faith, ethnic affiliation, and neighborhood identity. Curious onlookers gaze from cars, congregate on street corners and lean off the porches of apartment buildings as the parishioners sing, pray and chant. "In addition to evoking the sacred past, the procession is a way for this urban ethnic community to tell a story *about* itself and *for* itself..."<sup>1</sup> This study attempts to revalue these public urban practices apart from traditional folkloristic and reductive presentations of ethnic religion. The study is premised on the thesis that such devotional practices serve complex social, political, and neighborhood functions while also allowing for the performance of ethnic identity in a pluralistic society. I examine *these* practices, in particular, because they are staged in urban public space, in the streets.

Methodologically, the study attempts to address the dearth of scholarship on procession in general and urban Polonian popular religion in particular. Kay Turner comments that in over one hundred years of American

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Sciorra, "Religious Processions in Italian Williamsburg," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Fall 1995), 65.

anthropological and folklore research a major and universal ritual-ceremonial genre such as procession has been almost completely ignored.<sup>2</sup> Scholars of ethnicity, urban studies, and religion all agree that one of the most under-examined areas of American urban life is the religious street life of European ethnics. Robert Orsi argues that the history and phenomenon of urban religions remains little examined.<sup>3</sup> This project responds to that lack.

While there is a wide and excellent body of work on Polish American Catholicism,<sup>4</sup> as William Galush notes, "Histories of communities have tended to focus on leaders and institutional development."<sup>5</sup> A focus on fraternal organizations and prominent clerics has for the most part neglected multidisciplinary study of the popular religious practices of immigrants and ethnics. When scholarship has focused on Polish American religion it has been, as Galush argues, largely from the folkloristic perspective.<sup>6</sup> These studies have neglected the political context of devotional practice or worse, reproduced a notion of the sentimentalized immigrant, out of touch with the modern world. Countering the traditional scholarship on folklore, my project aligns itself with the recognition that "Folklore is not some mental baggage mindlessly perpetuated by 'bearers of tradition'" but is an ongoing active process of identity formation by which the ethnic subject comes into being.<sup>7</sup> Recent ethnic scholarship has moved away from "cataloging the content of ethnicity to focusing on how the identity is manufactured and what purpose it serves."<sup>8</sup> The project attempts to revalue procession as a Polish-American practice; because, as John Radzilowski has argued, "Fundamental assumptions about the immigrants' spiritual, religious, and cultural life remain unchallenged and unexamined."<sup>9</sup> In particular, I wish to

<sup>2</sup>Kay F. Turner, "The Virgin of Sorrows Procession: A Brooklyn Intervention," *Folklore Papers of the University Folklore Association*, Vol. 9 (1980), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Orsi, *Gods of the City* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 1-78.

<sup>4</sup>James S. Pula, *Polish Americans: An Ethnic Community* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995); Joseph John Parot, *Polish Catholics in Chicago, 1850-1920* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981); Anthony J. Kuzniewski, *Faith & Fatherland* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1980).

<sup>5</sup>William J. Galush, "Polish Americans and Religion," in John J. Bukowczyk, ed., *Polish Americans and Their History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 91.

<sup>6</sup>Galush, 88.

<sup>7</sup>Joseph Scierra, "Return to the Future: Puerto Rican Vernacular Architecture in New York City," in Anthony D. King, ed., *Re-Presenting the City* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 79.

<sup>8</sup>Mary Patrice Erdmans, *Opposite Poles* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>9</sup>John Radzilowski. "Ritual, Celebration, and Community Among Polish Immigrants in Minnesota, 1870-1920," paper presented at the 58th Annual

suggest that these are powerful vehicles for both the performance of ethnic subjectivity as well as cultural practices resistant to assimilation and hegemony.<sup>10</sup>

The notion of seeing everyday religious practice as a form of cultural resistance is not the norm. In fact, scholarship on American popular religion has in general approached religion using the anthropological model of studying primitive rituals.<sup>11</sup> From the viewpoint of the secular, Protestant-inflected, even post-Christian culture of contemporary America, such acts most often seem like archaic throwbacks, perhaps quaint and superstitious folkways that add "local color" to gentrifying neighborhoods. Recent scholarship in the field of cultural studies posits that the traditional culture of folklore represents areas of human experience, aspiration and achievement which the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses or even cannot recognize.<sup>12</sup> To revalue practices such as the urban Polishian

Meeting of the Polish Institute of Arts & Science of America, June 16, 2000, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland.

<sup>10</sup>In acknowledging the complexity of such practices, this essay highlights the counterhegemonic but does not claim that such practices are merely or simply subversive or counterhegemonic. In order to consider popular religious devotion in this light, I need to clarify what is meant by oppositional practices or practices of resistance. This analysis depends on the analytical framework of cultural hegemony, articulated by Antonio Gramsci and developed by Raymond Williams (in Scierra, "Return to the Future"). According to their work, "hegemonic process involves the creation, manipulation, and maintenance of cultural symbols by the dominant class that serves to achieve a consensus among subordinate groups to the legitimization of the existing social order as controlled by the former" (in Scierra, "Return to the Future," 78). This cultural hegemony is maintained through formal institutions, "such as schools, churches, or the media, as well as through artistic, intellectual or scientific trends or formations" (in Scierra, "Return to the Future," 78). However, there exist at any given moment cultural forces that undermine the prevailing hegemony. My methodology shares Matthew Frye Jacobson's approach to American immigrants in that I "concentrate far less on questions of economics, class, labor, and mobility than has been customary in immigration historiography, and far more on matters of superstructure: the cultural production of narratives and representations. The phrase 'diasporic imagination' itself refers precisely to this realm of ideologies and engagement of minds: both the shared currency of cultural imagery and the mindset of the individual as he or she navigates the inner geography of international migration." See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>11</sup>Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

<sup>12</sup>Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 123-24; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), 12-13.

street procession we need to realign our notion of "folk practices" such that folklore's countercultural power is affirmed.

My research examines one Chicago Polish American parish, St. Helen's Roman Catholic Church and its yearly cycle of processions. In the American immigrant context, the urban parish neighborhood has been and continues to be central to the ethnic experience. St. Helen's is one of numerous historically Polish Catholic churches in the city of Chicago, one of dozens where Polish is the primary language of both everyday interaction and liturgical celebration. St. Helen's Church is the Polish Roman Catholic parish of the "Ukrainian Village" neighborhood, called *Hełenowo* in Chicago Polish nomenclature. It was founded in 1913 by Chicago Archbishop Quigley to minister to the needs of American Catholics of Polish descent. Rev. Bronisław Chmiel, a native Pole, served as pastor from 1996 to 2002. Comprised of approximately four hundred families, the majority are Polish-speaking immigrants and their children. Many have emigrated within the past twenty years. There is also a small group of Polish-American ethnics of the second, third and fourth generations, for whom English is the primary language.<sup>13</sup> The focus of this essay considers the counter-cultural nature of two processions at St. Helen's: Good Friday and Corpus Christi; both rituals involve carrying the body of Christ from the church into the city streets. I argue that each of these public acts of incarnational spirituality is countercultural.

The first of these processions takes place on Good Friday, the most somber day of the Christian year that commemorates the Death of Christ. As evening falls, the parish recreates a kind of funeral cortege in the dark night streets. The crucifix is borne by men of the parish and carried throughout the streets, followed by mourners. This funeral procession is accompanied by altar boys wielding special wooden clappers [*klekotki*, *grzechotki*] rhythmically ringing out the nailing of Jesus to the Cross. This insistent pounding echoes loudly off the brick "two-flats" and apartment houses characteristic of the neighborhood. The sorrowful mood is enhanced by such plaintive hymns as "*Ludu, mój ludu*" and "*W Krzyżu cierpienie*." These laments are not accompanied by musicians, as in the other processions, as this would be considered vulgar at a time of such sorrow. As the block-long funeral continues around the streets, the lamenting voices cause onlookers to rush to the doors of taverns, businesses, and to hang out the windows of passing city buses. These services are conducted strictly in the Polish language. It is as though when performing these rites at the core of Catholic narrative, there is no room for negotiating cultural identity. Holy Week is, for the folks of St. Helen's, Polish.

<sup>13</sup>I use the distinction immigrant (foreign-born Poles) and ethnic (native-born Americans of Polish descent) as delineated by Mary Patrice Erdmans' excellent study of Chicago Polonia, *Opposite Poles: Immigrants and Ethnics in Polish Chicago, 1976-1990* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 1-16.



Good Friday Procession

The men of the parish bear the crucified Christ throughout the streets. The Crucifix is carried aloft past the entrance of the parish grammar school. Courtesy David J. Gunkel & Ann Hetzel Gunkel ©.

The funeral cortege returns to the church and then inaugurates many hours of veneration at a tableau of Christ's Tomb called the *Boży Grób*. Throughout Polonia as in Poland, a life-size figure of Christ lying in His tomb is widely visited by the faithful, especially on Holy Saturday. Each parish creates an artful display of Christ's dead body, flowers, candles, fabrics and a Monstrance exposing the Blessed Sacrament.<sup>14</sup> In a move not atypical in Polonia, the fabrics selected as St. Helen's utilize the red and white color scheme of the Polish flag. Parishioners gather at the grave, kneeling on the church floor, singing the *Gorzkie Zale* or Polish lamentations. After several hours of mourning, individuals move in line to pass the body itself – in order to kneel, pay homage, and kiss the wounds of the dead Christ. This tends to be the most emotional outpouring of the religious year, with men and women alike wiping away tears as they confront the crucified Christ.

<sup>14</sup>The tableaux may include flowers, candles, figures of angels standing watch, the three crosses atop Mt. Calvary. Some Polish churches, such as the Bernardine Church in Kraków, are known nationally for the expansiveness of their *Boży Grób*.

It should be noted that such displays are not typical American practices, neither in Protestant denominations nor even within the milieu of "mainstream" American Catholicism. The funeral of Christ seems to be a strictly Polish American devotion in Chicago, although other "ethnic" Catholics do mark Good Friday in public space, dramatizing the Lord's Passion and reenacting the Stations of the Cross.<sup>15</sup>

It is not hyperbole to assert that these public displays of the crucified Christ and the emotional mourning of his death are radical in an American context. Contemporary American sensibilities are profoundly offended by the bloody spectacle of the crucified Christ. Notions of suffering, sin, and redemption are squarely out of touch with the upbeat culture of American marketing. Indeed, the most popular trends in American religion, the so-called mega-churches and new age spirituality, are noted for their positive and upbeat reworkings (erasures?) of the Christian message. Theologian Father Richard John Neuhaus describes his encounter with a well-known American evangelist and builder of mega-churches.<sup>16</sup> The evangelist worried about including a cross – not a crucifix, but a simple cross – in his new church because it was feared that the cross might prompt negative thoughts, maybe even thoughts about suffering and death.<sup>17</sup>

In the context of the so-called "happy ending" so typical of American popular entertainment, spectacles of death, despair, suffering and mourning are genuinely counter-cultural.<sup>18</sup> The Good Friday procession reminds onlookers of the physicality of crucifixion and makes notions of the Body and Blood of Christ tactile. Moreover, the procession's open display of grief is a potent way of posing questions of sin and responsibility (thought to be

<sup>15</sup>The most significant of these public practices is found in Pilsen, on the Lower West side of Chicago, originally port of entry for thousands of Europeans, esp. Bohemians, which today forms the center of Chicago's flourishing Mexican community. Every year, Pilsen residents continue the Good Friday ritual of the *Via Crucis*. Mexican Catholics reenact the Last of Supper of Christ at Providence of God Church at 18th and Union. Following a mock trial, the crowd follows "Christ" as he carries his cross along 18th Street to Harrison Park where he is "crucified." The body of Christ is then carried to St. Adalbert Church. The procession is widely covered by the mainstream media and attended by thousands of residents and spectators alike. "Unlike other celebrations, the Way of the Cross symbolizes the suffering endured by local families as they struggle for economic survival in the city." Dominic A. Pacyga and Ellen Skerrett, *Chicago: City of Neighborhoods* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1986), 253.

<sup>16</sup>Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

<sup>17</sup>"Finally, I said that of course there will be a cross," the famous evangelist said. "After all, the cross is the symbol of Christianity and we are a Christian church. But I can guarantee you," he declared with a triumphant smile, "there is nothing downbeat about the cross at New Life Cathedral!" From Neuhaus, 16-17.

<sup>18</sup>Mark Crispin Miller, "Hollywood: The Ad," *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 1990), 41-68.

private matters in Protestant theology) in public space. As Neuhaus states, "Christianity is about resurrection joy, but do not rush to Easter. Good Friday makes inescapable the question of complicity."<sup>19</sup> But questions of sin and suffering, what critics call "guilt-tripping," are very out of fashion in American public life. Kathleen Norris describes an American woman who abandoned Christianity because "the blood symbolism seemed a form of cannibalism. She took refuge in a Unity Church, and said she felt at home there because teddy bears were provided in all of the pews for churchgoers (the adults, not the children) to hug to themselves during the service. Flesh, blood, divinity. Not much like teddy bears, who are much nicer.... Over the centuries Christians have grown adept at finding ways to disincarnate the religion.... The Incarnation remains a scandal to anyone who wants religion to be a purely spiritual matter, an etherized, bloodless bliss."<sup>20</sup> Against this backdrop, the funeral grief of the Good Friday procession, in which the crucified body of Christ travels through the city streets, can be considered counter-cultural, if not simply radical.<sup>21</sup>

One might add that participants do not have to conceive of themselves as radical or confrontational to take part in a countercultural practice. However, as my research on processions has demonstrated, key parishioners – including the pastor – do conceive of themselves as "sending a message" or "making a statement" in the public display of procession. This would not be an unusual leap for Poles accustomed to the multiple symbolic meanings accrued to everyday practice in the highly coded milieu of Soviet-era Poland.<sup>22</sup> The relationship of religious devotion to political life is a familiar theme throughout Poland's history.

<sup>19</sup>Neuhaus, 8.

<sup>20</sup>Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 114.

<sup>21</sup>Lest one assume that Polish Catholicism is dire, it should be pointed out that between the dark night of Good Friday and the joy of Easter dawn's *Rezurekcja* procession the community prepares for *Świecone*. This has proven to be the single most long-lasting feature of Polonian Catholicism, even for those who have no more ties to Polish language, neighborhoods, and parishes. *Świeconka* is one of the most enduring and beloved Polish traditions. Baskets containing a sampling of Easter foods are brought to church to be blessed on Holy Saturday. The basket is traditionally lined with a white linen or lace napkin and decorated with sprigs of boxwood [*bukszpan*], the typical Easter evergreen. Poles take special pride in preparing a decorative and tasteful basket with crisp linens, occasionally embroidered for the occasion, and just enough boxwood and ribbon woven through the handle. Observing the beautiful foods and creations of other parishioners is one of the special joys of the event. While in some older or rural communities, the priest visits the home to bless the foods, the vast majority of Poles and Polish Americans visit the church on Holy Saturday, once again praying at the Tomb of the Lord. The blessed food will then be shared when the Easter fast is broken, after the Resurrection Mass at dawn.

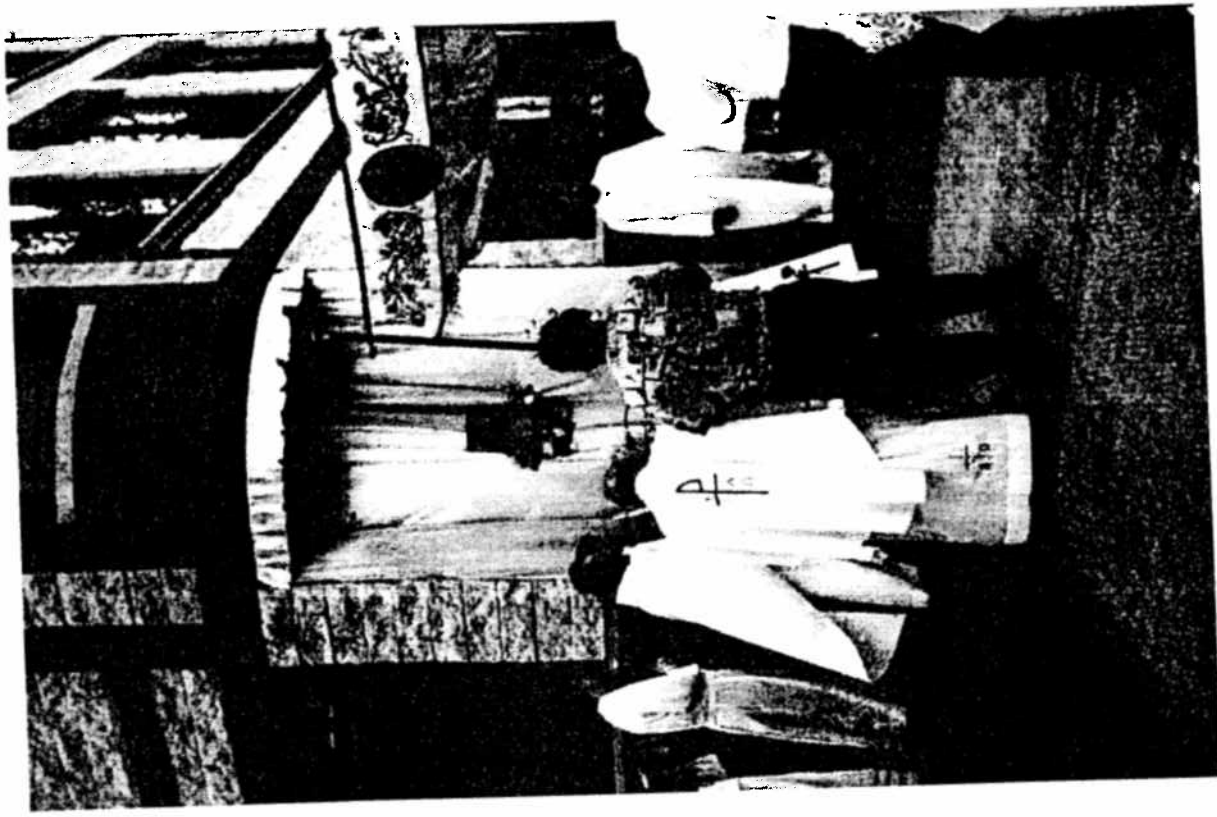
<sup>22</sup>The author thanks Dr. Anna Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann for her recollections of the coded symbolism of Solidarity-era Corpus Christi. She noted that private

The second procession in consideration is Corpus Christi [*Boże Ciało*], which commemorates the institution of the Holy Eucharist and is celebrated with great pomp and solemnity throughout Polonia (as in Poland). As the Eucharist is the central feature of Catholicism, made present in the Sacrifice of the Holy Mass, this Feast is of enormous importance.<sup>23</sup> The celebration of Corpus Christi, common to the pre-Vatican II American Catholic church, seems foreign to many contemporary Americans. However, this perception is generally out of touch with world Catholicism, wherein this feast is celebrated vigorously.

The important rituals that form the core of Polish Roman Catholic Corpus Christi devotions are Corpus Christi Altars [*Boży Domek*] and the Procession [*Procesja*]. For this event, the entire parish assembles in finest dress. Often children in First Communion dress precede the Blessed Sacrament dropping rose or other flower petals to create a carpet for the approaching Eucharist. Altar boys, clergy, prominent citizens with guild and society banners of silk, and others process. The Holy Eucharist is itself transported in a processional Monstrance, carried by the priest or bishop. The Monstrance is further protected by an embroidered silk canopy held by four posts, borne by parishioners or altar servers. Publicly proclaiming and reaffirming their devotion to the Holy Eucharist, the entire congregation walks through the neighborhood to the sound of bells and voices singing sacred hymns. The procession then walks and sings its way to the first of the altars. There the Blessed Sacrament rests while the assembled faithful kneel to pray and sing in adoration of the Holy Eucharist. The procession then continues on in the same manner to the other altars until finished. Central to the Feast is the building and decorating of four special altars away from the confines of the church building. Decorated with statues, holy pictures, cloth and flowers, these usually resemble small chapels. Traditionally, these are erected at four centers of a Polish town square, four points in a village, or four homes in an urban Polish neighborhood.

windows and balconies were decorated to make political statements: greenery, flowers, or sacred images indicated approval of the church and the hanging of laundry before the passing procession indicated disdain.

<sup>23</sup>The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963) begins Chapter 2, "The Most Sacred Mystery of the Eucharist," with the following: "At the Last Supper, on the night when he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and so to entrust to his beloved Spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is willed with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us." *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [Sacrosanctum Concilium]*. Documents of Vatican II. N.C.W.C. Translation (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1963), 19-20.



Corpus Christi Altar on Apartment Building

An apartment building in converted into a Boży Domek – one of the four Corpus Christi Altars – in the neighborhood. In this instance the building's entrance is draped with fabrics in the colors of Our Lady (royal blue and white) and adorned with flowers and an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Courtesy of David J. Gunkel & Ann Hetzel Gunkel ©.





Corpus Christi Altar at St. Helen Exterior

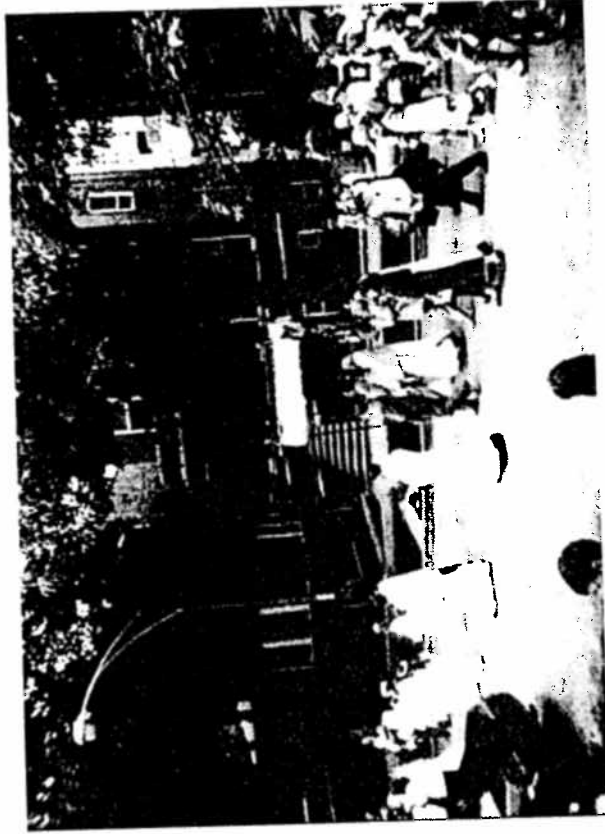
The fourth Boży Domek is erected on the side steps of St. Helen Church. The altar includes an embroidered banner depicting the Eucharist, flowers, and images of Jesus and Our Lady of Częstochowa. *Courtesy of David J. Gunkel & Ann Hetzel Gunkel ©.*

The importance of such a ritual gesture cannot be underestimated, for it involves bringing God literally into the community, through the streets and passages where people live and work. It is a literal, not symbolic, ritual that sacralizes common space and echoes the mystery of Catholic incarnational theology: the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. The Feast of Corpus Christi reminds the faithful that the quarantining of the Sacred within the church structure (a common feature of Reformation theology) is impossible. This theological ritual insists that God erupts amidst and dwells among us.

To understand the radical or counter-cultural nature of the public celebration of Corpus Christi in America, one must situate these practices in light of Catholic Eucharistic theology – a theology that runs counter to both popular culture and mainstream (Protestant) American religions. The Eucharistic celebration is a holy meal that recalls the Last Supper. In the Eucharist, Christ the Lord nourishes Christians, not only with His word but especially with His Body and Blood, effecting a transformation which impels them toward greater love of God and neighbor. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the perpetual sacrifice of the New Covenant in which the Sacrifice of the Cross is made sacramentally yet truly present. This embodied or

“incarnational” theology is what marks a distinction between this Catholic expression and the larger Protestant culture.

This incarnational experience of God in the world – indeed, in the city streets – presupposes a prior Catholic worldview, called by David Tracy and Andrew Greeley the analogical imagination. Discussions of the analogical and dialectical imaginations suggest that the Catholic analogical imagination assumes a “God who is present in the world. Thus, the world and all its events, objects, and people tend to be somewhat like God.”<sup>24</sup> It is therefore not unusual or incoherent for the consecrated Host to move along the streets and sidewalks of everyday life. The Protestant dialectical imagination, by contrast, “assumes a God who is radically absent from the world and who discloses Himself only on rare occasions.” The world and all its events, objects, and people tend to be radically different from God, thus needing “consecration.”<sup>25</sup> The city streets – part of the fallenness of the material world – would be the last place one would expect to find or experience God.



Corpus Christi Procession in Helenowo

Procession includes altar servers with incense, First Communicants dropping rose petals before the Host, priest with monstrance, cantors, parish band, and parishioners. The procession passes by the two- and three-flat houses typical of the neighborhood. *Courtesy of Ann Hetzel Gunkel ©.*

<sup>24</sup> Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Myth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 45. See also David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

<sup>25</sup> Greeley, 45.

In a non-Catholic nation, one might thus expect that Corpus Christi procession would represent a strange or incomprehensible, perhaps even sacrilegious, form of devotion.<sup>26</sup> I would argue however, that this ethnic devotional practice also deviates from contemporary American Catholicism. While Corpus Christi procession was a devotion practiced widely by American Catholics prior to Vatican II, it is now much less known and practiced except by Polish Catholics and the few "traditionalist" churches who have returned to the Latin Mass. Urban Polonia has been able to maintain a devotion which has been lost with the suburbanization of middle-class American Catholic ethnics.<sup>27</sup>

The demystification of the Eucharist, what many have called the core crisis in North American Catholicism, continues unabated amidst the Catholic "middle class."<sup>28</sup> Numerous polls indicate that for as many as half of American Catholics, the Eucharist is "a genial and commemorative" symbol, as it is for many Protestants, "but hardly an experience of the 'body, blood, soul, and divinity' of Jesus himself."<sup>29</sup> We must revalue the urban Polish preservation of Corpus Christi in the context of American Catholic culture, which – out of step with world Catholicism on this point – increasingly finds the issue of Real Presence a contemporary crisis of faith. As John David argues, the sense of the sacred has been radically expunged from American Catholic liturgical and devotional traditions.<sup>30</sup> In this context, Polish Corpus Christi performs the radical task of placing the sacred in public space.

The experience of God in space, in the Cartesian dimensions occupied by human bodies, points to a key characteristic of procession as a form of devotion: its performative, bodily nature.<sup>31</sup> "I am interested in the actions of the body ... before the mind, assuming that worship is the precondition of belief, not the other (Protestant) way around."<sup>32</sup> In this way the methodology of this study arises from out of the worldview created by the practice of procession, rather than simply applying the worldview of American (Protestant) religious studies – which has focused on historical institutions, dogma

<sup>26</sup>In fact, when I present video footage of this procession to students in my course, *Urban Images in Media & Film*, they are baffled and confused by what they see. These students, quite versed in visual imagery but from widely diverse segments of American culture, are dumbfounded and uncharacteristically silent.

<sup>27</sup>See Erdmans, 48-54; Ray Suarez, *The Old Neighborhood* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 26-57.

<sup>28</sup>Sidney Callahan, "The Eucharist," *Commonweal*, Vol. 23 (April 1999).

<sup>29</sup>John David, "Sense of the Sacred," *Commonweal*, Vol. 21 (May 1999), 1. <sup>30</sup>David, 1.

<sup>31</sup>Critics might suggest that this sort of analysis does not properly attend to theology, belief, and dogma and attends instead to mere ritual. This study – by design – is guilty of said charge.

<sup>32</sup>Thomas J. Ferraro, "Not-Just-Cultural Catholics," in Thomas J. Ferraro, ed., *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 9.

and belief – to procession. If this inverse formulation holds merit, one might speculate that the lack of embodied Eucharistic devotion, such as is found in Polish Corpus Christi, is a contributing factor in the lack of "belief" now expressed by some American Catholics. This would also suggest that procession, a performative spirituality, has the potential power to shape embodied faith – a sense of the sacred derived less from dogma and more from the very experience of space.

Procession is a practice that marks urban space in such a way as to sacralize it, insisting that one place is *not* interchangeable with another, thus resisting the homogenization of public space so common to shopping malls and the suburban landscape. Furthermore, the marking of sacred space through religious devotion suggests a love of place in urban neighborhoods not often taken into account and yet critical to a complex understanding of such communities.<sup>33</sup> In neighborhoods sometimes imagined by outsiders as "slums," these rituals emphasize the solidarity of neighborhood life. Often portrayed as people who simply want to get out as fast as possible, urban dwellers actually display a passionate love for the neighborhood. Even in poor, densely populated, and physically deteriorating places, the neighborhood is a place that people come to love, a place where – against the odds – immigrants and their children create a community life.<sup>34</sup> In stark contrast to the popular imagination of urban immigrant ghettos, counterhegemonic analysis of urban practice must begin by acknowledging the radicality of love of place.

This love of urban neighborhood place also flies in the face of the dominant anti-urban traditions of American politics, letters, and popular media.<sup>35</sup> The particularly American form of anti-urbanism was tied to the development of the industrial city in the antebellum period when the city became a negative imaginative locus for negotiating the problem of American identity. "The beginning of urbanization in the United States coincided with and partially occasioned a crisis of national identity ... and from this point on, what it meant to be an American – morally, religiously, politically, even physically – was defined in opposition to the cities, even as the nation became increasingly and inexorably urban."<sup>36</sup> From political rhetoric to opinion polls of the American populace, images of city life are consistently and overwhelmingly negative.<sup>37</sup> Procession rejects this view of urban space by extending a "sacramental template" on a "specific urban area under-

<sup>33</sup>Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 45-49.

<sup>34</sup>Orsi, *Madonna*, 45-49

<sup>35</sup>Orsi, *Gods of the City*, 1-78; Claude A. Fischer, *The Urban Experience* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984), 13-41.

<sup>36</sup>Orsi, *Gods of the City*, 6.

<sup>37</sup>Fischer, 13.

stood as distinct and recognizable."<sup>38</sup> In sacralizing urban space, street processions make sacred those regions considered most profane by American tradition.

The hegemonic anti-urbanism of American tradition must be seen in the related contexts of anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment. One of the most important forces shaping modern American Protestantism was the "widespread senses of apocalyptic urban crisis provoked by the swelling populations of immigrant Catholic laborers."<sup>39</sup> It should be remembered that "immigrant Catholicism" as it was called, or something worse, "ghetto Catholicism," was seen as "an obscurantist form of cult worship that stood in the way of Catholics being fully accepted in the American cultural mainstream."<sup>40</sup> As Erdmans has noted, the nativist 100 percent American movement "blamed social ills in America on the arrival of large numbers of new Southern and Eastern European immigrants. The new immigrants, they claimed ... were too foreign, too dirty, too Catholic"<sup>41</sup> and seen as generally racially inferior to Northern and Western Europeans.<sup>42</sup> Procession defiantly flies in the face of this prejudice by publicly performing an ethnic religious subjectivity long considered strange or suspect.

How "radical" is such public display? We must recall that the pervasiveness of anti-Catholic sentiment in American life led many ethnics and immigrants to feelings of shame about themselves and their religious practices. American "Catholics frequently denied their rituals, which gave them a sense of shame. Even Catholic universities refused to study rituals, an attitude that prevailed as late as the 1980s." Orsi partly attributes this attitude to anti-Catholic sentiment in the U.S., and a tradition of American liberal religion in which morality is paramount, and ritual de-emphasized. "The view of religion as a rational choice connected to morality and understanding leaves out the 'stuff of religion,' namely, ritual."<sup>43</sup> Procession is a

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Sciorra, "We Go Where the Italians Live": Religious Processions in Italian Williamsburg," in Robert A. Orsi, ed., *Gods of the City* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 327, 327.

<sup>39</sup> Orsi, *Gods of the City*, 24-25.

<sup>40</sup> Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City: the Forgotten Virtues of Community in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 118.

<sup>41</sup> Erdmans, 29.

<sup>42</sup> The belief in the racial inferiority of Eastern and Southern European immigrants was bolstered by intelligence testing and surveys. See Erdmans, 30-34.

<sup>43</sup> Roberta Neiger, "Faith in Memory," at <http://www.indiana.edu/~rcapub/v17n1/p9.html> (Research & Creative Activity, Indiana University, Office of Research and the University Graduate School, Vol. XVII, No. 1, April 1994. Accessed June 6, 2000). This sense of shame has even been reproduced in the choices made by ethnic scholars, particularly in their selection of subject matter and a tendency to focus on ways in which so-called "ethnic traits" are consistent with rather than resistant to American mainstream values. The multi-layered, multi-regional, and multi-generational Polish emigration "has been reduced to a

ritual that rejects that sense of ethnic shame and puts it out there for folks to see.

The ritual of procession marks and makes sacred space of the otherwise public streets. Molded in the traditions, iconography, languages and religious vernacular of ancestors, these events function as acts of cultural resistance. Religious processions are, thus, "dramatic demonstrations and confirmations of group identity organized around the display of a central religious" icon. "But celebratory activities such as processions not only express preexisting community affiliations; they are themselves collective experiences that engender a heightened sense of belonging, what anthropologist Victor Turner called *communitas*."<sup>44</sup> Rather than serving as retrograde and conservative actions these religious processions, in the tradition of pilgrimages, serve "not so much to maintain society's status quo as to recollect, and even to presage, an alternative mode of social being, a world where *communitas*, rather than a bureaucratic social structure, is preeminent."<sup>45</sup>

Such a communitarian - one might say catholic - ethos can also be read as resistant to the prevalent American celebration of individualism. Orsi places the ethos of individualism in the context of American anti-urbanism.<sup>46</sup>

The belief that religion is not natural to cities is pervasive in contemporary American culture. The religious ethos of white middle-class Americans at the end of the twentieth century is dominated by a spirit of "expressive individualism," ... a romantic sensibility akin to Eliade's that is more likely to identify mountaintops and ocean beaches as places evocative of religious feelings than street corners and basements of housing projects; and religion, in this common un-

single 'Polonia' category" (Felix Gross, "Noted on the Ethnic Revolution and the Polish Immigration in the U.S.A., in *The Polish Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1976), 158). As Felix Gross has pointed out, "the simplification of the immigration picture was influenced in part by the excellent work of Thomas and Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (University of Chicago Press, 1918-20)." (158) To validate the theoretical assumptions of this work, the authors needed "as homogenous a sample as possible." Thus, this definitive Polish ethnic study "included primarily immigrants of peasant background, strongly related to church and parochial organizations, groups that were rather conservative in outlook." This early scholarly examination of Polish immigrants in some ways solidified the notion of Polish-American backwardness, ruralness, and conservatism. The study did not include radical, socialist émigrés, for example. Thus, the tendency to define Polish identity in these terms rather than in urban or politically radical contexts presented those Polish groups, especially those in later waves of immigration, with a dilemma. See also Erdmans, 32-36.

<sup>44</sup> Sciorra, "Where the Italians Live," 319.

<sup>45</sup> Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 39.

<sup>46</sup> Orsi, *Gods of the City*, 42-43.



understanding, is a matter of feeling rather than of practice, authority, discipline within a tradition, or of feeding the spirits... The history and phenomenology of urban religions remain so little explored in large part because of the authority of the narrative of urban religious decline and alienation and of these variant strains of romantic religion in American culture.<sup>47</sup>

"Real religion" it is thought is not only a pastoral experience but also a private experience. The participatory, performative, communal nature of street procession fundamentally contradicts the American (Protestant) sensibility that religion is separate from public life and moreover, a private matter – between the individual and God. This resistant quality of public ethnic religion makes street procession profoundly interesting. As Thomas Ferraro notes, the social and cultural contexts of ritual extend beyond the narrowly religious.

To me, cultural as a qualifier to Catholicism does not necessarily mean dilution or dissolution – a draining of the religious imagination into banal secularity – but can in fact signify the opposite, a form of transfigurative reenvisioning that refuses to quarantine the sacred.<sup>48</sup>

The "refusal to quarantine the sacred" is a countercultural religious practice that also serves to question secular social values. Thus urban Polish street processions can be revalued as part of an ethnic culture of contestation. These practices: (1) reject the anti-urbanism characteristic of American letters & politics, (2) reject the anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment at the heart of American culture, most specifically the suspicion of ritual, (3) challenge the dominant American ethos of individualism, and (4) respond to the local urban politics of gentrification by performing public acts of community ownership over contested urban space. All my arguments presuppose that people of the diasporic city have some active role in shaping their own lives and communities. As Orsi argues, "space does not simply act on people; city people contend with space, and it is in their religious practice that they struggle with the most intimate dimensions of spatial challenges."<sup>49</sup>

As theologian Tom Driver has noted, "Until recently, most educated thought in the Western world, whether liberal or radical, has been under the sway of the Enlightenment's opinion that rituals belong to stages of human development destined for obsolescence by the triumph of reason. The liberal theological world has partaken of the same Enlightenment bias, while Protestantism inherited a Puritan suspicion of rituals as pagan, idolatrous,

and popish. The chief result of such attitudes has been to leave interest in rituals in conservative hands. Mostly unchallenged is the assumption that rituals, by their very nature, either perpetuate the status quo or, worse, serve reactionary causes."<sup>50</sup> I argue that the Polish ritual of procession functions as a countercultural form of expression in which "individuals actively call into play a repertoire of past symbolisms and infuse them with new meaning and values."<sup>51</sup>

Finally, I would suggest that these performances of ethnic "collective subjectivity staged topographically"<sup>52</sup> in urban space require us to reexamine our notions of ethnicity and identity. As Fischer has argued, "ethnicity is not simply passed on, learned or taught, or inherited by blood; it is a dynamic component of identity that must register and respond to the flux of the modern world, through dialogue with it."<sup>53</sup> Urban Polish processions create such a dialogue. As dynamic components of ethnicity, these public practices create a culture of resistant Catholicism in an age largely assumed to be post-Christian. Rather than discarding popular religious practice as out-dated, old-world relics irrelevant to contemporary life, we must revalue these practices as complex negotiations of contested urban space and ethnic identity.

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<sup>50</sup>Tom F. Driver, *Liberating Rites* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>51</sup>Joseph Sciorra, "Return to the Future: Puerto Rican Vernacular Architecture in New York City," 79.

<sup>52</sup>Sciorra, "Where the Italians Live," 327.

<sup>53</sup>Michael M. J. Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 230.

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<sup>47</sup>Orsi, *Gods of the City*, 42-43.

<sup>48</sup>Thomas J. Ferraro, "Not Just Cultural Catholics," in Thomas J. Ferraro, ed., *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>49</sup>Orsi, *Gods of the City*, 62.

