

Catholics work to head off conflicts over Polish migrants

WARSAW, Poland – Catholic Church leaders have been working to head off a possible conflict about pastoral jurisdiction over the estimated 1.5 million Polish migrants in the United Kingdom.

“Integration affects spiritual and cultural values, so we must give people time and freedom to feel well in their new country of residence without forgetting their old homeland,” said Bishop Zygmunt Zimowski of Radom, Poland, the Polish bishops’ new delegate for Polish migrants abroad.

Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor of Westminster, England, president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, addressed the Polish bishops during their early March meeting. On March 6, Polish and British church leaders announced they had set up a new working group to address the issue of Polish migrants in Britain.

Bishop Zimowski told Catholic News Service March 18 that Polish church leaders counted on migrants’ ability to “maintain values of faith and morality” in England and Wales and believed the Polish Catholic Mission in England and Wales should work more closely with the bishops there. The mission, which was founded in the 1890s, was reorganized in 1948 and looks after Poles in England and Wales. The mission follows a program set by the Polish bishops.

“If the mission gives our people a good pastoral guidance, they shouldn’t get lost in Britain’s liberal atmosphere. They should also be able to set an example for English Catholics,” said the bishop. “The role of the Polish Catholic Mission is to ensure that the Poles do not lose their faith and preserve their culture.

“The Polish church has never forced migrants to attend holy Mass in Polish – if someone feels they belong in the English Mass, they can take part in that,” he added.

Migrant issues have been an important topic of discussion since a December

interview with Poland's Catholic information agency, KAI, in which Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor said he was concerned that Poles were "creating a separate church in Britain" and called on them to play a fuller part in local Catholic life.

After addressing Polish bishops in Warsaw March 6, Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor told journalists that he believed his comments had been misunderstood but added that circumstances had changed since the mission's establishment in the 1890s.

"We appreciate Poles have good reasons for wishing to keep their heritage and traditions within their own communities, but we also want to explore new arrangements for their gradual integration," the cardinal said. "I didn't mean Polish parishes or traditions should be immediately taken away. But I would like Polish priests to learn English and work more with their English counterparts. There should be give and take on both sides."

Meanwhile, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk told KAI in late February that his government hoped to persuade Polish migrants to return home. He said the government was working to improve Poland's image, cut taxes and encourage small businesses.

Bishop Zimowski said whether this would work would depend on migrants being able to retain their values and identity as Polish Catholics.

"Our government can encourage Poles to come back. But if they're to do so, it will be important to keep their roots," said the bishop. "The Polish Catholic Mission will play a key role in ensuring they maintain their national culture and identity and don't forget the native country."