



Australian Province of the Society of Jesus

Homily

Celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the arrival of **Leon Rogalski SJ**
to Australia and the Clare Valley in 1870

St Aloysius' Church Sevenhill, Sunday 14th March, 2021

It is nearly a year ago that we had planned to celebrate the sesquicentary arrival of Fr Leon Rogalski on Australian soil in 1870.

This past year has been no simple year. We will remember it as the year when covid-19 changed the world and how, in so many ways, it infected and separated us. We learnt the 1.5 metre rule and tried to cope with lockdowns and border restrictions. We witnessed members of families being separated from one another and those overseas finding it difficult to return home. We learned all manners of social distancing because here was a virus that threatened companionship, community and celebration.

We are possibly in a far better position, a year on, to grasp something of the pain and human suffering expressed by Psalm 137 in today's Mass, capturing the exile of the Jewish people in Babylon. The psalmist invites us into a deep wound that people can experience when separated from what they have come to know as their true and lasting home. 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept, remembering Zion ... on the willows there we hung up our harps'.

So, perhaps on this occasion and where borders remain fragile but open, we come to celebrate the arrival of a very remarkable person, Leon Rogalski, and appreciate the gift of his coming with new eyes and hearts than we may have a year ago.

It was on the 20th March 1870 when Leon Rogalski arrived in Australia. He had left the English port city of Liverpool some three months earlier on the 20th December 1869. He was forty years old.

Leon was born in 1830 and, following the footsteps of his older brother, Jan, was ordained as a diocesan priest in 1855 at the age of 25. Four years later he was inducted into the army, serving as a military chaplain in north-eastern Italy. Was it the war experience that led him two years later to join the Society of Jesus? After entering the Jesuit novitiate and further studies he became a much loved parish priest.

For some years, the Jesuit Superior General had wished to respond to a request by the Austrian Jesuits, who had arrived in South Australia in 1848, for a Polish chaplain for the growing number of Polish migrants. Eight years after joining the Jesuits he was asked by the Jesuit Superior General, Fr Beckx, to leave his country and go to Australia.



Somewhat like Francis Xavier, who volunteered to go to India replacing a Jesuit who became sick and could not travel, Rogalski replaced another missionary who was suffering ill health.

In this modern time of air travel it can be hard to imagine the generosity of this man. To go somewhere new and totally foreign and to the far end of the world as it was then known. A journey so far away from home that he would never return and see his family again.

Clearly, he was not a sailor and did not enjoy the three month trip. He suffered from sea sickness, dizziness and a lack of appetite. He would later quote the latin proverb: *qui nescit orare, pergat ad mare. They who do not know how to pray, let them go to sea.*

And pray he did. With him on the boat were people of different nationalities: Scottish, English, Italian and Irish. He made friends with one particular group, the Irish: 'similar in character and disposition', he later wrote to his brother, 'they love us very much'. He found with the Irish a mutual understanding. They shared a common faith where both home countries were controlled by others and this included the suppression of language and culture. The country of Poland had ceased to exist in 1795 when it was divided between Russia, Austria and Prussia.

As early as the 1830s a slow and steady wave of Polish immigrants began coming to South Australia for economic reasons and, like the Irish, seeking a new and safe place they could call home. A large group settled near the already established Jesuit community of Sevenhill and in an area that came to be known as Polish Hill River.

The month before he left for Australia, Rogalski visited and prayed in the room where the young St Stanislaus Kostka had lived. He brought with him to Australia a devotion towards this young man who had walked more than 1,500 kms to seek permission to become a Jesuit. Rogalski would travel by ship a much longer distance than the young Kostka but, perhaps in the life of Stanislaus, Rogalski saw something of a total commitment to the journey he was about to take, accepting the sacrifice and separation that would follow from such a commitment.

While Rogalski's first pastoral responsibility was to the community at Polish Hill River he sought to build a Chapel in honour of St Stanislaus Kostka. It was in that chapel that Rogalski placed the painting of St Stanislaus that (we believe) he had brought with him on the ship. The painting remained there until the Chapel was deconsecrated in 1950 when it was given to this church of St Aloysius at Sevenhill. It is only fitting that, on the occasion of this celebration, a copy of that original painting be returned to those who have continued to care for this memorial of the first 'Polish community' in Australia.



In addition to his parish responsibilities, Rogalski taught at Sevenhill in the secondary school, the seminary for the training of diocesan seminarians and the novitiate and house of studies for Australians wanting to become Jesuits. He heard confession in three languages – English, German and Polish. He was a very busy and energetic man.

It was said of Rogalski that ‘he had come to a strange country and he meant to make it his’. And make it, he did. In his last letter home, in 1897, he finishes by saying: ‘I work in the confessional and behind the pulpit in three languages: Polish, German and English. I do missionary trips, I visit the sick or neglected to raise their spirits a little and to attract them to Jesus’. When recounting his activities he listed thousands of confessions, first communions, spiritual exercises, visitations, baptisms, marriages and funerals. He travelled some 60,000 kilometres, mostly on horseback. He was a remarkable and generous bearer of the Good News, both in his early life in Poland and later, in the second half of his life, in Australia.

What Jesus says to Nicodemus in today’s gospel, can be said of Rogalski, ‘Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God’. Today, let us also remember those many Polish people who have made their home in this land. Their faith, language and culture have now become a blessing for our Church and nation. We also give thanks for those Jesuits and other chaplains who followed Rogalski and have generously given their lives to the service of the Polish community here in Australia.

In him and of them, we may draw confidence and hope. For neither covid or vaccines, lockdowns or border restrictions, nothing can separate us from the love of God found in Christ Jesus. Nor even living here in South Australia or in Poland. This is what Leon Rogalski learned, lived and his whole life expressed.

Brian F McCoy SJ