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The Origins and the Activity of the Family of John Paul II Schools <http://rodzina.org.pl/>

“Demand from yourself even though others don't demand from you”, these are the Pope's John Paul II words, which are most frequently put on the plaques, banners or school mottos. The words not only inspire the people to work on themselves and to help others but they also liberate creative energy. The need of common work on development of the Polish schools obeying the Christian value system, was one of the main reasons of the origins of the Family of John Paul II Schools.

The Family of John Paul II Schools was created in 1998 in a State Primary School no. 41 in Radom. Its founding father was Mr. Zbigniew Gumiński, the father of three children learning at this school and Mrs. Halina Marciniak – the school's headmaster. Thanks to the local and diocese authorities, 33 schools named after the Pope were found. On the 20th November 1998 the first meeting of the John Paul II schools was held in Radom. 20 representatives from 15 schools were present. The most important goal of the meeting was to get to know each other, exchange the experience in the area of the Pope's studies and set the plan of common operations connected with the John Paul II pilgrimage to Poland in June 1999. Thanks to the bishop Jan Chrapek's help, the Family was able to arrange the meeting with the Pope himself, which was to be held in Łowicz. In the meantime while waiting for the beloved Pope's arrival the Family organized literary and arts tests as well as the one checking the general knowledge about John Paul II. What is more the Family members took the commitment that the teachers together with the students will pray for the Pope during the Religious Education lessons, and every 16th day of the month they will participate and offer a mass for his intentions.

The proposal from Radom was very well accepted. In a short time other school started to join the Family. During the second meeting which was held in Sułoszowa, representatives of 26 schools were present. Since then the intensive work and growth of the family has started. At the Primary School no. 1 in Sułoszowa headmaster's initiative, the term "Family of John Paul II Schools" was officially accepted. As the main goal the Family set itself the best preparation for the meeting with the Pope. The regulations of the contests were worked out, the participants also decided that the next meeting will be organized in Nowy Targ.

Since November 1999 to June 2011, twenty four more meetings were held. All of them took place in various regions of Poland. The hosts were the schools from the towns like: Radom, Sułoszowa, Twardogóra, Toruń, Nowy Targ, Gołkowice, Podole Górowa, Warszawa – Targówek, Myślenice, Klimkówka, Nowy Sącz, Działdowo, Oleszyce, Licheń – Wysokie, Paprotnia, Narzým, Rypin, Zarzecze, Ulanów, Lipień, Cisiec, Biała Podlaska, Kornowo. Being the host of the Family's meeting is commonly regarded as an honour to the local community, an ability to present the school's work, exchange pedagogical experience, making friends and wide integration of the Pope's schools.

Traditionally, all the Family's meetings look more or less the same. There is a holy mass concelebrated by the ordinary of the local diocese, a presentation of the school's work, a concert to commemorate the Pope, a lecture about John Paul II, a discussion, making plans for the coming year and sightseeing including local sanctuaries. The interest in the Family's activity is still increasing. During the first meetings there were only several dozen of participants whereas now there are over three hundred of them including; headmasters, teachers, parents, religion instructors, school inspectors, Education Department's representatives, town presidents, local authorities and press. The day of the Family of John Paul II Schools meeting is a time of celebration for the participants and the whole local community.

The period of the Family's activity can be divided into two parts; from 1998 to 2005 when the Pope was still alive, and the later years after his death. In the first period we tried to follow our patron's instructions, his pilgrimages, activities for the World's peace and unity of all Christian people. The essence of those times was the ability to personally meet the Holy Father either during our visits to Rome or his pilgrimages to Poland. There were two official meetings of the Family with John Paul II. The first one in Łowicz – on the 16th June 1999 and the second one in Kraków – on the 18th August 2002. The great and unique experience was our pilgrimages to Rome and the audience with John Paul II which took place on the

5th November 2002, on the 5th February 2003 and on the 10th April 2004. During these meetings the Holy Father blessed the Family. He was our highest authority. From the 2nd April 2005 the second period of our activity has started. During this period we have focused on experiencing and implementing His work as well as on spreading the Pope's cult.

Nowadays, we are the biggest School Family in Poland grouping with about 1200 schools, universities and kindergartens. In 2003 we chose our logo and in 2007 the official anthem was composed. On the 7th January 2005, during the meeting at Radom, the Family's Social Council was created. It consists of: Mrs. Grażyna Dominiak – the headmaster of the Primary School in Paprotnia, Mrs. Hanna Gałązka – the headmaster of the Primary School no. 10 in Łomża, Mr. Grzegorz Gorczowski – the secretary of the Primary School in Gołkowice, Mr. Zbigniew Gumiński – the Family's founding father, Mrs. Dorota Koncewicz - the headmaster of the Primary School in Grabina, Mr. Tadeusz Łuszczak - the headmaster of the Primary School in Sułoszowa, Mrs. Halina Marciniak - the headmaster of the school in Radom, Zbigniew Masłoń - the headmaster of the Primary School no. 13 in Toruń, Mrs. Jolanta Nawrocka - the headmaster of the Grammar School no. 145 in Warszawa, Mr. Wiesław Smerczyński - the headmaster of the Group of Schools no. 2 in Działdowo, Mr. Marian Penar - the headmaster of the Group of State Schools in Klimkówka, Mr. Andrzej Nowak - the headmaster of the Grammar School in Wysokie, Mrs. Elżbieta Stepień - the headmaster of the Primary School no. 2 in Twardogóra, Mr. Andrzej Słószarz - the headmaster of the Grammar School no. 2 in Myślenice, Mr. Krzysztof Tur - the headmaster of the Grammar School no. 1 in Sejny, Mrs. Halina Węgrzyn - the headmaster of the Primary School no. 21 in Nowy Sącz. The chairman of the Family's Social Council is Mrs. Halina Marciniak and the secretary is Mr. Grzegorz Gorczowski.

The first aims of the Council were: creation of the Family's website, releasing a publication about the Family, spreading the "Adopcja na odległość" charity action and organizing the Family's students visit to Colonia during World Youth Day. During 14 years of our activity we have organized eleven pilgrimages to Częstochowa. The first one, on the 9th October 2001, gathered about 300 pilgrims from 61 schools, The last one, on the 6th October 2011 was attended by over 19000 representatives of 444 schools, including 2 from Lithuania. 419 school banners were present, and the holy mass was concelebrated by 200 priests. We are very grateful to all bishops, who have helped us from the very beginning of our activity. The first one was bishop Jan Chrapek, the next one was bishop Zygmunt Zimowski and now it is bishop Henryk Tomasik – ordinary of the Radom diocese.

Our pilgrimages to Black Madonna – Poland’s Beloved Mother – is a time of prayers, summary of the school competitions and charity work (we are building a school in Togo) as well as taking part in concerts and making friendship.

Competitions are an important part of our family’s activity. Since the beginning of our existence we have organized 4 oratory competitions of John Paul II poetry. Its finals are always held in Toruń. Apart from the competitions, three competitions about the Pope were organized. The finals took place at Radom, Nowy Sącz and Mysłowice, at the moment Lublin is preparing to be the host of the next one. What is more, the city of Łomża has organized 2 Athletic Meetings so far.

Systematic and rapid growth of the Family of Schools and lack of ability to participate in the Family’s meeting by all its participants, were the main reason of the decision of the Social Council in 2006, to create Diocesan Families. The first one was formed at Tarnów Diocese in March 2006. Nowadays they also exist in other dioceses like: Kalisz, Siedlce, Katowice, Kraków, Lublin, Sandomierz, Sosnowiec, Toruń and Zamość. They organize seminars, pilgrimages to places connected with the Pope, competitions and commemorate the Pope’s anniversaries. The families have a large influence on the societies’ awareness by giving the instructions and values of John Paul II.

All the Family’s output is being stored both on video and written materials. We have our own website. Since 2005, 3 representatives of the Family’s Social Council are members of the Foundation “Work of the New Millenium”, and since 2010 Mr. Grzegorz Gorcowski is a member of the Centre Social Council of John Paul II in Kraków.

The Family was a special theme at the heart of the Pope’s love and care. He has dedicated a lot of his speeches to it, and in its revitalization he saw a hope for the change in Polish society. It is also an inspiration to us, the members of the Family’s Social Council. We hope that in the future our work will be prolonged for the Poland and the Church goodness.