The second annual Conference of the Polish American Leadership Association (PALA) was held at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa in Doylestown, Pennsylvania from August 17-20, 2011. The mission of the Polish American Leadership Association (PALA) is to form college-aged intellectuals who will promote Catholic faith, culture, and traditions of Poland in the United States with the cooperation of Polish-American communities. The organization’s goal is to unite, strengthen, and prepare the future leaders of Polandia in the United States by initiating conferences and other events that advance and cultivate Polish cultural heritage and Catholic values. Last year’s conference was mostly a discussion between current leaders of Polonia and Polish American youths about the importance of maintaining Polish identity and the challenges that encumber this aspiration. This year’s conference continued this theme while also further developing practical implications of these Polish ideals.

Almost twenty young adults from the ages of 15 to 29 from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Connecticut actively participated in this year’s conference, which was coordinated by the Msgr. Anthony Czarnecki and Msgr. Peter Zendzian of the National Polish Apostolate Committee. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops also sent Sister Joanna Okezie as their official liaison. Ms. Theresa Romanowski of the Polish American Congress, Eastern Pennsylvania District, as well as Mr. Chester Lobrow, the 1999 New York Grand Marshal of the General Casimir Pulaski Day Parade also partook in the Conference.

Two honorary guest speakers were invited to address the young adults. The first was His Excellency Archbishop Szczepan Wesoly from Rome, who was a very close friend of Blessed Pope John Paul II and Primate of the Millenium Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński as well as the long-time papal delegate to Polonia and Polish emigrants. He spoke to the group about what it means to be a Polish Catholic. Among other things, he emphasized the centrality of the family as the fundamental bastion of the “4 pillars of Polishness” — moderation, love of freedom, and Catholic morality. Abp. Szczepan Wesoly stressed that the teachings of the Polish Pope Bp. John Paul II and the values that he embodied must be the backbone of Polish identity. In addition, he underscored the crucial role of Polish parishes as oasises for immigrants and the essentiality that faith is to underpin and permeate every aspect of the young adults’ lives. Therefore, Abp. Wesoly also addressed the importance of enrollment at the Academy of Music. He was associated with the Chicago Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and achieved unparalleled popularity in America at the turn of the 20th century. By invoking the example of Sienkiewicz, he emphasized that it is possible for Poles to prevail over general disinterest and antagonism and instead capture the hearts and minds of millions of Americans for the Polish cause. However, such success could only be achieved through a united concerted effort by all of Polonia to engage Americans and introduce them to their Polish culture. Afterwards, Marek Szymula from Philadelphia spoke about different types of leaders and qualities that are necessary to make a leader effective.

Then Natalia Kolakowska from Connecticut led an online group exercise designed to reveal each member’s leadership strengths as well as qualities that still need to be developed.

The conference did not end with mere discussions. Inspired by them, the group decided to formally organize itself. A cabinet of officers was elected: Marek Szymula as chairperson, Natalia Kolakowska and Joanna Sudyka as vice-chairpersons, Dorota Bielawski from New Jersey as secretary, and Bogumil Misiek as public relations liaison. The organization’s bylaws were written, the construction of the website of PALA was authorized, and participation in the General Pulaski Day Parade was proposed. Most importantly, all PALA members pledged to bring their newly-acquired Conference experience to their local parishes and to organize local PALA groups so that the young generation of Polish Americans can already unite and prepare themselves as future leaders of Polonia.

If anyone would like to acquire further information about the Polish American Leadership Association (PALA) or get involved in the organization, please call (508) 943-0467.

Three major student presentations were delivered at the Conference. Bogumil Misiek from New Jersey highlighted that the three premier values for Poles have always been “God, Honor, and Homeland” — which are not essential and yet yet embedded in American society, though so many Americans hunger for them. In his speech, he recalled that the great Polish novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz with utmost respect reflected these values in his writings and achieved unparalleled popularity in America at the turn of the 20th century. By invoking the example of Sienkiewicz, he emphasized that it is possible for Poles to prevail over general disinterest and antagonism and instead capture the hearts and minds of millions of Americans for the Polish cause. However, such success could only be achieved through a united concerted effort by all of Polonia to engage Americans and introduce them to their Polish culture. Afterwards, Marek Szymula from Philadelphia spoke about different types of leaders and qualities that are necessary to make a leader effective.

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