

# Snapshots

## The Visit



Monsignor Achilles Ratti, Papal Nuncio to Poland

It is a well-documented fact, that Mgr. Achilles Ratti, Pope Benedict XV's Nuncio to Poland, paid a visit to the Convent of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception at Szymanow, on 18<sup>th</sup> October 1918 – slightly less than one hundred years ago. Szymanow was not, then, the Generalate of the Congregation – that honour was still held by the convent at Jazlowiec. The visit was a great event – then, and now – it is one of the special moments in Szymanow's history, with a commemorative plaque fixed onto the wall above the wooden staircase, known as the "Holy Stairs" leading from the entrance hall to the first floor; a staircase used by Mgr. Ratti.

The day was carefully planned by the Sisters so that the honoured guest could see and experience as much as possible. Upon his arrival, the welcoming procession walked with him to the chapel, where he prayed. He then went to the room especially set aside and for him, and emerged to celebrate a Holy Mass, where several girls received the Sacrament of Confirmation. The day continued with visits to the Sister's school which taught children from the local community, copious amounts of food, a tour of the convent, performances by the girls and local children, and an official farewell. Mgr. Ratti took time during his visit to talk personally with some of the Sisters, and guests. Reading the account of this event, one is struck, by the Nuncio's interest in what was going on around him, and the life of the convent and school, by his concern to make personal contact, and his sincere thankfulness for the effort that had been made to welcome him, and prepare for his visit.

A very special event, was Mgr. Ratti's address to the girls. There had been a meeting with the girls, during which one of them gave a short speech – prepared and well-rehearsed – to which the Nuncio was seen to be paying great attention, and to be visibly moved. He then stood to make his reply. It would be short, he said. It was thirty minutes later that he finished speaking! The representative of the Pope himself, his words carried authority and easily found a place in the hearts of those listening.

It is difficult to imagine the event. Szymańów has changed in many ways since it happened, and almost 100 years is a long time. Some of the words spoken on that day by Mgr. Ratti, though, strike a chord. Part of his speech, not surprisingly, given the context, was devoted to Christian education. Looking back at his own life, for he told them he was quite advanced in years (he was 61), he could see how much he had gained from the Christian education he had received, and they were receiving:

“I cannot stop myself from sincerely congratulating you on the riches, that are your in this house ... this great treasure in a Christian education.”

At Szymanów, this idea of Christian education is one we take very seriously and wish very much to provide. It is not just a question of the girls having religious education lessons, attending Mass on the first Friday of the month, experiencing various retreats throughout the school year, and praying at the beginning and end of the school day. It is concerned with helping them to come closer to Jesus, to see that He wants to be part of their lives, be involved with them, not through events, but in the everyday ups and downs of life, and not only at school. It is about equipping them to go on to serve Him in their homes, their families, their workplaces, and to pass on what they have learned. It is about love. This is basically what those girls in 1918, listening to their special guest heard:

I am convinced that only Christian education stands as the foundation for everything in life, which constitutes God’s work in a soul. To take part in such education is to participate in shaping the masterpiece of a good God; the creation, transformation and perfection of souls.”

He continued:

“Christian education gives direction in life. When a soul is well-orientated regarding God, it will always know whether to turn to the right or to the left...to do one particular thing, or not ... what is good and what is bad ... and you, my dear children, you are the women of tomorrow.”

Reading these words during a study period, looking at the girls sitting at their desks in various attitudes of concentration, a question comes to mind: *How true is this today?* The fact is, we still have something to offer, which is not necessarily available elsewhere. Many things are not different. The girls of 1918 have a lot in common with those of 2018. Being a teenager, with its conflicting emotions, confusion, joys and sorrows is much the same as it was. Our girls today have more possibilities, and, externally, their future lives will be very different from those of their predecessors, but they are wired in the same way. Making the transition from childhood to adulthood is far from easy, yet it is a time when foundations are laid, and values learnt, and these will be drawn on in the years ahead. Mgr. Ratti was right in that –the path ahead, will sometimes will be pleasant and easy on the feet, and at others, steep and muddy, but Christian education gives direction, and sets a goal to move towards. The words he spoke then to the girls physically present before him, he also spoke to those who would come after them – to the very girls sitting behind their desks in Szymanow today. The very things he said then, we still believe now, and they are our motivation in the ministry God has called us to.