

A special Polish Christmas carol

[youtube=<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92txLzud5VI>]?

If I'm counting correctly, tonight's Midnight Mass at Our Lady of Hope in Dundalk will mark the 20th time I've had the honor of serving as organist for the joyful Christmas liturgy. People of all ages will crowd into the contemporary-styled church, which is usually dimmed slightly and illuminated with flickering candles and glowing Christmas lights. The effect is warm and almost otherworldly.

In front of the ambo, figures of Joseph and Mary will stand next to a hay-strewn manger bearing the newborn Christ child. The Magi statues will be placed on the other side of the church, symbolically traveling toward the holy scene before arriving on the Epiphany.

Tonight, there will be a certain formula we dare not break in the singing of the carols. Expect to hear "O Come All Ye Faithful," "Away in a Manger," "Silent Night," and "Joy to the World" - in that order.

But there's another, less familiar song I've added to the repertoire.

As a postlude, I always pull out the stops and fill the massive worship space with a lilting Polish carol, "Dzisiaj w Betlejem" - "Today in Bethlehem." Nearly every year I've played the charmingly simple song, a gentleman approaches me after Mass and thanks me for highlighting his favorite Polish carol. He presses a \$20 bill into my hand despite my protests.

"Dzisiaj w Betlejem" holds a special place in my heart, too.

Growing up in a Polish and Czech family, it was one of the kolendy - carols - we heard every Christmas season. It became an even more important song more than a decade ago when my mother was battling the last stages of cancer.

On the Christmas of 1998, my mom only had a few weeks left to live. She slept almost constantly in the hospital bed we set up in her bedroom, relying on morphine to manage the pain. Drifting in and out of consciousness, she would speak of seeing

long-gone relatives and would sometimes talk in the Polish tongue she remembered from her youth.

On that Christmas Day, I set up a speaker in her room to let her hear an album of kolendy that included “Dzisiaj w Betlejem.” I don’t know if she was aware of the music, but I like to think it may have lifted her spirits in some way and brought her some sense of peace.

When I play that tune tonight, I will be thinking of my mom and all those who have lost loved ones this year. My prayer is that no matter what you are going through in life, the Prince of Peace will bring you comfort.

In the words of?? Dzisiaj w Betlejem’s refrain:

Angels are singing, Kings gifts are bringing, Shepherds are praying, Cattle are kneeling; To the little Jesus, To the Son of Mary who this day is born to us!

Have a blessed Christmas, everyone! Wesolych Swiat Bozego Narodzenia!