



Mariavites

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Introduction

Political persecutions giving rise to eschatological sentiments are not unusual in the history of Christianity. In Congress Poland (the part of Poland under the occupation of the Russian Empire during the nineteenth century), many religious institutions were obliterated after the insurrection of Poles against Russian occupants known as the January Uprising (1863–64). Monasteries were mostly abolished, and they were prevented from recruiting new novitiates. This situation also affected secular (that is, non-monastic) clergy, most of whom were deprived of higher education while the installation of bishops required approval from Russian authorities (Mazur 1991, 9). This led to the situation that some dioceses were without a 'shepherd' for years. To fill this void, secret religious orders were created, primarily through the activity of Capuchin Honorat Koźmiński (1829–1916). And without formal supervision, private attempts at reviving religious practices and ideas emerged.

It was in this context that the Mariavites developed. Mariavitism can be classified as an apocalyptically oriented movement with their employment of such terms as 'end times' and reliance on the book of the Revelation to explain the present. However, their earlier literature shows that they did not expect the literal end of the world, but rather a coming of a new epoch in civilisation that would be characterised by the work of the Holy Ghost. The idea was not entirely alien to a Polish audience. After the November Uprising (1830–1831), a group of Polish poets and thinkers started to proclaim the coming of a new social, religious, and political order, with Poland playing a fundamental role in the process. The idea of a suffering nation was compared to the sacrifice of Jesus that would bring ultimate redemption and a new era in the history of humanity. These ideas were subsequently taken by the Mariavites, who built their identity around them.

As a movement, Mariavitism did not set out to create an independent Catholic Church. On the contrary, their activity was aimed at reforming the Church from inside (Górecki 2011, 25). They saw themselves, through the private revelation of Feliksa Kozłowska (1862–1921), as the new Franciscans who were called to stop the corruption of the Catholic Church as Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) did. The difference was that Francis believed himself called to imitate Jesus while Kozłowska—also known by her monastic name as Maria Franciszka, the founder of the movement—was called to imitate Mary, mother of Jesus. In line with her revelations from 1893, Kozłowska came to believe that she was appointed by Jesus to organise

Mariavite Order. The term 'Mariavites' stood for followers of 'Mary's life' (*Maria vitae*). Although their origin was Polish, the revelation was not understood to be for only one nation; it would therefore be a mistake to call Mariavitism a nationalistic religious movement in this sense. Mariavites understood 'national sentiments' akin to Polish Romantic thinkers—namely, as a set of ideas that need to be promoted worldwide.

Surprisingly, it does not look like their apocalyptic orientation brought much controversy at the beginning. It did not even constitute the main objection against them. Much more controversial in the early years was the fact that a woman, Kozłowska, dared to lead priests spiritually. The lack of emphasis on apocalyptic themes can be seen early in the movement's history in the reaction of the first priest to become a Mariavite, Felicjan M. Franciszek Strumiłło (1861–1895). Strumiłło did not even mention 'end times,' but was more preoccupied with the idea of a woman taking religious control over a priest. Koźmiński seemed to share the same concerns. Other points of controversy involved exposing the sins of priests and the similarity of Kozłowska to Mary, mother of Jesus. The idea of 'end times,' however, was in many instances overlooked.

The critical scholar writing on Mariavites encounters the problem of looking at their earliest moments through lenses coloured by later reforms that took place after Kozłowska's death in 1921. For instance, the introduction of the priesthood of women in Mariavitism in 1929 was certainly connected to her role in the movement, but it was not present in the Order from the outset. Therefore, it is impossible to say how she would have reacted to that change. However, the explanation of 'end times' was publicly expressed at least from 1907 and never met with criticism from Kozłowska, which points to its relative acceptance in the movement.



Simplified Mariavite emblem. Zografos 07 own work, using elements by Heralder, Xavigivax and Auzac.

A Short Biography of 'Mateczka'

Feliksa Kozłowska did not have an easy life. Her father died in the January Uprising of 1863–1864 when she was just eight-months old. Even during her childhood, she was said to communicate with Jesus through internal revelations, though at that time she did not consider this as her own particular privilege. Upon taking her first Communion, she developed a special devotion to the Eucharist, receiving it as often as possible, but always with permission from her confessor. Kozłowska was relatively well educated, graduating from a high school in Warsaw with knowledge of foreign languages, including French, Russian, English, and German. She also knew some basics of Latin, but it was a language reserved for boys (Gołębiewski 2002, 21–22). Instead of pursuing a secular education, Kozłowska spent most of her time reading hagiographical works and practicing some forms of mortification, e.g., wearing a cilice (a garment made of coarse cloth worn close to the skin to create discomfort) or fasting regularly.

The political situation seriously hindered her religious career. She desired to join a female convent, but the authorities forbade her. Joining a secret order of nuns seemed to be the only available solution, but the

sisters there were mostly preoccupied with social work, and Kozłowska was looking for a contemplative life. Initially she was assigned by Koźmiński to the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Afflicted in 1883, but after two years she was given permission to leave. Then, in 1887, she organised the Congregation of Sisters of the Poor of Saint Mother Clare (the 'Poor Clares') in Płock with the approval of her spiritual supervisor (Mames 2016, 22). She came to be known as Mateczka, which is similar to the diminutive form 'Mummy' in English and is used in convents to refer to the Mother Superior. Later, and up to the present day, all Mariavites titled her in this fashion.

The Poor Clares kept a strikingly austere lifestyle which was even respected by their later opponents. To the three traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience they added a fourth: the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. To keep their true nature hidden, a manufacturing shop selling religious items was officially established by Kozłowska. At the beginning, the local Płock clergy were positively disposed to the sisters, helping them materially and listening to their confessions of sins. Soon, however, the situation was to change, mostly due to the events of 1893, which are discussed below.

The Revelations and History of the Order

On 2 August 1893, during a celebration of the feast of Our Lady of the Angels of the Porzioncula, Maria Franciszka claimed to receive a revelation from God after attending Mass. The vision urged her to form a religious order called the Mariavites in order to spread the initiative called 'The Work of Great Mercy,' which chiefly meant adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and looking for protection from Our Lady of Perpetual Help. These devotional practices constituted the ultimate means by which God's mercy could be obtained (Mames 2016, 23-24).

Kazimierz M. Jan Przyjemski (1868-1920), the second Mariavite, proved to be the leading missionary for the work. He recruited many new members, including from outside the Płock diocese. Not all of the new recruits were aware of Mateczka and her role in the Order. They were asked to reform their private lives according to a modified rule of Saint Francis. It is probable that all the priests recruited personally by Maria Franciszka to the movement were told about the revelations, but it is difficult to assess the extent of the knowledge of the rest. Przyjemski certainly informed the bishop Michał Nowodworski (1831-1896) about the initiative and revelations, but probably only in general terms (Mames 2009, 142).

Mariavites had opponents from the beginning, but the situation seemed relatively stable for a number of years. This changed in 1897 when parish priest Kazimierz Weloński (1831-1915), who used to help the Poor Clares, started to publicly criticise Kozłowska and the priests visiting her from the pulpit (Mames 2009, 24). It is difficult to understand his motivations, but he was certainly not content with the fact that a secret organisation was being constituted without his approval. As a consequence, the Mariavites were ridiculed due to the fact that they followed a woman.

In December 1902, Mateczka wrote down the revelations she had received, and the text known as 'Początek Związku Zgromadzenia Kapłanów' ('The Beginning of [Mariavite] Priest Association') was composed, which was subsequently included in the 'Dzieło Wielkiego Miłosierdzia' ('The Work of Great Mercy'), published in 1922. It was not the first time the revelations were written, but this version was to become authoritative. Bishops Franciszek Jaczewski (1832-1914) from Lublin and Wincenty Teofil Popiel

(1825–1912) from Warsaw did not accept the document, fearing consequences from the political authorities. Only Bishop Jerzy Szembek (1851–1905) from Płock accepted the writings.

The first official letter against the Mariavites was issued in the Płock diocese on 13 February 1903 by Catholic priest and professor of seminary, Piotr Borniński (1862–1936). It stated very generally that the revelations contained some elements contradicting the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church (Górecki 2011, 68). The Mariavites were reprimanded for honouring Mateczka as their teacher and spiritual mother and accused of believing themselves to be the only ones capable of bringing necessary changes to the Church. Bishop Szembek arranged a religious trial for Mateczka and the leading Mariavite in the Płock diocese, Leon M. Andrzej Gołębiowski (1867–1933) in order to collect their testimonies before sending them to Rome.

Verdicts from Rome

Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Mirae caritatis* (1902), concerning the veneration of the Blessed Sacrament, was translated by Gołębiowski and widely used to validate Mariavite practices. In July 1903, Mariavites headed to Rome to personally acquaint Pope Leo (pontificate 1878–1903) with their activity. En route to Rome, they learned that the Pope had died, so they met the newly elected Pius X (pontificate 1903–1914) on 13 August, a week after Jan M. Michał Kowalski (1871–1942) had been chosen to be the first Minister General of the Order (Mames 2009, 25). During the audience, the manuscript of revelations and the history of the Order were given to the Pope. After receiving his benediction and later permission to continue their monastic life, the Mariavites returned to Poland expecting rapid official recognition. The visit to Rome was met with hostility from the Polish Church hierarchy, who felt they had been marginalised.

On 4 September 1904, the Inquisition of the Catholic Church issued a decree abolishing the Mariavite Order and calling the revelations mere hallucinations (Gołębiowski 2002, 51). Mateczka and Mariavite priests were forced to profess the Trent confession of faith, which was normally required from suspected heretics, though the decree did not mention heresy specifically. The Mariavites accepted the verdict, but they anticipated a change of the decision, and were even informed in private conversations about such a possibility from Roman officials.

The Mariavites privately (i.e., not as members of the Order) continued to promote adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, frequent taking of Communion, and prayer to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. This brought accusations of insubordination. To defend themselves, and with the approval of some hierarchs, Mariavites started collecting examples of the perceived lewd conduct of their fellow priests. In June 1905 a delegation of peasants linked to the Mariavites journeyed to Rome to hand the Pope a complaint concerning harassments toward 'their' clergy (Górecki 2011, 110). But in response, the Mariavites were themselves defrocked.

On 1 and 8 February 1906, official declarations with termination of obedience were submitted by the Mariavite priests to the bishops Popiel and Apolinary Wnukowski (1848–1909, who had succeeded Szembek at Płock). Up to the middle of March 1906, sixteen parishes with about sixty thousand people had decided to follow the Mariavites (Górecki 2011, 124). Kowalski and Roman M. Próchniewski (1872–1954) headed to Rome requiring from the Pope a revocation of the dismissal of the Mariavites and permission for

unfettered adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and the veneration of Mary. They also wanted him to acknowledge the authenticity of the revelations and pronounce Mateczka the Mother of Mercy. These requests were believed to be the only guarantee of religious freedom for Mariavites within the confines of Catholic orthodoxy. They pointed out that the title was given to Mateczka in the revelations, therefore one could not accept the latter without also accepting the former: 'If everyone who wants attains My Mercy, then you have obtained it in the highest way: You shall be Mother of Mercy' (Uzupełnienia Objawień Mateczki, Dzieło Wielkiego Miłosierdzia 1927, 57, my translation). During the audience, Kowalski swore obedience to the religious authorities on behalf of the Order, but on the condition that their proposals would be implemented.

Upon return to Poland, Kowalski wanted to communicate with the Archbishop of Warsaw, but the latter decided to wait for the verdict from Rome. Since the breach with the bishops, Mariavites were publicly accused of heresy and physically assaulted. Since Rome kept silent, Kowalski decided to inform lay people about Mateczka and her revelations. Parishioners were informed that Mateczka was Jesus's bride, similar in holiness to Mary, and were encouraged to pray to her to obtain God's mercy. It should be emphasised that such language can be easily misunderstood outside theological circles and was not necessarily a deliberately controversial move. To take a classic example, the church father Caesarius of Arles (468/470–542 CE) wrote that 'the souls not only of nuns but also of all men and women, if they will guard chastity of the body and virginity of heart ... should not doubt that they are spouses to Christ' (quoted from McGinn 1996, 31). Moreover, although it has never been officially approved, people have spontaneously prayed to those they recognise as saints, even while they are alive, as happened in the case of Padre Pio (1887–1968).

On 5 April 1906, the encyclical *Tribus circiter* was issued. The document mentioned the eschatological orientation of Mariavites, though it did not clarify how 'end times' were understood. Methods advocated to overturn the expected impending judgment—thus the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and seeking of help from Mary—were highly praised but not fully authorised. The encyclical tallied with a (probably false) accusation that Mariavites encouraged people to neglect work and pray for long periods in front of the Eucharist. Mariavites were also accused of uncritically accepting Mateczka's directives and following her 'delusional apparitions.' References were made to disobedience toward rightly elected supervisors. The decree from 1904 ceasing the Order was upheld (Warchoń 1997, 25–26). However, only two Mariavites were immediately impacted by the encyclical. On 5 December 1906, Mateczka and Kowalski were officially excommunicated, and the rest were given twenty more days to make up their minds (Rybak 1992, 34). Consequently, the Mariavites found themselves outside of the Catholic Church, but they did not instantly create a new church. Rather, they operated as an independent Catholic Order for some time.

Establishment of an Independent Catholic Church and its Activities up to 1935

In 1909 the Mariavites were accepted as members of the communion of Old Catholic Churches, the Churches who considered themselves Catholic but rejected the decisions of the First Vatican Council, most notably the idea of infallibility of the Pope (Mames 2009, 31). Kowalski was ordained a bishop on 5 October 1909 in Utrecht by Gerardus Gul, the Archbishop of Utrecht between the years 1892–1920. A year later, the Mariavite Church had three bishops, 30 priests, and 120 nuns. Accounts of the numbers of believers

vary significantly as different sources hold the figure to be anywhere from 50,000 to 200,000. The secular authorities decided that all the churches and facilities, despite the preferences of the parishioners, had to return to the Catholic Church. By the end of 1908, Mariavites completed the building of fifty-four new churches and 166 chapels. Moreover, many shelters, schools, craft workshops, and other social facilities were established. The greatest architectural construction—the Temple of Mercy and Charity—was erected in Płock between 1911 and 1914 alongside a monastery.

Since 1906 the Mariavites were recognised by Russian civic authorities only as an association of independent parishes with clergy approved individually by each parish assembly. After the introduction of an episcopal structure, authorities slowly began to recognise Kowalski as the administrator of all the Mariavite parishes. On 11 March 1912, the Mariavites were finally acknowledged as a Church and not merely a tolerated sect, though the status of the autonomous parishes remained unchanged (Mazur 1991, 49). When, during World War I, territories of Congress Poland came under German and Austro-Hungarian rule, some Mariavite churches were closed and the activities of their priests were restricted outside of territories previously occupied by Russia (Rybak 1992, 48–49).

Since 1917 the Mariavite parishioners were asked by the Mariavite hierarchy to sing to the ‘book of life,’ a reference to the phrase frequently mentioned in the book of Revelation (3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 20:15, and 21:27). Access to it was given to all people, including non-Christians, on the condition that they looked to transform their lives and honour the Blessed Sacrament (Warchoń 1997, 51). About three thousand non-Mariavites decided to sign up. In 1918 Mateczka announced, in accordance with the continuous revelations, that the Eucharist in the Catholic Church would someday cease, and Jesus would deprive all the priests, including Mariavites, of the capacity to spiritually guide the souls. This did not, however, mean the abolition of the hierarchical clergy.

Mateczka died on 23 August 1921. It was a moment of incomparable grief and confusion in the movement that gave rise to some significant theological innovation. Mateczka was known to oppose fiercely any kind of exaltation of her persona. However, at the moment of her death, she was believed to have united her will perfectly with the will of God, and therefore it was believed that she had to be recognised as a saint. Her opposition to that title was understood to have proved the kind of humbleness that characterised authentic virtuosos of faith. Within the movement, her name started to be invoked right after Mary in the Liturgy to emphasise their similarity. Soon, Kowalski started to come across ambiguous passages in the Christian literature that he believed helped him to understand Mateczka’s nature more clearly. He was responsible for the translation of the Bible into Polish, and in around 1930 he noticed that the term *mastoids* from Revelation 1:13 (‘and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like a Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest [Greek: *mastoids*]’) could refer to female breasts, potentially making ‘like a Son of Man’ a woman. It was of further significance that the Mariavites believed that Jesus was continually present in the Eucharist and never left the Earth and that another Messenger from God was expected—this time in the form of a woman, who would be wholly filled with the Holy Spirit. The fact that the word *ruah* in Hebrew, signifying the Holy Ghost, could be taken as feminine only intensified Kowalski’s assumptions (Tempczyk 2011, 99–105). Mateczka was also regarded as the second Eve and ‘a woman clothed with the sun’ from Revelation 12:1. Traditionally, both monikers were given to Mary, but Mateczka was understood to imitate her perfectly, and by her sacrificial death she enabled the creation of the kingdom of God on earth.

After the death of Kozłowska in 1921, Bishop Kowalski adopted the title of Archbishop, on grounds that are

not fully explained. In 1922 there was the introduction of marriages between priests and nuns (Mames 2009, 39). Kowalski's pastoral letter from 1924 explained that these marriages were to be different from their secular counterparts. They were to imitate the union between Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, established primarily to nourish spiritual development. According to Irenaeus of Lyon (130–202 CE), primordial parents were created in the form of infants who were capable of growing spiritually. Mariavites thought that this growth was only possible through 'virginal marriage,' where reproduction was not motivated by sexual desire but by God's will. Although such theories may seem controversial, it is worth emphasising that the Orthodox theologian, Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), also wrote that there was no contradiction between marriage and virginity and gave the first couple as an example par excellence. Moreover, Kowalski hoped, following Polish Romantic thinkers, that a new generation of people would soon inhabit the earth. He concluded that such marriages were established to give birth to children without original sin, which meant they would be full of grace already in the womb, resembling in this regard Mary or [John the Baptist](#). They were nevertheless to be baptised and receive all the sacraments to multiply God's gifts rather than for the remission of sins. Although the marriages were introduced after the death of Mateczka, the Archbishop was certain she would have approved them since she communicated her will to him occasionally through dreams and visions. The reform was understood to be in accordance with the idea of establishing God's kingdom on earth.

The Mariavites were strongly influenced by Saint Augustine (354–430) and his apocalyptic ideas, most notably expressed in his Sermon 259, which stated that before the final judgment there would be an earthly period of peace for the just. Therefore, Kowalski strongly encouraged people to register in the book of life as the purifying fire was believed to come soon in order to cleanse the earth, leaving only the pious. This belief was primarily based on Revelation 20:15, which states that 'anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.' Mariavites did not claim, however, that the people who were to be thrown into 'the lake of fire' would be irrecoverably condemned, but instead left the decision to God. The final days were believed to have arrived already and they could potentially last for hundreds of years after sinners had been destroyed by the fire. The purge was close and corroborated by the belief that the valid Eucharist in Rome had ceased, fulfilling Daniel 9:27 ('he will put an end to sacrifice and offering'). Such convictions jeopardised the relations with other Old Catholic Churches, but Mariavites did not give up on their ecumenical endeavours, visiting the ancient Orthodox patriarchates with the mission of uniting Churches in 1926 (Rybak 1992, 54).

1929 brought further changes. Twelve Mariavite nuns were ordained as presbyters, with Antonina M. Izabela Wiłucka-Kowalska (1890–1946), wife of the Archbishop, consecrated as a bishop (Mames 2009, 39). Kowalski knew that there was a well-established tradition in the ancient Church of ordaining deaconesses, although he openly admitted that women had not been ordained as presbyters up to this point. The change seemed to be a logical consequence of the reform from 1922. If spouses were to represent one body and help each other to grow spiritually then they had to be perfectly equal. Moreover, it was justified by the claim that there were many priests who said the Mass unworthily, and female priests were to satisfy God for the sloppiness and sinfulness of their male counterparts. The number of female members of clergy grew rapidly. There were twelve female bishops by 1931, and from September 1929 to January 1935, 137 Mariavite sisters were ordained. For unknown reasons, Wiłucka received the title of 'archpriestess' instead of 'archbishop.'

Other, less controversial, changes included:

- 1) Both kinds of Communion given to parishioners, i.e., bread and wine (1922)
- 2) The abolishment of required private confession and clergy titles (1930)
- 3) The distribution of Holy Blood (eucharistic wine) to newly baptised infants (1930)
- 4) The abolishment of the use of holy water, anointing of the sick, and fasting (1933)

All these changes were interconnected and had one purpose—namely, to introduce the kingdom of God on earth.

Many opponents of the Mariavites thought that they were discrediting the Christian faith and the Polish nation. Apart from clergy marriages and ordination of women, the Mariavites were criticised for alleged promiscuity and their attacks on papacy. In 1928 a lawsuit against Kowalski was initiated (Warchoń 1997, 78). Some court procedures were violated (e.g., the trial was recorded for the public) and the press did not pay much attention to the principle that an individual is innocent until proven guilty. Some groups openly demanded from the civil authorities the eradication of the Mariavite Church. In the end, Kowalski was sentenced to three years in prison, but the verdict was not implemented immediately.

Around 1935 some Mariavite bishops and priests became dissatisfied with the rule of Kowalski and he was controversially removed from office (Mames 2009, 41). This divided the Mariavites into two separate ecclesiastical bodies: the Old Catholic Mariavite Church (opposed to the Archbishop) and the Catholic Mariavite Church, where Kowalski remained at the head. Kowalski continued his reforms, promoting the people's priesthood and developing a new understanding of the Trinity, where Mateczka became the incarnation of the Holy Ghost. This second change requires further critical analysis due to the multiplicity of meanings regarding the Polish term *wcielenie* (incarnation). The Old Catholic Church, on the other hand, soon realised that returning to the time before Mateczka's departure was impossible and decided to retain some of the changes, albeit refashioned (e.g., priests were to marry secular women). The female priesthood was kept, but it became connected with the personal charisma of already ordained sisters. Further ordinations were soon suspended and are not practiced today.

After the Split

The schism led to thirty per cent of lay Mariavites leaving the Church. Kowalski and his supporters moved to a village called Felicjanów, while the Old Catholic Mariavites, headed by Bishop Klemens M. Filip Feldman (1885–1971), took over the Temple of Mercy and Charity in Płock. Despite the introduction of the people's priesthood by the Catholic Mariavite Church, the hierarchical clergy was retained, primarily in order to teach people how to celebrate the Eucharist in their own houses and to represent the Church in dialogues with secular authorities. In Płock, Feldman was chosen to be a new Minister General, but the Church was reorganised and in place of a monastic structure adopted a synodal way of governing (Rybak 1992, 63). Both Mariavite Churches claimed to be the only legitimate inheritor of Mateczka's legacy and did not shy away from attacking one another.

On 9 July 1936, the deferred court sentence regarding Kowalski was implemented and the Archbishop

remained imprisoned until 9 January 1938. It was during this time that he came up with his idiosyncratic understanding of the Holy Trinity and the incarnation of the Holy Ghost. His ability to engage with parishioners was restricted as he was repeatedly put in prison—this time by German occupants in January 1940—for defending the integrity of Polish lands and comparing Hitler to Stalin. In his absence, leadership of the Catholic Mariavite Church was passed on to Wiłucka-Kowalska. The Archbishop was ultimately gassed to death on 26 May 1942 in Alkoven, Austria. According to accounts from his fellow prisoners, he never doubted his religious convictions. World War II did not spare any of the Mariavites. They were evicted from their properties and the Temple was almost transformed into a garrison cinema (Mazur 1991, 112). Feldman, denounced as a Jew, turned out to have German origins and was deported to Blumberg where he served in a local Old Catholic parish. His administration of the Mariavite Church was seriously hindered. Even after the War, due to the new political situation, he could not return to Poland until 1957 and by this time the leadership position had been transferred to Próchniewski.

During the Communist era in Poland, both Mariavite Churches had to regulate their legal position from the bottom up (Mazur 1991, 117). Polish Messianism seemed outdated, although the Catholic Mariavite Church tried to continue the teaching on the kingdom of God and carried on Kowalski's theological legacy. Meanwhile in the Old Catholic Mariavite Church, the title of Minister General was replaced with that of Prime (*Naczelny*) Bishop. Jan M. Michał Sitek (1906–1970) occupied this position from 1957, being succeeded by Waław M. Bartłomiej Przysiecki (1878–1961). The number of Mariavite nuns systematically started to decrease and today there are only a couple of sisters left in both Churches, including outside of Poland. In Felicjanów, after the death of Wiłucka-Kowalska, her replacement was not chosen immediately, and the government of the Church was given to the ecclesiastical body known as Temporary Council of Superiors. In 1950 Józef M. Rafael Wojciechowski (1917–2005) was chosen as Minister General and served as Archbishop for the Catholic Mariavite Church until his death in 2005 (Rybak 1992, 74–79).

The Mariavites led some missions on British territories, but today there are no remaining traces of Mariavites. In 1936, an Englishman, Neville M. Augustine Francis, was ordained a priest in Płock, but after his death around 1987, the presence of Mariavites died out. Other endeavours led either to absorption by different ecclesial entities (e.g., the Episcopal Church in the United States of America) or assumed syncretic and uncontrollable form (e.g., in Argentina). The only church outside of Poland which is fully recognised by the Old Catholic Mariavite Church as canonical is located in France. It has a French bishop, Arsène Jean M. André Le Bec, and the congregation is ethnically diverse (Mames 2009, 59).

Today

It is difficult to assess current numbers of Mariavites. The Catholic Mariavite Church, led from 2005 by a female bishop, Damiana M. Beatrycze Szulgowicz, may have about two thousand followers in Poland. The Old Catholic Mariavite Church, whose Prime Bishop from 2015 is Marek M. Karol Babi, may number somewhere between 20,000 and 23,000 believers in Poland. Statistics regarding France are even more problematic to capture due to constant flux. There are other non-canonical Mariavite Churches (e.g., in Cameroon), but their beliefs remain generally unknown. The year 2019 brought new ordinations in Płock and the number of clergy seems stable there. Felicjanów occasionally receives new converts and it is very likely that the people's priesthood will completely replace a hierarchical clergy in the near future, which would open up a new chapter in Mariavitism.

References

The fundamental work for understanding the Mariavites is *Dzieło Wielkiego Miłosierdzia* (*The Work of Great Mercy*) which contains all of the revelations of Mateczka and the history of the movement from a Mariavite perspective. Undeniably the most authoritative work for the group, it was first published in 1922 in Polish. There are not many publications on Mariavites in English. Oxford University Press released *The Third Adam* by Jerzy Peterkiewicz in 1975. However, this work relies mostly on materials hostile to the Mariavites and is generally unreliable. The literature that was published before the 1990s is mostly characterised by a polemical tone. Since that time, however, more academic and dispassionate publications have started to appear. Three works in particular stand out as important publications:

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