

Ryszard Sylka, long-time Mayor of Bytów, gave this eulogy of Fr. Paul Breza at the meeting of the Kashubian-Pomeranian Association, Bytów Branch, in November, 2025.



Father Paul Breza

All Souls' Day Remembrance of Father Paul Breza from Winona

This year's All Souls' Day event, organized by the Kashubian-Pomeranian Association in Bytów, could not take place without remembering a person who meant so much to the Kashubians—especially to those across the ocean, along the Mississippi River—but not only to them. To us as well, the residents of Bytów, who are grateful for the development of the partnership between Bytów and the American city of Winona, and to all Kashubians living in Poland, the person of Father Paul Breza is particularly important.

Father Paul Joseph Breza—for it is he whom my All Souls' Day remembrance is about—came from a family with very strong Kashubian roots. His father's family, on the Breza side, originated from Róg near Osława Dąbrowa. Father Paul's grandfather, Józef Breza, was born in 1864 right there in Róg, and his paternal grandmother, Franciszka Hering, although born in Winona, had parents who came from Parchowo.

The story is similar regarding the origin of the priest's ancestors on his mother's side; she was the granddaughter of Józef Pellowski (who was also born in Róg) and Barbara née Breska, who came from Żelewiec near Śluza. All of the priest's ancestors came from western and southern Kashubia, primarily from the areas of today's Bytów, Kościerzyna, and to a

lesser extent, Chojnice counties. Right at the very beginning of my remembrance of Father Breza, I can boldly say that his Kashubian origin had a decisive influence on his entire life, and on his later choices, decisions, and actions.

Fr. Paul Breza was born on June 23, 1937, in Winona. There, he attended a kindergarten run by religious sisters who still spoke Polish, and from that time he remembered a few words and phrases in Polish. Among others, these were phrases that he would later repeat in his adult life: *Jô jem Kaszëba* [I am a Kashubian] and *Witômë do nas* [Welcome to our home]. Next, the young Paul began his education at St. Stanislaus Kostka School, then attended Cotter High School, and studied at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. After graduating from the theological seminary, he was ordained a priest in 1963 in his hometown of Winona. Before settling permanently in his beloved city, he served as a pastor in several towns across southern Minnesota.

Father Paul Breza passed away this year on April 9 and was buried in Saint Mary's Cemetery, close to the grave of his parents and the graves of many other people who died over the past 150 years. The deceased resting in this cemetery are, in fact, almost exclusively Kashubians. Among them is also the grave of the famous Kashubian poet and journalist Hieronim Derdowski, who died in 1905—120 years ago.

After the funeral Mass for the late Fr. Breza, his loved ones and acquaintances sat down for coffee in the rooms beneath the Basilica of St. Stanislaus Kostka. This church is especially important to the local Polish diaspora (Polonia). It was at the end of the 19th century that immigrants from Poland built this church, which is the largest both in the city and in the Diocese of Winona. The Church of St. Stanislaus Kostka was also exceptionally important to Fr. Paul Breza. This was the exact church he ran to every day as a child, and a few decades later, he carried out his priestly ministry there while serving as its pastor.

Everyone who gathered after the funeral to remember the deceased drew attention to the uniqueness of his character. Each of us had our own memory—sometimes slightly different, sometimes a particularly special one, sometimes one we had heard from others—but everyone emphasized that he was a remarkable pastor and an exceptional community activist. He knew perfectly how to combine his priestly ministry with social and cultural activities. Among other things, he worked on the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents, helped people recovering from addictions, and organized inexpensive, appealing trips and educational expeditions. With great commitment, he worked toward integrating the local Polonia and promoting Kashubian cultural heritage.

Father Paul Breza was the founder of the Polish Museum in Winona. He was the organizer of the annual May 3rd Constitution Day celebrations, which this year—less than a month after his death—were celebrated for the fiftieth time. Three years after founding the Museum, in 1979, Fr. Breza established the Polish Cultural Institute in Winona, which became the center

of cultural life for the local Polonia. In 1998, the priest donated his own building for the needs of the Polish Museum, where he served as curator almost until the end of his life.

The Polish Museum created by Father Paul Breza is unique in its own way, especially in terms of preserving knowledge about Kashubian history and tradition among immigrants from the territory of present-day Poland. It houses family heirlooms—often those that came from family homes back in Kashubia—prayer books, hymnals, and devotional items. It somewhat resembles a collection of things that have gone out of style. Father Breza used to say about his museum that he created it to tell a story in America that cannot be found in textbooks. Why? Because "the history of poor people is never written down, and immigrants from Poland were considered to belong to that category. So, something had to be done," he explained.

Fr. Paul Breza came to Bytów for the first time in 1997. His arrival was likely the result of a conversation with Cezmir Januszewski from Milwaukee, who at that time was already the owner of the Bytów-based company FORMET. From then on, Fr. Breza became a tireless advocate for bringing the two cities closer together. Thanks to his efforts, a partnership agreement between Winona and Bytów was signed in 2004. The agreement included, among other things, cooperation in the fields of education, culture, environmental protection, and youth exchanges.

For his activities, he was honored with numerous distinctions. On February 26, 2012, the President of the Republic of Poland, Bronisław Komorowski, awarded him the Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland for popularizing Polish culture and his work on behalf of the Polish diaspora. In 2010, the Town Council of Bytów granted Fr. Paul Breza the title of Honorary Citizen, and the Kashubian community who knew the priest personally repeatedly emphasized that he deserved to be called a "Kashubian knight"—modeled after the literary character Remus, who was an awakener of the Kashubian spirit in his community, and beyond.

In my opinion, Father Paul Breza won the affection of everyone who had the pleasure of knowing him. A major achievement of his was the annual youth exchange, which brought students from high schools in Bytów to Winona. Every day, he maintained his Kashubian identity, thereby sensitizing successive generations of former Kashubian immigrants living in Winona to learn about the history of their families, Poland, and Kashubian culture.

While preparing for today's All Souls' Day remembrance of Father Breza, I asked a dear colleague of mine from Winona, who is a few years younger than the late Father Paul Breza, but who lived on the same street as him during childhood and observed his older neighbor. He answered me: "In my opinion, what defines Father Paul Breza is the fact that there was a place for everyone in his heart. Every person was important and was his friend. Even his ancestors and the land they left behind were important to him. This love for others was the

reason for his success as a priest, a teacher of our Kashubian heritage—and it is his most important message."

Sylka Ryszard

Bytów, November 3, 2025