November 17, 1957

Dear fellow countrymen and countrywomen, I greet you with the words: Praised be Jesus Christ!

It is not often that a person whom Providence, or luck, or maybe blind chance has placed in a more comfortable situation and given a life better than that of a common mortal deigns to notice the ranks of normal beings. He regards them as something below him. He doesn’t look, so he doesn’t see. Hence, he will learn nothing. It’s a shame, because if he stopped to look at what is going on, he would perhaps squeeze out a tear of compassion and remind himself of duties to fulfill. People prefer to go through life with their heads lifted high, thinking about their own comforts, lost in their dreams, and they walk by what they can meet at every turn. They let the real mysteries of life, which you will not find in any book, or on any painting, pass them by! It’s a shame, because only God from up on high looks down on the uncounted ranks of the poor, the destitute, often scorned and hated, in whom there is more force, beauty, energy and virtue than in dramas which squeeze out tears and engrave themselves in the memory of people looking for sensations! And so someone wrote: “Often, looking at a shabby beggar, at a poor village child, who was left an orphan and lived off the alms of moldy bread, I thought to myself: how much we could learn from looking closely at the painful, humiliating, poor and rejected lives of people who are unknown, unhappy and rejected. We know very well how time flies for those who are happy, rich, important, wrapped in soft diapers ever since their birth; we know, how they are kept on a lead, how they are drilled for the future; how they walk, how they bow, what they eat, how they dress, marry, deceive and divorce, grow old and senile, yawn and die! But who ever expressed the forms of life of the poor man, the beggar? And yet before God the existence of a poor man is great and very important!” Hence the program entitled:

“The life of a vagabond!”

Frequently, and in spite of myself, when I sit busy by my desk, I put my pen to the side and fall into a reverie; I remember what someone wrote a long time ago, that in men there is a force which is often unnoticed, which is rarely used appropriately; a force, almost magical, which if it comes from faith, works miracles; which conquers everything that surrounds it, cuts the ties that bind, fights doggedly and victoriously against time, difficulties, and adversity; thanks to whose force great, surprising works, true miracles happen. This force is free will based on faith! Will is a short word, but in this word hides the concentration of human powers. In this will there is the content and essence of the highest, the most noble human virtues. The will is a spring which sets into motion and forces into action unknown, latent, supernatural forces, which cannot be moved by anything else. When the action of the will ceases, man changes, weakens, retreats, falls, languishes, disappears! The will is not the sole domain of genius, talent and reason; everyone can possess it, but he must work on it himself, and everyone can bring about miracles with its help! Practically all of our life is based on our will; its absence makes man a slave, or a person without a will; its presence makes man a ruler! On this axis turn the wheels of chance, which are directed by the invisible hand of Providence, but moved by the force of man’s will! And so I admire more the cell of an ancient hermit, dug by hand in a hill, than the enormous Egyptian pyramid, built by the bloody sweat of slaves; I am more impressed by a countryside hut, covered by straw and moss, than by Nero’s golden palace in Rome! A small, almost invisible opening, which is carved by an insect in a tree, is for me at least as wonderful a construction, as a tunnel under a river, dug by the hands of thousands of workers! The weight, made up of crumbs, which an ant lugs to its pantry, is for me more admirable than the Egyptian obelisk transported to Rome! The same goes for human affairs; when you look at the tiny world, which not many people turn their eyes to, you will find there pyramids, enormous works, and miracles, brought about only by the will, perhaps more remarkable than those which we usually marvel at!” You will forgive me, I am sure, for putting before your eyes a few images from years gone by! Here is a scene, which I saw a few times in New York in the year one thousand, nine hundred and seven. I saw hundreds of Poles, men and women, who came to America on ships of different companies, especially German. On the docks in the port, railway agents and others waited for them. They walked in groups like sheep behind their shepherd. Those who came to their family or friends had addresses written on pieces of paper attached to their vests. These were led by agents to the appropriate railway stations! Others were sent to work in mines in the coal basin, to coking plants, to steel plants, to slaughter-houses. Of course they were sent to the most difficult and hardest jobs! And to the least paid. Still today I see these groups of men, women and children. Dressed tidily, but oh so poorly. Their whole fortune was on them, or by them! The father lugged a trunk and sack. The mother carried a large basket with linen. By her side walked two or three children! The father walked deep in thought, the mother sad, often crying! They spoke to each other in whispers, looked about with disbelief, with suspicion! Poor, because almost everyone came on borrowed money, or on a sent ship card. Poor in material goods, but in spirit, rich men and millionaires! They had a strong, even stubborn will; they had good intentions and noble goals; they had strong faith, sincere piety, tender pity and unremitting faith in God’s help and their own forces. It seems that in their souls the Creator had carved in gilt letters the saying: “Pray and work!” Circumstances had so providentially shaped themselves that seemingly led by the Holy Spirit’s inspiration, they had left their homeland, their family hut, their siblings and friends and had come here, not so much for themselves, but for their children, that is – for us! In a word, so that we would have a better life. So that we would have the liberty of professing our faith; so that we could speak to God in the Polish language, without risking various punishments, imprisonment, or exile to Siberia! So that we would have the chance to live as free people, and not as slaves. So that we could assure ourselves a bite of bread and a peaceful life! They didn’t know the local language, customs and traditions. They were sent to hard work and paid poorly. They were taken advantage of at each turn. They were paid generously with curses and imprecations. And yet they did not let their spirits fall, they did not give up! I will let myself show you the thinking of a Polish peasant, as described by Bolesław Prus: “That’s God’s will” sighed the peasant. “I can see they have more sense than I have, but when it comes to holding on, there I can match them! Look at all the woodpeckers on that little tree; that tree is like us peasants. The squire sits and hammers, the parish sits and hammers, the Jews and the Germans sit and hammer, yet in the end they all fly away and the tree is still the tree.” [[1]](#footnote-1) This was the character, the temperament of these our Polish immigrants, our fathers! The difficulties and obstacles which they met with at every step formed unflinching fortitude and an indomitable character. They went forward! They built narrow yet comfortable houses; they built churches and schools; they founded associations and organized ceremonies. And what more, and this is something truly moving which remarkably characterizes Polish nature, that in spite of their slim, meager earnings, they didn’t forget their own in Poland, but sent them modest aid! In the year one thousand nine hundred thirty one, I described an event which I had witnessed, many years ago. We lived then in a company hut in McClure, Pennsylvania. One day, a Polish family arrived at this small town. A husband, a wife, and four children! They had been “brought” by their relatives, who lived right next to us, who themselves had come by a sent ship card a few years earlier! – I am unable to describe my feelings upon seeing the newly-arrived! They looked like scared sheep! They moved heavily and slowly! They looked at us shyly, fearfully! They spoke in hushed voices, which sounded wonderful to my ears. Especially the voices of children, like the twitter of nightingales and larks! Well, I couldn’t stop looking at the strange cut of their clothing, its motley color, the strange shape of their hats, and the shapeless look of their shoes; frequently I dream of this helpless group, and their image stands in my imagination yet today! But to continue. When the first Saturday came after the arrival of this group in our town, after having finished work, the coke-plant workers and miners gathered at our place to listen to news of our fatherland from the lips of the newly-arrived! They asked about the health and well-being of not only their loved ones, but acquaintances and people they didn’t know. Questions spilled out like wheat from a bushel! They were interested by the harvest. And this simple peasant, when he described the fields of wheat, rye and oats, he spoke as if inspired; in his teary eyes flickered the flame of enthusiasm, happiness and – longing! Those present listened with bated breath, as if it was some Skarga who was speaking to them, and not a simple peasant who described for them what they themselves had experienced a few years earlier! The peasant’s voice sounded touching when he spoke of those last moments in his native village, when he went to the cemetery by the parish church for perhaps the last time in his life, to kneel by the graves of his forefathers and pray: “Eternal rest grant unto them, o Lord!” When he stopped by the pastor to say goodbye and “Reverend convinced me not to go to America, because there I would abandon God and renounce my faith!” And I replied: “Reverend, so many have left, and haven’t died of hunger, nor have they renounced their faith! I will go too, and what will happen, well, God’s will be done!” Upon hearing this, those present nodded their heads and smiled, as a sign of their contentment! And now the immigrant, thoroughly moved, wiped his eyes with his sleeve, sighed and became silent. After a moment he got his voice back. He gave a slight cough and started to describe the parting in the family hut, when along with his wife they knelt before their parents and, kissing their hard, work-worn hands, they asked for their blessing for a successful voyage across the ocean, and for further life in a far-away and little-known country! By this time everybody was sobbing quietly! Each and every person present was reminded of scenes of parting from their village, their church, their family hut, their parents, siblings and everything which was dear to them, everything they had got accustomed to during so many years! At this moment, imaginative minds turned into television screens, and this peasant became the translator of scenes in which they acted; and the scenes were expressive, because these had been life-changing events! They heard the last requests and parental advice; they felt the last and affectionate kiss planted on their forehead; the father, usually as hard as a rock, was touched; tears streamed down his care-worn and furrowed cheeks, he barely managed to whisper: may God guide you. He stood on the threshold and burst into tears, sensing that he will not see you, nor you him, ever again! Your mother hung a scapular around your neck, or with a shaky hand gave you a rosary or a medal, saying: dear children, in that far-off country, remember God, and do not forget us or the traditions in which you were brought up. Then God will bless you, and our Holy Mother will have you in her care! – Those present sat as quiet as mice! They gulped down these words. They waited for more! Midnight was approaching! And I listened with interest and attention, in spite of the fact that my eyelids were rapidly closing shut! Finally the newly-arrived unbuttoned his coarse shirt. On his breast was a new scapular; right beside it, a tiny sack, and in it, two thimblefuls of Polish soil. It was passed from hand to hand. It was kissed reverently, amidst hot tears. These few grains of Polish soil were for them something sacred, a relic. Why? Because, they had in them the years of carefree childhood and the years of dreaming youth! Because, this soil was a part of the fertile Polish farmland, which they loved more than life itself, and which was their bread-giver! Because their imagination took them back to their family’s thatched house, their church, and to the cemetery, where their quiet, hard-working, God-fearing forefathers slept the sleep of the just! These few grains of Polish soil showed them the whole Polish country, moistened by tears and stained by the blood of men, women and children, who had patiently undergone persecution for their faith and their language, and suffered agony, and often died a heroic death with the cry: “For our Faith and our Country!” on their lips! - Back then I little understood why a pinch of Polish soil had made this group of Polish emigrants cry! Today – I understand it very well! And this change took place mainly due to my first visit to Poland, shortly after the First World War. Then I made a visit to Cardinal Hlond; the good primate received me warmly, as a son! Amid many questions, he was interested in what had brought me to visit Poland; I replied that my parents had come from these parts, and that my Daddy often told me that I should visit the country of Poland, so that I could breathe the Polish air, get to know the customs of the people, because this will be very helpful in my work as a priest. The Cardinal listened to me with a smile on his lips. When I mentioned this scene of the immigrant with the little sack of Polish soil, the Cardinal had tears in his eyes. He rang a ball. A footman came in. The Cardinal whispered him an order. He nodded his head and left. The conversation went on for about five minutes, when the servant came back and gave the Cardinal an envelope! After a moment, the Cardinal handed me the envelope, saying: “Father Justin, please take this handful of Polish soil as a relic, because it is moistened by the tears and blood of men, women and children in defense of the faith and of the Polish language!” In Poznań, the Fathers gave me a canvas sack into which I poured the Cardinal’s gift; in Kraków I added some more from the Kopiec Kościuszki (Kościuszko Mound), and in Warsaw I added the soil from the old Russian citadel, where the Muscovites had hanged Traugutt! I took this Polish soil with me to America. I have it with me! But I return to our parents, who left their fatherland and at the beginning came across difficulties which seemed to exceed human endurance and resistance! Our fathers drudged away from morning until night, denying themselves any comforts. Our noble mothers toiled from daybreak to nightfall, not sparing themselves, so that we might be spared. More than a few of these parents used up their forces and left this world prematurely, so that we would have a better life, so that we would live longer! Yes, they had our good at heart. Their efforts and exertions, with small exceptions were neither futile nor fruitless! The present generation of Americans of Polish descent is the living monument to the efforts, exertions and sacrifices of pioneers, who were famous for their piety, their industriousness, their sobriety! Yes! They loved God, they loved their neighbor, and in spite of obstacles they reached their goals, because today we have in hand a better bite of bread, and we not only equal but, praise the Lord, surpass others in our loyalty to God and to our Fatherland America! I remind you, however, in all due honesty and humility, that this is not our merit, but the merit of our fathers and our mothers, those caring, visible – Guardian Angels! In reality our parents worked wonders, because they went from day to day with faith in their heart, with trust in their soul, with prayer on their lips! What our parents achieved, so can we, and it is so much easier for us. Faith, work, harmony, sobriety and perseverance will guarantee us the protection of Providence and a happy future! Let us be model citizens of our country America, which is our mother – but let us not forget Poland, which was the Mother – of our parents!

Comments:

1. 16 701 / 1600 = 10.44 translation pages

10. 44 x $15 = $ 156.60

1. Bolesław Prus, The Outpost. Quote taken from: Selected Polish Tales by Else C. M. Benecke and Various. Consulted online at [http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8pltl10.txt on April 11](http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8pltl10.txt%20on%20April%2011), 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)