

HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF *VELIKA GOSPA* IN CHICAGO

On August 15th, 2006 for the hundredth time, the Croatian procession celebrating *Velika Gospa*, the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, made its way through the streets of Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood. After the American and Croatian national anthems were played, ten brass bands comprised of over 300 members marched in procession playing familiar songs, many in honor of the Blessed Mother. In the American custom for such a procession, 17 beautifully decorated floats were interspaced among the bands, along with many young people and some older folks clad in Croatian national costumes. A multitude of American and Croatian flags and banners displaying the names of various Croatian societies were proudly carried by their members. Among the participating dignitaries were representatives of the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois, the Deputy Ambassador of the Republic of Croatia in the United States, Marijan Gugic, the Consul General of the Republic of Croatia, Marica Matkovic and the Consul General of Bosnia & Hercegovina, Filomena Nikolic. Chicago Bishop Francis Kane, 14 priests, Franciscan seminarians from Croatia, and Franciscan and Dominican nuns comprised the members of the clergy, praying the rosary in the wake of the picture of Our Lady of Sinj that led the way for a great number of pilgrims, processing in her honor.

The procession began in front of St. Jerome Church, making a nearly two-mile journey before returning to the church. After the procession, a solemn high Mass was concelebrated, presided over by a native of the town of Sinj, Franciscan priest, Dr. Luka Tomasevic, professor of Moral Theology at the University of Split.

A special feature of this year's procession was a contingent of the "Sinjski Alkari" (Knights of Sinj) and their special attendants, including this year's winner of the historic knight's tournament of Sinj, Ante Poljak, and the winner of another knight's contest called "Bara", Jakov Jerkan, who served as honor guards accompanying the picture of "Gospa Sinjska".

From Society to Parish Church

All of this originated with the establishment of the "Dalmatian Family Society of Gospa Sinjska" in Chicago in 1906, before St. Jerome Croatian Parish was founded. At that time in the Bridgeport neighborhood of Chicago there lived approximately 5 thousand Croatians. The purpose of the society was to provide help to families in need and maintain social and cultural ties.

The society was predominantly comprised of people from the Dalmatian region of Croatia who settled in this part of Chicago, immigrating from Sinj, Poljica, Kastela, Split, Imotski, Dubrovnik, the islands of Solta, Brac, Hvar, and other locales. The society took the name of Gospa Sinjska, whose shrine is widely known in Dalmatia, and whose picture is dear to the people.

The first Gospa Sinjska banner was acquired in 1907, which the Croatians then used for all of their celebrations. Considering the economy of those days, a great amount of money was paid for it – seventy-five dollars. At that time, holy Mass for the Croatians was celebrated at a nearby Slavic church, St. John Nepomucene.

In 1910, 543 families from Dalmatia became members, thereby making the society the largest Croatian organization in the Midwest. Since the members of this society were good Catholics, devoted to Our Lady, the need for their own official church and parish became increasingly evident, and in 1912 St. Jerome Croatian Church was founded. The former Lutheran church on 25th and Wentworth Avenue became the home and hearth for the Croatians in that part of Chicago, taking the place of the old homeland. St. Jerome is still the name today, even though in 1922 the parish moved to another former Lutheran church on 28th and Princeton Avenue, which remains its location.

The Picture of Gospa Sinjska

In 1912, the Bradaric brothers from the town of Sinj brought to their new church the gift of a copy of the original picture of Gospa Sinjska, which has been carried in the procession every year since then. When not being carried in procession, the picture resides in the church above the side altar, which was long ago dedicated to Gospa Sinjska.

Fidelity to “Gospa” Despite Hardship

In the early years of the *Velika Gospa* celebration the participants were exclusively the members of the Gospa Sinjska Society; however, after a number of years, they were joined by other Croatian societies: St. Nicholas, from the island of Cres, the Dalmatian United Brotherhood, Our Lady of Carmel, and the Dalmatian Family Society. Thus, the *Velika Gospa* procession with the picture of Gospa Sinjska grew larger and larger.

Devotion to Gospa among the Croatians is a source of strength everywhere in the world, just as in the homeland; therefore, it is understandable that for the Chicago Croatians August 15th has always been a dear and important day. In that context we can understand their attitude that going to work on that holy day is thought to be a sacrilege and anti-Croatian. Many individuals and families in those early years endured much sacrifice and hardship because the faithful did not go to work on that day, especially during those Depression years when it was especially difficult to find jobs. Often these immigrants were taken advantage of and exploited. Yet, despite everything and no matter what the cost, the vast majority of believers did not go to work on that special day. Therefore, it is no surprise to see, from the perspective of those times and the nature of the people, that the celebration of *Velika Gospa* has become known as Croatian Day in Chicago. In fact, the City has recognized the *Velika Gospa* celebration as Chicago's oldest continuous festival held in the same location on the same day, August 15th, for the last one hundred years. All other Chicago festivals, processions, and celebrations have moved their feasts to the closest weekend. St. Jerome's parishioners are staunch in their resolve that as long as the main purpose of this feast day is to honor Mary, the Mother of Christ, it will be celebrated on August 15th.

Croatian Fest

The next oldest Croatian custom, after the *Velika Gospa* procession and celebration of the solemn high Mass, is the festival that follows in fellowship with the traditional Croatian feast. Barbecued lamb has become a familiar sign of Croatian feasts. During the 1950s over 100 lambs were roasted on spits in preparation for this major feast.

People came from all over to wait in line for hours just to buy a portion. Good people of the parish would volunteer to work all night, barbecuing the lambs so that they would be ready to sell by 8 a.m. on the feast day. This work is still carried on today in much the same way.

As in the past, and continuing today, the aroma of baked goods, lamb, and other Croatian culinary specialties helps those who don't know where Croatian day is celebrated in Chicago, find their way to the fest.

A Memorable Year, 1954

The largest crowd to ever celebrate *Velika Gospa* gathered in the year 1954, proclaimed by the pope as a Marian Year. Because of the traditional grand celebration of *Velika Gospa* in Chicago, Croatians from the Midwest and beyond decided to come here as pilgrims honoring Mary. Pilgrims and society groups from 10 Croatian parishes arrived from Pennsylvania, Illinois, Missouri, and Wisconsin. A Marian Congress was held, and Mass was presided over by the archbishop of Chicago, Samuel Cardinal Stritch, who spoke of the deep love and devotion of the Croatian people for Mary and their steadfast celebration of *Velika Gospa* in Chicago.

Over the century the crowds varied in size, some years very large, some years smaller. Then, in the 1970s, a new wave of Croatians came to Chicago and the feast of *Velika Gospa* gained new momentum. Since that era the feast has gained more and more recognition each year.

Now, every year on the feast day the friends of *Velika Gospa* from the first generation down to the fifth come to St. Jerome's from at least 10 states. Some, like the family of Valerie Babic, walk in pilgrimage style over 10 miles despite heavy traffic and obstacles that are normally found in this big city.

In Honor of the 100th Anniversary

On the occasion of the founding of the "Dalmatian Family Society of the Miraculous Lady of Sinj" in 1906, representatives of the society traveled to Sinj to meet with the city leaders and Franciscan friars. A picture that gives testimony to that meeting now occupies an important place in the Franciscan monastery in Sinj.

One hundred years later, a special group of citizens of Sinj reciprocated by visiting Chicago. The spiritual leaders of St. Jerome Parish, the pastor, Fr. Joe Grbes and assistant pastor, Fr. Ivan Strmecki, in collaboration with the Parish Council, and in addition to all of their other preparations and obligations, took the responsibility of seeing that the finest organization in Sinj made its way to Chicago to celebrate this milestone anniversary. Four members of the prestigious group known as the "Sinjski Alkari", or Knights of Sinj, and four guards were the special guests of this year's 100th *Velika Gospa*: Tonci Beslic, Bosko Vladovic, Jakov Jerkan, Ante Poljak, Drasko Talaja, Petar Domazet, Davor Jenjic, and Milan Vucic.

The winners of this year's Sinjska Alka tournaments, Ante Poljak and Jakov Jerkan made their reservations to come to Chicago before the games in Sinj were held. Their victories in Sinj made the trip to Chicago even happier for them and the many Chicago Croatians, who are fans of the Sinjska Alka tournament.

The other honorable guests from Sinj were the following dignitaries: Snjezan Sentija, Anita Stimac Rako, Dinko Bosnjak, Ante Delic, and popular singer, Drazen Zanko.

Fr. Luka, who presided over the solemn high Mass, spoke of Our Lady's grace that has for centuries drawn and continues to draw her children to her and her Son wherever she is known. Political boundaries cannot and must not be allowed to separate the Croatian faithful, who feel united with their Mother and continue to build that unity with her in places such as Sinj, Bistrice, Trsat, Aljmas, Olov, Medjugorje, Chicago, and in other Croatian shrines and parishes in the homeland or throughout the world.

In honor of the 100th anniversary of the Velika Gospa feast, a commemorative fireworks display delighted the large crowd of parishioners and friends of this very active and strong Croatian parish community of Chicago. As further indication of the significance of this historic event at St. Jerome Parish, Channel 7's ABC television station devoted two and a half minutes of its main evening newscast to this historic church event.

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Custos*