

Understand the call to prayer

Despite conflict, Hamtramck stands as a cool, cultural hot spot

By THADDEUS C. RADZILOWSKI



The peal of church bells is a call to prayer. The bells signal morning, noon and evening prayers. They also call worshippers to mass.

Aleksander Gierymski's famous 1890 painting the Angelus, of women praying in response to the bells, shows a common Polish rural scene. It was just as common in the Hamtramck of my youth. To a faith as rich in symbols as is Polish Catholicism, the bells speak as eloquently as a muezzin's call.

Islam's presence is spare and puritanical, but the liturgical genius of Polish Catholicism not only fills the air with bells, but the public space with processions and other paraliturgies.

Hamtramck's religious communities have not accepted the view that faith is just private and personal or that the public square must be naked of religion. Faith and culture are intimately tied together. Thus, the underlying issue is "how shall the public square be configured and shared?"

The first step for both sides is to recognize they share a belief with each other and their Jewish "elder brothers in the faith" in the God of Abraham. Pope John Paul II, who himself prayed at a mosque, recently affirmed "the Catholic Church's respect for Islam . . . the Islam that prays, the Islam concerned with those in need."

The pope's vision of brotherly respect between Abrahamic faiths can be the catalyst for a climate of civic cooperation and problem solving. The emerging ecumenical, multiethnic coalition in Hamtramck to restore the city's statue of John Paul II can be the first step in this effort to create a new vision of community on the generous faith-based principles shared by almost all residents.

Poles have been most influen-

tial in shaping Hamtramck and its neighborhoods. But it was always a place with people of different races, cultures and religions. It is that spirit of communal toleration that continues to attract newcomers from the entire world. Yemenis, Bosnians, Albanians, Macedonians, Bangladeshi, Africans and a new influx of Polish and Ukrainian immigrants have joined the older Polish, Ukrainian and African-American residents in recent decades in the city. No place in the metro area has absorbed so many different groups in so short a time so well. It especially appeals to newcomers for whom the establishment of neighborhoods around houses of worship is important.

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Hamtramck also offers newcomers relatively easy access to political participation and civic life. The election of Shahab Ahmed, a Bangladeshi Muslim, to the City Council in 2003 just a few short years after his group's arrival is, in historical perspective, astounding for its rapidity. It took the Poles far longer to get accepted in Detroit.

This controversy gives us an opportunity to revisit the strengths of the city and its contribution to diversity. Diversity here is the real thing. It is neither the pallid diversity of the shopping mall food court nor the exotic but genial community presentations of dances and customs from somewhere else far away. The story of Hamtramck is about American pluralism and about communities, not just individuals, seeking to become "at home" here.

It can be raucous, noisy and messy as neighbors jostle and ar-

gue with each other as they evolve a rough and ready toleration. Hamtramck's history shows that the process usually leads in the end to a shared community which they all love. The promise of such an ending has always been present in the city's attraction to newcomers, or so many would not come. That so many stay for a lifetime shows that the kind of community they found in Hamtramck cannot be recreated elsewhere.

For all of its faults and problems Hamtramck can be a key factor in the revitalization of Detroit. It anchors old and new communities that are expanding into adjacent areas of Detroit. The Arabic, Bangladeshi and new Polish immigrant clusters straddling the city's north and south boundaries are cases in point.

Hamtramck's shopping area is a small-town main street at the crossroads of the world. There is no greater diversity in the region than Joseph Campau on a Saturday. The city is also one of the nation's music capitals and a major entertainment venue. Underlying all of this is its national reputation as a center of Polish America. It will probably retain that for quite a while, even if the Polish population continues to decline. Its Polishness is at the heart of the special character of the city.

Hamtramck is — next to downtown — the zone that draws more people across Eight Mile than almost any other. Cutting-edge music and art, Old World traditions, folk crafts and foods, historic churches, ethnic restaurants and an unparalleled access to American diversity in a safe environment is readily available to all in the metro area.

Hamtramck is a cool city. If it didn't exist, we would have to invent it.

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