
STUDIA POLONIJE
T. 46 LUBLIN 2025
DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18290/sp2546.47>

American Patroness: Marian Shrines and the Making of U.S. Catholicism, eds. Katherine Dugan and Karen E. Park, New York: Fordham University Press 2024. Pp. 312, HB. ISBN 9781531504878.

Forty years ago, as a doctoral student, I took a summer course on American Catholic history with Robert Orsi, who was then also writing his dissertation. That work would become *The Madonna of 115th Street*, published by Yale. Orsi's focus was the annual street festival, crowned by the procession of the statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which took place at the Italian ethnic parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Harlem every July 16. Since our course coincided with that festival, we also participated in it.

Orsi was interested in how this popular or "folk" Catholicism of the streets had different "meanings" than the standard, liturgical celebrations of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. A secondary interest was how that meaning was changing with the changing ethnic demographic: by the 1980s, "Italian Harlem" was really an extension of Spanish, i.e., Latino Harlem. Latino Catholics joined the festivities, but also brought their own "meaning" to bear on it.

I'm reminded of Orsi's interests reading Dugan and Park's *American Patroness*, a collection of 12 essays about how Catholic Marian shrines in the United States reveal the complexity as well as the "dynamic malleability" (i.e., adaptability) of the Church in this country. Among its themes are how Catholic institutions (in this case, Marian shrines) have changed with the changing face of Catholicism in the United States. One example: Ohio's National Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation, which originated with German-speaking Catholics but, in the early 20th century, also became a Midwestern Slavic pilgrimage site.

Given that Catholics of Polish extraction have been a group part of the Church in the United States since Panna Maria in 1854, they receive some – albeit limited – note in this book. Besides Our Lady of Consolation, they are mentioned in conjunction with the National Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Fatima in Niagara Falls, New York, in part because the Buffalo area Catho-

lic who helped build the shrine included those of Polish descent and because some of the “Cold War” characteristics of the Shrine (e.g., Russia spreading errors throughout the world) coincided with Poland’s postwar geopolitical imprisonment. Polish Catholics are also mentioned as having an interest in “Our Lady of the Underpass,” a Marian painting hung inside the Fullerton Avenue underpass of I-90, which has attracted Catholics of Latino and Polish extraction in Chicago.

The primary interest Polish Americans would have in this book is, however, a chapter on Pennsylvania’s National Shrine of Our Lady of Częstochowa. The chapter was written by Terry Rey, professor of religion at Temple University in Philadelphia. His scholarly focus is “African and African diasporic religions.” Doylestown attracted his attention because, for years, Haitian communities have also made its Black Madonna their pilgrimage site.

Rey provides brief overviews of Our Lady of Częstochowa and her place in Catholicism and history in Poland as well as of Polish Catholics in the United States. His primary focus, however, is on “Creolizing Mary in Pennsylvania” and the “Racial and Devotional Diversity at the Shrine.”

He notes that Our Lady of Częstochowa was not unknown in Haiti. She was brought by Polish freedom fighters who, in the aftermath of the Partitions, initially threw in their lot with the French Revolutionaries, only to be dispatched to Hispaniola to put down the Haitian Revolution. When they reached Haiti, they joined the local revolution and eventually settled there. Rey admits there is no Haitian Jasna Góra, but the Haitian diaspora in the eastern United States and Canada has adopted Doylestown.

Rey’s description makes clear that two streams of meaning coexist in the Haitian devotion: a Catholic one and a syncretistic one, mixed with voodoo elements. He is also clear that is how he perceives Polish and Haitian (non)-interaction at the Shrine: separate, with some inference that the Haitians have been relegated to secondary status. He salutes Polonian Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski who, in offering Mass in Doylestown in 2019, consciously included both communities. He includes observations on how each community approaches the patronal feast day in August.

Given his scholarly interests, Rey’s Haitian focus is hardly surprising, but it does not do justice to the Polish dimension of Doylestown, which is sometimes inadequately treated. Granted, that’s not his focus, and perhaps it’s also the fault of American Polonian for inadequate scholarship on Polonian Catholic institutions, especially given the rapid pace of parish dissolution by bishops under the rubric of diocesan “renewal.” Perhaps it also says some-

thing about the “diversity” focus of contemporary American scholarship: Caribbean non-whites are “in,” European ethnics are “out.” Such “inclusivity,” of course, gives short shrift to the European part of the story, a gap likely to expand as the handful of American scholars who devote some attention to American Polonia retire, to be replaced by younger faculty unlikely to focus on Slavs, much less specifically on Polonia. It is another reason why partnership with Polish academics is more vital than ever.

From Rey’s treatment of *Częstochowa amerykańska*, one might infer that – like many urban parishes where another ethnicity has replaced the original founders, such as the Latinos of Italian Harlem – Doylestown’s Polish character is vestigial. It is not. It is in fact probably more important than ever, given local bishops’ destruction of ethnic parishes, in the name of “unleashing the Gospel” by merging or closing churches.

Remember that Doylestown is a pilgrimage shrine, not a parish. Shrines will never fulfill the role parishes did for Polonia. Their role will be different, but still vital. Consider, for example, what will be the role of the Shrine Chapel of Our Lady of Orchard Lake, now that St. Mary’s College is essentially defunct and the Polish Seminary is being closed. While its intra-institutional role may change, the Shrine Chapel may have an outsized role filling in for the decimated Polonian parishes of the Archdiocese of Detroit.

Doylestown’s Polish identity and mission will likely be sustained because, unlike parishes usually under diocesan priests’ care, the Pauline Fathers are primarily a Polish order. They will continue to address Polonian needs, even as they expand their ministerial outreach. The relevance of religious orders to preservation of Polonian Catholicism is evident elsewhere, e.g., in dioceses where bishops who could put parishes otherwise on the chopping block placed them instead in a religious order’s care (e.g., the Polish Redemptorists in New Jersey). That nexus also sustains the original ethnic mission.

Rey does not account for the Polish pilgrimage dimension of Doylestown. There is no mention of the annual August Polonian walking pilgrimage to Doylestown, in imitation of such treks to Jasna Góra in Poland, launched decades ago by the late Rev. Ignacy Kuziemski from Ss. Peter and Paul Church in Great Meadows, New Jersey.

Also unmentioned is the key role Polonia’s postwar *emigracja polityczna* played with Doylestown. Rey does not even mention the postwar political emigrés who, in many ways, reinvigorated and nationalized American Polonia. One example: *pace* Rey, the cemetery in Doylestown is more the resting

place of Polish World War II vets than Vietnam soldiers. Many have arranged to be buried together there, while the iconography of the grounds clearly points to Polish historical and military traditions.

Likewise omitted is the Cold War aspects of Doylestown. Fr. Michał Zembrzuski's push to finish Doylestown by 1966 was not just to coincide with the Millennium of Polish Christianity. Given Poland's ongoing subjugation under communism and the latter's persecution of the Church (e.g., the refusal to allow Pope Paul VI to visit Jasna Góra in 1966), *Częstochowa amerykańska* assumed a further role as Polish Catholicism in exile. Rey mentions that President Lyndon B. Johnson attended the Shrine's dedication but never asks why: the President of the United States does not attend church openings just because he has a free weekend.

In summary, while Rey's focus keeps with his interests, it does not tell the whole current story of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Częstochowa or how it addresses Polish pastoral needs today, much less how it might in the future. The latter question merits Polonia's research, as does the growing question of the shape of likely increased intersection between Polish/Polonian and other ethnic groups in the "worship sites" that used once to be Polish parishes.

*Dr. John M. Grondelski
Falls Church, Virginia, USA
e-mail: grondelski@op.pl*