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Polish faithful offer heartfelt tributes

By Tom Lochner
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Emilia Szczepankowska had not worshipped at Martinez's Polish church for a while, but Sunday, she felt drawn there to reconnect with her past and join her countryfolk in mourning Pope John Paul II.

"The pope did so much for us," Szczepankowska said after Mass at Our Lady Mother of Immigrants Chapel. "Not only with the fall of communism. He put Poland on the map. We probably will not see a man like him in our lifetime."

In death as in life, John Paul II rallied Catholics around their church Sunday, reaffirming their faith.

Szczepankowska, who came to the United States in 1989 shortly before the fall of the communist regime, has clear memories of Mass in her native Bialystok, Poland.

"The details, the smell of the church -- it stays with you your whole life. I just felt I needed to go to church today. Religion is such an important factor of the Polish community; you can't separate the two," she said.

An overflow congregation spilled out to the sidewalk in front of the chapel. Some wept; others knelt in prayer or stood silently, heads bowed, as hymns sung in Polish wafted out into Mellus Street. Left of the altar under an icon of the Virgin of Czêstochowa, Poland's patron saint, and the baby Jesus, stood a shrine with a picture of the pope, framed with candles and lilies.

"Nie lekajcie sie! (Do not be afraid)," said Father Miroslaw Bozek, quoting the words John Paul II often repeated at the start of his papal Masses during his first pilgrimage to Poland as pope in 1979. "May your (holy) spirit come to this land and renew it."

Relaying information he got from Polish Web sites as well as other news sources, Bozek told the congregation the pope, fully conscious right before his death, managed to utter the word "Amen."

After the Mass, many congregants spoke of deeply personal feelings for the pope; others emphasized his status as a giant of world history.

"Of course, John Paul II, for Poles, has a bigger dimension than for other Catholics," said Peter Kodzis of Pinole, a U.S. resident since 1987. Kodzis had been a student in Gdansk, the birthplace of Solidarity, the workers movement that stood up to the communist regime.

"For us, he was not only the head of the church, but also the person who changed the history of our nation and Eastern Europe by freeing it from communism," Kodzis said.

Parishioner Cichon Zdzislaw praised the pope as "a man of peace," not only for his conciliatory gestures toward Anglicans, Jews, the Eastern Orthodox churches and other faiths. Zdzislaw believes that by engaging Muslims in dialogue as well, and by urging Christians to live in peace with them, John Paul II may have prevented U.S.-led military actions in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks from escalating into a worldwide war between members of the two faiths.

"He is the most famous son of Poland," said Zdzislaw of Oakley, formerly of Poznan, Poland. "The biggest man in Polish history," added Wojtek Grobelny of Concord, formerly of Wroclaw, Poland. "We are feeling like we lost our father."

"We feel like someone very close to us died," said Elizabeth Lukaszewicz of Concord, who can boast of an even closer kinship to the pope than her fellow congregants. She is a native of Krakow, where Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope John Paul II, was bishop in the 1960s.

"He was the one who confirmed me," Lukaszewicz said.

Bozek, who was a boy in Katowice, Poland, when the pope visited in 1979 and 1983, credits the pope for the nonviolent ouster in 1989 of the communist regime, which often had not shied from spilling blood to repress dissent.

He recalled the pope's power, and the regime's awe of it, when about 10 million people, about a third of the country's population, attended

the papal Masses. "He gave us an inner power."

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