

Gorzkie Żale – The Bitter Lamentations

Are you familiar with this 100% Polish Lenten Devotion. What is it you ask? Or better yet what are they? *Gorzkie Żale* translates literally as the Bitter Lamentations or Sorrows. It is a sung devotion that focuses on the passion and death of the Lord Jesus and the sorrows of His grieving mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The *Gorzkie Żale* devotion Polish people practice was first introduced in the city of Warsaw in 1707 at the church of the Holy Cross. This is a well known church in the city of Warsaw, staffed by the Vincentian fathers. Frederick Chopin was organist there at one time. In front of the church on *Nowy Świat* Street stands a famous statue of Christ carrying His Cross with one hand raised in a beckoning call. At the foot of the figure the Latin words *Sursum Corda/Lift up your hearts* are carved.

The missionary priests of St. Vincent de Paul who wrote the texts for this beloved devotion drew their inspiration from various *mystery plays* that dated back to the middle ages in Europe. The theme of course was the Passion of Christ, one so common on the Polish countryside which is dotted with roadside crosses, shrines and carved figures of the *Worrying Christ* or *Chrystus frasobliwy*. This folk carving common in the Polish village depicts Christ sitting with a scarlet cape on His shoulders and a crown of thorns on His head. For some strange reason our ancestors loved this Christ, maybe because He too was worried, maybe because He reminded them of a confessor, maybe because He too suffered.

It was this Jesus that was most human, who is Jesus sung of during the musical meditations of *Gorzkie Żale*. It was at Calvary that God became real, like one of us, even worse: *despised and scorned by men*. Here He truly *emptied Himself taking the form of a slave* and felt His humanity. This moving devotion helps all of us meditate with all creation on the death of the Savior of the world and the suffering of His sorrowful mother. The plaintiff melodies set the tone for the soul to call out to Christ in the midst of our own trials and find meaning and peace of soul.

